

A Man as a Primary Chorister?

by Bruce T. Forbes, 2009

Few Latter-day Saint men are privileged enough to spend most of their adult life in Primary, but I have been one such lucky fellow. While the rest of you brethren have been struggling with all those 'grown-up' callings, I've been enjoying myself each week in the company of all those pure, innocent children.

I have also been blessed to serve as the Primary chorister! I am currently serving for the third time in the best calling in the Church. May I offer some advise to other male choristers of what I have learned along the way?

Yes, You Are Still a Man

Here are a few random thoughts about Manhood and being a Primary Chorister:

- The Lord does not expect you to check your manliness at the door and perform the calling as a woman might. Bring your manliness and masculinity into the calling and enjoy it. The boys will appreciate that there's finally someone who speaks their language, and the girls will be fascinated with the novelty of it all.
- There will be children whose only interaction with the priesthood is with the men who serve in Primary - show them what a priesthood holder is supposed to be; set an example they will want to emulate. There will be children who do not have a father at home – or have abusive parents of *either gender* in the home ... show each child what a real father's love is like; give them something masculine *and* godly to follow when they become parents.
- Remember that *Doctrine and Covenants* Sections 4 and 121 outline some of the most manly, Christlike attributes you can develop, and believe me when I say they are most useful while serving in Primary. Although it is important to enjoy the company of the children, remember that they are watching you and learning what a priesthood holder and a father is by *your* example.
- While President David O. McKay was a young Apostle, he served as the president of the Deseret Sunday School Union – what we call the General Sunday School. During that time he taught that a man is never more manly than when he is sitting among his little brothers and sisters and teaching them the Gospel. While I don't consider myself especially manly, I do know that my years in Primary have made me a better man. It has helped me learn the Gospel in its plainness and purity, uncluttered by all the grown-up analyzing and theorizing. It has taught me the joy of the Gospel as seen through the eyes of the children; they of whom Jesus said: “of such is the kingdom of Heaven”.¹ I wouldn't trade that for all the grown-up callings the Church has to offer!
- There will be parents who are not pleased with a man holding this calling – it's just 'not done'. Take it all in stride while you smile and show them that a man called of God can do as good a job as any woman.

1- Matthew 19:14

-- Some of your harshest critics may turn out to be the dear sisters who work in Primary with you – after all, you're not performing the calling the same way as all the sister choristers before you. Take it all in stride while you smile and show them that a man called of God can do as good a job as any woman.

-- One of our counselors recently returned from vacation and announced that she'd finally discovered the difference between men and women choristers. Her male cousin was the Primary chorister in the ward she attended on vacation, and she spent her time watching him. She says that, and this is of course a *generalized* statement, while women choristers put time and effort into their artwork and making everything 'nice', men choristers put time and effort into playing with and interacting with the children. (Again, this is a generalized statement.) I quickly examined myself and found this to be *generally* true with myself. My artwork is minimum and centered on the message of the song we are learning and only used as a tool. I do much more interaction than artwork.

No Awards Programs for Your Calling

You haven't been called to teach 'music'; you've been called to lead the children in singing and to teach the Gospel - with the *Children's Songbook* as your teaching manual. You haven't been called to conduct the Tabernacle Choir on international television; you've been called to teach the Gospel to a group of children who pick their noses and compare findings while showing you their new Christmas underwear – believe me, the children aren't going to be critiquing your musical abilities!

None of the children have a clue how to conduct music, so stop worrying about how you wave your hand – do it however you want to begin the calling. As long as the pianist can follow your waving you're doing perfectly fine. Once you get comfortable with the children, go to the back of the *Children's Songbook* or the hymnal and start learning the standard arm-waving movements. Your pianist, ward music leader, or stake Primary chorister may even be willing to help.

Follow the Prophet; Don't Go Astray

You are required to have a copy of both the Primary Handbook and the Music Handbook – get them and read them and follow them. The handbook is the instructions given by the First Presidency; they take priority over instructions given by local leaders. For instance: the handbook says you already have the First Presidency's permission to use the *Children's Songbook*, the hymnal, and music printed in the official church magazines without having to ask anyone's permission.² It also says you may use seasonal and patriotic music appropriate for the Sabbath and in the correct season. But take note that it also says any other music should be passed by local leaders to review for doctrinal correctness and to give the final approval for its use.

For me, reading this was a blessing as the first time I was the chorister I had a Senior Primary group that was begging to sing from the hymnal and not the *Children's Songbook* – they felt they were too mature to sing “baby songs”. After thoughtful prayer I went ahead and did just that, and the result was a group of boys and girls who sang their hearts out every week.

2- PRIMARY Handbook (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998) page 236

'Brave New World' - Asking for Help

Okay, we don't think it's masculine to ask for help, but you're going to need it! There are resources in your ward and stake already in place, waiting for you to discover them:

- The Stake Primary chorister's purpose is to help YOU! Call her (or him) today!
- Go through the Primary closet in your meetinghouse and see what's there and figure out how to use it.
- Former choristers in your ward are willing to give tips and suggestions and even offer their artwork. It is said that Primary Chorister is the most expensive calling in the Church because we don't want to part with all our visual aides – while I would never tattle on *myself*, I can tell you that one of the counselors in my ward is a former chorister who has all her singing materials cataloged with a computerized database. She has given me a printout of her database (done by song and by item!) and there is a standing offer to use anything she has.

There are more pictures than you ever dreamed of in your meetinghouse library – take a field trip and see what's there.

The Church's official website has tremendous resources:

- Primary Resources: <http://www.lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,4647-1,00.html>
- Music Resources: <http://www.lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,6747-1,00.html> (There is training material on how to lead music and how to teach a song.)
- Disability Resources: <http://www.disabilities.lds.org/disabilities/eng/> (I have a child in my Primary for whom I refer to this page while making my lesson plans!)
- Gospel Library: <http://www.lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vgnextoid=2b6f3c7ff44f2010VgnVCM1000001f5e340aRCRD&locale=0>
- Church Distribution Center catalog: <http://www.ldscatalog.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/StoreCatalogDisplay?storeId=10151&catalogId=10151&langId=-1>

Besides the Church's websites, there are many other sources of help on the internet – including e-mail and chat groups to give each other help and encouragement.³ There are even sites for artwork. Go to your search browser and type in something like “Primary music” or “Primary art” and you will be thrilled with all the help you can come up with.

Communicate with the Parents

Use the monthly ward/branch newsletter and weekly bulletin to communicate with parents by making a handout for the monthly practice song to include in the newsletter for the parents to use in teaching the song in the home. (Include the lyrics in the handout!) If a child just isn't getting a song, ask

3- My “music buddies” all work with each other at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/primusic/> and they welcome men and their points of view into the group.

the parents to work with their child. After all, *you* are assisting *them* in teaching their children.

What Are Your Gifts?

Use your talents and gifts in the calling; do not hide them under a bushel basket. It doesn't matter if a talent appears to be masculine – the Lord called you to the calling knowing you are a man, and he expects you to use your manly talents in teaching the children.

One of my talents is writing, including poetry and lyrics. So, as I have made handouts to include in the ward newsletter, I have added some of my own writing. For instance, the month we learned “How Firm a Foundation”, I included the song “The Wise and the Foolish Man” as a second song to teach the same concept of firm foundations, and I included some additional lyrics I had written for that song. Additionally, I try to add a lot of variety to the Wiggle songs, and in doing so I am slowly writing additional verses to “Popcorn Popping” with the goal of having a verse for every season and sort of weather. The younger children love it and the older ones (including the boys) love the imagination. And, on the Sunday after President Monson was sustained in General Conference as the new President and Prophet of the Church, I taught the children this verse to “Follow the Prophet” which I wrote during that conference session:

Thomas S. Monson, how we love this man!
Just like a grandfather, he loves all he can.
Visits sick and lonely, blessing every one -
If I follow his steps the Lord will say “Well Done!”

Fifth Sundays

Talk your Primary president into allowing you to do something totally different on Fifth Sundays – after all, the grown-ups do!

One Fifth Sunday I taught the children the basics of conducting music – only to find out afterwards that the Achievement Days girls had exactly that requirement.

Another Fifth Sunday I brought drums made out of hot chocolate canisters and we learned about musical beats and metering – while reciting the words, thus also working on our memorization without the children realizing we were doing so.

On an upcoming Fifth Sunday I am going to teach the older children how to write extra verses to songs. As a hymnist and a budding hymn historian, I have had several occasions to communicate with the Church Music Committee, and they have assured me in private communiqué that writing additional verses is most certainly an encouraged activity (increasing our gifts and talents), emphasizing that they should be passed by local leaders for approval if they are going to be generally used in the ward.

How to Make the Senior Primary Sing

Immediately discard the idea that you are going to '*make*' or '*force*' the Senior Primary boys or girls to sing, as illustrated in the hymnal:

Know this, that ev'ry soul is free
To choose his life and what he'll be;
For this eternal truth is giv'n:
That God will force no man to heav'n.
He'll call, persuade, direct aright,
And bless with wisdom, love, and light,
In nameless ways be good and kind,
But never force the human mind.⁴

Your mission is to *entice* them into singing – to make them *want* to sing. Present the Gospel truths in the song in a way that they will *want* to sing. Remember that you are teaching the Gospel and illustrating that teaching with a song.

Again, some random thoughts:

-- Do not force the Senior Primary boys and girls to participate in wiggle songs or other singing that is purely meant to keep the attention of the little ones. They will only learn to resent you, resent singing, and resent music in general.

-- I mentioned earlier that I used the hymnal with the Senior Primary – it was the best thing I ever did with that specific group! I enticed them into singing by telling them that as long as they were learning the monthly practice song then all the rest of our singing would be from the hymnal. The result was that they learned the practice songs perfectly and then enjoyed all the rest of the singing. They came to Primary ready to tell us why a hymn was meaningful to them, and the depth of their love for any particular hymn simply amazed me. Ten years later some of them still pass me in the hall and thank me for doing “something different”. Instead of learning to hate singing, they learned the joy of singing hymns. They are all, in whatever wards they now live in, members of their ward choirs ... including the boys!

-- What to do with those Senior Primary boys who won't sing? Make them your helpers in everything but actual singing. They will be glad to fetch and carry when you've left something somewhere. They will be glad to be judges when other classes are trying to out-sing the others. Have them judge who wiggles the best during the wiggle songs. Have them hold the really big pictures. Use them in skits and demonstrations. You may discover, as I did, that once they are *physically* involved they will suddenly find themselves singing – and when they *do* accidentally sing, don't draw attention to it or they will stop! Let it be their secret!

-- Senior Primary girls can be a challenge as well! I have found a way to make them my helpers in a different way: I have three or four of them come to the front of the room and sit facing the three, four, and five-year-olds and sing the practice song facing them, giving the little ones someone besides me to watch while singing. (They now wear dresses modest enough to sit on the floor in front of the little ones; a plus I hadn't counted on!) Because the children can't always see my mouth through my mustache (a problem most women choristers don't have), they watch the girls' mouths and follow

4- “Know This that Every Soul Is Free”, HYMNS, 1985 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985) hymn #240

along. For me it's a win-win situation – the older girls are involved, the young ones have someone helping them, and my mustache remains intact.

“Do Not Be Discouraged; God Is Over All”

Here are some random thoughts for when discouragement rears its head:

- Seek the Spirit not only for guidance but for COMFORT! Don't forget He is called the COMFORTER more times than He is called anything else!!!
- There is only one Being you have to please - Heavenly Father. He is expecting you to teach the Gospel, not win music awards. As long as the children are learning the Gospel and testimonies are budding and blossoming, you have done your job. Sure, it would be nice if the children were also singing like a professional choir, but that's not the point.
- The annual Primary Presentation in Sacrament Meeting is *not* a reflection of how good or bad a person you are. Temple worthiness and entrance into the Celestial Kingdom has nothing to do with the success or failure of the Primary Sacrament Meeting Presentation.
- Do your best and be proud of what you've done and what you're learning. Complement yourself when you do good!
- We take a month to *introduce* the song, and then we take eight or nine months to *memorize* it. This is why we introduce the hard songs in January and February and the easy ones in July and August. Separate the concepts of *introducing* and *memorizing* and I promise you the panic attacks get farther apart.
- There are going to be Sundays that Primary is more like a gymnastic event than a church meeting – like on the high-sugar content Sundays of Easter and Christmas. It is *not* your fault the children come to church with sugar highs unless you drove to their houses and handed out sugar tablets at breakfast. Don't blame yourself and don't accept the blame. When Singing Time is earning an Olympic gymnastic medal, adapt to the situation. Change the songs you are going to sing to songs that allow more movement and more-enthusiastic voices than what you originally planned (if you have a pianist who is able to cope with a changed program). You can not and should not turn all songs into motion songs, but do what you can and let the Spirit guide.

A Chorister Is Not the Disciplinarian

It is not the chorister's duty to discipline the children! The presidency and the teachers should be doing it! Do *not* be afraid to stop in the middle of a song and ask a teacher to do something with *their* unruly student. Put the responsibility squarely on the proper shoulders – with a loving, kind face firmly in place.

Men in Primary Should *Not* Accept Abuse

In today's climate it's very difficult for a man in Primary to know how far he can discipline a child and not be accused of abuse – the 'standard' even seems to be different in every ward or branch. One accusation (true *or* false) and a man's membership record can be marked that he is not to have

callings with children or youth, and once marked it's there for life. Unfortunately, there are Primary children who know the men have a limit – a boundary has been erased and they feel their freedom. Additionally, we men have had it drilled into our minds that it is socially-incorrect for men to correct girls and young women who are not their daughters – we are just supposed to smile and keep our mouths shut and endure whatever they are doing. Believe me when I say the girls are aware of this.

I was reminded by a kind proofreader of the Primary theme of 3 Nephi 22:13: “And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children.” Everyone should feel peace and safety while in Primary – the children, the women, and the men. A man should not have to accept abuse simply because he is a man and the abuser is a child; whether boy *or* girl – that is as opposite God's standards as a man abusing the child. If you feel there is a problem with the way a child is treating you and you are unable to control the situation from turning into you being abused, then talk the situation over with the Primary presidency and, if warranted, with the child's parents and the bishopric.

A wise Primary presidency needs to be aware of the need for them to set a boundary their male workers hesitate to set in fear of their actions being misunderstood.

Show Them that You Love to Sing!

Your enthusiasm for the songs and their message will rub off on the children! Let them know you love the Songs of Zion. When you teach a Gospel concept, bear your testimony and then sing the song as a Second Witness. Let them see on your face and through your actions that the songs mean something to you, and share what they mean to you *personally* with the children.

Tell the children what the song means to you personally. (Feelings!) There are one or two songs in the *Children's Songbook* that choke me right up and bring tears to my eyes. ('A Child's Prayer' was sung at our baby's funeral, for instance.) So I have told the story behind my emotions to the children, making it a teaching moment as well as a bearing of a very tender testimony. Bless those little ones – when they see my emotions over those songs, they just sing all the sweeter and smile their comfort at me to let me know they remember my story and testimony.

In this way the children have learned what many grown-ups have forgotten: our singing, no matter the quality of our voice, is yet another way of fellowshipping, loving, and comforting those around us – whether we know it or not. Through song our spirit communes with the other spirits within hearing range, giving strength and nourishment to those in need. (We also help heal our own wounds by singing and allowing the Spirit to speak to us through our own singing.) As one writer described,

“They sang for pleasure, without self-consciousness, or even awareness that most of them sang badly, and their singing seemed to brighten the whole shore. Men turned from their work to listen, and from a distance ... the somber [crowd on the] shore echoed to the sound of their voices.”⁵

I would say - “Mission Accomplished”!

5- Louis L'Amour, “How the West Was Won” (New York: Bantam Books, 1963) pages 21-22; comment in brackets added by myself for clarification

