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Choristers Revive Parish

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Peter Stoltzfus Berton leads rehearsal of the Professional Choristers.

G. Jeffrey MacDonald photo

# Choristers Revive a Congregation

St. John's, Providence, returning to parish status as attendance grows.

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald

Seven of eight child choristers are poised in their seats around a grand piano when the clock strikes five in a quaint neighborhood parish hall just a stone's throw from Narragansett Bay. When the last girl scurries in with her dad two minutes later, rehearsal has already begun.

Holy Week has just ended and some might be tired from singing at four services, but there's no slackening of standards here. Punctuality is prized at St. John the Evangelist Church in Newport, Rhode Island, where choristers ages 7 and older gather twice a week for a rigorous, no-fooling-around choir practice.

It's not just because being on time builds character, although that's part of the reason. It's also because these

children are paid (\$15 to \$30 per month) to do an important job. If they are late, they feel the consequences come payday.

"We're training a child to be responsible and to be professional," says Peter Stoltzfus Berton, executive director of the Choir School of Newport County, a two-year-old umbrella organization for three congregations' youth choirs. "It really helps them to show up on time if their pay is docked if they're late. And that's what we do. If they're late to rehearsal, they are docked half of their pay."

Officially speaking, the job of the Professional Choristers at St. John's is to sing twice a month at Holy Eucharist and perform at special events through the year. But their unofficial job description is larger: to play an

instrumental role in the revival of a 122-year-old congregation by infusing worship with old tradition and new energy.

The St. John's singers form one of the choir school's three pillars. The other two are found at Emmanuel Church and Trinity Church, as each offers a distinct choral experience for children. The Diocese of Rhode Island provides targeted support, and more than 40 children take part across the three programs.

It's early days yet, but the choir school seems to be inspiring a new vibrancy at St. John's. Since the Professional Choristers started singing twice a month at Eucharist, average worship attendance has jumped from 25 to 60. Worship has a lyric quality, such as when choristers lead congregants in singing the Nicene Creed

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and all kneel at the mention of the Incarnation.

Now when St. John's vicar, the Rev. Nathan Humphrey, looks out on his invigorated flock, he sees solemnity, joy, and the beauty of holiness, just as he had hoped when he envisioned what the choir school could do.

"It would attract children, their parents, and grandparents," says Fr. Humphrey while eating dinner alongside the children after rehearsal. "Even if they weren't members of St. John's, it would swell the numbers for the times when their children were singing, and thus bring an extra layer of joy to the whole celebration."

Not long ago, the atmosphere in this seaside congregation was much less cheerful. For the decade from 2003 to 2013, St. John's stumbled through decline after a rector left in an inferno of conflict. Charred feelings helped empty the pews. What had been a charming church in a historic residential area became a place from which many neighbors felt estranged.

A key turning point came in 2013, when the congregation gave up

parish status and voluntarily became a mission church. That step opened the door for diocesan support from a particular fund established with proceeds from the sales of closed church buildings and earmarked for congregational vitality projects around the diocese. St. John's fit the bill, especially since the congregation is one of only two Anglo-Catholic congregations in Rhode Island. (The other, St. Stephen's, is located at the other end of the diocese in Providence.) Humphrey arrived with a vision for a community powered by a choir school.

He knew from experience that the idea could work. He had come to Rhode Island from St. Paul's, K Street, in Washington, D.C., where a choir school had helped revitalize the community by attracting young families. He figured a Newport County school could attract kids from across the city and beyond, and it has. Trinity's Newport Community Youth Choir, for instance, draws singers from 20 miles away in Fall River, Massachusetts.

The model has succeeded in bring-



Peter Stoltzfus Berton stresses a point during rehearsal. G. Jeffrey MacDonald photo

ing people to church who would not otherwise cross the threshold. Tracey Neylon of Newport grew up Congregationalist, her husband grew up Roman Catholic, and neither practices the faith anymore. But she welcomes enrichment activities for her homeschooled daughter. She has no objection to her daughter walking downstairs for Sunday school for a portion of the worship service. And she regards the Professional Choristers as a great value.

The family spends \$200 in yearly tuition, but the payment her daughter receives more than covers the cost. Parents have a job, too: cooking dinner for the group once every six weeks. On this March night, Neylon is serving baked stuffed shells, which the children enjoy after their 45-minute rehearsal and a meal blessing that they say in unison. As she clears the table, she reflects on what makes the commitment worthwhile for her daughter.

"She's getting an incredibly good musical education that I don't think you could find elsewhere in this area," Neylon says. "It's an activity she picked. She chose this herself, and she does it because she likes it. She likes the friends that she's made here, and she enjoys it."

After dinner, the children are not quite done. They walk next door to the sanctuary at 6:30 for another 45-minute rehearsal, this time with the adult choir. On the way out, a 10-year-old girl named Regan explains that her family attends St. Barnabas Ro-



The youth and adult choirs, and the Rev. Nathan Humphrey, at St. John the Evangelist Church in Newport. Photo courtesy of St. John the Evangelist





Two choristers hold a note during rehearsal.

G. Jeffrey MacDonald photo

marked increase in the number of children attending classical and choral music concerts.

For St. John's, which has an annual budget of \$394,000, the Professional Choristers depend on targeted charitable giving to cover the program's \$166,000 in yearly expenses. The bulk of that sum comes from foundation grants and individual donors who have a passion for Anglican choral music and what it can do for Episcopal community life in southern Rhode Island, Humphrey says.

The Choir School "is not designed to be a cash cow," he said. "It is always going to be a typical, nonprofit after-school program. ... Right now, we're simply operating because people believe in us."

With benefactors eager to see both the choir school and Professional Choristers continue, St. John's will no longer seek diocesan support as a mission congregation after this year. The church is applying to regain parish status in the diocese. Humphrey hopes other congregations might find inspiration in the principle that a church can do a lot when it taps into its distinct tradition and offers an experience that families of various stripes genuinely value.

If all goes well, the school might eventually fulfill Berton's vision of offering musical instrument lessons to children in exchange for their participation in Professional Choristers. In the meantime, some are discovering for the first time the beauty and joy of Anglo-Catholic worship.

"We've had completely unchurched families come into the church through this Professional Chorister program, having no religious background at home at all," Berton said. "Now they find they really love the liturgy. They find it fascinating and enjoy the ceremony and the occasion for which they sing." □

man Catholic Church in Portsmouth, but she started coming here for the singing after her mother found the program online.

For children like her, benefits run the gamut from receiving top-notch musical training to making new friends and singing at some big venues, including a trip to St. Bartholomew's Church in New York City. The New York trip has been the biggest highlight, Regan said. The money they receive is nice, they say, but is not what it's all about.

"I like the way Mr. Berton teaches," Regan says. "He makes it fun."

With more being paid to participating families than is collected from them, the Professional Choristers rely on a business model that is anything but tuition-dependent. Each congregation in the choir school partnership has a distinct funding stream that makes the ministry possible. It is not a surplus-generating engine for any of them. Instead, it is a ministry underwritten by various benefactors who appreciate how it supports mission on multiple fronts.

At Emmanuel, the Emmanuel Angel Choir launched last fall as an introductory program for children ages 4 to 7. They learn to match pitch, build rhythm, find their singing voices, and work cooperatively. It's an important source of community,

including non-religious and military families who are in Newport for a year or two during a stint at the Naval War College, said director Waylon Whitley.

"Choirs for young children are virtually nonexistent in schools, so the church has an important role to play in the musical development of children," Whitley said via email. "This has always been the case. Consider how many pop singers attribute their starts in music to singing in their church choirs as children."

At Trinity, the Newport Community Youth Choir is supported by a mission grant from the Diocese of Rhode Island. These participants, ranging in age from 9 to 15, perform a variety of secular and sacred music at many a civic event throughout the year. Practice regimens are less frequent than those of the Professional Choristers at St. John's, thus enabling a wider range of busy families to take part.

"With arts programming in the public schools having been drastically reduced in recent years, Trinity saw an opportunity to offer an after-school program to children in the area using the resources of its strong music ministry," said Stephan Griffin, Trinity's music director, via email. Since the choir launched as an outreach ministry in fall 2013, he has seen a