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## Community Choirs



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### Choral Connections: Building Community Among Conductors

By Matt Hill

One of the most compelling benefits of participating in choir is the sense of belonging it fosters. In a world where social isolation and loneliness are increasing, and where screentime is increasing among all demographics in the U.S. population, the act of singing together in a choir is almost countercultural. Choir members work collaboratively toward shared goals, such as preparing for concerts or improving vocal techniques, which cultivates a sense of camaraderie and teamwork, and creates a final product that is greater than the sum of the individual contributions.

As choral conductors, we are intimately familiar with the values and benefits associated with participating in a choir. We’ve given our professional lives (and some of our personal lives) to maintaining and perpetuating the choral art and the communities that surround it. This profession, however, is by its nature isolated and isolating. The responsibilities go well beyond rehearsing and concertizing, and in most cases we are the lone captains of our respective programs, be they scholastic, parochial, or community ensembles. While many of us have learned to work and thrive in this environment, we too should remember the value of community and connection for ourselves. This is not to say that we can’t or shouldn’t build and maintain relationships with our choristers—of course we do that by the very nature of our work. But the need to maintain at least some layer of separation from our singers (even in the case of adult ensembles) creates limitations on the level of connectedness we can experience.

This is where ACDA and its state chapters have been an invaluable asset to me. When I began attending the

Nebraska chapter's summer conference in 2007, I was a twenty-five-year-old church and community choir director, a college dropout (temporarily), and felt underqualified and completely on my own. It was at that summer conference that I began a journey of fellowship with colleagues that has become one of the pillars of my professional work for the past eighteen years.

### **The Importance of Community, Networking, and Relationships for Choral Directors**

Given the amount of time we spend by ourselves listening to music, programming repertoire, studying scores, preparing concert programs, emailing the piano tuner, etc., it is crucial for our longevity in the field (and for our continued growth and enjoyment) to find ways to meaningfully connect with other people who understand the full breadth and depth of our work.

The significance of community, networking, and relationships among choral directors cannot be overstated. Outside of my family, my two closest relationships are with choral conductors in my state. This is no accident. I am fortunate to have two like-minded choral professionals—both of whom work at the highest levels of their respective niches in the profession—with whom I can share ideas, concerns, dreams, plans, and strategies for my ensembles in full confidence that they not only comprehend the nuances of the conversation, but also that they have me and my ensembles' best interests in mind when they offer opinions and guidance. They are also fully confident in my reciprocal investment into the lives of their choirs, and our triumvirate is built on a foundation of mutual respect and love for one another.

Further, because of the time we spend connecting, be it via our group chat or over a late dinner after our

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respective evening rehearsals or a shared NCDA board meeting, we have also grown to know one another outside of our professional roles. We discuss family matters; we know each other's spouses and children and have a general sense of the things that are going on in each other's lives. This depth of relationship with peer colleagues has become an oasis for me in a sea of tasks and deadlines. Even if the connection point is simply shared memes or baseball trivia, a daily touchpoint with these friends provides levity and freshness to the otherwise narrowly focused work of the day and deepens the relationships, which allows for more serious conversations as the need for them arises.

I am also fortunate to have two colleagues in the Fine and Performing Arts Department at Creighton University with whom I connect daily. The first is a colleague in the music area, our band director, and the other is the head of our dance program. While we do not share discipline-specific challenges, we are all performing artists and performing arts educators with shared professional values and expectations. Every profession brings its unique set of challenges, but finding solutions is easier with trusted confidants to help navigate the path. A quick visit to one of their offices or a lunch "meeting" to discuss departmental business always leads to other conversation, be it about family, future artistic projects, or other tangentially related topics. Similar to my choral connections, these university colleagues and I know about each other's families and the general goings on in each other's lives. These friendships make coming to work easier and more enjoyable, and I suspect results in better job performance for us all as well.

To expand out one layer, service on the state choral director board has afforded me opportunities to get to know many of the active members around the state as we share time together in meetings and at conferences. These relationships have led to a network of shared music libraries, have opened the door for guest conducting opportunities, and in many cases have built up to collaborative opportunities in shared performances with guest artists. We can consult each other for repertoire ideas, rehearsal techniques, guest-artist referrals, successful fundraising approaches, touring guidance, and any other musical or non-musical element of our work. Who better to consult than those who are also

actively engaged in the activities before us?

### ACDA Is This Network

As choral conductors, we all find ourselves focused on the betterment of the singers and audiences in our charge, and we accept that responsibility happily. I encourage you to either build or deepen your relationships with other choral conductors with whom you are philosophically and/or otherwise aligned, and to make regular contact with that person or those people. ACDA provides an incredible foundation for those kinds of connections.

The relationships we build with fellow choral conductors foster a supportive environment where peer review, constructive criticism, and encouragement are the norms. Directors can celebrate one another's successes, encourage one another in down times, and share in the ebbs and flows of life as a choral professional. These connections also provide advocates and allies. Strong colleagues can serve as job references and can open doors to new and exciting professional opportunities.

The choral directing profession is at its best when it is collaborative, and when directors see each other not as competitors but as colleagues. The importance of community, networking, and relationships lies in their capacity to enrich both the music and the musicians. Meaningful relationships with peer colleagues provide a platform for continuous learning, mutual support, and collective joy in the art of choral music. All of this is available to us through our membership in ACDA at the state, regional, and national levels. I encourage you to reach out to someone today, whether that's a colleague in your school or district, or perhaps a connection from a past conference event. If no one comes to mind, reach out to your local ACDA state or region chapter president or R&R chair to see how you can get involved and connect with others in your area. Remember, we are better together! 

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