

Organizing a Handbell Program

Retention of Ringers

by Karen Eastburn



a resource for members of
Handbell Musicians
O F A M E R I C A

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Love needs

When I speak of retention of ringers, I'm really thinking about the ways in which the leadership and other ringers provide care and nurturing to each other. Regardless of how we care for and treat each other, there will sometimes be life circumstances that do not allow us to continue ringing. Still, there are ways in which we can care for and affirm our ringers, to help them feel valued and wanted, which will increase their satisfaction and desire to continue serving in handbell ministry year after year.

Every ringer needs to feel:

- Needed
- Wanted
- Valued
- Respected
- Appreciated

One could summarize all of these needs as being part of "love," as all are components of a loving relationship. Ringers must feel needed, as the group goals can't be met without each individual. If ringers feel they are accepted for who they are, and that they fit in as part of the group, they will believe they are wanted. It is our responsibility to also help each person understand that they are valued and that what they have to offer is good enough; that their gift is worthy. Lastly, ringers should each feel that they are respected by the director and other group members. Respect for each person's time given, effort put forth, and dedication to the ministry should be appreciated and given respect.

Leaders of ringing ensembles will find various ways to accomplish the nurturing of our ringers so that their emotional needs in ministry are



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met. A variety of methods may be used to provide opportunities for ringers to feel needed, wanted, valued, respected, and appreciated.

Group recognition

Your church, staff, pastors, and congregation will appreciate the music and service your ringers provide, but you may need to orchestrate opportunities for this to be expressed to ringers. Recognizing the efforts and contributions of your ministry will show ringers that the church values them, supports them, and respects their time and dedication. Some ideas:

1. Receiving appreciation from the pastor or other significant person during their visit to your rehearsal
2. Asking the pastor to offer verbal praise to the group, not just to you, after a performance
3. Keeping a line item in the church budget (a tangible way of saying your group is important)
4. Providing space and time for rehearsals and ample opportunities to perform

Personal recognition

These may help provide the individual kind of recognition each person needs.

Naming

Say something positive to each person, by name, at least once per rehearsal. This is really not very difficult to do, when you think about it. The more you look for good things about someone, the more you will find. Congratulate, by name, the person who finally conquers that tricky rhythm, the person who shows up early, the ringer who helps another with a ride home, etc.

Click Images for
Larger View

Ephesians Handbell Choir Service Awards

*I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I
may share in its blessings. 1 Corinthians 9:23*



Service Pin Card



Service Donation



Year End Compilation DVD

Affirmation

This should happen in various ways each season.

Music Appreciation Day: Plan a liturgy designed for the day, with names in the bulletin, luncheon

Group Recognition: Invite the choir to dinner or dessert at your place; Give a donation to a special area of your church or to the Guild in honor of your group (be sure you give them a keepsake of this gesture, like a printed or hand-written card or acknowledgement)

Individual Recognition: Personal notes written by you, small gift, fellowship time, a donation made in each person's honor, verbally thanked often

Service awards: Pins, certificates, etc., to recognize years of service

Small gift ideas: Specialty cookies (bell or music note) shaped with "thank you" or group name on them; small bell gift, pin, hat, tie dye gloves, gloves with names machine-embroidered inside, bell tree pins (a tree with the number of bells on it for years of service) worn on your bell uniform, a flowering plant, a handbell CD of music, or a home-baked treat of some kind

End of Year: Make a compilation DVD of pictures, videos, programs, quotes from ringers about the music, or funny things they say in rehearsal (be mindful of copyright laws)

Graduating Seniors: Provide a special way to honor the commitment of high school seniors in your program with a special gift, name on a plaque, a hymnal inscribed to them, etc.

Ringers who move away: Dedicated ringers who move away can be honored with a token gift, such as a hymnal engraved with their name on the cover, which is our choice

Birthdays of ringers: Birthdays provide a great way to individually affirm each person's importance by sending a card or email, singing to them, or taking turns bringing a treat that says "you are special."

Group-building activities

Plan short, fun activities designed to mingle ringers and demonstrate the interdependence of the group members. Many ideas can be found in ministry resources and on the internet. Also, nothing will build up your group's togetherness more than a trip. A trip across town or a trip across the country will give unique opportunities for friendships and memories to be made. Our last trip was to a local church with an active bell tower, where the youth learned about change ringing and climbed up into the tower for a go at ringing the bells.

Connection

Leaders of bell choirs are responsible for helping individuals create personal relationships and becoming connected to one another by providing opportunities and guidance.

Design time in the rehearsal or during social events for ringers to share about themselves. These moments help each ringer to be known and to know others. During our first rehearsal, I passed out notes with the name of an animal written on them, and each ringer had to make the noise of the animal and find other animals, by listening, that would fit into their group: dogs, insects, birds, and farm animals. Another easy way is to pick a topic, and then everyone has to quickly share something related to that topic. Last week it was, "What website do you waste the most time on?" Another example is, "What was your favorite cartoon as a kid?" We do these in between pieces in rehearsal. All you need is something easy, short, and fun.

Be deliberate about planning social events. If you don't plan them, they may not happen. Designate a volunteer ringer to plan an event; like dinner out, lunch after church, or a trip to a local concert. People ring for the music, but they also ring to be with others and to make friends.



Tower Trip



Lunch Group

Listen: Staying after rehearsal, arriving early, answering emails promptly, and always being sensitive to others' needs will build a caring relationship between director and ringers.

Office Hours: A friend started a great routine of planning to be in the rehearsal room at a set time each week, aside from rehearsals, in which he would be available for one-on-one practice, ensemble rehearsal, techniques training, discussion, or whatever a ringer wanted to work on.

Recognizing significant life events

We all experience significant events in our lives that affect us very deeply. As a caring body of Christ, it is appropriate to respond in some manner to these. Although there are a myriad of events that could affect us as individuals, it seems wise to decide which type of events to respond to and what kind of response you wish to provide. Some groups send a card, make a meal, or offer a personal contact by phone or in person. The most common events that we respond to are ringers who become parents, deaths of immediate family, marriages of ringer members, moves out of the area, and serious illnesses.

The manner of your response is not nearly as important as the fact that you have acknowledged, sympathized, shared the excitement, or grieved with your friend. Choose your method of response to each situation you can envision, and keep in mind two guidelines:

Choose a response that will not wear you out over time. For example, if you make meals for someone for a week, do you think your group can keep it up for every similar circumstance? Maybe it should be just one meal—or is the situation so unique that it bears extra support from your group?

Choose a method that will work for you, but be consistent from one ringer to another so that all members feel equally loved and cared for by your actions.

Communication

As with all groups, a key factor in success and reaching your goals is communication between members. Find what method of communication is the most successful for you and your ringers and plan ahead to disseminate information early enough that people can set aside the time needed for rehearsals and performances.

For a long time, we used handouts and followed up with reminder postcards. This task took up a good bit of my time and a fair amount of money, but it was very effective. Currently, email has replaced postcards as the reminder for our events the week before. Also, we have used our Facebook page to connect, remind, and generate excitement for upcoming events, as we continue to build ringer participation.

Also, I have used a newsletter to convey information about holiday events or end of year events when the schedule threatens to be very full. By providing a hard copy at rehearsals and another copy via email and online, we are able to keep numerous ringers and various ensembles in touch with each other's schedules. I don't think it's necessary to do a newsletter every month, or even every quarter; I produce them when the situation seems to dictate its usefulness.

Building trust

As the leader or a ringing ensemble, it may be difficult to accept, but it primarily falls on you what kind of experience your ringers have behind the table. It is crucial that you select music for the ringers you have and for their current skill level, rather than playing music that you



View a sample newsletter

*“By this
everyone will
know that
you are my
disciples, if
you love one
another.”*

John 13:35
NIV

want to play for other reasons. If your choir is L3 but they ring once a month, you may need to choose L2-L2+ music based solely on the amount of preparation time you are given, perhaps only occasionally ringing L3. If your ringers are often left thinking or saying, “I didn’t get that piece,” “I missed those notes,” “I was lost,” “I wish we had two more weeks,” or other statements of regret, then take an honest look at what you are doing.

Ringin in worship should be an uplifting experience for all involved—ringers and listener—and if it isn’t, that may explain ringers not coming back for another year. Handbell ringin is unique and specialized and requires incredible dedication by ringers and directors alike. Don’t shortchange anyone’s experience by asking more of them than they can give. Getting the correct notes is just the beginning, as true music making occurs when musicians have attained a level of mastery over their challenges. As your director, ringers place their complete trust in you, that you will not allow them to perform at less than the best they can do. It is your responsibility to honor that trust.

Pray for one another

Whatever else you choose for your rehearsal time, do not forget or diminish the importance of praying for one another. As Christians, this is the most tangible thing we can do for each other. Find a method for sharing prayer concerns and joy prayers with the members of your ensemble. Have a sharing time each week, write a prayer journal and email them out, break up into pairs and share with the other person, and covenant to pray daily for that person the following week.

For children, I have found it beneficial to have them write something down, and at the end of the hour you read them and get more information from them. This way you can control the flow of the sharing time, which is important with children who tend to be very egocentric and not listen to one another.

Please be mindful that when someone is sharing, often they are speaking from the heart, and appropriate respect needs to be given by listening and not talking, and not polishing bells or doing other tasks during sharing. If necessary, reorder your rehearsal so that these conflicts do not happen. Generally, gathering everyone away from the tables to a different part of the room will help the focus be on the speaker. If not, you will need to step in with a gentle reminder that it is time to listen.

Praying at the beginning and/or end helps everyone focus, slow down, and reflect, and will give additional meaning to the music you are ringing by reminding everyone why we are there ringing handbells in Christ's church.

*“I pray for
them. I am not
praying for
the world, but
for those you
have given
me, for they
are yours.”*

John 17:9
NIV



For more information
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a resource for members of
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