

Music Director – Music Department

Submitted by: Holly Phares

List of the members currently serving on your ministry or leadership team:

Holly Phares: Music Director; William Lowden: Organist

Choir members and soloists: Bobbie Benjamin, Cole Charron, Suzanne Cole, Bruce Conley, Kris Forrest, Madeline Forrest, Blossom Gica, Richard Kalwaic, Emily Markman, Meg Ouderkirk, Bob Robinson, Joanna Robinson, Adam Sherr, Alexa Sherr, Anna Sherr, Sarah Sherr, Max Staley, Julie Steiner, Trixie Steiner-Rose, Carrie Thomas, Woody Ulmer, Beth Walker

As you look at the goals you had planned for 2021, what were you able to accomplish? Please be as specific as possible.

As we entered Year Two of the pandemic, we continued to create pre-recorded music in the way of hymns, solos, duets, instrumental works, organ & piano selections. As far as goals went for 2021, due to the unpredictable situation of living with the ever-evolving status of the COVID virus, the main goals included providing interesting, approachable, varied, and hopefully inspiring musical selections via both the pre-recorded platforms and, in the summer, “live” performances in our early morning outdoor worship services. I feel confident that we accomplished those goals, but not without glitches due to technical hurdles. My own main objective for our wonderful volunteer singers and instrumentalists was to NOT overburden them with extra challenging selections (just due to inability to effectively rehearse coupled with the limitations of the Acapella app and the need to adjust length of selections to keep things flowing in the Zoom platform). When the additional early service was added into the mix from June through the end of September, I began to utilize selections from our vast collection of recordings from the previous year, which enabled me to lighten up the work of recording each week a bit and adjust additional time into preparing the music for our in-person service, including organizing the singers who felt comfortable singing in-person as vocal leaders each week.

When it was brought to my attention around August that some folks in the congregation felt there were perhaps too many repeated recordings for our Zoom services, I just made a concerted effort to amp up the new recordings again for those services, including creating some safely produced “live” recordings with 1-4 singers at a time in the Social Hall. Once it became apparent the new Omicron variant was creating widespread infection at a rate that no one predicted and things started shutting down towards the end of November and December, we stopped that practice and went completely back to creating only pre-recorded music from our own homes.

Another goal that was not music related was to move the entire choral music stacks upstairs into the pews in the balcony in order to shift them into the new filing room when it was completely constructed. A very huge debt of gratitude is owed our beloved Beth Walker for her spearheading this effort and the incredible amount of organizing and putting in the

physical hours to get this project underway and finished in the quickest manner possible. As one can imagine, the challenges of having more than one or two people in the same little room during a pandemic indoors was not optimal and we just did our best, eventually bringing the work into the Social Hall with much distance at tables. We gratefully had a good handful of volunteers help us and the “muscle” of our pastor, Michael, and others schlepping the boxes of music upstairs.

We also recycled tons of music that was very outdated or just not appropriate for where our church theology and choir size was concerned. Initially, I offered about 10 local colleagues the database list of these pieces for them to take any music they could use for free. Unfortunately, not one of them was able to take any music so it all went out on the curb for recycling.

As of this writing today, there are approximately four more hours of labor left for me to finish this project as far as getting the music upstairs and in the database. The next phase is for me to put all of the single copies I have collected into binders organized by themes and alphabetically. That way I can have instant access to all of the repertoire for planning in my home studio and be able to plan in advance for the music to be pulled from the library for rehearsals once we get back into the Sanctuary with the choir.

How has your ministry’s or leadership team’s work and goals shifted throughout 2021 because of COVID?
(See above)

Where is your group or ministry area stuck? Do you need help in discerning who to ask to join your group or to get more involved?

I personally don’t feel we are stuck in any area, which is a blessing. I think the one drawback only at this moment continues to be that not every regular choir member can participate in the pre-recorded music as they don’t have the proper devices (only Apple products) that are needed for this particular platform we are using. I am hopeful that either Acappella will create the ability for other non-Apple devices to record or we can find comparable means of engaging these few folks with whom we miss making music right now. As of this writing, sadly the Android version of Acapella is still not ready for utilization.

It has been incredible to work with all of our amazing singers and instrumentalists who have such open hearts and are willing to stretch their creativity in this one-dimensional land of online pre-recorded music. It’s far from perfect, but my heart is always full each week as I enjoy the fruits of our labors in our Zoom worship service.

Also, I am very grateful for those singers and instrumentalists who were willing to join me for making some very beautiful music this summer outdoors. We learned more and more throughout the summer how to balance the sound system and navigate through making music with the ever-present sounds of the city such as buses, sirens, tour buses, and horse drawn carriages! I can honestly say it was a unique experience none of us will ever forget.

Everyone was so lighthearted and accepting and I think just so grateful to be together it didn't matter!

Last but definitely not least, I also am incredibly grateful for our wonderful organist, Bill Lowden, who has been able to provide us with recordings of organ repertoire from previous performances he has given prior to arriving at Old First, as well as borrowing a friend's organ recently to record new music for Advent and Christmas.

What do you hope to accomplish in 2022?

I feel if we can continue in the same way we have been operating through this unusual year, we are in great shape. There is not much else we can do when we're not meeting in the church. At present, I think we figured out the best way to enhance our worship with pre-recorded music, as well as live music being led from different folks' homes once in a while.

What do you anticipate will be different in 2022 (because of COVID, or because of other factors)?

As I responded last year, I honestly have no way of knowing what to expect this coming year. The only thing I can remark on at present is my curiosity into how we will integrate back into the Sanctuary when it is time and is safe. Will we have limited numbers of people? Will there be congregational singing? Will everyone still have to wear masks? Will the choir be allowed to rehearse and sing in the Sanctuary? Only time will tell.

What are the ways that the church can support your team in achieving your goals?

The only thing I have to say is thank you to all in our Old First community for your immense support, creativity, and flexibility as we all adapted to a whole new way to appreciate music and its role in enhancing our weekly worship. There are no words sufficient for me to express the depth of gratitude I have for the love and support I have felt ever since entering into this odd and somewhat tumultuous time. There's no other place I'd rather be on this wild ride than with Old First!