

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN STATE TEACHERS' CONFERENCE

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BEGINNING A HANDBELL PROGRAM IN YOUR CONGREGATION

Cheryl Diener, Presenter

PART I. The Basic Equipment

1. What is an English handbell?

An English handbell is so named because it originated in England. It is a tuned bell with a rigidly mounted clapper, hinged so that striking is possible in only two directions. A restraining spring prevents the clapper from lying against the body of the bell when it is upright. English handbells in America are made of bronze, a mixture of 80% copper and 20% tin.

2. Who manufactures handbells?

There are four manufacturers of English handbells, two European, two American. The Whitechapel Bell Foundry of London, England, makes the original, the "Cadillac" of bells. Petit and Fritsen bells, manufactured in Aarle-Rixel, Holland, have a noticeably muddy sound and emphasize the minor third harmonic overtone. One WELS congregation owns Petit and Fritsen bells. Both European manufactured bells are quite costly and not usually considered when buying handbells.

Two American companies manufacture handbells. When purchasing handbells you will need to choose between the two. They are:

Malmark, Inc., Bell Crest Park, P. O. Box 1200, Plumsteadville, PA 18949
Phone: 1-800-HANDBEL (1-800-426-3235) Fax: 215-766-0762 www.malmark.com

Schulmerich Handbells, Carillon Hill, P. O. Box 903, Sellersville, PA 18960-0903
Phone: 1-800-423-7464 or 215-257-2771 Fax: 215-257-1910
www.schulmerichbells.com

3. What are the differences between the American bells?

One man, Jake Malta, designed both companies' bells. He had first been with the Schulmerich company. Schulmerich has been selling handbells since 1962. He left Schulmerich in 1972. He spent two years working on his new design and founded his own company, Malmark, in 1974. Jake Malta died on August 8, 2010 at the age of 91. Until very recently he was active in the company.

The tonal sound of both the Malmark and the Schulmerich is composed of the fundamental pitch and the dominant 12th. In the Schulmerich bell the other harmonics fall "where they will." In the Malmark bell, through design and polishing, the other harmonics have been reduced or eliminated. Although

some people dispute a difference in sound, it is fair to say that the Malmark bell sounds brighter or clearer. The Schulmerich bell is more mellow or “muddy.”

Before ordering handbells, hear and see both kinds of bell, preferably in the place where you will play the bells.

4. How many bells do we need?

Bells are sold in octave groupings.

Two chromatic octaves – 25 bells, designated G4-G6, notated from the G below middle C and up two octaves.

Three chromatic octaves – 37 bells, designated C4-C7, notated from bass clef C and up three octaves.

Four chromatic octaves – 49 bells, designated G3-G7, notated from the G one and one-half octaves below middle C and up four octaves.

Five chromatic octaves – 61 bells, designated C3-C8, notated from the C two octaves below middle C and up five octaves.

Bell manufacturers have produced the sixth and seventh octaves, but they are not common. No WELS congregation or school has more than five octaves to my knowledge.

I strongly suggest that the initial purchase of handbells be at least three octaves. A two octave set limits what music can be rung. Most of the handbell music published is for three octaves or more. Considerably less music is available for two octaves.

Bells are a transposing instrument. They sound one octave higher than notated on the staff. For example, the staff note of C5 is middle C, but it sounds the pitch of C five C's up from the lowest note of a piano keyboard, or the C of the treble clef, third space.

5. How much do bells cost?

Get a current price list from the manufacturers' websites. In October, 2010, a three octave set of handbells with carrying cases were \$8,500 from Malmark and \$8,800 from Schulmerich. Price changes usually occur July 1 of each year.

6. What other equipment is needed to begin ringing?

You will need tables, pads, covers, gloves, polishing clothes, music binders, music risers and mallets.

Rectangular banquet tables, available in most churches and schools, are used by many bell choirs. Tables designed specifically for handbells are available from the bell manufacturers and other handbell suppliers. If possible, tables should be placed in a U shape so that all bells are equidistant from the director. Use this shape in rehearsals even if you alter the shape in the church sanctuary.

Foam padding is needed on top of the tables. It should be “super-soft,” four inches thick. It is available from upholstery or mattress shops as well as from the handbell manufacturers and handbell suppliers. The foam is needed to absorb the sound of bells that are stopped, or damped, on the table.

The foam should be covered with a cloth. Pinwale corduroy is the recommended fabric. Avoid heavy or synthetic fabrics. Velvets and polyester are not wise. A custom fitted covering is preferred. Many choirs make their own coverings. They may be purchased from manufacturers or handbells suppliers. A drape to the floor adds a pleasing look.

Gloves are usually worn to protect the bells from the acid on human hands and to prevent blisters. Some bell choirs do not wear gloves. It is felt that as long as the hand doesn't touch the bell, nothing is gained. An ungloved hand may have better control and page turning is certainly easier. However, there are some bell techniques in which the hand does touch the bell, so that a gloved hand is better for the bell. Practice gloves may be inexpensive cotton garden gloves. Performance gloves, white or black, are readily available. Plastic dots on the gloves help the grip. Handbell suppliers have a variety of gloves. Some have wider bands for wrist support.

After every use handbells should be polished. Polishing cloths have an inner cloth of jeweler's rouge and a soft buffing outer cloth. Clean flannel cloths may also be used. Every four to eight weeks the bells need to be cleaned with a polishing cream and buffed with old, soft cloths. Moisture from the mouth and nose is a serious cause of tarnish on the bells. Ringers should be taught to cough and sneeze away from the bells. Gum chewing around the bells should be banned.

Music binders, three-ring note books with a hinge, are usually used to hold a ringer's music. To bring the music up to eye level, music risers are used. Clear acrylic risers may be purchased. Handymen might make some for you. The risers are especially helpful to ringers who wear bifocals.

Mallets are often used in bell ringing. They vary in size to correlate to different sizes of bells. They are used to strike the bell either on the table or suspended.

The handbell companies sell complete packages which include these necessary equipment items. Consider your needs and resources to decide if you want the whole package for a higher price or just the bells and add these items.

PART II. The Director and the Ringers

7. What should be considered in selecting a handbell director?

A handbell choir director should have some musical training. Keyboard experience is especially helpful. Previous conducting experience is desirable. Most new bell directors know very little about bell ringing. This knowledge can be learned.

Other traits desirable for a bell director include: patience, dedication, dependability, enthusiasm for ringing, ability to teach, a good sense of humor, and people skills to relate to and communicate with ringers.

8. How can a director acquire knowledge about bell ringing and directing?

First and foremost a director must attend a handbell workshop with hands-on experience. These workshops cover areas such as basic bell ringing, special sounds and techniques, bell assignments, understanding bell notation, bell music literature, and bell maintenance. "Old" directors should continue to attend these workshops to update their knowledge and keep abreast of what's new.

There usually is a session of beginning ringing at WELS Worship Conferences. Some colleges offer these sessions.

The American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) is a national organization which sponsors workshops and clinics. They also publish a magazine, *Overtones*, which has helpful articles. The annual membership fee for AGEHR is \$65.00. Contact AGEHR at 1055 E. Centerville Station Rd., Dayton OH 45459-5503. Phone: 1-800-878-5459 www.agehr.org.

A new director might visit rehearsals of an experienced director and choir. Attending bell concerts and a WELS Handbell Festival would be beneficial.

Instruction books, especially those written by Donald Allured and Susan Berry, provide valuable information.

9. What is expected of a handbell director?

There are many duties of a handbell director. They include:

A. Select Music

A judicious selection of music for a choir to ring is important. There is a lot of religious music published. Some Lutheran publishers, in particular Concordia Publishing House, Morning Star and Augsburg, publish handbell music. The director must choose music within the ability of the ringers, yet with some challenge to the choir. The Church Year must be understood so that appropriate music is selected for the service and the season. Variety is appreciated by ringers and listeners alike. Contact music publishers to get on their mailing lists. Attend music reading sessions when possible.

B. Assign Bells

Each ringer is usually assigned two consecutive diatonic notes, such as C4 and D4. Once a director knows the strengths and weaknesses of the ringers, permanent assignments can be made. Each piece of music usually uses more than two bells per ringer. These bells must be assigned in such a way to allow them to be rung at the proper time, in the most musical way possible.

C. Know the Score

Study the score before you ask ringers to ring it. Make sure that all the terms and editor's markings and notes are understood. Make sure that you understand the timing. Decide how you will interpret the music. Most music publishers supply recordings of their music on sample discs. Study! Study! Study!

D. Prepare the Ringers for Ringing

Prepare each ringer's score by indicating which bells they will use in the piece, where bell switches will need to be made, and note any spot where something out of the ordinary needs to be done.

Teaching skills and techniques should be a part of almost every rehearsal. Anticipate difficult spots in music. Make up drills for these things and do the drills for several weeks before ringing it in the music. Always strive for musical excellence.

E. Listen Carefully

The director is the ears of the choir. The director must be able to detect errors in notes, note values, timing, dynamics and technique. You must know where the melody is and make sure that it is heard. Since the director must concentrate on listening to the musical sound, the director should not be expected to ring while directing.

F. Be Prepared to Conduct

Directors must know the fundamentals of conducting. Movements should be precise and clear. Practice giving downbeats and cut-offs in front of mirror. Generally speaking, the right hand conducts the beat, the left hand gives other musical messages such as dynamics, style, cueing. (Left hand directors reverse this.) Use your eyes. Know your score and look at the ringers.

G. Establish Musical Authority

Be on top of things. Give the message of confidence to the ringers, knowing what you want, and what is expected of them. Be ready to make quick decisions in rehearsals. I take it as a compliment when my ringers affectionately call me “Sarge.”

H. Communicate Clearly

Prepare ringing schedules, consistently announce warm-up times and polishing parties. Write announcements on a board. Try to take away any reason for confusion.

I. Connect with the Ringers

Know your ringers, listen to your ringers. Be personable, patient and understanding to their problems. Convey the attitude that this is “our” choir, not “my” choir or “your” choir.

J. Set an Example

You can't expect ringers to be punctual if you aren't punctual. If the director isn't committed, the ringers won't be committed either.

K. Work with Other Worship Leaders

Work with the pastor, organist and other choir directors for the benefit of the total music ministry in your congregation.

10. How many ringers are needed for a handbell choir?

Generally, a three octave set of bells uses 11 ringers. Seven or eight ringers are used with two octaves. When the fourth octave is added, often one or no more ringers are used. With a fifth octave 12 or 13 ringers are usually used.

11. Who should be recruited as bell ringers?

Ringers may be recruited from children through senior citizens. Handbell ringing bridges generations. It is desirable that ringers have some previous musical training—keyboard ability, playing an instrument, singing in a choir. When ringers have no musical background, beginning to ring is slower, but it can be

done successfully. Ringers will have to read printed music. Most anyone can play handbells, but not everyone will have the same degree of success.

When beginning a bell choir with all ringers inexperienced, you might ask an experienced handbell director to come and conduct a workshop for several hours to teach the basics of bell ringing.

It must be stressed that everyone in the bell choir must make bell ringing and rehearsing a priority. A half-hearted or hit-and-miss effort by just one ringer can cripple a choir.

Other good traits of ringers include: patience, dedication, dependability, and enthusiasm.

12. What if there are more ringers than needed?

If you have more ringers than needed (such a happy problem!), start another choir. Too many ringers in one choir means that ringers aren't busy or challenged. One extra ringer can be a "floater."

13. How should bell ringers be recruited?

You may have an announcement in a church bulletin, or have sign-up sheets in church, but personal contact is probably the best way. Sometimes you need to gently nudge people, sometimes you have to almost beg. Other ringers can help recruit. Getting enough interested, committed ringers tends to be a more difficult problem for adult bell choir than for children's choirs.

Finding substitute ringers is often a problem. Once a choir has "former" ringers, these people become good substitutes. When you first begin a bell choir you might try to recruit more ringers than are needed so that there are substitutes available.

14. What are the benefits of ringing?

Ringers gain a sense of serving by sharing the joyful sound of bells with the congregation. Another benefit of a handbell group is the close, personal relationships which develop through a small group where each person must give his best. The desire to belong and to be needed is satisfied by ringing in a bell choir. New members in a congregation often are good recruits for ringing. It is a good way to get new members involved in the congregation.

PART III. Resources for the Director

15. Who are some good music publishers?

Agape (Hope) Publishing Company
Carol Stream, IL 60187
Phone: 1-800-323-1049
e-mail: hope@hopepublishing.com

Concordia Publishing House
3558 South Jefferson Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63118

Phone: 1-800-325-3040
e-mail: cphmusic@cph.org

Choristers' Guild, Lorenz, AGEHR, and GIA are also publishers worthy of your examination. If you order music through Jeffers Handbell Supply, you will receive these publishers' promos with CDs.

16. How can the music be obtained?

You may order directly from most publishers. Larger music stores can order the music for you. Handbell suppliers often carry large inventories of a lot of music and can handle orders from several publishers in one shipment.

Jeffers Handbell Supply, Inc.
Carillon Park
P. O. Box 1728
Irmo, SC 29063-1728
Phone: 1-800-JHS-BELL
E-mail: jhsbell@aol.com
Website: www.HandbellWorld.com

Heitz Handbells and Music
6603 Queen Avenue S., Suite S
Richfield, MN 55423
Phone: 1-877-426-3235
E-mail: info@heitzhandbells.com

The website of Jeffers is very helpful. They will answer most any question about handbells. You can listen to most any piece of music they have in stock.

17. From whom can handbell supplies be obtained?

The bell manufacturers also sell supplies—polishing cloths, gloves, etc. Jeffers Handbell Supply also has all items available.

18. What are some good handbell instruction manuals?

- A. *Mastering Musicianship in Handbells*, Donald Allured, Genovox Music Group, Nashville, TN. This updates his two previous books, *Joyfully Ring* and *Musical Excellence in Handbells*, both published by Broadman Press, Nashville, TN.
- B. *Learning to Ring, Director's Manual*, S. Berry, J. VanValey, Lorenz Publishing Co., Dayton, OH.
- C. *Handbells in the Liturgy*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO
- D. *Healthy Ringing*, Susan Berry, available through Malmark and Jeffers.

19. Are there instructional videos available?

Videos are available from the manufacturers and handbell suppliers. Some worthy ones are:

Bell Basics by S. Berry and D. Weck (Hope Publishing House)
Sound Advice, Malmark Handbell Maintenance, available through Malmark.

20. Are there resources available to help plan for the worship service?

The Creative Use of Handbells in Worship, Hal H. Hopson, Hope Publishing Co. and *Handbells in the Liturgy*, Concordia Publishing House are two helpful books. *Planning Christian Worship*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, WI is an excellent resource. It provides the main focus for each Sunday's worship. It also lists hymns appropriate for the service. These hymn suggestions will help you pick appropriate music.

21. Are there resource people available who could help answer questions?

Experienced fellow directors are usually very helpful to new directors. There is a camaraderie among bell directors. Feel free to contact me at anytime.

PART IV. WELS Handbell Festival

22. What is the purpose of WELS Handbell Festivals?

The purpose of WELS Handbell Festivals has always been to worship the Lord through the musical medium of handbells. Festivals allow ringers and directors to grow in their knowledge and skills. It gives opportunity to share experiences. Ringers and directors experience a special bond of Christian fellowship through working together.

Participation in a WELS Handbell Festival does much to maintain enthusiasm for ringing.

23. What is the format of WELS Handbell Festivals?

WELS Handbell Festivals are two-day events, held on a weekend in March or April. All participating choirs prepare the same music and work on that music from fall to spring. Saturday is spent rehearsing the music. On Sunday afternoon a festival concert is rung.

The first WELS Handbell Festival was held in 1980 with five congregations participating. Today the WELS bell choirs are divided into three regions. Regional festivals are held for two years. In the third year a national festival is held. Almost half of the WELS congregations with handbell choirs have participated in WELS festivals. Any WELS congregations with a handbell choir is invited and welcomed to the festivals.

PART V. Deo Sola Gloria

Whether you are a new or experienced director or ringer, I hope this presentation has given you some helpful information and ideas. I hope I have conveyed to you my joy in serving the Lord through the handbell choirs of my congregation and by my involvement in WELS Handbell Festivals.

Approach your work with Christian humility and with the confidence that the Lord will be with you and will bless your efforts. We acknowledge that all of our musical talents are a gift of God's grace. We dedicate them to the glory of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Cheryl Diener
750 Leighton Rd.
Waupaca, WI 54981
Phone: 715-258-7203
E-mail: jdiener@charter.net