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Music ministry at St. Margaret of Scotland works in concert with the congregation in giving praise to God



Photos by Jerry Naunheim Jr. for the St. Louis Review Krista Kutz and Madeleine Rodriquez sang during a rehearsal on Oct. 23 at St. Margaret of Scotland Church in St. Louis. The music ministry of St. Margaret of Scotland Parish will receive the Great Preacher Award from Aquinas Institute of Theology on Nov. 14. It is the first time a ministry will be honored with the award.

St. Margaret of Scotland music ministry will be first ministry to receive a Great Preacher award from Aquinas Institute

Jennifer Brinker
(<https://www.stlouisreview.com/author/jenniferbrinker/>).

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The choir at St. Margaret of Scotland Parish carefully considers every note, measure, harmony and crescendo. Sopranos, altos, tenors and basses are all parts of the Body of Christ, bringing music to life in a way that's meant to engage and inspire the congregation each week.

St. Margaret of Scotland's music ministry (<https://www.stmargaretstl.org/parish/get-involved/ministry/music-ministry/>), has been named one of this year's recipients of the Great Preacher Award (<https://www.ai.edu/cta-button/great-preacher-award>), from Aquinas Institute of Theology. It's the first time in the award's 30-year history that the honor has been given to a ministry.

"Especially embodied in the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, the ministry of music is understood as a unique

expression of the word proclaimed in the Church's assembly," Aquinas president Father Mark Wedig, OP, said. "God's word made flesh is encountered distinctively through ritual song. Presiders, preachers and parish musicians work in concert together as the assembly together giving praise to God."

The St. Louis parish's music ministry stretches back to 1980 when Terri Merideth gathered several vocalists and instrumentalists and introduced the music and hymns that would shape the parish for decades. Three years later, Peter Fisher Hesed was invited as a pianist and collaborator, and he eventually became the pastoral associate for music and liturgy in 1995.

Steve Neale (<https://www.stevenealemusic.com/>), a composer, conductor and musician who was Hesed's student, took the reins as choir director in 2010 when Merideth retired. In 2022, Orin Johnson (<https://orinjohnson.com/>), also an active composer and musical artist and director, was named director of music and liturgy, succeeding Hesed at his retirement. All four are still active in the ministry, helping shape the musical and liturgical life of the parish.

The ministry includes the main choir with upwards of 40 members, ranging from children to older adults, along with numerous cantors, soloists and instrumentalists. A children's choir participates about once a month during the school year, and there's an active group of high school teens from the parish's youth ministry program.

Members of the ministry see their mission as creating a harmonious and inclusive environment where they not only enhance the congregation's experience of the liturgy but foster a relationship between music, preaching and liturgy, Johnson said.

That experience also should extend beyond Sunday Masses.

"What the ministry does is it takes the 'capital W,' the Word, and our 'lower case w,' words in music, and makes it real — first in the sound that fills the church, but it also has a strong connection to how the parish lives its faith the rest of the week," Johnson said.

When it started more than 40 years ago, the choir sang at liturgies from the choir loft at the rear of the church. Merideth and Hesed agreed that the arrangement made it difficult to engage the congregation, and they petitioned the pastor at the time



The choir rehearsed on Oct. 23 at St. Margaret of Scotland Church. The music ministry at St. Margaret of Scotland will receive the Great Preacher Award from Aquinas Institute of Theology on Nov. 14.



Orin Johnson, director of music and liturgy at St. Margaret of Scotland Parish, led prayers after choir practice at the church on Oct. 23. The music ministry of St. Margaret of Scotland will receive the Great Preacher Award from Aquinas Institute of Theology on Nov. 14, the first time a music ministry has been honored with the award.

to remove some of the side pews in the church’s nave to create a space for the choir.

“We needed to be amongst the congregation in order to really develop a singing congregation,” Merideth said. “The singing here is magnificent on Sundays, and it’s not always us at all. It’s the congregation.”

Music for Sunday Masses, special feast day liturgies and prayer services is carefully planned weeks in advance. The congregation’s experience and participation is always at top of mind, Neale said, while also considering how the music works in concert with the Scriptures and prayers for that week’s liturgies.

The choir performs a mixture of music, from Latin polyphony to contemporary and folk music styles, as well as hymns from other cultures. To accompany an Old Testament reading for a recent Mass, the choir sang “Sh’ma (You Shall Love),” a hymn in Hebrew and English that Johnson and Neale have experience playing at Congregation Shaare Emeth in Creve Coeur, where they also assist with services.

While the faithful are drawn to different musical styles, Hesed said he believes everyone is capable of hearing and appreciating music outside of their preferences.

“The word is made flesh in preaching and in music ministry, but the word needs to be made flesh in our lives after we leave here,” he said. “We’ve all had the experience of a hymn staying with you through the week. We hope that we go out as better people with a new focus, or a stronger faith or a deeper love.”



Choir director Stephen Neale led the choir during rehearsal Oct. 23.

Music keeps pastor Father John Vien centered on prayer while celebrating Mass. “It might sound strange, but as a presider I’m thinking about a hundred different things,” he said. “I’m thinking about the servers, and is everything here, and why is it so cold, and who is that guy standing in the back of church? The music ministry here helps me to pray, and for me, that’s a great gift. And when it’s amplified by preaching that has similar themes, it’s so much more the gift for everybody.”

Sixteen-year-old Molly Schiltz has been in the choir for nearly her whole life. Her mom, Emily, used to tote her along in an infant car seat, and as she grew up, she became an active member.

When the Schiltzes moved to St. Margaret of Scotland and Emily joined the choir, she was encouraged to let her two children sit with her. She noticed that other families sat together in the choir section, too.

“It was for my own spiritual experience, and I would not have allowed myself to hope that my own kids would of their own volition later decide to join — and yet here they are,” Emily Schiltz said. Her older son, Ben, now a student at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, helps lead the music at the Newman Center there.

The choir is a considerable time commitment, but everyone gives of their time and talents to create a worship experience for the congregation that hopefully will move them to grow closer to God, Molly Schiltz said. “It’s important to me to keep it going and to have other people be able to hear the music we create,” she said.

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