

I Believe

19 years ago, it was the summer of 1998. This is when church leadership made a pivotal decision that dramatically changed Worship at FUMC of Owasso.

A surprisingly successful campaign raised enough money for the church to purchase not only their first 3 octaves of handbells, but also 3 octaves of hand chimes. When the bells arrived in November, a very brave group of novice volunteer ringers became the genesis of today's handbell ministry.

As is typical for a church in this situation, the search for a handbell director found a volunteer from within the existing music ministry. Kent Kanauss, the leader of the praise team, accepted the challenge. Kent led the fledgling handbell choir for about a year and a half until he moved on to new employment in another state.

With the church needing a new leader for the praise team, the eventual hire, Creighton Wallis, also became the new "volunteer" handbell director. This was in August of 2001. While Creighton had a passion for contemporary music, he was still willing to lead the handbell ministry even with no experience in handbells. After only one year, Creighton accepted employment with a new church.

It was at this same time that the church needed a new Minister of Music for all of the church's music ministries. The new hire in the fall of 2002 was Wade Thompson. He had much to offer from his experience including leading a handbell choir. However, due to health complications, Wade was not able to lead the handbells until September of 2003. Eventually, his declining health forced a much earlier than expected retirement. This was in October of 2003.

Unknown at the time, that October was a turning point for the handbell ministry. Our pastor, Chris Tiger, asked one of the volunteer ringers, me, if I could lead the handbells, just through Christmas, until a new Minister of Music could be hired. Having never directed before, I was very reluctant. However, since it was just for 3 months, I said OK.

The on-going joke to this day is that I forgot to ask him, which Christmas? Truth be told, I fell in love with directing the handbell ministry. During my first year of directing, I asked the group to come up with a name to brand our choir with. After a couple of months of not finding a suitable name, one of the ringers said we should be called the ***Believers Bell Choir***. This was a great honor to me since it was my habit to encourage the ringers by constantly saying, I believe in you!

After several years of struggling with retaining volunteer ringers, the handbell ministry experienced another turning point. In the fall of 2010, the handbell ministry expanded with the addition of a youth handbell choir. This brand new choir was aptly named the ***Genesis Ringers***.

By 2012, the youth in the ***Genesis Ringers*** were no longer beginning ringers. It was time to "graduate" them to a brand new handbell choir called ***The Ring of Fire***. This advancement allowed for a new group of youth to become the next generation of ***Genesis Ringers***.

The expanding growth of the handbell ministry required the addition of another director. James Schrag, a long time ringer in the *Believers Bell Choir*, accepted the challenge of leading the *Genesis Ringers*.

With three active handbell choirs, the handbell ministry searched for ways to share our ministry outside the walls of the church. For several years, the handbell ministry has been:

- 1) ringing in Worship in other churches all around Tulsa,
- 2) ringing in the Tulsa district camp fundraiser at FUMC on Memorial Drive,
- 3) ringing before 3,000 people in Owasso's *Gathering on Main*,
- 4) ringing in retirement homes and living centers around Tulsa,
- 5) ringing at Camp Egan,
- 6) ringing the national anthem at the Texas Rangers baseball game,
- 7) ringing in handbell events within the greater Tulsa handbell community,
- 8) providing up and coming handbell choirs with technical assistance, and
- 9) created the Green Country Ring Handbell Festival.

In addition to the above activities, FUMC of Owasso has becoming known as the "handbell" church by hosting well known handbell choirs in concerts including:

- 1) *Rezound!* a professional community choir based in Kansas City,
- 2) The Oklahoma City Handbell Ensemble,
- 3) *Cast of Bronze*, a professional community choir from Dallas,
- 4) The William Jewel College (Missouri) during their annual concert tour,
- 5) *Strikepoint* from Duluth, MN, and
- 6) Professional solo ringer, Christine Anderson from California.

More detailed information, including pictures and videos, of the handbell ministry in action can be found on our website: www.GCR-handbell-festival.weebly.com.

Our handbell ministry is a member of the national GUILD, Handbell Musicians of America. Steven Eddington is a past board member of the Guild, Area 9.