

Many church choirs are ending. Here's why

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(RNS) The newly released National Congregations Study finds church choirs are on the downbeat in white Protestant churches across the theological spectrum.

Choirs stand strong in black Protestant congregations, where 90 percent of regular attendees say there's a choir at the main service. The same is true for three in four (76 percent) Catholic worshippers.

But 40 percent of white conservative evangelicals say they hear a choir at services, down from 63 percent 14 years ago. For those who attend liberal or moderate Protestant congregations, there's a similar slide to 50 percent in 2012, down from 78 percent in 1998.

Sales for the music for choral anthems slid so deeply four years ago that Abingdon Press, the United Methodist Church's publishing arm, stopped buying new anthem music, said Mary Catherine Dean, associate publisher.

There may be several reasons that choirs are shrinking, if not falling silent.

People are reluctant to perform.

Mary Preus, choir director at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, blames "our culture of performance and expertise. We don't sing anywhere else in our lives the way we once did. I grew up singing in home, in school and church every week. Now, people think they are not good enough to sing," she said.

The recession was a blow.

"Music is an area that can be cut when dollars are scarce in the (offering) plate," painful as that may be, said Terre Johnson, national chairman for music in worship

for the American Choral Directors Association.

Thirteen years ago, when Joey Lott became director of worship arts for Maples Memorial United Methodist Church in Olive Branch, Miss., there were 55 voices in the choir. "In 2008 when the recession hit, I lost 15 members of my choir in six months. They had to move elsewhere for work. That started the descent. From there, I am now down to about 25 people," Lott said.

Yet choir leaders adapt and sing.

Preus has spent decades working to "revive the joy of singing" at Our Saviour's. Choir members don't sit or stand in a special spot. They don't wear special clothes or robes, said Preus. "They just stand up wherever they are in the pews and sing."

And because traditional choral music can be challenging for even the most talented of singers, she takes time to hunt down more accessible music, often drawing on music from Africa and Latin America.

Don't count choirs out, said Eileen Guenther, professor of church music at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and former president of the American Guild of Organists.

"Churches are struggling to find the style that is most engaging," Guenther said. "But there's a reason choral music is called 'traditional.' It's been around a while. Contemporary music may not have as much staying power."

It may be that what is fading away is the "performance choir," replaced by choirs that lead the whole congregation in song, said Charles Billingsley, worship pastor for Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia.

"We are in the age of church planting, and a lot of these startups are small," he said. "But I see even some of these churches will throw up some risers and have 20, 30, 40 people sing."

Thomas Road has "a loft full of singers, 300 people in the choir. But their main function," he said is "leading the people of God into the presence of God."