

**THE CHORAL SOCIETY OF
ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
- WAUWATOSA, WI -**

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Early History (1900-1932)

The choir at St. John's Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin has a long and rich history. The earliest mention of a choir in the records of St. John's occurs in the Golden Jubilee booklet of 1932. In a section describing the years under the spiritual leadership of Rev. R. R. Thiele, it says, "Improvements and repairs on the church and school were financed to a great extent by the Ladies' Society and also by the choir, which is mentioned as early as 1900."¹ That same booklet describes the choir with this paragraph:

A choir has been in existence for more than thirty years. A chorus of male voices also existed for a while. The present choir was organized in 1923 and, under the able leadership of Mrs. Ella Buuck-Pritzlaff, made admirable headway. Anthems and concerts that were rendered during her time were highly appreciated by large audiences. Mrs. Pritzlaff's untiring efforts will be thankfully remembered. At present the choir has about 50 members...The present director is Teacher Max Hackbarth.²



From 1932 Anniversary Booklet

¹ Carl A. Otto, *Golden Jubilee of St. John's Lutheran Church, Wauwatosa, WI 1882-1932*, 10. (This book's pages are not numbered.)

² *ibid.*, 27.

The choir sang for the dedication of St. John's current church building on June 23, 1929. Four services were held on that day. The first was a "Farewell Service in the Basement of the Church, 9 A. M." The second and third services were conducted in German (at 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m.). The final service was at 7:30 p.m. in English. In each service, the choir sang an "anthem fitting the occasion." Later, Dr. Theophil M. Otto recalled that the choir sang a cantata.³ The same Ted Otto, seventeen year old son of Rev. C.A. Otto, accompanied the choir and played organ for those services.⁴

Little else is known about the choir's activities before 1932. Beginning in 1932, there are minutes of the choir's regular business meetings and ledgers detailing the choir's finances. It does appear, though, that such records were kept previous to 1932 but have not been preserved.

Constitution and by-laws

It also seems likely that the choir had also drafted its original constitution prior to this date. The minutes beginning in 1932 assume a formal structure of electing officers, admitting new members, and collecting dues. The copies of the constitution on file are revisions from 1955, 1961, and 1977. While the wording of the constitution may have changed slightly between 1923 and 1955, the 1955 revision seems to adequately describe the activity of the choir throughout this time.

Membership was granted to those who had been approved as a candidate in a regular meeting, then accepted as a member at the next meeting by popular vote. The by-

³ Notes from phone conversation between Dr. Ted Otto and Lynn Kozlowski, May 1, 1999.

⁴ Dr. Otto also played the organ on June 20, 2004 to observe the 75th Anniversary of this building.

laws call for a junior choir that was to be considered "a preparatory school" for the choir. Junior choir members would have to follow the same procedure for membership. Membership was also dependant on regular attendance at rehearsals and services. Continued absences were cause for action by the officers of the choir.

A President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Librarian were to be elected in the October meeting each year. A Choir Mother was also appointed who was responsible for the choir's robes and had "the right to criticize unseemly appearances at services." The by-laws specified the collection of dues. In 1955 dues were 15¢ per month for the senior choir and 10¢ for the junior choir (the same rate as 1935). The junior choir was officially a part of the Choral Society. The direction, the dues, and the property of the junior choir all belonged to the senior choir. The constitution does not specify membership requirements of the junior choir.

Function of the choir

The choir's constitution states that the purpose of the choral society is to "assist in beautifying the church services by means of appropriate choral selections."⁵ The choir took this responsibility seriously. The choir sang regularly in the worship services of the congregation. Already in 1934 the pastor (Otto) asked that the choir sing every other Sunday.⁶ Later on the choir began to sing every Sunday in the 10:30 service, except once a month when it would sing at 8:00. It appears that the choir continued to sing as regularly for at least another 40 years. Most often the choir sand an anthem it had

⁵ Constitution, rev. 1955.

⁶ Minutes, Feb. 9, 1934.

prepared. Sometimes the choir simply sang a hymn from the hymnal. In addition to Sunday services, the choir often sang for weddings and funerals. It also gave special concerts on different occasion, like anniversaries, or sometimes around Lent and Easter. The highest point of the year, however, was the very popular Candlelight Christmas Concerts. At times other, smaller groups would sing in place of the full choir. Sometimes some men of the group would sing an anthem for male voices. A male quartet (Paul Kuphall, Ted Otto, Frank Mundstock, and Herman Zitzke) often sang an anthem on New Years' Eve.

Principal Max Hackbarth directed until 1935. He was given a salary of \$5.00 per month. On September 6, 1935, the choir welcomed its new director, Ted Otto. A dentist by trade, Dr. Otto had been the organist at Apostles Congregation (38th and Michigan). He came to St. John's in 1927 when his father accepted the call to serve as pastor. When he was called up for service in the Korean War (1953-1955), Mr. Ted Lau, the principal of the school, directed the choir.



Theophil Otto (1980)

Not only did the choir take its singing seriously, its demeanor reflected a certain dignity and seriousness as well. Under Dr. Otto's direction the choir began to process into church at the beginning of services and march out at the end. They met in the basement before the service to dress in robes. The robes had stoles that matched the color of the

season. They lined up and walked up the stairs at the front of church. Half the choir walked behind the chancel to the opposite side of the church. On a given signal during the opening hymn, the doors at the front of each side of the church would open and the choir would process in, to the middle aisle, then down the aisle to the back of church. The choir's march has been described as a swaying back and forth. Once out of the nave, the choir split again and went up the stairs to the balcony. At the end of the service the choir would do the same thing in reverse. Some people commented that it was a little backwards: the choir went out of church at the beginning of the service and into church at the end. The practice was started by Dr. Otto himself, sometime after he started directing the choir in 1935, and it continued until well into the 1970's.



The choir's candlelight Christmas concerts were tremendously popular. Two concerts were held on the fourth Sunday in Advent. In 1940 the combined attendance was 681.⁷ The building generally seats about 300. The choir began rehearsing music for the

⁷ Minutes, Jan. 2, 1941

Christmas concert early in the fall, so that the concert could be given from memory.

Candelabra were made to mount on the pews for the candlelight services.

In many ways, the junior choir was considered a part of the senior choir. Children were able to join the junior at about fifth grade. Dr. Otto directed the choir. One former member said that he "would correct us bluntly, but was approachable and encouraging."⁸ They sang when the senior choir sang. They had robes like the senior choir and marched in with the senior choir. The senior choir "choir mother" would also make sure that the junior choir members were dressed and vested appropriately.

Business of the Choir

The business of the choir was conducted at monthly business meetings that followed rehearsal. A large part of the choir's business was to approve membership changes. They approved and welcomed new members. They released members who could no longer attend. Sometimes the choir was unwilling to let singers go, and did not accept requests for release (in fun, of course). Another major business item was to set dates for concerts or other singing engagements. It was assumed that the choir would sing on Sundays. Besides the Christmas concert, there was no set schedule for concerts given by the choir. A third major business item concerned the choir's robes. The choir mother was responsible for much of the upkeep of the robes. Yet there were regular discussions concerning cleaning and storage of gowns. Decisions had to be made when the time came to buy new robes, as well as later on when the choir had to decide whether or not to continue wearing them at all.

⁸ Paul Lehninger, email, December 16, 2004.

Yet not all the choir's business dealt directly with the choir's main function. The choir sent cards and gifts to people on various occasions (weddings, hospitalizations, etc.). Probably the item that consumed choir meetings the most was the planning of choir parties. Once the choir decided that it would have a party, a committee was often formed to plan the details of the get-together. There were bowling parties and skating parties. Often there would be a banquet in the spring of the year to celebrate what the choir had done. At the end of the season, around June, the choir would have a picnic at Doc Otto's cottage on Big Cedar Lake. Each year the choir would go Christmas caroling with the junior choir at the homes of those who were sick or shut-in. Afterwards the choir would get together for chili or just some fellowship. These were opportunities for the choir to socialize in a setting outside of their regular meetings.

In many ways the choir as an organization was very much separate from the congregation. Since the choir had its own treasury, items purchased became the property of the choir unless the choir decided to donate the item to the congregation. The choir received the proceeds from offerings at its concerts. With this and the choir's dues, it always seemed to have more money than it needed. Semi-regularly the choir would then donate excess monies to the congregation. It was not until 1978 that the choir was funded completely out of the church's budget.⁹

Most often the minutes of the choir indicate a business-like atmosphere. The choir took its business as seriously as it did performances. Yet there were times when they took on a more light-spirited atmosphere. The minutes from April 2, 1970 state:

⁹ Board of Elders minutes, September 9, 1978.

Herman Zitzke thanked the choir for the lovely plant sent him while he was hospitalized.

Motion was made by the bass section to thank Herman for coming back for Easter Sunday. Motion was lost.

Motion made, seconded and passed that Dr. Otto report on whether "The Rain in Spain Falls Mainly on the Plain".

Under new serious business...

Those were a part of the choir during this period have many fond memories of the experience. They were times of fellowship and fun. But for most who were involved it was a privilege above all else to proclaim the Word of God through song.

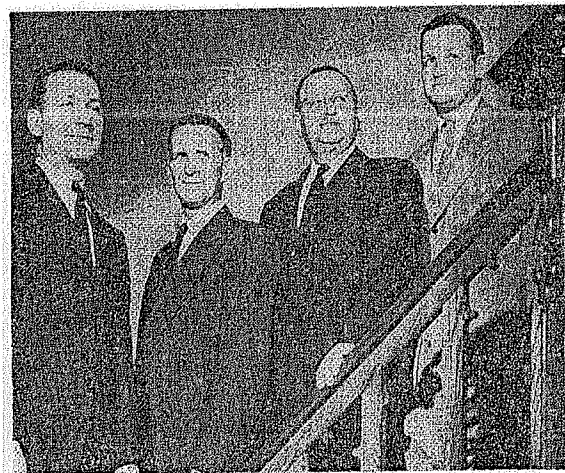
Changing Traditions (1972-1980)

The early history of St. John's congregation saw several challenges. There was high turnover in the pastoral office. Twice large groups of people left the congregation to start another. When Pastor Carl A. Otto accepted the call to serve St. John's in 1927, it began a new era in St. John's history.

Pastor Otto and his son Karl served St. John's for a combined total of forty-six years. This was a period of stability. Under the leadership of Dr. Otto, the choir experienced the same kind of stability.

The last thirty years were not so stable for the choir. By the early 1970s

membership in the choir had gradually declined. Attendance charts from the early 1960s show rehearsal attendance regularly in the upper 40s. The member list from 1975-76 lists 24 choir members. In 1972 it was noted that membership in the choir was decreasing and



—Journal Staff

Four members of one family were concerned in the installation of the assistant pastor of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran church Sunday night. The Rev. Karl J. Otto (left) was installed; his brother, the Rev. R. P. Otto (second), Wilmot, Wis., preached the sermon; their father, the Rev. Carl A. Otto (third), pastor of the church, read the installation service, and another brother, Dr. T. M. Otto (right), choir director of St. John's, played the organ.

attendance at concerts was declining as well. During this time several attempts were made to explain the reason for this and to bring the numbers back up.

In regard to the Christmas concerts, it was suggested that the choir sing more familiar Christmas carols. Judging by the concert program of 1973, this suggestion was not taken. That same year the Christmas concerts were moved to one service on the last Wednesday of Advent.

During this time other changes (not necessarily to get new members) were in the works as well. The long-standing tradition of marching was questioned. There were some in the congregation and the choir who did not like the practice, considering it a unnecessary and unhelpful show. In one discussion, Dr. Otto was asked his opinion concerning the practice. He said that he was neither for nor against it, but that the choir should decide. He did give some historical background for the practice, but remarked that choir marching had somewhat disappeared from the scene. After this he made an interesting remark, according to the minutes of February 1, 1973: "the main purpose of the choir is to sing to the glory of God." The comment suggests that perhaps at this time the practice of marching was not serving this purpose. In 1972 the choir had decided not to march except on special festivals (Easter, Mission Festival, etc.). Marching is last mentioned in the minutes in regard to Easter 1976.

Each time the decline in membership was discussed, suggestions were given of ways to increase membership. One of the first suggestions made was to reinstate a junior

choir.¹⁰ For many years the junior choir filled its role as a "preparatory school" for the choir. It supplied a steady stream of new candidates for membership. It had even been rather popular for confirmands to join the choir with their friends. It doesn't appear that the effort to create a new junior choir in the 1970s ever succeeded. It was also suggested that going back to wearing robes and marching might attract more members.

Since the beginning the choir of St. John's had been a social group. Its fellowship activities were nearly as important as its choral activities. The fun and fellowship enjoyed by the choir made it into a tightly knit group. At some time, however, it seems that this group became a closed group. While they desired more members, it was not easy for others to really become a part of this group. Despite efforts to reach out to new members via pastoral recommendations and bulletin notices, the choir continued to lose members. Mr. Norbert Sprengeler, then president of the society, mentioned to the choir that they may not have been aware that they did not make their new members feel welcome.¹¹ Multiple anecdotes suggest that this was the case at times.

Pastor Ron Heins (1973-1987) suggests that another reason for this decline may have been a congregational shift of focus over the years. In the 30's and 40's, the Choral Society was the premier organization of St. John's. It was what St. John's was known for, even outside Wauwatosa. Christmas concerts were full and new members, including confirmands, were eager to join the choir. In 1958, the congregation was forced to decide whether to continue providing a Lutheran elementary school. The school building was

¹⁰ Minutes, January 6, 1972.

¹¹ Minutes, December 5, 1973.

condemned. The congregation decided to build a new building. The new building proved to be a great blessing for St. John's. Over time, however, the school became the central program of St. John's. Less time and energy was devoted to the choir and its program.¹²

One might also suggest that the changes in the congregation and the choir were simply reflections of the changes in society at large. Group membership was *the* thing to do in the decades before the sixties. Whether it was a lodge, the National Guard, or a church group, people had to belong to some organization. Based on records and personal testimony, being a member in St. John's Choral Society was as much about being a member of the "society" as it was about singing, if not more. Since this need for group membership has faded from society, it is not really surprising to see it fade from church life.

Throughout this time the choir continued its work. They continued giving concerts and singing in services. They continued collecting dues and planning parties. Some would say that at times when the choir was smaller it was a better singing choir. And yet the Choral Society of St. John's Lutheran Church would never be the same.

On April 13, 1975, St. John's paused to reflect on Dr. Otto's service as organist and choir director. He had served in those capacities for forty years. A special tribute was written for the occasion. Two paragraphs summarize the congregation's appreciation.

The rich heritage of Lutheran music is in the very being of Theophil Otto. God gave to Dr. Otto the gift of music. Visibly and audibly the joy of God's love within his heart and mind is manifested. through his organ playing and choir

¹² Rev. Ron Heins, Personal Interview, December 15, 2004.

directing Dr. Otto's joyful love for God is projected to all who attend the worship services.

The members of St. John's Choir appreciate the hours they spend under Dr. Otto's direction. Not only do they respect his competence as their director, but they also discern his patience and understanding. Through the years God has moved the choir under his direction to render songs resounding with trust in God. The worshippers through the choir then are edified.

On September 11, 1976, the president of the choir introduced a new director—Mr. Jim Albrecht. At this time Dr. Otto desired to continue to play organ at St. John's, but stepped down as choir director.

With this new director came changes for the choir. Two main changes should be noted. One was practical and one theoretical. At this time Jim worked second shift at Miller Brewing Company. This meant that weekday evening rehearsals were not possible for him. The choir began to rehearse on Saturday mornings. For some this change of rehearsal time may not have been a great issue, but for some it was more difficult. At this first meeting 26 were in attendance. The minutes show that 16 people were up as new members or those returning after a leave of absence.

The other change was deeper and more subtle. It relates to the choir's purpose. The choir's stated purpose was "assisting in beautifying the church services." They accomplished that goal by singing an anthem in the services. When Mr. Albrecht began to direct the choir in 1976, he attempted to introduce the concept of the liturgical choir, regularly singing part of the liturgy, specifically the introit and gradual. This concept was new to St. John's, but it was not new to WELS Lutheranism. In 1958, Kurt Eggert, pastor at Atonement Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, wrote in the newsletter Viva Vox:

The choir should, however, never add songs merely "in order to beautify the service," as if the congregation could be treated as a sort of listening concert audience. Too many present-day choirs suffer from "anthemitis," the "disease" of

now and then adding concertlike special musical contributions to the service; such anthems, pleasant and helpful as they may otherwise be, usually undermine the real work of a genuine church choir and in the long run serve to dampen rather than incite congregational worship.¹³

In the 1977 revision of the constitution, the choir's purpose was re-worded to read: "The object of the organization is to assist in the worship services of the church." This minor change reflects a shift in emphasis towards a more active assistance in the worship of the congregation. It was not a radical change, nor was it contrary to the choir's former purpose. Unfortunately the choir was not able to move forward in this direction. The choir, as it existed then, was dying out.

One highlight of this period was the recognition of three choir members whose tenure combined for over 125 years. On Cantate Sunday, 1978, Paul Kuphall, Helen Katzer, and Herman Zitzke were honored in Sunday services and a dinner in the school cafeteria. Each had been in the choir for over 40 years.



Jim Albrecht, Herman Zitzke, Heten Katzer, Paul Kuphall, Ted Otto

The event was written up for the local newspaper and the Northwestern Lutheran.¹⁴

Mr. Albrecht directed the choir for years. When Mr. Albrecht stepped down from the director's position, the choir was very small and was now without a director. Despite the dedicated singers who would have been willing to continue, the choir stopped. The

¹³ Kurt Eggert, reprinted in *Not Unto Us*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001), 9.

¹⁴ Northwestern Lutheran, July 9, 1978, 224.

last recorded minutes are from March 11, 1978. The congregation's Board of Elders resolved in October 1978 "that we make every effort to continue with a choir."¹⁵ Attempts were made to find a director, but to no avail. If there was to be a choir at St. John's in the future it would have to rise as a new choir without the former structure.

For a few years there simply was no choir at St. John's. During the years 1979-1983 there were no regular choir rehearsals, singing in church, or business meetings. Sometime during this period Paul Kuphall approached St. John's organist Lynn Kozlowski about helping a group of male singers to learn music to sing in church. At other times, a group of singers would gather together to sing for festivals and other special occasions.

One such event was "Dr. T. M. Otto Music Appreciation Sunday" on September 28, 1980. This event brought to a close forty-five years of service as St. John's head organist. Lynn Kozlowski then took his place. As of 2004, Dr. Otto continues to return to St. John's in the summers and plays a few services. An announcement was put in the newsletter for those who wished to sing for the special service. It rehearsed and sang three numbers in that service.

In 1982 the congregation celebrated its 100th anniversary with several special services. The bulletins from those services note that a choir sang under the direction of Lynn Kozlowski. In the congregation's centennial history booklet there are several paragraphs devoted to the many organizations of St. John's—the Altar Guild, the

¹⁵ Board of Elders Minutes, St. John's Lutheran Church, October 3, 1978.

Christian Education Society, Pioneers, Ladies' Aid. There is no mention, however, of St. John's choir as one of those groups.

Mrs. Kozlowski was not interested in directing a church choir. Besides teaching full time, Lynn was by this time the head organist at St. John's. In the spring of 1983 a committee was formed that had as one of its tasks to make a full time choir possible. They reached "a consensus that the congregation needs and wants a fulltime choir."¹⁶ They recommended that the congregation seek David Bauer, the new instrumental grade school band director at Wisconsin Lutheran High School. Apparently that option did not work out.



Lynn Kozlowski, Mary Wilde, Janice Valleskey

A new choir

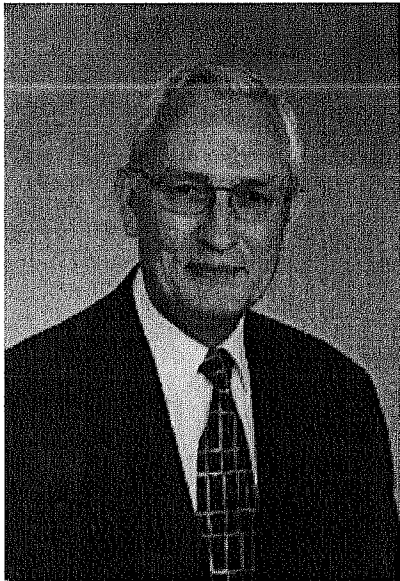
In 1984, Miss Mary Kuehl was called to teach at St. John's. In addition to third and fourth grades, Mary was called to work on the school's music program and to serve in other capacities in accord with her training and gifts.¹⁷ Mary used her musical gifts to begin a regularly rehearsing choir for the first time in several years. Her time at St. John's was short, however, as she resigned after one year in order to get married and move to Minnesota.

¹⁶ Worship Committee of Board of Elders, May 17, 1983.

¹⁷ Call Document, January 31, 1984.

In 1985, Miss Mary Wilde received and accepted the call to replace Mary Kuehl. She too served as organist and choir director. After some classroom difficulties, however, she began a leave of absence from the classroom for the 1989-1990 school year. During that time she agreed to continue as choir director and organist. In October of 1989, however, Mary submitted her resignation. In preparation for Christmas, Pastor Joel Gerlach (1988-1998) asked Professor David Valleskey of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to fill in as director through Christmas. Before coming to the Seminary, Valleskey served Apostles Lutheran Church in San Jose, CA. Pastor Gerlach had been a member of Apostles when he was serving as California Mission Board Mission Counselor.

Though he originally planned to direct only through the Christmas season, Valleskey directed the choir for three years. Yet he did not intend to be a permanent

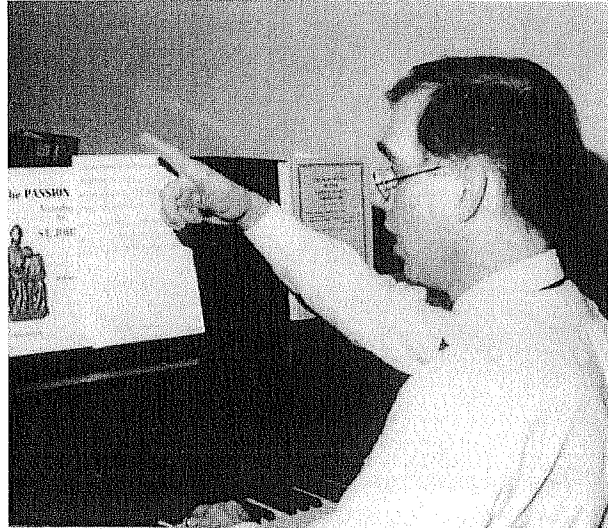


Prof. David Valleskey

director of the choir. He had some directing experience from his time serving in California. He probably had less formal musical training than Dr. Otto, Mr. Albrecht, or his successor, Dr. William Braun. Yet Valleskey's contribution to the choir of St. John's was no less significant. During his tenure the choir grew from about 20 singers to about 30. He worked to introduce the singing of psalms and other liturgical pieces. His wife Janice also sang in the choir, serving as accompanist for rehearsal and helping select music for the choir to sing.

At this time Prof. Valleskey was on the Board of Regents at Wisconsin Lutheran College. He was involved in the process of calling a new music professor to the college,

Dr. William Braun. When Braun came to the college in 1992, Valleskey offered him the director's position at St. John's. Dr. Braun said that he would not be ready to do that right away, but maybe after he settled into his new position. After Christmas that year, in January 1993, Bill Braun became the new director of St. John's choir.



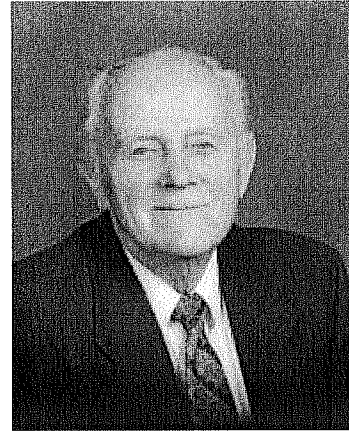
Bill Braun

In the years that Dr. Braun has directed the choir, the choir has remained a fairly large and strong choir. Dr. Braun's interest and expertise seems to be in Renaissance and Baroque era music, and the music selection of the choir reflects that. In the past years the choir's musical repertoire has substantially increased. The selection of styles of music has become more diverse as well, though a majority of the choir's material is classic church music from previous eras. The music is generally more challenging than any other music choirs at St. John's have attempted. But in the past years the choir's ability to sight-read and learn such music has increased as well.

One factor that greatly increases the choir's performance is the strong network of other musicians in the congregation and in the Wauwatosa area. The choir can usually rely on the expertise of Lynn Kozlowski to accompany the choir, though there are other choir members who would be capable as well. Instrumentalists can usually be found within the choir or the congregation at large. At other times, WLC students or members who are studying music at other institution are available to play for special numbers. The

availability of such resources combined with the long-range planning allow St. John's member to hear music from their church choir that many congregations only dream of.

On September 7, 2003, St. John's dedicated its new educational facility. At that service, the congregation recognized Mr. Paul Kuphall on being a part of the choir at St. John's for seventy years. Paul was fifteen years old when



Paul Kuphall

he joined the choir in 1935. He sang in a male quartet with other members of the choir. He was a large part of the choral and social aspects of the choir throughout its history. After the dedication, Paul was recognized with a standing ovation and given a plaque commemorating the occasion.

St. John's is not the only church that once had a large, highly organized choir. It is not the only place that Christmas Concerts were given or where choir parties were planned. It's not the only church choir that was dignified or that is capable of beautiful music. But to those who sit in the pews of St. John's, to those who sit in the balcony Sunday after Sunday, to those who spend hours upon hours preparing music for the edification of this congregation, St. John's choir is one of a kind. For many of the people involved in the choir over the years, it was their little way of carrying out the Great Commission.

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