

Spotlight on Crestwood Songs Fill the Air

There is something new about the choir since our return from the Covid closure. Have you noticed?

There are now seven – sometimes eight – new Choral Scholars who help fill our sanctuary with sounds of musical worship and thanksgiving each Sunday. According to Frank Spragens, our choir director of sixteen years, the new choir members were made possible by several generous gifts to the church. Most of the scholars are University of Kentucky voice students, although there is also a music professor from Kentucky State University.



The scholarship benefits everyone. We add talented voices to our choir, while the young students get needed experience and a little extra money. One of the students, Emily Sparks, has even expanded her role and serves as our Children's Music Director.

Going into this Spotlight of the choir, I confess I felt insecure. I've never been part of a choir – and none would want me. I had no idea how the musical side of the church service worked. In fact, I have been a little in awe of church choirs all my life. Dressed in special robes and scarves called hoods, the singers traditionally cradle their folders of music as they solemnly process toward the chancel. It is obvious the choir is central to the worship experience.

Until now, I had never been in the Crestwood choir room which is hidden behind a door near the south entrance. The other day, sneaking in while the members were practicing in the sanctuary before the service, I found a room meticulously neat, with three long rows of carefully placed chairs. Closets lined one wall with racks of white robes and green hoods that match the sanctuary backdrop in color. Shelves and cabinets contained what I assumed was music. There was a baby grand piano and an upright piano as well.

Suddenly, as I looked around, the serenity of the empty room changed. The room became a whirl with people as the choir members returned to ready for the service. Men and women were reaching for robes, chatting and laughing. I met and shook hands with Frank Spragens and quickly made my escape before I was trampled. I waited in the hall.

Soon a mass of robed bodies exited and mingled in the open greeting space in what looked like great confusion. Then, without direction or observable signs, the mass of bodies started moving and merged into a straight line as they headed to the sanctuary. It reminded me of a large flock of birds, rising from the ground, forming a pattern and heading off gracefully through the skies in formation. By the time they reached the sanctuary, the choir members were in a straight line, and they filed neatly in correct order into their assigned chairs. It may say something about my lack of knowledge of music, that the organization of this movement is what caught my attention and stuck in my mind.

In the service that followed, their anthems soared through the sanctuary, inspiring and preparing the congregation for worship. Congregational hymns took on a special energy with the choir behind them.

Later in the week, Frank Spragens talked with me about the choir that he has directed so many years. The choir has thirty-five members if everyone shows up. Other than the Choral Scholars, it is a voluntary group, so the number in attendance can vary. The Choral Scholars audition for their positions, but anyone in the congregation is welcome to join without audition.

The choir sings during the 10:45 service and practices on Thursday evenings (except during the summer), and on Sunday mornings. At least twice during the year – at Easter and All-Saints week – the choir is accompanied by an orchestra. The orchestral musicians are usually from the University of Kentucky’s music program.

I had once heard that music can be one of the top causes of conflict within a church. Spragens says that is not true at Crestwood. Music seems to bring us together in joy. There is no conflict or competition, according to the music director. In addition to praise for the choir, he was insistent that I mention the contributions of organist Jane Johnson who has been at Crestwood even longer than he. “Jane makes things so easy,” he declared.

There seems to be no move to change the type of music enjoyed at Crestwood. Spragens describes our music as “eclectic.” While traditional, the sounds have a lot of appeal on a number of levels, he said. Theologically, the words are meaningful. Rev. Kory Wilcoxson chooses the hymns sung in both services by the congregation each week to match the sermon topics. Spragens chooses the anthems sung by the choir, being aware of the sermon or other worship components. Sometimes which choir members will be present influences his choice. Both men feel the music adds significantly to the worship experience.

The music at the 8:30 service is separate from the music director’s bailiwick. Cindy Abernathy is the skilled pianist for that service, and she and Jane Johnson choose the music other than the congregational hymns, which Rev. Wilcoxson picks. The first Sunday of the month, Katherine Steckler provides special music.

Apparently, praise music bands are not in the future of Crestwood as long as Spragens is director. Those songs are simplistic and repetitive in his opinion and don’t interest him. But that doesn’t mean our choir doesn’t try new things, he insists.

Frank Spragens doesn’t talk much about himself, but I was able to find out a few things. He is a retired band and orchestra director, having taught music mostly at the high school and middle school levels. Still an active performer, he plays trumpet with BAJA (Bluegrass Area Jazz Ambassadors). The group plays big jazz band music in a variety of venues from concerts at University of Kentucky to gatherings in the park.

He is the father of four adult children, three still living in the Lexington area. All of his children are music lovers, he says. Three of them played instruments. His daughter Ann is following in her father’s footsteps as she teaches music at Tates Creek Middle School.

Although he spends most of his time at Crestwood, Spragens is still a member of First Presbyterian Church. We are glad we can at least partially claim him as “ours.”

Before closing, it should be mentioned there is an interesting opportunity to hear two of our Choral Scholars in concert at Crestwood on Sunday, February 5, at 4 pm. Courtney Porter and Jazmin Salaberrios will be joining another vocal student in celebrating African-American month. We are all invited to come.

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If there is some area of the church you would like to know more about, please share your ideas with me. Let’s explore together.

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