

Carols and hymns have long been the harbingers of Christmas, igniting and nurturing the Christmas spirit in hearts yearning for the joy of the season – and in that sense, this year will be no different, thanks to parish musicians across the Diocese who have been adapting during the pandemic.

“The Church is out of the building and we are thinking out of the box!” said Malena Towers, music director in St. Mary Parish, Middletown.

For months, parishes like St. Mary have been adhering to all diocesan and government pandemic guidelines while working diligently to bring music safely back to parish life after statewide shutdowns and stay-at-home-orders. A large part of that work has been in preparing for the Advent and Christmas seasons.

### **Tradition of Joy**

Jessica Kortenhaus, music director in St. Martha Parish, Point Pleasant, believes music is more important this Christmas than ever before.

“Music has the ability to lift up our souls,” she said. “During these uncertain times, it is important to highlight the beauty in this world and that which we hope to enjoy in heaven.”

Andrew Macirowski, pastoral coordinator for worship and music in St. Mary Parish, Colts Neck, agreed. “More than ever, it is important for people to feel that joy, especially when we have been forced to change the way we go about our daily lives, when we have lost loved ones or been ill ourselves, or are without a job – all due to circumstances beyond our control. This year, the music at Christmas reminds us to be thankful for the gifts we have received from God.”

Added Towers, “Nothing will stop our Christmas from being fabulous in Jesus’ name. We want to bring hope through music this year.”

To help the Middletown parish accomplish that goal, Towers wrote a special Christmas play, titled “The Messiah Was Born in My Heart,” which is scheduled to be performed outside Dec. 18-19, with all pandemic safeguards in place.

The parish is also building a covered outdoor stage so that its Saved by Grace Band can continue leading music for outdoor drive-in Masses throughout the Christmas season. To support the outdoor music ministry, the parish cantors created two audio recordings of favorite hymns. These CDs will be available for purchase during and outdoor European-style Christmas Market the parish has planned for Dec.12-13.

St. Martha’s ministry is working to bring hope through music, too – through instrumentalists.

“We have put together string trios to augment the music at our Christmas Eve and Christmas Day liturgies,” Kortenhaus said. “Through the beauty of our music, we can share the love, hope, comfort and joy that Christ’s arrival at Christmas brings.”

Meanwhile in Colts Neck, “Our handbell ensemble has been rehearsing in order to perform some short instrumental offerings during Christmas Masses,” Macirowski noted.

### **Staying Connected**

It has been a long – and sometimes, lonely – road for parish music directors, choirs, cantors and other ensembles since March.

“When the governor closed the churches, I got all of my materials and moved my office home,” Towers explained. “I immediately set up [online] choir rehearsals to keep our members connected during such a stressful time.”

Towers utilized weekly virtual meetings to teach her choir members techniques to improve presentation and projection skills, and she invited guest musicians to come teach and work with the choir virtually.

Kortenhaus had a similar experience. “As soon as the pandemic caused us to shut down, I began to think of new ways to keep our music ministry going and keep everyone connected. Our [online] rehearsals have been a way for us to come together and pray, sing and have fellowship. In many ways, by having to pivot to these other forms of gathering and communications, we have been able to get to know one another on more personal level. This pandemic has really brought our music ministry members closer together.”

Diane Dannenfelser, music director in Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish, Hainesport, said she was saddened by the end of performing music together in-person. “Pre-COVID-19, we had an active parish music ministry. “My pastor, Father Joe Noche, is very supportive of the music program. Normally, we have 14 cantors and 18 choir members.”

Because of the pandemic, Dannenfelser’s parish experienced a complete change in the music program, meeting online for support.

Macirowski echoed that sentiment. “When the pandemic forced the closing of churches, our choir met [online] – not for rehearsal purposes, but more for ... keeping in touch with each other and maintaining that personal bond.”

### **Hitting the Right Note**

In the summer, the lifting of certain pandemic restrictions led to innovations in music presentations.

“We created a contemporary music ensemble that could lead music for drive-in Masses,” Towers explained. “The parish invested a lot of financial and time resources to make sure that high-quality music was able to be included,” which led to the creation of the Saved by Grace Band. The band has not only been performing in the church’s parking lot ever since, in the summer, its members also evangelized through music – taking their tunes to an outdoor gazebo in Atlantic Highlands near the marina.

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“It was a great outreach for the Gospel because we were able to bring music to people outside of the walls of the church,” Towers said.

Dannenfelser also incorporated music into Our Lady Queen of Peace’s outdoor liturgies during the summer months. “We had two outdoor Masses weekly with a guitarist or organist and cantor.”

Other music directors created safe ways to bring music to indoor liturgies. Explained Kortenhaus, “We use plexiglass sheets to create a barrier when the cantor is singing and have moved the cantor farther away from the

congregation. While we are discouraging congregational singing, we select music that is familiar to our parishioners so that when they attend Mass they can feel at home and have a sense of peace.”

And as musicians – like every faithful person in the Diocese of Trenton – continue to adapt to the daily changes of the pandemic, they also will keep an eye on the hope that Advent and Christmas bring.

At 6 p.m. Dec. 8, Our Lady of Queen of Peace will celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a Mass and outdoor Christmas Tree lighting. Choristers will circle the tree and sing while the tree is lit, with all those in attendance adhering to diocesan safety and social distancing guidelines.

“It will be a short ceremony due to COVID-19 restrictions, but heartfelt nevertheless,” Dannenfelser said.

*Editor’s Note: Due to everyday changes in pandemic regulations, please check parish websites for updates to any planned events.*

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