

Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church Music Department: A History

Certainly, no story of the events that have transpired in the life of Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church could be complete without attention to the music ministry that has made and continues to make the church an outstanding place of worship in Augusta. The history that paints the picture of the music department of Reid becomes even more significant when consideration is made of the uniqueness of its leadership.

Mrs. George Craig was the first choir director, according to the best records available. However, the choir was not the only musical contribution to worship. At the church's 15th anniversary (January 1964), Mrs. Roy Goodwin, who was born in 1880, recalled the early days of the church when children from all over The Hill and Augusta Arsenal attended Sunday school at Reid Memorial.

She said, "People used to come from downtown Augusta by streetcar. They came from a variety of churches to participate in our programs and sing in our choir." Mrs. Goodwin further recalled, "Mrs. Muriel Black Carey of the First Baptist Church, a daughter of Judge J.C.C. Black, came every Sunday to play the organ."

Mrs. Bright (Marge) McConnell was the Reid organist from 1962 to 1967. In 1963 she was joined by her daughter, Sandra Patton, who became choir director. Mrs. Patton moved to Saint Louis in 1969, but she returned to Augusta and to Reid in 1974. The following year she became choir director.

Mrs. McConnell was succeeded by another daughter, Mrs. Marge Russell, as organist in 1967. Mrs. Russell also served as choir director from 1967 until her sister assumed the position in 1975.

This unusual sibling combination, known in the Augusta music community as "the sisters", acted as joint music directors until their mutual retirements in 2001. Under their direction, the music program of Reid Memorial became one of the foremost in the community. Their leadership led to the expansion of the senior choir, organization of youth choirs, and the organization of a handbell choir that achieved outstanding recognition in its skill level. The acquisition of the bells was through a gift from Mr. and Mrs. William S. Morris III, who continued to support this special music ministry with additional gifts to update and enhance the handbell collection.

Dr. John G. Schaeffer Jr., professor of music and organ at then Augusta College (now Augusta University), became the organist at Reid in September 1971. His skill and interpretation of sacred music unfolded new avenues of worship and enjoyment for members of both the congregation and community alike. At his untimely death in 1997 various memorials in his name were directed for upgrading and updating the Reid Memorial organ. This opportunity led to the remodeling of our sanctuary and the rebuilding of the Schantz organ. Subsequently, a gift from the Charles Goodwin family covered the cost of the organ remodeling. In an act of the session, it was determined that funds given in memory of Dr. Schaeffer would be used to establish an annual concert on the new organ. It would be known as the John G. Schaeffer Memorial Organ Recital.

Dr. Schaeffer was succeeded as organist by Mr. Everett Summerall, a middle school music teacher who had recently retired as organist/choirmaster at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Augusta. Mr. Summerall served faithfully with his outstanding gifts and devotion.

Upon their retirement as joint music directors, Sandra Patton and Marge Russell were honored by the chancel choir with the commissioning of an anthem to be composed in their name by noted musician Alfred Fedak. A printed copy of the anthem, which was first performed by the Reid Memorial choir on the date of their retirement, is now included in the hymnals in the sanctuary.

A diligent effort by a search committee organized to find a successor to this unusual combination of sisters who had given so much to this church, proved to be imminently successful. Dr. Larry Abernathy of Columbia, South Carolina, was named the new director of music in November 2001. Expanding on the work done by Mrs. Patton and Mrs. Russell, the Chancel Choir continued to grow, youth and children's choirs moved into more challenging areas in their presentations, and the handbell choir continued to be a vital part of the music at the church.

Upon Mr. Summerall's departure, the church sought and found a new organist in Mr. Brad Cunningham. Mr. Cunningham continued serving on the bench during the departure of Dr. Abernathy and the arrival of Dr. Richard Cook as director of music. Under Dr. Cook's leadership the Chancel Choir and Master's Ringers Bell Choir continued to refine their level of quality and presentation of music for worship services and concerts.

Mr. Cunningham was succeeded as organist by Mr. Peyson Moss who brought great musical sensitivity to not only the organ, but the 9-foot concert grand Steinway piano. Previously the piano of master teacher, Vola Jacobs, the grand found a new home through a generous gift of Mr. Al Cheatham. Mr. Kenneth Courtney who came to Reid after serving as organist/choirmaster at First Presbyterian Church of Aiken followed Mr. Moss after his departure in 2018. Mr. Courtney was later succeeded by Mr. Dale Hesse.

When Dr. Cook departed Reid Memorial, Mr. Hesse continued his duties as organist while also assuming the role of interim director of music while a search committee conducted a search for the congregation's next music director.

In May of 2021, Mr. S.C. Toe, of Canton, Ohio, assumed the role of director of music. Mr. Toe's vision for strong and diverse congregational song as well as his love for working with musicians of all ages and skill levels are driving forces in his ministry. Unforeseen health issues led to the sudden resignation of Mr. Hesse as organist upon Mr. Toe's arrival, and a committee was formed to search for the next organist.

In November of 2021, Dr. E. Wayne Lord, a well-known and respected area musician and educator, was named organist and promptly promoted to associate director of music.

Summer of 2024 marked the departure of Mr. Toe and installation of Dr. Lord as full-time Organist/Choirmaster. Today, Dr. Lord enjoys joyfully working with clergy, staff, and the devoted musicians of the Children's Choir, Master's Ringers Handbell Choir, and Chancel Choir leading God's people in worship.