

Lexington Presbyterian Church
Life of the Church – The Handbell Program
Presented by Ruth Floyd
Sunday, October 22, 2006

Handbells and handchimes have been part of Lexington Presbyterian Church music for 23 years, due primarily to the vision and dedication of one member and the extreme generosity of one church family.

In early 1983, Marge Phillips requested permission from Session to start such a program. She and Betsy Brittigan were introduced to handbell ringing by David Gates, who was then at Manly Memorial Baptist Church. David helped Marge craft the proposal for Session, which included the anticipated cost for an initial 3-octave set of handbells, 7 tables and pads, music binders, and a beginning study set. Permission was granted, and, in Marge's words, "we were off on a grand new adventure!" Marge wrote an article for the church newsletter, inviting members of the congregation to consider contributing financially to help the program get started. Before the newsletter reached every home (even Marge's), Caldwell Lam arrived at the church office and offered to fund the program in its entirety. He and his wife, Sally, wanted to make the donation in honor of their children. Marge took her paperwork to Caldwell to let him know the details of where their money would be going, but he said he didn't know anything about that stuff, and to just go do it, then tell him how to make out the check!

The order for the start-up package was placed with Schulmerich Bells that spring, and the program got underway in the fall. Three choirs were organized, and are still in existence today. The adult and teen-age choirs require members who can read music. A third choir was organized for folks who want to learn how the bells work, but aren't interested in ringing for an audience.

In 1985, Caldwell approached Marge, and donated funds for a fourth octave of handbells. That scene was repeated many times over the years, and today our handbell fleet includes

five octaves of handbells and three octaves of handchimes, *all* made possible by Lam Family donations or memorial gifts after Sally Lam's death.

In 2003, after 20 years, Marge Phillips retired as Handbell Director, and handed the baton over to me. She continues to direct the Friday Morning Handbells, the group that "rings for fun". I now direct the adult Lam Handbell Choir and the Lam Teen Tintinnabulators, for music-reading youth.

In addition to participation in worship services, bell choirs and ensembles have played for many community locales and events throughout the years, including dinners, open house events, weddings, memorial services, and entertainment at retirement communities. In the 1990's, this church began hosting a bi-annual handbell festival for nearby churches – a chance for choirs to gather for a day of massed ringing and to learn from the expertise of a guest conductor. The most notable of these guest conductors, Cynthia Dobrinski, is a well-known handbell composer and arranger, and was commissioned write a piece for the Lam Handbell Choir to ring at the 2002 dedication of the rebuilt sanctuary.

The Lam Handbell Choir consists of 13 ringers playing five octaves. Betsy Brittigan gets the distinction of being the only charter ringer still actively ringing in the Lam Handbell Choir. Another of our current members, Bonnie Gates, is the wife of musician David Gates who gave Marge her start. The Lam Teen Tintinnabulators total 11 ringers ranging from 7th through 10th grade, and play 3-4 octaves.

To me, there's nothing quite like the challenge, and satisfaction, of ringing in a handbell choir. You are part of a team, an ensemble, of musicians that must work carefully together to produce smooth melodic lines and perfectly-timed chords. Every ringer is a soloist of sorts, since each is responsible for a unique group of bells.

Music is an important aspect of worship for many in the church family, and the handbells add to the praise and worship of our God in a very special way.

If you are interested in learning more about handbells, please let me know. There's always room for another "ding-a-ling"!

Ruth W. Floyd

with assistance from Marjorie Phillips

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