

Ministry Formation – Cantor (or Psalmist)

The cantor shares the ministry of proclaiming Scripture with the lector. You need not be a professional singer to be a cantor. Because the cantor models the song for the assembly, a pleasing voice and the ability to sing on pitch and in rhythm is necessary.

All Scripture, including the psalm, is proclaimed from the ambo, although, for good reason, it may be sung elsewhere. Typically, the psalm is sung by one cantor with the assembly repeating. Pairing inexperienced young cantors with an adult or another cantor is permissible as a transitional practice but should not become common practice.

Preparing a psalm:

- Read the entire psalm text out loud several times. Use the articulation guides in the lector formation package to assure that initial, middle and final consonants are clearly pronounced.
- Sing the psalm on one note while paying attention to the consonants and vowels. Find clear, pure vowels that will sustain held notes. When diphthongs appear, that is, two vowel sounds next to each other, sing the first vowel for as long as possible then quickly change to the second as you complete the note.
- Sing the psalm melody until you can sing the correct notes and rhythms with ease. Be sure to breathe deeply and let the breath carry the vowels.
- Sing the psalm as written while paying attention to the articulation, rhythm and sense of the words.

Eye contact:

- Ideally, as with lectoring, eye contact is important to communicate to the assembly. Therefore, try to memorize the psalm antiphon and sing it while looking at the assembly.
- For the verses, look down to read. When there is an important word or phrase to convey, memorize that small section and finish while looking at the people. Mark your place with your finger, if necessary, and be ready to go on.

Gestures:

- Inviting the assembly to repeat the psalm antiphon after you is one of the most important things you do. Done well, this can encourage hesitant singers. Done poorly, it may cause the assembly to choose not to sing at all.
- Gestures begin just before the assembly is to sing. Invite them to sing at the start of their refrain with a simple acknowledgment to them with one hand, with the arm bend lightly at the elbow.

Ongoing formation:

- Cantor formation is ongoing. Like a lector, it is important to get feedback on volume, clarity, etc. from a trained cantor.
- Schedule additional cantor formation as needed with the Office for Divine Worship.

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Resources

Handbook for Cantors, Diana Kodner, 1998, Liturgy Training Publications, LTP.org. Kodner “has advanced degrees in voice and conducting and many years of experience as a cantor and trainer of cantors.” Provides both technical vocal training methods as well as sound spiritual formation for cantors.

Troubleshooter’s Voice Manual, Frances N. Brockington, 1998, Oregon Catholic Press. Brockington, chair of the Vocal Division of the Music Dept. at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. “An experienced pastoral musician and professor of music, her passion is to help others enjoy singing well.” Written for the music director, this question and answer format can be helpful for individual singers as well. Addresses specific questions and offers practical solutions based on sound vocal principles. This book is no longer available through Oregon Catholic Press; however, you can find it on Amazon.com.

Cantor BASICS, James Hansen, 1991, Pastoral Press, Oregon Catholic Press, OCP.org. Hansen, “proficient and experienced cantor, former coordinator of NPM Cantor schools.” Question and answer format emphasizes the prayer leader role of the cantor. Addresses a broad range of issues on the role of the cantor in relationship to the assembly, the liturgy and the music.

The Ministry of Cantors, Kathleen Harmon, 2016, Liturgical Press, LitPress.org. Harmon takes us deeper into the spirituality of the ministry of cantor through an understanding of the role of the psalm in the liturgy, the primary role of singer as psalmist and the secondary role of singer as song leader, the use of appropriate psalms, and an in-depth look at our gestures as integral to the song and prayer.