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# Ringers' Roundtable

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## USING HANDBELLS/CHIMES IN CHURCH SERVICES

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Questions to be determined before using handbells/chimes in church services:

1. Who is involved in planning worship and music for services?
  - Minister
  - Committee
  - Organist and/or Choir Leader
  - All of the above
2. When are worship plans decided?
  - Year in advance
  - 3 months in advance
  - 2 weeks in advance
  - Or...heaven forbid – Saturday night
3. What are the liturgical factors to be considered in choosing music for worship?
  - Church season
  - Following the lectionary
  - Scripture reading
  - Style of worship: traditional, contemporary, youth-led
4. At what point in the service should music be included?
  - Prelude
  - Offertory
  - Special Music
  - In place of a sung anthem
  - Postlude
5. What are the logistical factors to consider in choosing literature?
  - Space for handbells to play: front of sanctuary? At the back? Side Chapel? Narthex? Balcony? Outside in nicer weather?
  - Need to set up tables? Or no tables, just stands?
  - Memorized for a processional as you walk down the aisle?
  - If Communion is to be part of the service, where do bells play if there is little space at the front of the sanctuary where the elements are located?
  - Other instruments being used in the service? Strings? Brass or Woodwind ensembles? Keyboard? Percussion?
6. How many groups are taking part?
  - Singing choirs?
  - Handbells/chimes?
  - Soloist?
  - Band or some instrumental ensemble?
  - Some people may be involved in more than one group.

7. Sunday morning rehearsal time before the service.
  - Can be tricky if you are in more than one group?
8. On special occasions, you may have to shorten the service, especially during Grey Cup or Super Bowl Sundays!

### EFFECTIVE BELL TECHNIQUES THAT CAN BE USED

Use the following ideas sparingly by introducing them over a long period of time. Keep the congregation guessing as to what you will come up with next!

The French term, **Laissez Vibrer or Let Vibrate (LV)** is akin to using the damper pedal on a piano. No damping is required, thus allowing bells to resonate regardless of note/rest values indicated until otherwise indicated with R (Ring) or 

**Bell Trees** are formed by interlocking handles, beginning with the lowest pitch on the bottom and building upward to the highest pitch.

- The tree can be held in one hand while the other hand mallets the bells.
- One person can hold the bell tree while the neighbour mallets.
- A heavier bell tree stand may be used where both hands can mallet the bells.

Bell trees of 5-6 notes can be used to play melodies of such hymn tunes as *Amazing Grace*, *How Firm a Foundation*, *Be Thou My Vision*.

**Peals** or the ringing of several bells in successive order comes from the tradition of English change ringing. A peal of bells simulates tower steeple bells calling people to worship. In 16<sup>th</sup> century England, tower bell ringers rang in mathematical sequences.

- If you have two bells, you have two possible changes: 1 2 and 2 1
- If you have three bells you have six possible changes:  
1 2 3    3 1 2    2 3 1    3 2 1    2 1 3    1 3 2
- If you have four bells there are twenty-four possible changes.

The formula to ascertaining how many changes are possible: take the previous number of changes and multiply by the new number of bells.

- 24 changes x 5 bells equals 120 changes.
- 6 bells = 720 changes
- 7 bells = 5040 changes
- 8 bells = 40,320 changes
- Believe it or not if you have 12 bells ringing changes that will come to 479,001,600 changes!

A **traditional bell peal** in change ringing would mean using 7 bells with 5040 changes without making an error. If an error is made, the ringers must start all over again!

You can use descending diatonic scales OR descending thirds in sequence as possible bell peals.

**Random Ring:** 4-5 bells rung freely, creating a non-rhythmic cacophony of sound. The advantage to random ringing is that you don't have to read any music. Random ringers could be placed at each corner of the church.

Another idea from the Handbell Camp at the International Peace Gardens – bell ringers stand in the aisles and on a given signal from the organist, they would ring a solid chord, followed by random ringing while the organist improvises.

A fun thing to do is get an entire family to randomly ring as people enter the church. No experience necessary! And you may get one or more of them hooked into learning more about handbells!

**Vibrato** is similar to a vibrato on a string instrument. Slowly rock a rung bell side to side with a relaxed grip and subtle movement of the forearm.

**Singing Bells:** With a round stick rubbed along the rim of a bell, this causes a slight sustained ringing such as a finger being run quickly in a circular motion on the rim of a wine glass. This technique could be used during a reading of scripture to empathize the mood, or at the beginning or end of a handbell piece if appropriate to the setting.

**Tower Swing:** The swinging of a bell, followed by the arm swinging backward, then forward, to imitate the larger swinging bells in church towers. Ring 1, swing back 2, swing forward in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. In 4/4 time swing forward on 1, continue lifting the bell on 2, swing back on 3 and swing forward on 4. To avoid undue strain on the shoulder or elbow, do not swing the bell further back for it to be pointing at the floor.

**Shakes:** Intermittent shaking of a bell adds colour and excitement. Add the octave above for more brilliance. Shakes at cadence points are very climatic! Add shakes on words like “*Alleluia*” and “*Rejoice*”.

**Ostinato:** A repeated figure used as an obbligato in the upper range, or ostinati on joyful hymns of praise or seasonal carols can be effective.

**Ground Bass** is simply an ostinato played on the lower bass bells.

Hymns with simple chord progressions adapt well to outlining the harmony.

E.g. In the hymn *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, play full chords on the *Alleluias* only. This is a good way to teach the basic I IV V V7 chords.

A **see-saw pattern** using two bells a major 2<sup>nd</sup> apart, usually the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> notes of a given key, can alternate back and forth. E.g. *I danced in the morning when the world was begun*.

**Canons:** Perhaps part one played on the organ, part 2 by the choir, part 3 by the bells or in any other order.

**Descants:** Choir leaders often create descants by transposing the alto or tenor part an octave higher. Handbells could double the descant along with the sopranos OR for more inexperienced choirs, the alto part could be rung on the bells.

## USING HANDBELLS WITH OTHER INSTRUMENTS

The concept of a hand-held, split tube, capable of producing a musical sound is thousands of years old, the earliest being from southeast Asia where lengths of bamboo were tapped on the ground to create musical sounds. In 1894 tubular resonators were made of metal and this was followed with experiments

with aluminum slotted tubes. The result were Malmark Choir Chimes in 1982, Suzuki Tone Chimes in 1985 and Schulmerich Melody Chimes in 1997. The use of alternating handbells with chimes is effective for antiphonal work. e.g. Handel's Hallelujah Chorus from *The Messiah*.

When using bells with organ, the bells need to be close by otherwise there could be a time delay.

Organists may have to change the registration so as not to overpower the quieter bells. Flutes, quiet reeds and principals are the best stops. Avoid 16 foot pedals as they are too loud.

Remember an organ can sustain sound whereas bells start to dissipate right away. And remember that handbells sound an octave higher than written.

Other combinations: Bells with woodwinds like flute, oboe or recorder

Bells with bowed strings, harp, guitar e.g. *Greensleeves* with solo bells and guitar

Bells with brass – trumpet, trombone, French horn, tuba e.g. *Festival Procession* by Richard Strauss

Bells with percussion instruments can add a great deal to a presentation:

- Ostinato patterns repeated and added on refrains
- Ethnic or folk music – stay with the character of the music
- Latin American – steady ostinato on maracas, slightly syncopated claves, mallet roll on bass bells to imitate a marimba, guiro
- African – shakes, cowbells, agogo bells, use martellato or plucking on lower bells while ringing treble bells
- Asian - use suspended bells for a chiming effect, gong or a Chinese bell tree
- Timpani can emphasize the tonic and dominant notes
- Bass drum reinforces the beat
- Tom toms can be tuned
- Glockenspiels – use sparingly and in not too fast passages
- Xylophones – like handbells, upper range sounds octave higher, glissandos are effective
- Gong – for added mystery or climatic passages
- Cymbals – do a drum roll on a suspended cymbal with snare drum sticks. Or use wire brushes on a cymbal
- Sleigh bells obviously during the Christmas season
- Triangle roll for ornamental colour
- Finger cymbals used sparingly – *Do You Hear What I Hear?*
- Hand drum or snare drum without the snares – *Little Drummer Boy*
- Add a variety of percussion instruments on the rest before singing about the different bones e.g. *The Spiritual Dry Bones*

### THREE EXCELLENT RESOURCE BOOKS

*Handbells in the Liturgy – A Practical Guide for the Use of Handbells in Liturgical Worship*

Task Force: Frazier, Junkert, Shier, Strusinski, Wurscher – Concordia Publishing House

*The Creative Use of Handbells in Worship* Hal H. Hopson – Hope Publishing Company

*Bell Prayers – A Weekly Devotional for Handbell Choirs* – Nancy Sandro and Barb Youngquist

Lakeside Press, 905 N. Hwy. 71, Willmar, Minnesota 56201 USA