

Ring Around Covid

By Jane Nolan



As we are all weathering the challenges of this pandemic, let's take an opportunity to talk about something that makes us feel better. Let's talk about handbell ringing; something we have longed to do since March and can do again with some simple changes.

In these unprecedented times, many of our churches are closed for in-person services. While some churches are taping and live streaming or worshipping outside, many of our bells are still in the closet. Some ringers may not be ready to return to full choir rehearsal however, others may be open to returning to rehearsal if it provides a safe ringing experience. So, what are our options?

If you have 3-6 interested ringers, offer them an opportunity to ring behind stand-alone music stands, socially distanced, instead of side by side at the table. Each ringer should wear a mask, sanitize the bell handles as well as their hands, and not change bells. This will allow your group to play safely and helps to fill the ringing needs of a small group. There is a wealth of music available for 12 bells played by 3-6 ringers, and many publications include piano accompaniment.

If you have more interested ringers (i.e. 7-11) and more music stands, there is music available for a 2 - 3 octave choirs with no bell changes that could be the next step to having a full choir of socially distanced ringers. With any of these ringing options, you could then be videoed or live streamed for your worship service.

If your church currently worships outdoors, what happens when the weather is no longer conducive to open-air worship? Many churches are entertaining worship that is back in the sanctuary with reduced attendance. This likely means no sung hymns, no choir anthems, no vocal solos, and no wind instruments. Handbells can provide music for indoor worship with all the aforementioned criteria in place. Keep in mind, the amount of room in the sanctuary will determine the size of the performing group.

Much like church handbell choirs, community handbell ensembles are facing all the same roadblocks to rehearsal and performing. Many rehearse in churches which are currently closed to groups of 10 or more people and their bells are no longer accessible. Even if a group has their own bells, it is unlikely they would have the extra tables that would allow them to practice with the proper social distancing needed. So, what are some of alternative options that may allow a community ensemble to resume their rehearsals?

With many vacant storefronts and business spaces empty as a result of the pandemic, this may be the perfect time to approach managers of commercial properties to see if they would consider renting space to small non-profit groups for rehearsal at a reduced price. These property managers may agree that some money is better than none when it comes to renting their space. The advantages of a dedicated space include a secure space where the bells can remain set up and covered, a climate-controlled environment, and, hopefully, ground level easy in, easy out access for loading and unloading bells and tables for concerts.

In times like these when everything seems to be outside the norm, it may be time to think "outside the box" and get excited about the possibilities that change can bring. Whether you are a church choir or a community ensemble, there are ways to continue your passion with a few small changes, an open-mind and a willingness to explore the possibilities.