

Notes from MASSACHUSETTS



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Greetings from Massachusetts, during a spring/summer unlike any other.

Certainly none of our bell choirs are rehearsing and performing as they normally would right now. However, I'm aware that a variety of situations exist across the state. I know of at least one choir that is still rehearsing (with only 10 people at a time), practicing social distancing. In other situations, quartets and trios (also well-distanced) or solo ringers are playing for live-streamed church services. At my own church, our services are pre-recorded (not from the church sanctuary), and we do not anticipate returning to the building for quite some time – likely Christmas at the soonest. However, I've begun to deliver bells to my ringers' houses; we're hoping to continue functioning as a Virtual Bell Choir, primarily using the Acapella app from PicPlayPro.

(This app is probably the most user-friendly way to build a virtual ensemble, although it unfortunately only works on iOS devices.)

As more ringers and directors strive to find ways to build new ensembles, either virtual or in smaller real-life groups, we will need to remain mindful that not everyone is in the same situation, even if they are in the same choir. Some people have higher risk factors than others or are simply more concerned about becoming potential virus carriers, and their concerns must not be dismissed. Some people are longing for the solace of music at this time – if there's a way to get them ringing, that's wonderful! Others are swamped with new and unexpected responsibilities. I'll confess that, despite my efforts to coordinate a Virtual Bell Choir at my church, bells are lower on my priority list than usual right now. As a piano teacher now functioning entirely via FaceTime, the preparation and follow-up required for each lesson is considerably more time-consuming than ever before. And in my role at church, I'm busy not only recording my own prelude and postlude each week, but also putting together a virtual (vocal) choir for every single hymn – that has become an extremely intensive job! While I'm committed to also keeping my bell choir playing, I can't realistically pour the amount of time into recordings that some of my ringers have hoped for. For others of you who are trying to direct virtual ensembles, the opposite might be true: you might have lots of surplus energy that you're eager to divert into bells, but perhaps some of your ringers do not. Luckily, we bell ringers have experience being flexible. This is a good time to exercise patience and compassion for ourselves and with each other.

I really don't have any additional advice to dispense at this time. The months, and perhaps even the year, ahead will constitute uncharted territory for all of us. So I'm eager to hear from *you*! How is your bell choir handling our current situation, and what are your plans, hopes, and fears for the future? Don't hesitate to share your experiences with me at ma.area1@handbellmusicians.org. Please stay safe and healthy as we look toward a time when more of us will be able to ring together again!

-Abby Schoppe, MA State Chair