

St. Paul's United Methodist Church – A Ringing Tradition

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A Ringing Tradition

The four hand bell choirs of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Kensington are a much-appreciated addition to the weekly church services and to the community.

In fact, when Dr. F. Thornton Lauriat interviewed for the position of Church Music Director, he was asked if he could conduct hand bell choirs. Although he had only heard a hand bell choir once, he answered that he'd love to learn. And learn he did- traveling to every hand bell clinic he could find in the region.

There are more than 30 hand bell ringers at St. Paul's, ranging in age from 8 to "over 50." Each choir rehearses once a week for 1 to 2 hours.

The advanced choir is called the Carillon Ringers. Led by Lauriat, they have been together for more than 8 years. The 11 adult members, including a high school junior, have been taken part in a number of religion and national festivals. In addition to playing for church services and special programs the Carillon Ringers have performed in local nursing homes, at Chestnut Lodge, at the Kennedy Center, and at the state prison in Hagerstown.

The intermediate adult choir is known as the Celebration Ringers. They are led by Jim Heins. The Celebration Ringers also take part in regional festivals and perform for the church and community.

There are two youth choirs. The Jubilation Ringers are five junior high school age ringers led by Dr. Lauriat. The Chimers are beginning ringers in grades 3 to 5, conducted by Frances Lauriat.

How it Began

Hand bell ringing began as a way to practice "change ringing" of church bells. This art became popular in seventeenth century England.

In change ringing, a group of people ring specially tuned tower bells in a variety of sequences, without repeating any sequence. The ringers have to use their whole body weight to ring the bells.

Extensive practice of this art is necessary to learn intricate ringing patterns. So bell ringing is an exhausting activity. As a result, hand bells were developed as rehearsal "stand-ins" for the tower bells.

Eventually, according to Dr. Lauriat, bell ringers came to appreciate the beauty – and fun – of the hand bells.

Today, the English firm White Chapel, one of the oldest bell makers, makes some of the finest bells in existence. A set of five-octave, hand-forged White Chapel brass hand bells cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000. It takes from 18 to 24 months to fill an order. A three-octave beginner set costs 6,000. In the past few years, six-octave and seven-octave sets have been made but very few choirs own these.

St. Paul's owns a five-octave set consisting of 63 bells. The "low C" bell weighs just 1.5 ounces.

When asked what it takes to be a hand bell ringer, Dr. Lauriat responds:

- Know your right hand from left
- Have physical dexterity
- Be able to count to eight
- Be willing to omit yourself fully to the time requirements

It also helps to have an innate sense of rhythm and be able to count consistently in and even pace. In any given piece of music, each hand bell ringer is assigned just two notes, so it is very important to know when it is your turn!

According to Dr. Lauriat, “You truly do not have to have the innate musical ability of a singer or other instrumental performer. Once you learn the technique of ringing the bells, then it’s a matter of counting and using the bell in a dynamic manner, such as hard or soft, fast or slow.”

It takes hand bell ringers about two to three years to develop their skills and techniques to move on to the advanced level. Some members of the Carillon Ringers have played hand bells for 20 years. One member, Jennifer Young, a student at Richard Montgomery High School, has played for four years.

Dr. Lauriat says that no other music group, other than a chamber music groups puts such responsibility on the individual. Since ringers have only two notes each per piece they must keep careful track of when they’re “on.” Each individual musician is ultimately important to the music of the group. In fact, if a musician is absent from a rehearsal or performance, there is no music!

Hand bell music looks like a piano score with standard notation. However, the arrangements are different. Hand bell music is written for five octaves and there are many more arpeggios and open chords than in piano music. These lend themselves to bells, since the overtones reverberate through the chord structure.

Fran Lauriat, a member of the Carillon Ringers and director of “The Chimers,” echoes her husband’s enthusiasm – although, as in bell ringing, it’s hard to tell where their echoes begin and end. According to Mrs. Lauriat, the key to playing hand bells is in the wrist. Players stand behind a table where the bells rest. Bells are rung by snapping wrist. A circular motion is added if the tone needs to be extended.

The sound of the bell is cut off or dampened by touching it either to the shoulder or to the tabletop. Although the ability to (sight read” music is not a prerequisite, ringers are usually proficient in reading music y the time they reach the advanced level.

When Dr. Lauriat is not directing the St. Paul’s music program, he works as a supervisor for secondary instruction in the Montgomery County Public Schools. He supervises Whitman and Richard Montgomery High Schools and two intermediate schools. He has also served in other positions, including teacher, counselor, and principal at Bethesda -Chevy Chase High School from 1975 to 1980. In his spare time, Dr. Lauriat also is musical director for the Rockville Music Theater.

–Diane Ursano