

Ring Out!

A History of Handbell Festivals in the WELS



The purpose of WELS Handbell Festivals is to worship the Lord through the musical medium of handbells. Festivals allow ringers and directors to experience a special bond of Christian fellowship through working together with others.

Beginnings—1970s-1985

Handbells have been used in American churches since the early 1900s. It was not until the 1970s that the first handbell choirs were formed in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

The first congregations with handbell choirs were Emanuel, St. Paul, MN; St. James, West St. Paul, MN; and Siloah, Milwaukee, WI. Wayne Wagner, a former teacher at Emanuel, began a bell choir at Dr. Martin Luther College (DMLC), New Ulm, MN soon after he was called there.

Siloah used their handbell choir as a goodwill ambassador. Directed by Pastor Rolfe Westendorf, the Siloah choir rang in other WELS congregations. In search of audiences for the handbell choir, Pastor Westendorf turned to DMLC for help. DMLC readily extended an invitation and the Siloah choir made plans for a trip to Minnesota. In arranging the tour itinerary, Pastor Westendorf contacted Pastor Stadler at St. James who welcomed Siloah's visit, as did Emanuel.

On May 13, 1979, Pastor Stadler gathered and informally introduced the handbell choirs from three WELS congregations—Siloah, Emanuel, and St. James. He jokingly announced that this was the first nation-wide WELS Handbell Festival. Little did he realize that he had planted the idea. The following year, the first organized WELS Handbell Festival was held.

In 1980, there were at least 10 WELS congregations and schools with handbell choirs. On May 4, 1980, five of these choirs assembled at Siloah for the first WELS Handbell Festival. At this festival and for the next three years, festivals were held in churches. The format for these festivals was a worship service with mass ringing on a few hymns and a piece or two.

- 1980 Siloah, Milwaukee, WI**
Rolfe Westendorf—5 congregations
- 1981 St. John, Burlington, WI**
Lina Schaal—5 congregations
- 1982 First Lutheran, Green Bay, WI**
Bonnie Enter—6 congregations
- 1983 Christ Lutheran, West Salem, WI**
Timothy Russow—5 congregations

With the growth in popularity of these festivals, it became impossible to hold them in a church. Festivals moved to gymnasiums.

1984 Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN

Wayne Wagner—11 congregations

1985 Northwestern College, Watertown, WI

Wayne Wagner & George Lillegard—13 congregations

1986-1994

A major change in format came with the 1986 festival. There were now 33 congregations and schools with handbell choirs. Concerts would be too long if each individual choir rang their own piece. Also, the sound of one bell choir could get lost in a large gymnasium. So, in 1986, the entire concert was changed to mass ringing. The participants chose to ring with either the Jubilate or Exaltate sectional choir. Each sectional choir rang three pieces. In addition, all the choirs rang seven selections *en masse*. With this format, there was more music to prepare.

1986 Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, WI

Richard Lehmann & Cheryl Diener—15 congregations

Beginning in 1987, three sectional choirs were used—Laudate, Jubilate, and Exaltate.

1987 St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, MN

Richard Lehmann, Cheryl Diener, Sandra Coates & June Holm—16 congregations

1988 Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, WI

Lina Schaal & Richard Lehmann—19 congregations

As the growth of congregations with handbells and festival participants continued, it was decided to hold alternately regional and national festivals. Two regions were established, East and West, divided approximately by the Mississippi River. More than 50 WELS congregations were known to have handbell choirs.

1989 Eastern Regional

Winnebago Lutheran High School, Fond du Lac, WI
Lina Schaal & Cheryl Diener—19 congregations

1989 Western Regional

St. Martin Lutheran School, Watertwon, SD
Daniel Schmal—8 congregations

1990 National

Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN
Wayne Wagner & Gwen Tjernagel—24 congregations

1991 Eastern Regional

Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, WI
Randy Bode & Robert Landvatter—25 congregations

1991 Western Regional

none held

1992 National

Martin Luther Preparatory School, Prairie du Chien, WI
Diane Karrow—25 congregations

1993 Eastern Regional

Hendrickson Center, Waupaca, WI
Cheryl Diener—22 congregations

1993 Western Regional

Onalaska Lutheran High School, Onalaska, WI
Sandra Graves & Tamara Koenig—13 congregations

1994 National

Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, WI
Kathryn Collyard, Naomi Mahnke, Cheryl Pasbrig, & John Stark—30 congregations

1995-2002

The need for continuity and better organization with written policies of festival guidelines prompted a committee to be named at the 1994 festival. Cheryl Diener was asked to chair the committee. Gwen Tjernagel and Timothy Russow were also named to the committee. This committee was asked to plan both regional festivals for 1995. The same music was chosen for both regional festivals. Two sectional choirs were used—Laudate and Exaltate.

1995 Eastern Regional

Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, WI
Timothy Russow—15 congregations

1995 Western Regional

St. Martin Lutheran School, Watertown SD
Alan Uher—6 congregations

The WELS Handbell Festival Committee presented their written proposals at the 1995 Directors Meetings.

At the 1996 Directors Meeting, the proposals were accepted. Three regions—Northeast, Southeast, and Western—were formed. National festivals would now be held once every three years. **Cheryl Diener** was elected the national chairperson. Each region selected a representative. The chairperson and regional representatives form the WELS Handbell Festival Committee.

89 WELS congregations are known to have handbell choirs.

- 1996 National**
St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, MN
Arnold Bousley—27 congregations
- 1997 Northeast Regional**
Manitowoc Lutheran High School, Manitowoc, WI
Marcia Wendt—9 congregations
- 1997 Southeast Regional**
Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, WI
Diane Karrow—20 congregations
- 1997 Western Regional**
Onalaska Lutheran High School, Onalaska, WI
Muriel Bartels—9 congregations
- 1998 Northeast Regional**
Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond du Lac, WI
David Enter—11 congregations
- 1998 Southeast Regional**
Lakeside Lutheran High School, Lake Mills, WI
Shelly Thompson—14 congregations
- 1998 Western Regional**
West Lutheran High School, Plymouth, MN
Debbie Maxson—10 congregations
- 1999 National**
D. C. Everest Jr. High School, Schofield, WI
Debi Traeder—31 congregations

WELS Handbell Festivals have now been held for 20 years. While not a region, the congregations in Michigan held their own festivals in 2000 and 2001.

2000 Northeast Regional

New London High School, New London, WI
Chris Ladwig—13 congregations

2000 Southeast Regional

Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, WI
Naomi Mahnke—20 congregations

2000 Western Regional

Zumbrota-Mazeppa High School, Zumbrota, MN
Cheryl Ziemer—10 congregations

2000 Michigan Regional

Emanuel First Lutheran School, Lansing, MI
Jean Mackenzie—6 congregations

2001 Northeast Regional

Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, WI
Louise Van Der Horst & Timothy Russow—15 congregations

2001 Southeast Regional

Shoreland Lutheran High School, Somers, WI
Lina Schaal—14 congregations

2001 Western Regional

Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, SD
Alan Uher—7 congregations

2001 Michigan Regional

St. Paul Lutheran School, Livonia, MI
Jean Mackenzie—6 congregations

112 WELS congregations and schools are known to have handbell choirs.

2002 National

Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, WI
Cheryl Pasbrig—39 congregations

When it happened, this was the largest handbell festival. 532 ringers came from the 39 congregations and schools. **Cheryl Pasbrig** was elected national chairperson, following Cheryl Diener's six years of service in that capacity.

2003-2005

Michigan held another festival in 2003, but is still a member of the Southeast Region. In an effort to tie the large Southeast Region together, the 2004 regional was held in St. Joseph, MI.

2003 Northeast Regional

Waupaca, WI

Cheryl Diener—13 congregations

2003 Southeast Regional

Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, WI

Diane Karrow—13 congregations

2003 Western Regional

Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School, New Ulm, MN

Jan Kieselhorst—7 congregations

2003 Michigan Regional

Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, MI

Patricia Johnson & Lila Foor—4 congregations

2004 Northeast Regional

Lombardi Middle School, Green Bay, WI

Nancy Schneider—18 congregations

2004 Southeast Regional

Michigan Lutheran High School, St. Joseph, MI

Ken Nolte—12 congregations

2004 Western Regional

Luther High School, Onalaska, WI

10 congregations

2005 National

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN
Bob Potratz—34 congregations

133 WELS & ELS congregations and schools are known to have handbell choirs. **Kim Pilz** was elected national chairperson.

2006-2011

2006 Northeast Regional

Trinity Lutheran Church, Brillion, WI
Marcia Wendt—16 congregations

2006 Southeast Regional

Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, WI
Marjorie Flanagan & Neva Kimble—18 congregations

2006 Western Regional

St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, MN
Arnold Bousley—12 congregations

2007 Northeast Regional

D.C. Everest Jr. High School, Schofield, WI
Debi Traeder—15 congregations

2007 Southeast Regional

Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, Jackson, WI
Marlene Randazzo—20 congregations

2007 Western Regional

West Lutheran High School, Plymouth, MN
Jan Nelson—8 congregations

2008 National

New London Public High School, New London, WI
Cindy Platz—43 congregations

148 WELS & ELS congregations and schools are known to have handbells.

2009 Northeast Regional

Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond du Lac, WI
Ruth Koepsell, Pam Zuberbier, & Judy Lauber—15 congregations

2009 Southeast Regional

Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, WI
Diane Karrow—22 congregations

2009 Western Regional

St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, MN
Lori Milewski—9 congregations

2010 Northeast Regional

Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Appleton, WI
Marti Ellingboe & Louise Van Der Horst—20 congregations

2010 Southeast Regional

Michigan Lutheran High School, St. Joseph, MI
Ken Nolte—14 congregations

2010 Western Regional

St. John Lutheran Church, Lewiston, MN
Mandy Rupprecht—7 congregations

2011 National

Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, WI
Craig Hirschmann—55 congregations

157 WELS & ELS congregations and schools are known to have handbells. **Brian Schwanz** was elected national chairperson.

2012-2017

2012 **Northeast Regional**

Trinity Lutheran Church, Brillion, WI
Marcia Wendt—12 congregations

2012 **Southeast Regional**

Trinity Lutheran Church, Crete, IL
Gretchen Italiano—16 congregations

2012 **Western Regional**

Great Plains Lutheran High School, Watertown, SD
Carol Janke—7 congregations

2013 **Northeast Regional**

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Green Bay, WI
Judy Altergott & Ann Wolfgram—11 congregations

2013 **Southeast Regional**

St. John's Lutheran Church, Wauwatosa, WI
Kristi Meyer—23 congregations

2013 **Western Regional**

Zumbrota High School, Zumbrota, MN
Dan Stiller—8 congregations

2014 **National**

Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN
Dr. John Nolte—25 congregations

2015 Northeast Regional
St. Peter Lutheran Church, Weyauwega, WI
Rebecca Miller & Kerry Koehler—13 congregations

2015 Southeast Regional
Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, WI
Marjorie Flanagan—19 congregations

2015 Western Regional
Salem, Stillwater, MN
Jennifer Jewell—7 congregations

2016 Northeast Regional
Grace Lutheran Church, Oshkosh, WI
Lisa Rick—11 congregations

2016 Southeast Regional
Peace Lutheran Church, Hartford, WI
Marlene Randazzo—18 congregations

2016 Western Regional
St. Croix Lutheran High School, West St. Paul, MN
Mary Huismann—7 congregations

2017 National
Lincoln High School, Wisconsin Rapids, WI
Marilyn Foley—29 congregations

The WELS Handbell Festival Committee commissioned a piece in honor of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Dr. John Behnke and Kenneth Kosche arranged “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less.”

160 WELS & ELS congregations and schools are known to have handbell choirs. **Janeen Roska** was elected national chairperson.

2018 Northeast Regional

Emanuel Lutheran Church, New London, WI
Cindy Platz—12 congregations

2018 Southeast Regional

Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, WI
Naomi Fritz—18 congregations

2018 Western Regional

Christ Lutheran Church, Zumbrota, MN
Dan Stiller—7 congregations