



Choir member Dan Mason, right, spends time mentoring young choir members in a new program designed to nurture singers at their own level toward a lifetime love of singing in the choir.

# Nurturing a New Song

Words: Cherie Ann Vick Photo: Kate Wisz

**K**evin Kerstetter stands behind the piano to lead the St. Cecelia and St. Gregory choirs through music they are learning for Christmas, which is three weeks away. Behind the semi-circular row of young singers stand first one, then two, then a small group of adult choristers—mentors tapped by Kevin to work with the younger singers. Kevin finishes reviewing a few measures, then lets the young people know their mentors are here. Most stand and look behind them.

Mentors and mentees begin searching for each other and pair up. Soon the pairs (or trios) fill the room with a soft buzz of conversation, the occasional tapping, and even a couple of softly sung pitches. Like a one-room school house, each mentee is reading a lesson and writing answers in his book, guided by the mentor.

"Young people can learn to sing and read music as well as any adult," Kevin says. "And we believe that we are called

to offer our very best musical gifts in worship. The goal of the program is to prepare our busy young singers as well as possible to sing to the Lord a new song, and worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."

Under Kevin's tutelage, the young singers work through two books: *Voice for Life* and *A Young Singer's Journey*. *Voice for Life* is actually a series of workbooks that comprise the official choir training workbooks of The Royal School of Church Music, an international organization founded in England in 1927 to promote the improvement of music in Christian worship. St. Michael's is an affiliate of RSCM. Most of its members are Episcopalian, from churches around the country.

I use the Light Blue Level book with my mentee. That book begins by inviting the student to observe different singing postures and comment on how posture affects vocal production. Later topics include the basics of reading music—names of notes, recognizing how long a note lasts, types of rests, time signatures, intervals, scales, key signatures, acci-



to find that most of this information is something I have learned over the years singing in choirs. (It did reinforce the difference between half and whole measure rests that I am forever confusing.) I like that this basic curriculum is a workbook that the students will keep when they have finished all the exercises.

The *Voice for Life* study includes five levels: White, Light Blue, Dark Blue, Red and Yellow — the yellow level the equivalent to a college-level music theory class. The RSCM also provides a system of rewards offered through assessment by a specially trained examiner, where singers can earn Bronze, Silver, and Gold medals to wear on their vestments. While most of the St. Michael's mentees are at a beginning level, others are working on next-level books.

"We've had success with *Voice for Life*," Kevin says, "but the problem has been that each singer is working at a different level. So teaching a large group, with some being very experienced musicians and others encountering music for the first time, was a challenge." He developed the mentor program so adult choir members can work with the singers in small groups, so each singer can progress at his or her own pace. Eighteen choristers take part in the program — four boys and 14 girls. The boys are in 4th and 5th grades and two of them have never sung in a choir before. The girls, in grades 6 through 12, all have different levels of experience.

In the early fall, Kevin invited all members of the adult choir to become members. Twelve signed up, surprising him. "I was thrilled when so many adults volunteered to be mentors! We have nearly as many mentors as choristers. We have mentors of all ages ... both men and women." The mentors meet on Wednesday nights before the adult choir practice begins.

It's not a simple undertaking. Any adult who works with children is required to complete an online course on Safe Church. This Diocesan-sponsored training is required for all Sunday school teachers, nursery volunteers, volunteers working with a partner less than three times a month. St. Michael's Youth Director Abby Van Noppen, now coordinates the training at St. Michael's and arranged for the mentors to complete the two-hour course on recognizing and reporting sexual misconduct, ranging from harassment to molestation.

But the choral mentoring program at its essence is about creating lifelong singers. The musical background of mentors ranges from choir experience to degrees in music performance. Some have experience mentoring young people in other subjects and others have none. What motivates them is a desire to work with young people and give back.

Linda Rogers has sung in church choirs since high school, where her 50-girl choir sang one service every Sunday. "I just think it's important for young people to have more adults in their lives, and I enjoy young people," Linda says. "Music is important and sacred choral music is especially important. That's the way I worship and enjoy participating. I hope to convey that to these young people."

Christine Haarvig Taylor recently retired from professional performance as a violinist and had some time she wanted to use productively. "I am pretty conversant with things a young musician would find helpful to know," she says. Christine doesn't really consider herself a singer, though she has sung in choirs since 1995. "I read music well and have really good pitch. I think intonation for string players is even fussier than it is for choral singers."

Currently the mentoring program is scheduled for two Wednesdays each month in the school year. Kevin plans to continue the program indefinitely, so young singers who are motivated can even prepare for exams that allow them to receive international singing awards. "The girls who have gone to the RSCM Carolina Course [offered each summer] at Duke most recently have seen other singers who have award badges," he says. He expects some singers to complete an entire level or more in a choir season. Others will move more slowly, and he is ok with that.

The mentees are learning more in the program than just how to read choral music. "They learn breathing awareness, posture, and develop self-esteem," Christine says. "They can stand up and sing in front of someone, which means they can go to middle school and do an oral book report in front of the class without panicking."

Parents are supportive, too. "Our choir parents are so appreciative of the musical training their children receive," Kevin says. "I'm grateful that our choir families make a considerable investment of time and energy to support their children's choir training, because I know families are very busy. It's a gift that can bring their children joy for a lifetime."



*Cherie Vick designs and writes educational programs for adult learners and articles for local publications. She sings in the choir.*

