

# **Transforming an Inner-city Church: History and Attitudes Surrounding a Paid Children's Choir**

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## **Abstract**

At various religious and ecclesiastical institutions, individual choir members singing in boys, girls, or mixed groups receive weekly compensation of various amounts for their participation. Typically, members are paid to attend rehearsals and to present choral music at religious services, as well as at other concerts and special events. The practice has been both lauded and criticized, even though it has been in existence for many years. There are some that feel singing in a children's choir should be a voluntary activity, primarily for enjoyment and educational purposes only. Others feel that children learn responsibility and pride through their participation in such a group. Many religious organizations take pride in the groups they are able to foster and promote and feel it is part of their mission.

Through interviews with children, parents, choral directors, and adults who participated in like programs as children, answers to the following points are explored: Do children who would not otherwise be attracted to sing in a choir learn to value their participation in a musical activity? Are successful members of these choral ensembles populated with singers who would likely be participating anyway? Does the compensation affect the children's attitude and behaviour in the choir rehearsal? Does the compensation increase the numerical participation level, as well as the musical level of a given group? Does participation in such an ensemble have life-long effects? How do ecclesiastical and civic communities really view and respond to such groups?

## **Introduction**

In 2007, I founded, at United Congregational Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a new children's choir program where the participants are paid a stipend to participate. As this was a new program for the church, the idea was initially met with curiosity and even some scepticism. As the Minister of Music at the church, I felt that a method of growing and expanding the very small and unviable children's choir was needed. Basically, the children participants are paid to rehearse Wednesday and sing in the Sunday service each week during the program year. The choir participates as well in occasional concerts and other special presentations in the community. This presentation is a history of beginning the choir, the reasons for its existence, and the attitudes and reactions to the choir from the participants, their parent/guardians, and church members and officials. These attitudes and reactions were gained through observation, reflection, and interviews. After its beginning, the choir has not only been accepted, but has been strongly embraced by the church and has formed an invaluable part of the church's ministry.

## **Background**

United Congregational Church was first founded by early settlers and Pilgrims in south eastern Connecticut in 1695. The first church, founded by about 20 people, was a log cabin in a rural wooded area. The area became Connecticut's largest industrial city from the mid to late 1800s through the 1950s. During this period, the church became quite affluent, and choirs, organs, and an active music program were very much prominent. By the early 1900s, the church featured a professional organist and a paid quartet that apparently was in demand throughout the state for musical events and services. In 1926, an expensive new church building was furnished with a 1,000 seat sanctuary in the Georgian colonial style. By its heyday in the 1940s and '50s, the church featured artists of international stature in organ concerts, with performers such as Jean Langlais, Robert Baker, and Claire Crozier. The organist was on the faculty of the renowned Union Theological Seminary in New York, and the large choir and concert society regularly featured such works as Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Verdi's *Requiem*, and Handel's *Messiah*, among others. In 1953, the church installed a large 4-manual pipe organ. The church was among Connecticut's largest Congregational congregations with more than 2,000 members. At its height, more than 75 children participated in a graded children's choir program.

Throughout the 1960s to 2000s, the church, being in a central inner-city location, felt the long and slow effects of being centrally located in a declining industrial city. The neighbourhoods surrounding the church radically changed, and as members whose families lived nearby and attended moved to suburban locations, the church also began to decline in membership, though its large endowment sustained a long standing tradition of quality musical and other programs. Nonetheless, when I arrived in 1996 as Minister of Music, the church had a membership of about 450, Sunday attendance of about 125, and 8 to 0 children in the children's choir. The choir featured a recorder instructor and an instructor of Orff instruments.

While Connecticut is a wealthy state, its inner-cities are in a difficult position, with largely poor, disadvantaged or immigrant populations, who live, in many cases, in dilapidated and run-down rental apartments. The schools are in also in a quite difficult position, with underfunding a big problem. While the church reached out to its surroundings with community programs and opened its facilities to its neighbours, few new members came from neighbourhoods surrounding the church.

Though the church has been able to maintain its adult choral program, though hiring professional soloists and ringers for concerts like presentations of the Mozart, Fauré, and Duruflé *Requiems*, for example, the children's choir declined as only a few children attended the church or Sunday school. By 2001, a children's choir was virtually untenable and was discontinued. When a few families joined in 2003, it provided the impetus for a choir, but the choir never reached more than 8 to 10 participants rehearsing on Sundays after church, and even participation from those children was relatively intermittent and unreliable. As some of those children reached high school age, by 2007, participation was down to roughly 4 members on a regular basis. Sunday school attendance hovered around 10, and church attendance and membership declined further, to about 300 members, with Sunday attendance about 80 to 100. It looked like any efforts at sustaining a children's choir would be fruitless. In fact, one church official indicated "there was no children's choir before beginning [the paid children's choir]." The average age of the congregation was on the older side, and as the few children in the church were not all singers, the numbers were too few to support a children's choir ministry. Clearly, if the church was to engage in children's music ministry, children would have to be attracted from outside the church's families and membership. I decided that attracting children through a paid children's choir program might be a possibility. I began exploring this possibility through conversations with the church leadership.

## Seeking Approval and Funding for a Paid Children's Choir

Although I grew up singing in church and school choirs, I had never personally had any experience with a paid church children's choir. My organ professor at the Manhattan School of Music, Alec Wyton, was a well-known conductor and church musician. His career included a 20 year directorship of the choir school at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. In the church music classes he taught, he spoke of the many paid children's choirs that he was associated with in various churches across the country in the Episcopal/ Anglican tradition. He indicated that the children took pride in receiving a stipend, even if the stipend was more of a token and not a huge or generous amount of money. By coincidence, one of the biggest financial supporters of the music program at United Congregational Church sang in the church's Chancel choir from 1938 to 2004, a total of 66 years. He started by singing in the paid boys choir of the St. John's Anglican/ Episcopal church across the street. He later sang in the Yale Wiffenpoofs, his own men's barbershop quartet, and the church's chancel choir for so many years. "Yes," he said in an interview, "it all started in that Men and Boys Choir (personal communication)." From this example, it can be seen that children's choirs are vitally important, and if children can be drawn in and develop a love of choral music, it can truly set the stage for a lifetime of involvement.

In our situation, and in thinking about what might draw children to the United Congregational Church, the idea of paying children to sing seemed like it could be something worth exploring, but funding seemed out of the question. This kind of program would be outside the scope and tradition of a mainline protestant organization like United Congregational Church.

However, opportunity knocked. In the fall of 2006, the church was informed that it would be receiving a significant grant from the foundation of a church member who had recently died. The Norma F. Pfriem Foundation was the legacy of a well-known philanthropist in the area. While living, she contributed to many projects at the church as well as the Norma Pfriem Cancer Center at the community's primary medical facility, Bridgeport Hospital. The Foundation's only stipulation was that the church use its grant allocation within one year, in a way that would honour as well as continue to name Norma Pfriem's legacy and life's generosity. There was indication that if funds were used in such a way that the trustees of the Foundation approved, then it would be likely that funding would continue in upcoming years. From this opportunity, I sensed that a paid children's choir would be an excellent project for part of these funds. I decided to see if a stipend to the children participating in a choir could be part of a revitalized children's choir program.

My next step was to speak to the trustees of the church who would be providing direction for these funds, and to convince them of the validity of my idea. In a November meeting, I met with this group and presented this idea as a fleshed out proposal. The senior minister of the church was totally against it, and voiced his disapproval strongly in a number of trustee meetings, as well as eventually from the pulpit. A couple of the trustees indicated that children should sing for the love of God, service to the church, and the joy of singing. Some trustees expressed the attitude that a paid children's choir was nothing that should be considered. Nonetheless, others on the board were intrigued by the idea. Overall, a strong selling point was that a paid children's choir would be a way to draw interested children and their families to the

church, given that an “Advanced Choir” would participate in the service each week. We would also integrate Orff instruction and recorders, long traditions of the church’s children’s program from the 1950s to 1990s. There was no certainty whether this program would draw in any children. Nonetheless, I began developing strategies of how to start this kind of a choir from scratch, as in reality there was not much of an in-house population of families with children to draw from.

Luckily for this program, in this particular Congregational church, the majority vote of the trustees can override the minister, and the program was approved by a majority of the trustees in the December meeting—with a couple of dissensions. It seemed to the trustees to be a good use of the funds, and the idea of the choir was one that seemed like it would meet the granting Foundation’s goals. I indicated the project could begin quickly, and show success by the end of the program year. I requested a bit less than half of the funds that the Foundation granted to the church. The suggestion was made that the choir be named “The Norma Pfriem Children’s Choir,” reflecting the name of the late benefactress of the Foundation giving the funds to the church. Approval of the project came at the December meeting of the church’s board of trustees. As the choir began to be organized, the senior minister of the Church tendered his resignation, and ironically preached his last sermon on the day the choir sang in its first Sunday service.

### **Beginning the Choir**

Once the project was approved, work had to begin immediately on starting the choir. I had indicated that a children’s choir could begin and show success by the end of the year. A logical starting time would be in September of an academic year, however, there was a need to show the Foundation trustees a successful outcome that would invite them to continue the grant going forward. It was really the story of seizing the opportunity at hand, even if the time frame was not the most optimal.

### **How to begin?**

First, in researching the choir, I had talked to other area churches that had paid choirs. These were mostly wealthy suburban Episcopal/Anglican churches, and the majority seemed to pay a small or token amount. They drew primarily from their own church membership, which, in churches with a large concentration of families, offered many prospects. One church I took as a model was the Trinity Episcopal Church Choir of Boys & Men, in New Haven, Connecticut. This church has a long standing tradition of choral excellence, dating from the 1860s, and is known for its high quality programs.

Basically, this choir, of any I found, paid the highest amounts to its participants. Still, they were not paying a lot of money. I took what they were paying and in most cases doubled or tripled it, reasoning that we, starting from scratch, in a less than attractive inner-city neighbourhood would need a more attractive rate. Trinity Church New Haven is located on the city green, steps away from Yale University and in an attractive part of town. From where we were starting, I reasoned that a more substantial stipend would be necessary to overcome a less than ideal location, and a lack of core families to draw from. In any case, what is actually paid to the children’s choir members is the smallest part of the budget, as other costs include necessary materials and programming staff. The following is a summary of the pay amounts for Trinity Church in New Haven, Connecticut: The boys are paid twice yearly in December and June on the following scale:

- Novices, \$15 per month
- Juniors, \$20 per month
- Seniors, \$25 per month
- Choristers, grade 7 or younger, \$30 per month
- Choristers, grade 8, \$35 per month
- Choristers, grade 9, \$40 per month

Lead boys, the head chorister, and others who do extra jobs for the choir receive additional pay.

The rates and budget for the Norma Pfriem Children's Choir are as follows:

- Grades 8 and 9, \$10 per practice and \$10 per Sunday service
- Grade 7, \$9
- Grade 6, \$8
- Grades 3 to 5, \$5

At the conclusion of each year, each choir member would receive a \$1 raise to incentivize their participation for the following season. Again, I had no idea whether this would be enough to attract any children – an educated guess. Nonetheless, the amounts seemed attractive to the children participants. The second step was to identify and interview an assistant director and staff. I reached out to numerous contacts, placed advertisements in local papers and journals, with the result of a number of applicants who were interviewed. Fortunately, among the applicants, a talented secondary school music teacher with a master's degree in choral music applied. She was taking time out from teaching to begin a family, and was able to begin work with the choir in the middle of the year. Her job description included, conducting the choir in rehearsals and services; choosing appropriate repertoire in consultation with the Minister of Music; communication with parents and the choir members; planning other events; and coordination all other tasks related to the administration of the choir.

With funding and a conductor in place, the next step was to recruit children for the choir. I began by talking to two of the soloists in the church's adult choir who are voice teachers, who recommended some and talked to some of their students. I sent emails to all local area schools, inner-city and suburban. I placed ads in the newspaper, contacted other local choir directors and vocal instructors, and everyone I knew. Finally, over the course of three Saturdays, 20 children auditioned. Quite a number were visibly excited to audition for the opportunity to be in such a choir. Six came from the existing church membership, and 11 came from outside the church. Another 3 children auditioned, who, for various reasons, could not commit to the choir program.

On February 14, 2007, the choir began with 17 members, and the choir sang the following Sunday. The choir was divided into the advanced choir, which would sing every week for the introit, beginning hymn, and first anthem with the adult choir, and then go either to Sunday school, or to an additional rehearsal with their director in the choir room. The Training Choir, consisting of grades 3 to 5 would join in the Sunday service once per month. These Sundays became a "Children's Service" with the entire choir remaining in place for the full service.

The choir broke for the summer, and we commenced recruiting for the fall of 2007. By that time, more members were auditioned who had heard of the choir through word of mouth,

reaching out to schools, and advertisements. The choir started the new season with 26 members, with a few more auditioning and joining as the year progressed: We had 17 in the advanced choir and 9 in the training choir. A few members did drop out for various reasons along the way.

In the fall of 2008, we instituted a choir camp day, and this resulted in a number of singers who invited friends who subsequently joined the choir. The choir had various sessions, using boomwhackers, Orff instruments, handbells, handchimes, and singing sessions, followed by a pizza lunch at the end of the day. The choir for 2008-2009 totalled between 33-35 members. Again, members auditioned at the end of August, throughout the year, and again few dropped out as the year progressed.

### Choir Accomplishments

Overall, we found that with just one rehearsal a week, we had no time to cover instruction on recorders or Orff instruments, and used those funds to hire a local university student to serve as a helper with the children's choir. Over the past two and one half years, the choir has sang in concerts with the adult choir at the church and at the following events: the local Cancer awareness program, Relay for life; the national anthem and "God Bless America" at the local minor league baseball game; Christmas carols and holiday music for a Christmas party of the area GE Corporation Headquarters at the local arena; a fundraising event of the Norma Pfriem Cancer Center; a fundraising event of the Greater Bridgeport council of Churches; and a yearly Halloween concert at the church sponsored by the local chapter of the American Guild of Organists. We decided that members would not receive a stipend for these outreach events.

Each year, the choir continues to increase in quality of music-making and performance. While the choir has not reached the professional level of an advanced children's community choir, or Trinity Church in New Haven, the choir has been considered a success by church officials and members, who now enthusiastically endorse it and are proud of the choir's accomplishments.

Since the institution of the choir, the trustees have voted twice to reinstate it, even though requests for funds from other programs have also arisen. I interviewed a number of church officials; the church treasurer said: "It is impressive to see 30 plus members sitting in the chancel along with the adult choir, which has also expanded due to parents/grandparents of children's choir members being involved." An interesting aspect about the choir is that from its inception, children from both the inner-city surrounding neighbourhoods, as well as suburban areas were recruited.

In order to get a sense of the attitudes surrounding the choir, children's choir members, their parents, and church officials were interviewed. Typical responses are included here. To the question: "Do you feel any difference of commitment level to the children's choir program at United Congregational Church since receiving a pay amount (personal communication)?" the majority of singers responded similarly to: "No, I enjoy singing and I feel it's more like a hobby or interest rather than a job (personal communication)." Although a small percentage responded similarly to: "I feel like the choir is my job, it's ok (personal communication)." Parents typically indicated:

I think the non-paid members of the adult choir are just as committed as the paid members of the choir because they love the choir. They participate for their enjoyment and that raises their level of commitment

to be as high, if not higher than paid choir members. I do think the children feel obligated to attend (personal communication).

Before the institution of the Norma Pfriem Children's Choir, some parents of choir members felt worried that children would actually be more induced to quit the choir and commitment to the church because with the pay, they could more easily quit with the justification of "it's just a job (personal communication)." Some parents did feel that children should participate in the choir as their duty, or for the service aspects to the church of being in a choir. However, one parent's daughter quit the choir during the middle of the second year, only to rejoin with a friend in the third year because she missed the musical activities, fun and being a part of the group. It seems the pay amount didn't actually affect her commitment one way or the other in the end. However, some parents wrote: "I think the children are motivated by the money, instead of singing for church (personal communication)." Another parent indicated, "We do not believe that payment will lead to a lower commitment level. We do, however, believe that payment may lead to youngsters singing for money and not for the love of music or God (personal communication)." Another commented,

We want our girls to participate in a choir because they love music and/or the experience. We were concerned that they wouldn't sing from their hearts and would become jaded by money. We no longer have this concern because we realize that they love the choir, the music selections and the camaraderie (personal communication).

The participants were asked if they would "feel a different commitment level to the choir if they were not paid?" In answer to this question, some children compared their commitment level to what they perceived was the commitment level in the adult choir.

For example, a children's choir member wrote, "I think the kids do [feel a different commitment level] but the adults enjoy it (personal communication)." Another wrote: "I think the older people like to be there, it doesn't matter if they get paid or not (personal communication)." It should be noted though, however, that more than half the participants in the adult choir are paid as well, either as choral scholars or soloists. One parent indicated: "I think there is a higher sense of commitment because the children are paid (personal communication)." Another parent stated,

Sometimes the kids are tired on a Wednesday or have other school commitments. They have to make a decision about what to attend and that can be a struggle. Also, sometimes I think the younger kids may tend to get a little bored in practice when it's not their turn to sing. Practice teaches them patience (personal communication).

A follow-up question asked, "Does being paid affect the choir's singing and focus in rehearsals?" One singer's response was typical: "I think it sometimes does because the directors decrease money if the kids aren't there or if they are talking. In general, I don't believe the behavior is different (personal communication)." Other children wrote that being paid "doesn't affect" the choir's singing and focus." No children felt bigger pride in their commitment to the choir because they were paid. A training choir member wrote: "I would have pride in being in the choir even if I didn't get paid (personal communication)."

Children reported the best part of singing with Norma Pfriem Children's Choir was: "Singing with all my friends and for a good cause (personal communication)." Others reported on the activities: "Going to the baseball game to sing, the choir camp, and (best of all) the end of the year party were all fun (personal communication)." A parent commented that "the girls have enjoyed themselves immensely and love the variation in songs – from Spanish to Latin origin, etc. Thus, we would rate the experience highly (personal communication)."

Some of the negative responses children reported in singing with Norma Pfriem Children's Choir included: "That it's at 9 a.m. on Sundays and rehearsal is so long on Wednesday (personal communication)." Another wrote: "that we have to get up early, just to sing (personal communication)." When asked, "Would you recommend the choir to others, and why? If the choir was not paid, would you recommend it to others?" Children involved in the choir typically wrote: "Yes because it's fun (personal communication)." And, "Yes because it's fun to sing on Sundays. And we get to do lots of fun activities, when you go on Wednesday (personal communication)."

Parents typically rated their child's participation with comments such as, "I enjoy my children's participation in the choir (personal communication)." And, "I look forward to them singing on Sundays. I think it teaches them responsibility and enforces commitment (personal communication)." Another comment stated, "Being a church member, it's beautiful to see the children singing on Sundays (personal communication)." One parent wrote,

I would recommend the choir to others paid or unpaid. [The directors] are teaching the kids valuable lessons about singing that they probably could not get at their normal school choir. Also, the group participates in a lot of extra-curricular activities, other than singing in church on Sunday (personal communication).

Another parent indicated,

I think that is a positive experience for the kids. We are happy that our daughter participates in the choir because she enjoys it and it serves as a stress reliever. Participation in the choir helps her to see the importance of teamwork and unity (personal communication).

## Conclusions

A church official wrote,

Five families have joined the church in the last year; more younger adults are attending the services. Most all the children attend Sunday school, and most of the older youth participate in our Church's Pilgrim Fellowship for youth. Sunday School, Youth Group, and Norma Pfriem Children's Choir have become very intertwined, making all three programs much more viable and vital to the church.

I think this has been an important factor in maintaining support and the church's funding for the choir. However, we do not require the children to attend Sunday school or participate in the youth group, and some do not. Nonetheless, many make friends with the other children in

the choir, so we see this participation as strengthening their friendships, which affects the choir as well.

From interviewing children and parents, having a paid children's choir has attracted a quite larger number of singers to the church's children's choir program. Nonetheless, motivation and support seems to still be needed from the children and their families, if the children continue in the choir over the long term. Overall, we can also track 15 children over the two and one half years who have joined and either not returned or quit after a few months. In analyzing these children and in interviews, where possible, we found that, 3 graduated grade 8 and went to a private high school that was far enough away to not be able to make the practice time on Wednesday afternoon; 3 were 7 to 8 grade boys whose voices were changing and did not feel comfortable in the treble children's choir; 1 dropped out to "sing in a rock band;" 3 quit as sports commitments were more predominant; and five simply dropped out. Of these 5, all were from inner or near downtown neighbourhoods. These children probably could have used the stipend the most, but observation shows that they did not receive as high a level of family support in continued attendance. For example, the children were left, not picked up for 45 minutes after the rehearsal, or didn't show up for Sunday services regularly or for concert events. We did institute a van service to pick up children, which 3 to 4 children participate in on a regular basis. Ways to better attract and maintain this population are being researched and explored.

Children and families seem to be attracted to the choir through the combination of pay and program. However, the pay is not enough to motivate children to continue if they do not enjoy the choir's program and activities. It seems the musical rewards and strong family support are what motivate the children to continue in the group and its activities. Overall, the choir has been transformative in the life of United Congregational Church. The attendance at the church's services has increased, and the services are livelier, more energetic, and youth focused. The older members of the congregation are extremely appreciative of the contributions of the children's choir members. Children in the choir have had a positive experience and have grown in their musical skill and accomplishment. The members have made friends from a wide range of backgrounds. Overall, the implementation of the paid Norma Pfriem Children's Choir at United Congregational Church has been overwhelmingly positive.