

# Historical Tribute to Musicians of



Researched and Written by Jean Mortenson





# **Historical Tribute to the Musicians of Bethel**

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**2024**

The writing of this history is a gift from me to the congregation which has been my church home for the past 55 years. Many aspects of this church I love deeply, but one of the most influential aspects of my involvement has been in the choir. The people who have been the leaders of the music of Bethel have influenced my life in significant ways. It came to my attention that many interesting facts and important details have never been chronicled. The death of Robert Oudal and then a few months later the declining health of Dale Mundahl made me aware that much history would be lost if someone did not write down the impact of their leadership. It is my intention to “shine some light” on the individuals who have taken their places in the music history of Bethel.

Music is one of the foundations of worship at Bethel and arises out of a solid and rich history from the beginning of Lutheranism.

Martin Luther was a theologian, but also a hymn writer, and he established music as an integral part of worship. One of his tenets is that singing teaches the faith in the common language of the people. In the words of Gracia Grindal, noted Luther Seminary professor: “Luther loved music and valued it as being next to the Gospel. Like the external word of the Gospel, it changed the heart from the outside with its rhythms and tunes.” The earliest Norwegian immigrants taught the faith with the use of songs in their homes even before the churches were organized and built. Into this rich heritage of music was established the congregation of Bethel in 1869.



This history will be divided into five phases of music history:

1. The Early Years from 1869 to 1920
2. The Pastor Hansen Years from 1920-1960
3. The Mundahl-Oudal Years from 1964-1997
4. The Pastor Norman Wahl Years from 1996-2021
5. The Brock Besse years beginning in 2017

## **The Early Years**

It was noted that in 1883 Mrs. O. G. Hanson was the organist and choir director of 7 choir members.

An entry in the early history noted that in 1894 there was a Pastor Urseth who had a rare and distinct love for music.

An entry in the history of Bethel written by Bill Bakken in 2019 reads: “Reverend Urseth loved music and worked to produce new hymns with his friend F. Melius Christiansen, The Director of the St. Olaf Gospel Chorus and the St. Olaf Band in Northfield, Minnesota. Dr. Christianson attended Augsburg in 1892 so they may have met there. Reverend Urseth wrote the songs and Dr. Christiansen composed music for them. “De Holy Sange” was an album of twelve songs published by them. Pastor Urseth also wrote hymns to the music of other composers. With his musical interest and ability, Reverend Urseth succeeded in training the Bethel choir to a high caliber. “

Urseth was a dear friend of F. Melius Christensen, who later became a noted composer and the founder of the famed St. Olaf Choir. Christensen’s sons followed in his footsteps and became directors of the Concordia (Moorhead) and Augustana (Sioux Falls) Choirs.

In 1934, the Young Peoples Society purchased an Eastley Philharmonia Reed Organ.



## **THE PASTOR HANSEN YEARS 1920-1960**

These years brought tremendous growth for Bethel from about 150 members in 1920 to 2500 members in 1960. During this time a new church building was completed in 1925, and further growth resulted in the completion of another church building in 1957 at the current location on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue SE.

A 1927 report of the pastor to the congregation places much emphasis on the importance of the music program. An entire section of the report is devoted to the Department of Music. Pastor Hansen wrote, "We owe a great deal to those who are active in this work. We cannot appreciate the work of the vested choir too much". Mrs. Avery Hyslop was the adult choir director and wrote a long report heralding the dedication of the singers and urging more members to join the group. She reports 20 members in the choir at that time.

In 1944, the annual report stated that "Bethel can be proud of its music contribution and choir." The congregation had grown to 1139 members. The organists were Mrs. Helen Larsen and Miss Muriel Hansen. Choir directors were listed as Mrs. Edith Myhrom, Mrs. Louis Hyatt and Miss Gladys Hennum.

The first regularly paid organist is Mrs. Marguerite McKibben, who was the organist from 1949 until 1964. The choir director from 1950-1965 was Mrs. Carol Suddendorf. By 1956, there were two Sunday morning worship services.

See now photos of the senior choir, organist, and choir directors during this period of Bethel history.

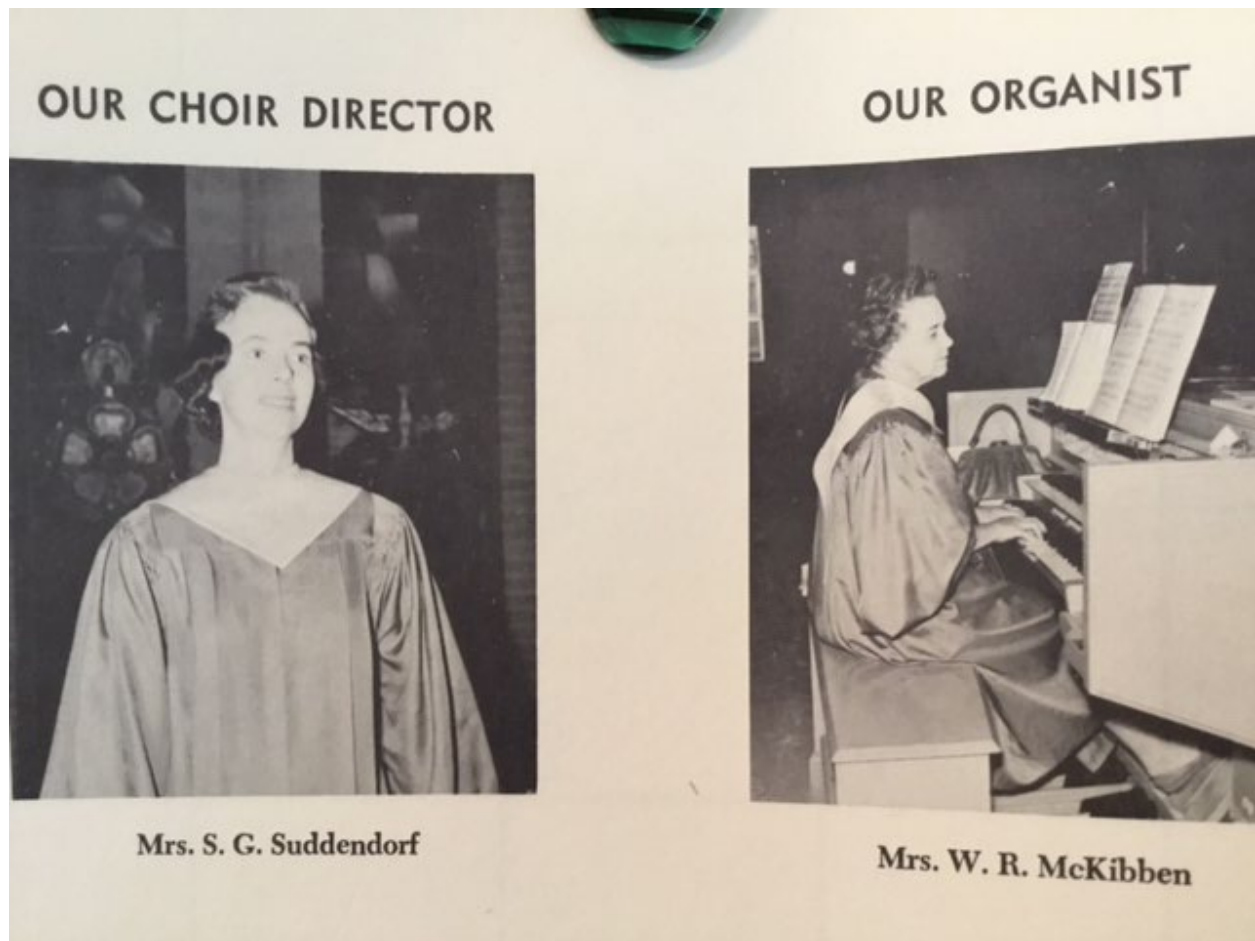




In 1958, the Senior Choir had 36 members with Carol Suddendorf as director, standing in front of the choir.

Names of members are not recorded in the archives.





**1962**

A major change came to Bethel with the appointment of Pastor Erling Tungseth as Senior Pastor in 1960. He was a musician himself and very interested in the growth of the music program. In the summer of 1964, Mrs. McKibben retired as organist, which necessitated the search for a new organist. So it came to pass that a wedding held at Bethel included a very young Dale Mundahl as the organist. Pastor Tungseth went to him immediately after the ceremony and asked if he would apply for the position of organist. As we say, 'the rest is history.' Thus began the next era of Bethel music history that will be called the Mundahl/Oudal era.



## **Mundahl-Oudal Years 1964-2010**

### **Personal Reflections:**

#### **Dale Mundahl, Our Organist and Our Friend**

Dale Mundahl moved to Rochester with his family when he was 10 years old from Whalan, MN. His parents had enrolled him 2 years earlier in piano lessons with a pastor's wife in nearby Peterson, MN. When he moved to Rochester, he continued with piano lessons. His organ experience began when he was in high school. He was a student of Dean Robinson, the carillonneur at Mayo Clinic. Dale credits him with teaching him the most about playing the organ. He achieved enough expertise on the organ at that time to be asked to be the organist in his home congregation of Zumbro Lutheran Church during his senior year of high school. In 1960, he became a student at Luther College, where he continued with organ lessons. His career of accompanying congregational singing really began when he was hired by the college as the organist for daily chapel and Sunday services during his junior and senior years.

He graduated from Luther College in 1964 with a degree in Spanish. Dale jokingly tells that he was a Spanish teacher with a Norwegian accent. He was hired by the Rochester Public Schools and completed a career of 35 years of teaching, including later years as a junior high school counselor.

He was recruited to come to Bethel Lutheran as organist in 1964. It happened like this. Dale was asked to play the organ for the wedding of some high school friends at Bethel that summer. After the wedding, Pastor Erling Tungseth came to the choir loft where the organ was located to talk to Dale. He said, "I want you to apply for the position of organist here at Bethel." Dale applied and heard later that there was some opposition to his appointment because some committee members thought he was too young and would not stay very long at Bethel. But there were others like Tony Pagel who said that he should be hired. That opinion won, and Dale remained the organist at Bethel for 46 years.

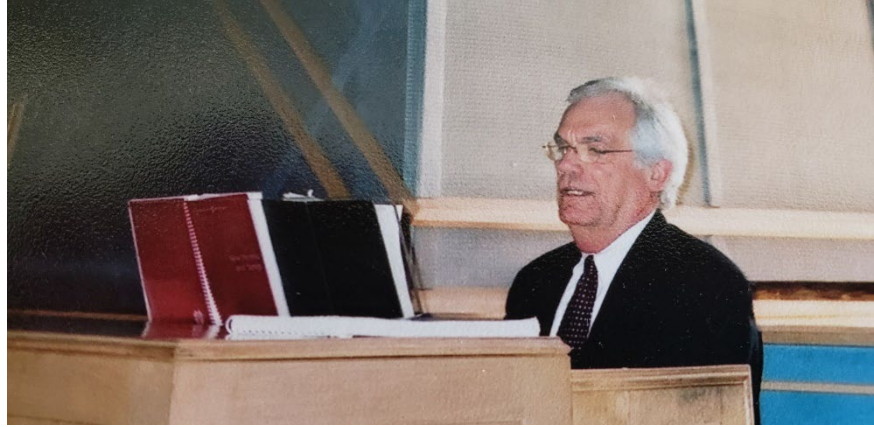


I first met Dale when I joined the senior choir in November, 1968. In a very short time, I experienced the musical genius of this team of Dale and Bob Oudal, who was hired as the choir director in 1965. I was soon aware of Dale's musical energy and accuracy. He played with a distinctive energy and vitality that I had not heard before. Whenever you entered the sanctuary when he was playing the organ, it was apparent immediately that Dale was at the keyboard. He rarely played a wrong note, at least not any mistake that could be detected. He could transpose from one key to the next without a flaw. Dale played beautiful classical music for preludes and postludes, but his greatest strength was his ability to lead the congregation in singing hymns. He played with a confidence and strength that is uncommon in many midwestern churches. He bound the worship service together by weaving in music on the organ that spoke exactly to the message or the mood of the spoken words.

One of the reasons he led congregational singing so well was that he sang EVERY word of every verse of the hymns in his rich baritone voice. This gave him a feel for needed changes in tempo or emphasis on certain phrases. As with all pipe organists in general, Dale also made music with his feet. You may be forming a visual image in your mind of Dale playing with both hands, both feet and with full voice engaged. He was able to play the organ with great volume that almost shook the rafters with joyous sound that inspired the congregation to sing with gusto.

But he also played with a most quiet sound and tenderness if accompanying a soloist or during a contemplative part of the liturgy. This artistry continued without fail for 46 years at Bethel and throughout the tenure of 22 pastors. If a pastor made a mistake in the order of service, Dale led the way to make a correction. He always was "in charge" with the power of the organ giving him the upper hand. Several choir members have related the stories of Dale playing without missing a note all the while carrying on a fully engaged social conversation as one of them stood beside him at the organ while he was playing the postlude.





**Dale in 2003**

Dale was not just invested in the music of worship. He was invested in the people of Bethel. Having lived in Rochester from a young age and being a junior high school teacher, Dale was acquainted with many people. His outstanding personality trait is warmth and friendliness. He was gregarious in the best sense of the word. Over time, Dale knew most of the families of Bethel and who was related to whom. As the worshipers filled the sanctuary every week, he took note of who attended and who was missing. He seemed to know all the “gossip” as develops with longevity in a congregation. Mostly, Dale CARED. He gave encouragement to those who were grieving or troubled. He rejoiced with those who had times of joy. He did special favors for members if he knew he could help them out. Professionally, he later became a school counselor, a perfect fit for Dale.

Dale had a gift for memorizing music. A long-time member of Bethel related the story of being told by Dale’s childhood piano teacher that Dale was the only student she ever had that came to every lesson with his entire lesson memorized. He demonstrated this ability during the Advent and Christmas season when there was a piano in the room, Dale was the leader of a Christmas carol sing-along. He had printed song sheets for anyone who needed one, but he could play and sing carols without any notes in front of him for long sessions if that was what the group wanted. He also knew when the crowd was tired and needed to change activities.



As mentioned earlier, an aspect of Dale's personality was his manner of speaking. From the first time I met him, I noted a touch of a Norwegian brogue. It reflected his childhood exposure to adults who spoke with a Norwegian immigrant lilt in their speech patterns. It immediately endeared him to those of us who knew this influence from our own upbringings.

Another remarkable aspect of Dale's character was his ability to develop a mutually respectful musical partnership with Bob Oudal. Dale could read musical scores handwritten by Bob that were barely legible to the choir members, but Dale would soon have all the notes learned when we started to rehearse a new piece that Bob had written. Bob wrote an introduction to the opening hymn of each worship service during his 32-year tenure at Bethel. It would usually be one page of musical score with words based on the hymn tune.

One could not know Dale unless you also knew his beautiful wife, Helen Tofte. She was born and raised in Decorah, Iowa, in the heart of Norwegian immigrant culture in the United States. She was at the beginning of her nursing career when Dale met her. They were married in August, 1966. She worked as a Rochester Methodist Hospital nurse for several years. Because of her high-quality work performance, leadership ability, and sparkling personality, she transitioned into Mayo Clinic administration and development. She was deeply devoted to her Norwegian heritage. She and Dale shared the love of all things Norwegian. Their home was decorated with beautiful textiles and art objects created by Norwegian artists. They also retained family heirlooms that reminded them of their Norwegian roots. In the early 1970s, Helen and Dale opened their home and entertained the senior choir for a Christmas reception on an evening at the conclusion of choir practice. We were met with Helen's glowing smile and their unmatched hospitality with a buffet of rosettes, krumkake, sandbakkels, lefse, fruit soup, open-face sandwiches, and much coffee, served on beautiful Porsgrund china.

Every Sunday, Helen, always impeccably dressed, and their two children, Erik and Emily, were seated in the front pew of the sanctuary for worship. Near the end of her professional career, Helen was stricken with Parkinson's disease that



progressed quickly. She died in October of 2019. Dale and all who knew her grieved the premature death of Helen.

For the tireless work and beautiful music that he played, Dale accepted gratitude from his listeners with humility. When people heaped praise upon him, he would often say with great enthusiasm, “Yaw, Yaw, that’s enough now! I just love doing this. I’m so happy you like it.” Then he would promptly change the subject with a question about them or their family.

Dale spoke from his soul through music all these years. He proclaimed the mystery and grandeur of God, the love and forgiveness of Christ, and the peace of the Holy Spirit in song to all who are within the sound of the organ and the singing of hymns.

Dale entered into his eternal rest on March 12, 2023. A celebration of his life was held at Bethel on April 3, 2023. He and Helen are interred in the Bethel Columbarium.

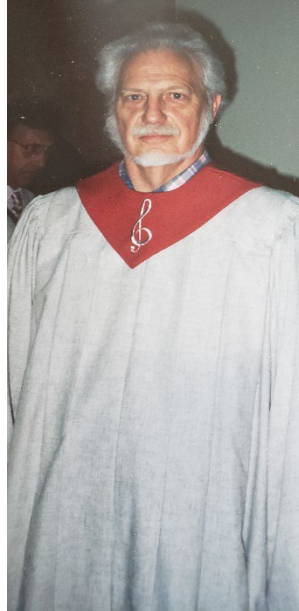
#### Bob Oudal, Senior Choir Director

Robert and Betty Oudal and their family joined Bethel in January of 1961. He had graduated from Augsburg College in 1951. He was first mentioned in the Worship Committee notes in 1964 when he was named as chairman of the committee that searched for an organist when Marguerite McKibben retired. The result of that effort was the hiring of Dale Mundahl as organist in 1964. The following year, 1965, Bob was hired as the director of the junior and senior choirs at Bethel. He continued in the position of Senior choir director until 1997.

Bob was well known in the music community of Rochester in that he taught music in the Rochester Public Schools. In addition, he had established the Robert Oudal Chorale in 1962 with 27 singers participating. On April 22, 1996, Mayor Chuck Canfield proclaimed the day in honor of Oudal. The Post Bulletin stated: “The accolade has been well earned when one reflects on this fine director’s work in so many phases of music over the years.” He was being recognized for establishing



and continuously directing the Robert Oudal Chorale for 35 years with many fine voices from the community, including several he met in the Bethel Lutheran Choir.



It is notable that Bob composed much fine music that was used at Bethel. Most frequently he composed an introduction for the choir to enhance the opening hymn of the worship service. Among those pieces was a larger work that was used for many years on Easter Sunday. It included brass instruments with organ and tympani to give majesty to the festival worship. All of this was accomplished with a crowd of musicians in the balcony of the 1957 building (now called Bethel Hall). “Jesus Christ Was Ris’n Today” was never more powerfully sung in the minds of the choir members.

In 1986, this description of the music program was noted in the annual report of the congregation: “The music program of Bethel still sparkles with excellent work of Dale Mundahl as organist and Bob Oudal as Senior Choir director.”

A history of Bethel written in 1997 noted that “Bob Oudal provided Bethel with 32 years of choral music of superb quality. In addition to his directing talents, Bob often wrote music that his choirs perform at Bethel.”

The tenure of Bob Oudal at Bethel ended in spring of 1997. He died in October, 2022.



## **Cherub Choir**

The Deacon's book in the Bethel archives records the existence of a Cherub Choir in 1954-1958. An early director was Mrs. Ray Nelson in 1958

In 1974, a Cherub Choir (preschool children) was re-established at the request of Pastor John Quello. He chose Lavonne Sasse as the director. She accepted this role with great enthusiasm and continued her superb work for the next 20 years. After her service with the Cherub Choir, she contributed to the music program by assisting Janet Olson with leadership of the Joy Bells.

Lavonne was assisted in directing the Cherub Choir during her 20 years with the accompaniment played by Denise Walser from 1974-78, Susan Schulz-Fincke from 1978-79, VJ Anderson from 1979-82, Deb Norrie from 1982-83, Joy Bollesen from 1983-85, Karla Hill from 1985-86, Lee Gilmore from 1986-88, and Darlene Voeltz from 1988-94.

Lavonne remembers her pleasure in carrying out this task for many reasons, not the least of which was the response of the parents who brought their children to sing and perform. During these years she had consistently 30-35 children in the choir at all times. She recalls that at the end-of-the- year programs, they were sometimes combined with the Joy Bells or the Junior Choir.

After 1994, Kathy Falk, Dave Gross, Elizabeth Coltvvet McGeeney and Kari Tollefson are a few of those people who have served in this capacity. Ann Okins began directing the choir in 2022. She accompanies the choir during rehearsals and Brock Besse accompanies when the choir sings at worship or concert performances.

## **Cantabile Ringers and Joy Bells**

An entirely new feature of the music program of Bethel was initiated and came to fruition in the late 1980s when bell choirs became a regular part of Sunday morning worship. This happened during the Pastor Art Baagason era and was highly encouraged by Pastor Don Deines, Pastor of Life and Growth. Janet Brandt was the individual credited with organizing the bell choir and became the first director. She served until 1998.



In 1984, a fund was initiated to purchase 3 octaves of hand bells. By the fall of 1985, the bells had been purchased, and the senior bell choir began with the name of Cantabile Ringers under the able leadership of Janet Brandt, a Bethel member. In 2010, an additional two octaves of bells were added because of a legacy gift from the Katie Healey family. Her strong interest and participation in the music program prompted her family to leave this gift to Bethel as she had requested.

Long- term membership in the bell choirs is common. Listed below are those individuals who have been Cantabile members:

Charter members: Heather Anderson, Maureen Bigbee, Donna Kaehler, Susan Ludvigson, Melissa Odenbach, Suzanne Odenbach, Doris Schreiber, Melanie Stein, Kim Schmidt, Beth Aakre, Marlene Durst, Judy Egger, Sharon Jones, Janet Olson.

Other members in Cantabiles have been Nadine Anderson, Jan Scheid, Sally Stolte, Sue Thalacker, Hilary Thalacker, Jean Wittmer, Paul Wittmer, Marty Schwartz, Libby Witzeman, Lavonne Sasse, Judy Egger, Donna Sippel, Kristin Sippel, Jana Kjome, Jean Rysavy, Loya Olson, Josie LaVoi, Chrissy Misso, Sheila Misso, Jenny Dick, Jan Chubbuck, Sherrie Moen, Kathi Kleist, Martha Frank, Celena Goodman, Nate Parent, Natalie Grimm, Dee Kelling, Erin Sinwell, Gail Nantt, Karen Apland, Shawn Buttshaw, Patricia McEwan, Kendra Hackney, Mark Rich, Jane VerWeyst.

In the spring of 1986, a younger group of ringers called the Joy Bells (grades 6-10) began with Janet Olson as director. Their first performance in worship was in November, 1986, with 12 students ringing. By 1987, the group had grown to 16 members.

Janet Olson completed a record of her years as the director (1986-1997) in a scrapbook now housed in the Bethel archives. This complete record with copies of bulletins and programs lists the names of more than 55 children who played in the Joy Bells. This beautiful scrapbook is available for your viewing whenever the church office is open. Lavonne Sasse assisted Janet Olson starting in 1994 after she completed her direction of the Cherub Choir.



Charter members of the Joy Bells were:

Reid Olson, Paul Odenbach, Sarah Stolte, Amy Stenson, Beth Fossum, Tanya Anderson, Heather Thalacker, Jessica Roth, Maren Anderson, Bill Hansen, Kari Scheid, Jenny Sippel, Nancy Regan, Todd Olson. They gave their first performance on November 23, 1986.

Starting in 1998, the Minister of Music directed all of the Bell Choirs.

During the pandemic of 2020, the bell choirs did not meet. At the end of the pandemic, a group called the Chapel Ringers was formed and is directed by Gary Thorn on a volunteer basis.

Current members of the Bethel Ringers are:

Dave Moen, Shirley Thorn, Ann Okins, Nate Parent, Jim Weaver, Nate Weaver, Stephanie Deziel, Chrissy Misso, Sheila Misso, Sue Naessens, Michele Pretzer, Merle Savage, Angie Misso, Matt Pretzer, Jim Naessens.

Chapel Ringers are a group that in the past few years were select members of the above group who wanted an additional challenge in bell ringing. In the fall of 2024, the plan of Gary Thorn, director, is to initiate a new group of Chapel Ringers. This group will include youth of the congregation as well as beginners of all ages.

In 2024, funds were given through the Bethel endowment fund for refurbishment of the bells. A specialized company came to Bethel to retool and clean the bells which has resulted in better instruments for the bell players to use. The refurbishment also provides for a clearer sound.



## **The Norman Wahl Years**



The installation of Norman Wahl as lead pastor in 1996 introduced a period of change and remarkable accomplishments in the area of music at Bethel. We were blessed by a lead pastor who was an accomplished musician and dedicated to the inclusion of high-quality music in the life of the congregation. He started his first Sunday by recognizing the gifts of Dale Mundahl at the organ. Pastor Norm tells the story of hearing a beautiful baritone voice singing the hymns at the first service he led. Then that same voice was there again at the next worship service on the same morning. He soon realized that that voice was coming from the balcony where Dale was leading the hymn singing with organ and voice.



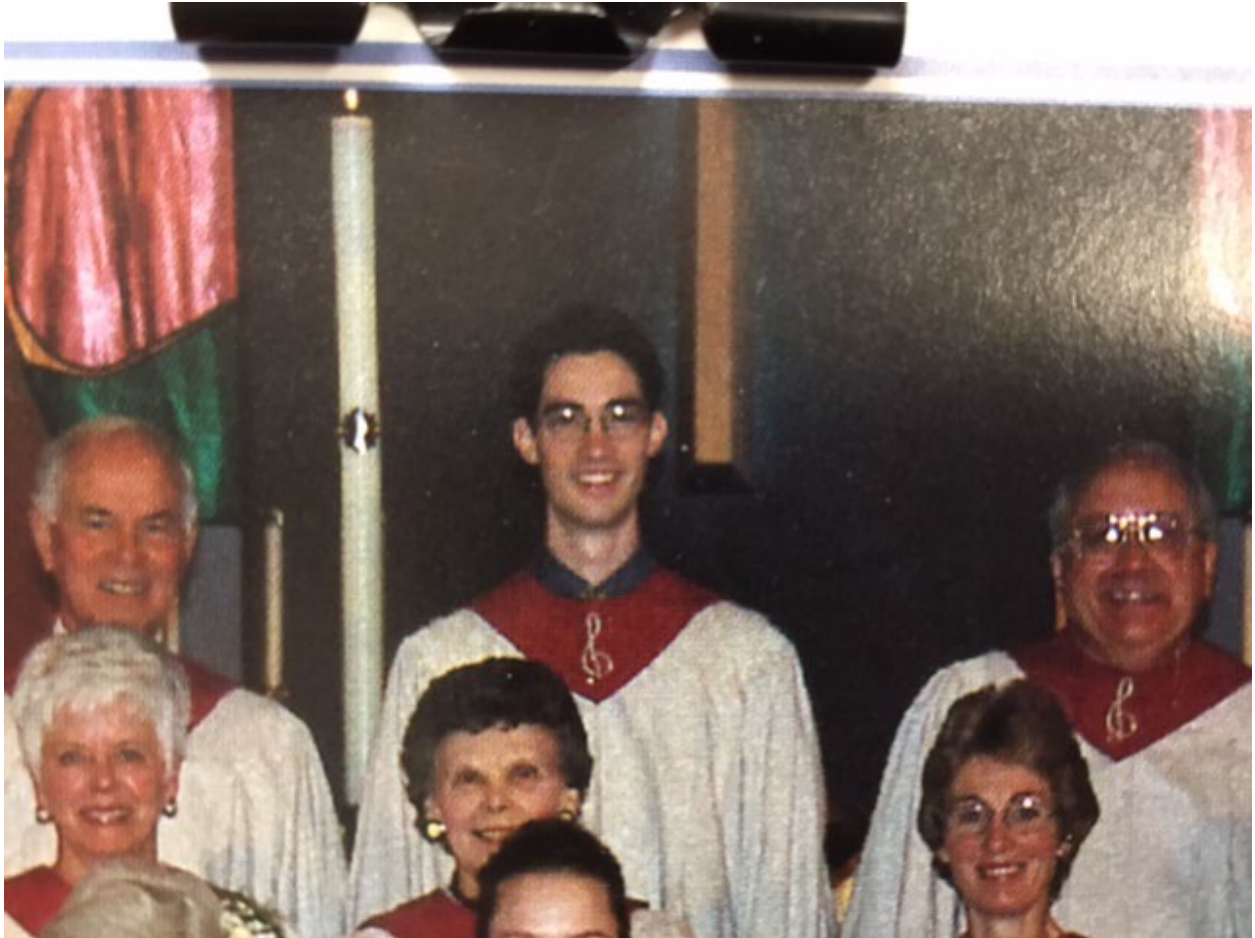
Pastor Wahl led the way in making the transition to a full-time Minister of Music and Worship. In addition, he led the building of a major addition to the church and new sanctuary, including installing a new pipe organ, the hiring of Ministers of Music: John Sall, Jon Strommen-Campbell, Gary Thorn, and Brock Besse.

He enhanced the worship experience by singing the liturgy with artistry and clarity. He was the first full-time pastor who sang with the Chancel Choir and other musical ensembles. He sang in his sermons when the narrative made way for it.

It was not just Pastor Wahl who participated in the music. His wife and family have also been active participants, especially his daughter, Kari Wahl Solak, who has shared her solo vocal talent with the congregation.



## John Sall, First Minister of Music 1997-2002



John Sall, Center of Photo with Choir members

In summer of 1997, a search committee identified John Sall as the first full-time Minister of Music and Worship. A recent graduate of St. Olaf College, he brought impressive musical talent, youthful enthusiasm, and charming personal qualities to this daunting position. The choir grew in numbers. He worked out collaborative events with Christ United Methodist Church to combine the choirs and sing major choral works, such as John Rutter's "Requiem" and the Mozart "Requiem" in concert.

John resigned his position at Bethel in 2001 to become Director of Music Ministry at Abington Presbyterian Church in Abington, Pennsylvania. He has continued in



that position since leaving Bethel. You can read his musical accomplishments at the website for his church in Pennsylvania. John and his wife, Ruth, had one daughter while living in Rochester and now have two more daughters during their time in Pennsylvania.



**Jon Strommen-Campbell, Minister of Music 2002-2006,**



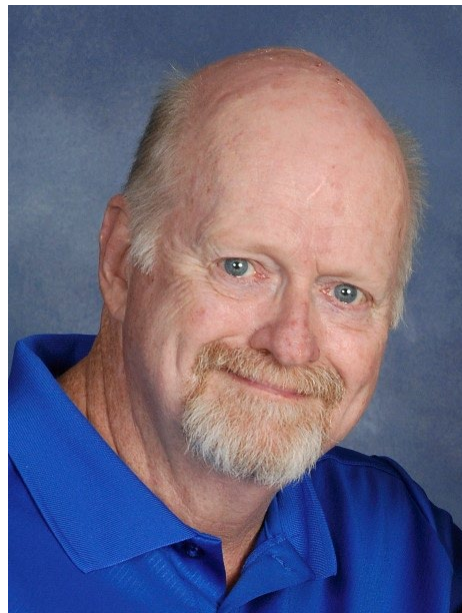
Jon came to Bethel with a degree in music from Luther College in 1998 and a Master of Sacred Music from Luther Seminary in 2002. Jon and wife, Siri Strommen, came to Bethel in June of 2002 and served Bethel until September of 2006. During that time, Siri served as intern pastor for one year and then was called to serve Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Rochester. Jon was very active in the search for an appropriate organ for the new sanctuary, spending many hours studying options. During the time that the 2004 sanctuary building was being planned and constructed, Jon was featured in an article written by Luther Seminary. It describes Jon's role in this way: "Jon's ears are helping him consult



with the builders and engineers who will make sure that Bethel's new acoustics sound like heaven."

He resigned from Bethel to take a position at Mt. Olive Lutheran, Rochester. He earned a Doctor of Musical Arts in choral conducting from North Dakota State University in 2015. He most recently is the Director of Music at Zion Lutheran Church, Anoka, MN. He and Siri have two children, Theodore and Lucy. Jon and Siri are divorced, and he is known as Jon Campbell.

### **Dr. Gary Thorn, Minister of Music 2006-2017**



Gary Thorn began his service to Bethel in December of 2006. It was during his time that the music program grew substantially and developed into the program that the search committee for a full-time music director in 1996 had envisioned. Gary came to Bethel with extensive experience, wonderful musical training, and a passion for choral music that enlivened the music program at Bethel.

He grew up in Dodge Center, MN, where he showed musical ability early in his life as part of the Luther League program at Faith Lutheran in Dodge Center, which happened to be located across the street from his family home. By the time he



was in high school, he became the director of the adult choir. He also was the leader of the trumpet section in the high school band.

His musical career really began when he was a student at Rochester Community College with Gordon Danuser as his instructor. Mr. Danuser greatly encouraged Gary and gave him the position of student conductor for both years there. Gary continued college at St. Cloud State with a major in English and Music. After graduating from college, Gary married Shirley and they lived in several communities teaching music and gaining invaluable experience. His time at Kingsland High School in Spring Valley was the best experience of his career with high school students.

When Gary and Shirley moved to Rochester, Gary was still teaching at Kingsland High School. In their search for a church in Rochester, they visited Bethel in the spring of 2003 and had a parking-lot conversation with Pastor Linda Helberg. She invited them both to join the Bethel choir, which they did. When Jon Strommen-Campbell announced his resignation in 2006, Pastor Norman Wahl immediately asked Gary if he would “fill in” as choir director until a new director could be found. As the saying goes, “The rest is History.”

One of Gary’s outstanding characteristics is his diligent work as the “recruiter-in-chief.” He asks everyone he meets at Bethel to join the choir. He makes it his business to meet as many members as possible. The way he tells it is that “many people have never been asked to join.” He believes you simply must invite them personally to participate and ask them to give this experience a try. The number and quality of the choir is a testament that his diligence has paid off. Even though Gary is now retired as music director, he is still inviting people to join the choir whenever he is able to talk to a person he has not met at Bethel.

Gary expanded the musical groups during his 11 years as director. By 2014, there were 14 music groups available at Bethel: Bethel Brass, Bethel Orchestra, Chancel Choir, Men’s Quartet, Celebrant singers, Ladies Trio, Sing for Joy, Chapel Ringers and Cantabile Ringers. The children’s program included Jubilate (grades 6-12), Choristers (grades 1-5) Cherub Choir (pre-school).

The brass ensemble started when Paul Brinson asked if Gary could start a group for clarinet players. Gary turned that request into a full orchestra. The brass ensemble was also formed and still exists with Merle Savage as the director.



Next came the group called Sing Four Joy. It began with Bruce Odenbach, Vern Anderson, Gary Thorn, and Norm Wahl. When that group expanded beyond 4 men, the group became Sing FOR Joy and varies from 4-9 members. In 2024, the group also includes Dave Dettmann, Bill Shea, Ed Heckman, Gary Thorn, Merle Savage, Ryland Eichorst, and Jim Naessens.

With this small men's group going well, the women wanted a group also and so was born Blessings, which varies from 6-12 members singing at any one worship service.

Gary also worked with Rejoice (a contemporary worship service) for some years. When interest in this group dissipated, he asked those members who wanted to sing to join the Chancel choir.

Gary loves to direct bell choirs. He has worked throughout all his years at Bethel in developing members and repertoire for those groups. Since the end of the pandemic and revival of bell choirs, he is serving as volunteer director of the Bethel Ringers.

With the significant expansion of the music program came another gift from the musicians of Bethel. In the spring of the year starting in 2007, Gary Thorn planned and carried out an end-of-the-year concert. All groups performed at least one musical number. It is a showcase of talent and demonstrates the dedication to the music program of Bethel. This concert has now become a treasured tradition which is a gift to the congregation and any guests our members invite. It continues yearly under the direction of Brock Besse.

### **Bethel Orchestra, Bethel Ensemble and Bethel Brass**

The orchestra began under the leadership of Gary Thorn. It grew to a group of more than 25 members. They played during worship services and at the annual spring concerts until the onset of the pandemic. When instrumental groups resumed after the pandemic in 2021, the Bethel Ensemble has continued the



tradition of instrumental groups playing preludes and accompanying the choir at occasional worship services.

Members and friends from other churches who have played in Bethel orchestra, but are no longer playing at this time:

Kay Buske, clarinet

Jean Rysavy, violin

Charles Bysheim, cymbals

Brenda Johnson, oboe

Diane Shopteau, flute

Jennifer Brandt, alto clarinet

Mason Pretzer, alto sax

Beth Aakre, flute

Rachel Coltvét, piano

Jason Burggraff, cello

Emily Gross, clarinet

Members playing in the Bethel Ensemble or Bethel Brass in 2024:

Synneva Hicks, flute

Victoria Waugh, flute

Susan Moen, clarinet

Dave Gross, clarinet

Sharon Northouse, bass clarinet

Clayton Reedstrom, piano

VJ Anderson, bassoon

Cindy Boese, alto sax



Shirley Thorn, timpani

Leslie Harrington, percussion

Susan Garcia, trumpet

Merle Savage, trumpet

Connie Post, French horn

Linda VanSoest, French horn

Dave Dettmann, trombone

Jim VanSoest, trombone

Jon Rask, baritone

Matt Wallace, baritone



## **Jim Bahler, Principal Organist**



Jim Bahler became the principal organist in 2010. A long personal history of service to Bethel and preparation came before this date. Jim and wife, Cindy, were married in 1977 and came to Rochester that year. They were attracted to Bethel by the preaching and leadership of Pastor John Quello and the organ playing of Dale Mundahl.

Jim's musical training began when he was in third grade. He began piano lessons at the direction and encouragement of his mother. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade, he was showing enough musical promise that his parents took him to Madison, WI, for lessons every Saturday in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades.



When he was in high school, he began organ lessons with a wonderful musician and organist in his home town of Monroe, WI. Even though Jim was at the same time involved in playing sports, he continued with the unusual combination of also playing the organ. A sports injury never interfered with his playing of the piano or organ.

His first experience of playing for church was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. An usher tapped him on the shoulder one Sunday morning and asked him if he would play the organ for the opening hymn. Thus began his love affair with playing in church.

His dad purchased a Baldwin organ to practice at home, and his mother greatly encouraged his interest in the organ. They were Lutherans, but Jim played during the summers for a UCC church in Monroe during the years he was in college. Jim attended Luther College in Decorah, IA, and took organ lessons for 7 semesters while he studied for his degree and also earned a Master's degree in counselling.

From 1977 until 1993, Jim was an “organist in waiting” at Bethel. During the tenure of Pastor Baagason, Jim asked for permission to practice on the Bethel organ. This he did in order to retain his organ-playing expertise. He volunteered on a Time and Talent sheet to accompany any group, but he was never tapped to participate until 1993 when Betty Frantzen asked him to assist with the beginning of a new venture at Bethel, a Saturday evening worship service. Under the leadership of Pastor John Braaten and Jim as organist and the committee chaired by Betty Frantzen, the Saturday night service began in January, 1993 and continues in 2024.

As it happened, in 1993, Jim had answered an ad for an organist at First Lutheran in Lake City. Jim accepted that position since he was really anxious to use his gift of playing the organ. He continued from 1993 until 2010 to play for the Saturday night service at Bethel and also the



Sunday morning service at Lake City, never missing a service for illness or inclement weather. He maintained this schedule until he became the organist at Bethel upon the resignation of Dale Mundahl.

An additional note about Jim's tenure at Lake City adds interest to his story. In 2004, the Lake City church needed an organ. They bought the organ that was in the 1957 building at Bethel because the organ was being sold in preparation for building a new sanctuary which would require a much bigger and higher quality organ. Jim was there for the dedication of the Bethel organ at First Lutheran in Lake City and continued to play it for 3 ½ years. He then gave up that position for the opportunity to become the principal organist at Bethel upon the retirement of Dale Mundahl in 2010.

Jim was active in the life of the congregation in many ways, but most worthy of mention is that he joined the worship committee in 1993, was chairman of the committee for about 10 years, and is still on that committee.

You cannot know Jim unless you also know his wife, Cindy. They are a dynamic duo who never let a holiday pass without the appropriate decorative outfit to celebrate the day. Many of you have seen Jim's back sitting at the organ as he displays his Stars and Stripes or other regalia. Cindy is the inspiration for his costumes or other holiday decorations. They love to put a smile on the faces of those who notice the fun and, sometimes, wild decorations.

It is Jim's fine musicianship on the organ and his gentle, gracious personality that has endeared him to the congregation. He remains the ever faithful, never missing a service (except for a Packers' game) servant of the Bethel congregation.



A small personal note about Jim. His last name is pronounced Bahler, rhymes with “valor”. It is not pronounced “Baylor” or “Baller” or “Bailer.

Merle Savage



A long-time and continuing force in the history of music at Bethel is Merle Savage.

He and his wife, Shelly, came to Bethel in 1988 when she was hired at Mayo Clinic. He came to Rochester with several years of experience as a music teacher, having graduated from Concordia College, Moorhead.



He then became a music teacher in the Rochester Public Schools and continued in that position for 30 years.

In 1988, he first joined the Senior Choir at Bethel. Over the past 35 years, he has been in many leadership positions. One of the first endeavors was as leader of a new worship model called “Rejoice,” which began in spring of 1993. This service was in a contemporary style with a blend of praise and traditional music, using leadership of a guitar, drums, keyboard, and singers. It was held at the 11:00 a.m. worship hour on two Sundays per month. He also was an integral part of a Men’s Quartet for about 10 years. The much-loved-by-the-congregation group was composed of Merle, Tim Alpers, Dave Moen, and Dave Gross accompanied by Pam Alpers. He performed a singing/actor role in the Lenten drama “The Promise” for several years. In 2006, he was part of the team that worked on the fund raising and installation of the current pipe organ. He was in the group of members that went to the Wicks Organ Company to select the new organ. He is currently a member of the men’s ensemble called “Sing for Joy,” another source of inspiration for the congregation.

When the transition from pandemic lock-down to worship services with limited attendance began, Merle served as the Bethel Cantor. He sang most of the verses of hymns and the liturgy responses to limit congregational singing, which could be a major source of spread of the virus.

Merle’s current role is a staff position as Associate Music Director of Bethel. He directs the Brass Ensemble, sings in Chancel Choir, serves as worship liturgist when needed, and directs the Chancel Choir when requested by Brock Besse. His versatile musical gifts make him an important part of the musical landscape of Bethel.



## **Dave Gross, Musician and Choir Director**



Dave Gross became a member along with his wife Tammy in 1990. He has contributed heavily to the Bethel congregation ever since. He has been adaptable to filling the role of singer, choir director, orchestra member, or staff member as needs in the music program have changed.

Dave and Tammy were attracted to Bethel by the organ music of Dale Mundahl and the choir music directed by Bob Oudal. Soon after joining Bethel, Dave joined the senior choir. He was soon recruited by Bob Oudal to sing in the Oudal Choral. He says that joining the Oudal Choral began his “instruction” in being a choir director. After that time, he was mentored by the next choir directors, John Sall, Jon Campbell, Gary Thorn, and Brock Besse. The first choir he directed starting in 1998 was the Cherub Choir or Small Singers for preschool children with the support of John Sall. Next, he added the Choristers for children in grades 1-5. When Jon Campbell became Minister of Music in 2002, the Junior Choir became Jubilate (middle school and high school ages). He directed this group from 2007-



2015. Dave directed choirs in which his own children, Emily and Eric, sang all the years they were children until they graduated from high school.

His participation in the adult choir program is significant. He has been in the Senior (now called Chancel) Choir from 1990 until the present day. His musical gifts have also given him a part in a Men's Quartet, which started in 1998-2000 with the encouragement of John Sall. The Quartet members were Dave Moen, Tim Alpers, Merle Savage, and Dave Gross. The accompanist was Pam Alpers. This group continued to perform in worship services and participated in the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Bethel celebration in 2019.

Dave played keyboards with the Rejoice Singers when it began in 1993. Another endeavor is that he became part of the Drama Team when he directed the off-stage choir for dramas called "The Promise" and "The Choice" for 3 years during those productions between 1995 and 2019. Dave has been part of the Rochester Choristers Guild, playing a leadership role in 2015 when Bethel was the host for a day of instruction and then concert at the end of the day for children involved in children's choirs in Rochester.

In the Bethel music program, he has been a member of the orchestra and then the instrumental ensemble playing a clarinet. He was honored to be selected by Brock Besse to join the more complex, classical style of music group named Cantori, singing with that group for several years.

In 2006 when Gary Thorn became Minister of Music, he asked Dave to become a part-time staff member in the music program in order to continue with direction of Choristers, Jubilate, and other duties as needed. This assignment continued until 2017.



## **Junior Choir**

The Junior Choir was started in 1940 with Mrs. N. H. Larson as director. In 1948, the Junior Choir director was Glenna Travis. In 1953, the choir was called the Chapel Choir and was directed by Ionia Olson, the Bethel parish worker. During the years between 1950-1964, the Junior Choir was directed by Carol Suddendorf. When Bob Oudal was hired in 1965, he directed the Junior Choir for several years.

In 1974, Judy Best was listed as the choir director. In 1983, Marcia Odenbach was the accompanist with a Mayo resident's wife as director. In 1984, Marcia Odenbach became the director with VJ Anderson as the accompanist. Other directors were Ruth Stoeckel in '86, Nancy Becker in '87, Martha Frank in '88-93, Kathy Falk '94-99, and Kathy Gentling in '99. Denise Walser, Joy Bollesen, and Lee Gilmore were accompanists during some of these years.

With the beginning of a full-time music director, John Sall and Jon Campbell directed the choir. During the tenure of Jon Campbell, another choir was added called Jubilate (grades 6-12) directed by Jon Campbell from 2002-2006. Dave Gross directed this choir from 2007-2015. After a break of 2 years, Dave restarted the group in 2017-2020. After the pandemic, this choir could not be again organized for practice. Another group of children called Choristers (grades 1-5) was formed in 2008 and directed by Dave Gross through 2017. Since 2021, Teri Wehrman has been the director with Lynn Pearson as accompanist.



## **Role of Choir Members in Music History**

It is necessary in this history of Bethel to note that there are lay members of the congregation who have played an extraordinary role in the music program. It has been said that “when you sing, you pray twice.” Using that axiom and for many other reasons, choir members are pillars of congregational life.

These individuals come to rehearsals 9 months of the year every week for 1-2 hours preparing for Sunday morning worship. On Sunday morning, they arrive at least an hour before worshipers to rehearse the choir anthem of the day. On festival days such as Easter and Christmas, many extra hours are spent in rehearsal and singing for several worship services.

What motivates these people? For some, it is the love of the Gospel message along with the love of singing choral music. For most, it is the fellowship that develops among choir members. The worship service is more meaningful when one is fully engaged in leading the liturgy and anthems and when the message of the day is proclaimed in song. They stay in the choir because of the relationships that develop between members and the sheer love of choral music which they experience at rehearsals and worship services. When you sing, you are surrounded literally and figuratively by the community of faith. Choir members experience the growth of a small disjointed sound when first sung, that grows into a beautiful harmony when the anthem is ready to be a part of worship on Sunday morning. The motivation to continue singing is strong, captivating, and nourishing to the soul. The love of Christ shines through the music and the singers to the whole congregation.

A significant factor in recruiting and retention of singers is the leadership of the choir director. Bethel has been richly blessed with choir directors over the years who were professionally trained and have had great skill in blending voices and selecting music that is suitable for the choir. Each of them has been profiled in more detail in this document.

These factors are made abundantly clear when you read the names of individuals who have participated for decades. Here they are listed with the number of years they have sung in the Bethel choir.



**The plus sign+ after the years signifies that the member is still singing in the choir in 2024.**

**Early Members (now deceased) for whom years of service are unavailable:**

Marie Roadway

Helen Friberg

Katie Healey

T.C. Hegge

Ollie Madison

W. R. McKibben

**Members recorded from 1962-2020 by Don Buske:**

Herb Halverson 60 (deceased)

Kay Buske 60

Don Buske 59

Norm Brecke 55 (deceased)

Merle Bolin 55 (Died 2017)

Millard Strand 54 (Died 2006)

VJ Anderson 54+ and Bethel Ensemble

Marcia Odenbach 50 + and Blessings

Jerry Greseth 46 (Died 2010)

Dale Mundahl, organist 46 (Died 2023)

Bruce Odenbach 45 and Sing For Joy

Dave Moen 40+ and Sing for Joy

Gloria Pankow 40

Wayne Munson 40

Maynard Pankow 38 (Died 2023)



Robert Oudal, Director 32 (Died 2022)

Dave Kaehler 29 (Died 2018)

Carol Lamberg 29

Jean Mortenson 28

Dorothy Becher 28

Dave Gross 27+ and Bethel Ensemble, Sing for Joy, Men's Quartet

Norman Wahl 27 + and Sing for Joy and Cantori

Kathy Wahl 26 + and Cantori

Barb Bigbee 26 (died in 2016)

Carol Steffenson 25

Julie Bisbey 24+ and Blessings

Terry Wiltsie 24+ and Blessings

Phil Soderberg 23

Rose Gruhlke 23

Jody Hanson 21 +

Kari Solak 21 + and Cantori

Donna Smith 20

Kris Robinson 20 (Died 2024)

Merle Savage 20+ and Bethel Ensemble and Sing for Joy and Assistant Music Director

Lynn Pearson 19

Jean Rysavy 19+ and Blessings and Cantabiles

Leslie Harrington 19+

Ron Hanson 20+

Jerry Ramaker 18



Gary Thorn 18+ and Bethel Ensemble, Sing For Joy, Bethel Ringers  
Shirley Thorn 18+ and Bethel Ensemble and Blessings and Bethel Ringers  
Rachel Coltvet 17 and accompanist for Sing For Joy  
Connie Post 17+ and Bethel Ensemble and Blessings  
Diana Vogt 17+ and Blessings  
Barb Evans (Achor) 17  
Pam Alpers 16 and accompanist for Men's Quartet  
Tim Alpers 16 and Men's Quartet  
Debbie Bennes 16+  
Michael Huls 16+  
Gary Poulson 16+  
Jim Weaver 15+ and Bethel Ringers  
Tammie Pankow Toogood 14  
Tammy Gross 14  
Ellen Moetsch 14  
Paul Peterson 14  
Nate Parent 14+ and Bethel Ringers  
Betty Frantsen 14  
Peggy Armstrong 14  
Donna Riess 13  
Louis Bortolen 13  
Jon Rask 13+ and Bethel Ensemble  
Jim Bahler (organist) 13+  
Brenda Warner 13



Jennifer Brandt 12

Emily Porcher 12 (Died 2021)

John Stone 12

Steve Greseth 12

Don King 12

Carla Brouwer 12+

Bill Shea 12+ and Sing for Joy

Gladys Shea 12+

Dave Von 12

Deanna Von 12

Sharon Northouse 12+

Kim Schmidt 11

Jorgina Livingston 11 (Died 2006)

Colin Williamson 11

Joel Worra 11 (Died 2021)

Ryland Eichorst 11+ and Sing for Joy

Diane Rollinger 10+

Jay Toogood 10

Linda Helberg 10+ and Blessings

Al Southwick 10 (Died 2016)

Sandy Brakke

In brief summary, Bethel has had 42 choir members who have served from 20-60 years each. We have 45 members who have served between 10-20 years each.

Members of the choir in 2024 who have joined within the past 10 years are: Sue Jenkins, Sue Garcia, Julie Hanson, Susan Moen, Lynne Kuennen, Erica Devine,



Lewis Jenkins, Catherine McBride, James Naessens, Susan Naessens, Ann Okins, Matt Pretzer, Ian Greenlund, Trinity Rafdahl-Northhouse, Linda VanSeost, Jim VanSeost.

Two choir members require special emphasis. Don Buske kept careful records of membership in the choir, and it is his records that supplied the above information that is shared in this document. In addition, he served as a volunteer organizer and “librarian” from 1964 until 2000. He handled the distribution and collection of music for all members of the senior choir. He was a true friend and assistant to his friend and choir director, Bob Oudal.

The other person who has served in the role of organizer of music and record keeper for the Chancel Choir is Diana Vogt. She has served as a volunteer under the leadership of both Gary Thorn and Brock Besse. Of additional interest, Diana was baptized at Bethel by Pastor Arthur Hansen and sang in a children’s choir as a 5-year-old in 1950.

Sue Jenkins is the 2024 secretary of the choir and provided the list of choir members at this time.

Included in this history is a Lenten service talk given in 2024 by Ian Greenlund that expresses the place of the Chancel Choir in the life of its members:

Good afternoon/evening! My name is Ian Greenlund, and my wife, Allie, and I have been members of Bethel since 2023, after relocating to Rochester in August 2022 from Bozeman, Montana.

Regular worship has been a cornerstone to my faith and relationship with God for as long as I can remember. Growing up, I would frequently attend worship with my parents, brother, and my extended family including my Grandmother, Great Aunt, and cousins. Much like many of you, we had our spot that we returned to week after week in the sanctuary.

As we grow older, you quickly learn that attending worship is more visiting with close friends, singing along to hymns, and listening to the message from the pastor. Attending worship is actually a way that we can connect with God. While all of those I mentioned are important, I may be a little biased toward one of them. Singing, is how I enjoy connecting to God during worship, or as Psalm 98 encourages us, to “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: Make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” This simple act of singing during worship is an opportunity to connect to God and to experience his love and compassion that he has for us. Singing helps each of us praise God for all that he has done, is doing, and will continue to do during our lives on Earth. Also, I think singing during worship allows each of us to pray to God perhaps when we do not know exactly what to say, but still want to offer our thanks to God during worship. Either way, this act is an opportunity for our spirit’s to connect with God.



One way I channel this connection is by singing in Bethel's Chancel Choir. Singing in this group was one of the best decisions I made since joining Bethel. It has actually allowed me to channel a talent that had long been dormant for over 10 years, and a great opportunity to embrace a gift that God blessed me with. This group is filled with gifted individuals with a variety of musical experience, and truly one of the most talented choirs I've experienced. We meet every Wednesday evening from 7:30 – 9:00pm. Each song that you hear on Sunday is typically rehearsed for 2 – 4 weeks, or more, depending on difficulty. An unexpected bit of joining this group was the "family" that I also entered into, where at the close of every rehearsal, we share prayer concerns with each other to include in our daily prayers, and conclude with the singing of the Lord's Prayer. I consider it a joy and a privilege to use my and our collective voices to share God's message of love and his desire to connect with all of us during worship. Sometimes music and singing are just what we need to connect with God after the loss of a loved one, when you are just going through a difficult time, but also to celebrate the joys of this life. We hope that each Sunday, our music helps your spirit, and your emotions, connect with God, maybe even with that goosebumps feeling.

Thank you!

### **Rejoice and Mosaic**

There was recognition in the 1990s that an alternative to traditional worship was growing in acceptance. Some members of the congregation were enthusiastic to design a service and be the leaders of a new style of worship for Bethel. Betty Frantsen was the Church Counsel representative for worship and was willing to take the lead. Julie Trenerry served as chairperson of the Alternate Worship Subcommittee. Merle Savage was selected to be the musical director of the choir and instrumental group for this worship service. March 14, 1993, was the first time the service was presented. There was an enthusiastic beginning with up to 450 worshipers attending these services held twice a month at the 11:00 worship hour. Musicians in the lead group were Merle Savage, Marcia and Bruce Odenbach, Barb Bigbee, Charles Bysheim, LuAnne Remme, Gordon Lundskow, Synneva Hicks (flute), Joel Worra, Sara Myrho (violin), Paul Odenbach (saxophone), Pam Alpers (piano), Julie Trenerry, Anne Mortenson (violin), Dave Gross (keyboar Kathi Kaehler, Kim Schmidt, Cindy Miller, Marge Hill, Lisa Hones, Virginia Bennech, Chris Bennish, and Lisa Seekins.



In 1996, the Rejoice service introduced a new hymnal “With One Voice”. The hymnal was purchased for use by the Rejoice service but added new hymns to the traditional services as well.

Another form of worship, Mosaic, was introduced in 2000 under the leadership of Pastor Julie Rogness with the Director of Family Ministry, Jonette Knock, John Sall, and Ramie Bakken. This service was designed as a family worship experience and met in Fellowship Hall. Ed Hagen, father of Pastor Julie, built a cross and altar from rough-hewn wood was used for this worship service. It was discontinued when Pastor Julie and Jonette resigned in 2002.

When the new sanctuary was built and ready for use in 2005, the Rejoice service was discontinued. The number of worship services was reduced to two worship hours and both were traditional worship styles held at 9:00 and 10:30, a change from the previous worship schedule.

### **Gate of Life**

In 2011, a new form of worship and music was developed in response to a need identified at a Church Council retreat. That need was to increase participation of young adults in Bethel. A council-sponsored task force formed to formulate a plan to fill a need for the “emerging generation” of worshipers. Those individuals who also led in this endeavor were Michael Beckman, youth director, Pastor Norm Wahl, Mark Smith, Ron Jensen, Julie Nelson, Dave Turner, Jim Weaver. Research was done, including a survey of the congregation. At the same time, there was a group of musicians who had strong interest in contemporary worship music forms. They were called “In Between” with members Michael Beckman, Tony and Tricia Knutson, Terri Wehrman, Erin Burggraff, Jon Schaefer, and Will Fredrickson. Both these groups worked together to develop the Gate of Life service that began in September of 2015.

Major questions that needed to be decided were where and when would the service be held. After much discussion with strong endorsement and leadership from Pastors Wahl and Burggraff, the decision was to conduct two services simultaneously with Gate of Life at 10:10 to be held in the Chapel while the 10:30 service was held in the sanctuary at 10:30. This practice has worked so well that



those decisions continue to be in place in 2024. Pastors pass from one service to the other during the course of the service so that the preaching pastor gives the sermon at both services and the liturgist moves from one service to the other seamlessly.

Gate of Life takes its name from John 10:9-10, "I am the gate...I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." It is a non-traditional, welcoming service which is held every Sunday with communion being offered at every service. It employs "praise music" with the support of singers, drums, keyboard, and guitar. The similarity to a traditional service is that every service includes the Forgiveness of Sins, sermon, prayers, Holy Communion, and Lord's prayer.

Those people who helped to launch this new service were Mike Smith, Renae Hoffman, youth director, Greg Maddock, Kristi, Jason, and Brie LaPlante, Anthony Wittmer, Paul Branstad, Sera(Mamisoa) Knutson, Bethel Coordinator of Communications. The church council approved the employment of a director for the service. James Dreissen was hired as the musical leader. A Luther College grad, he is described as the "heart and soul" of this service. He played keyboard, guitar, violin, and was the vocal leader. Other members of the band were Tony and Tricia Knutson, Will Fredrickson, Greg Maddock, Toni Fabian, Alexandra Johnson, Derrick Fabian, Terri Wehrman, Erin Burggraff, Josie LaVoi, Molly Lewis, Laurie Ringen, Brie LaPlante, Ashley Terrill.

James Dreissen continued in a leadership role for about 5 years. After his service, Michele Nyman was hired for that position and continues now in 2024. The musicians that lead this service with Michele are Tony Fabian, Greg Maddock, Caelyn Petersilie, Ethan Petersilie, and Stella Narr.

The role of the pandemic is an important part of the history of this service. Prior to the pandemic, the attendance was 80-90 worshipers. There was the beginning of plans for adding another service to accommodate all those who wanted to attend. After the pandemic, 30-50 worshipers usually attend. Gate of Life continues to offer a warm, less formal form of worship in a smaller and welcoming space.



### **The Brock Besse Years, 2017 to Present Day**



Upon the retirement of Gary Thorn in February, 2017, the search was on for a new Minister of Music and Worship for Bethel. Brock Besse had been Minister of Music at Mt. Olive Lutheran since 2013. He became well acquainted with Bethel members through his Rochester community involvement in a pit orchestra at Rochester Civic Theater. As soon as those members knew that Gary was retiring, they urged Brock to apply. He applied immediately and was hired after an interview with a committee from Bethel chaired by Jim Bahler and an audition with the choir at a rehearsal. He started his tenure at Bethel in June of 2017.

Written here is a brief biography about Brock during the time he was Minister of Music at First Lutheran in Albert Lea:



“Brock’s flare and passion for music began at a very young age. When he was five years old, he climbed up onto the bench of his grandmother’s Wurlitzer Funmaker organ and began playing simple songs such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” by ear. His parents immediately enrolled him in organ lessons with Dr. Eileen Weddingfeld of Norfolk, Nebraska. At the age of twelve, he began learning the flute/piccolo and over his high school years picked up many other instruments. From oboe, English horn, bassoon and piano to harpsicord, Irish whistle, uilleann pipes, and harp to name a few. During Junior High his teacher retired from her organist job at St. John’s Lutheran Church and Brock stepped in to this position through his senior year in high school.

Brock began his college career at Hastings College in Hasting, Nebraska, to study music performance on the pipe organ with a minor in music education. He continued his organ studies with Dr. Bushon of Dana College and then moved to Minnesota to complete his MFA through Minnesota State University and the University of Minnesota. His first full time position as Minister of Music was in Albert Lea, MN, where he worked at First Lutheran Church. He was asked to begin a praise and worship service while working with the adult choir, children’s choirs, instrumental ensembles, handbells, and playing organ for all services. In his time in Albert Lea, Brock created the Southeastern Minnesota Chamber Orchestra and the Albert Lea Community Chorus.”

While Brock was employed at Mt. Olive, he founded the Rochester Pops Orchestra. He tells the story of its beginning: when he became part of a pit orchestra for a musical at Rochester Civic Theater, he recognized the wealth of talent in the group and issued an invitation to join him in forming this new musical group. There proved to be great enthusiasm in the community for attending concerts with this kind of music, and he continued to recruit musicians of ability to play the music he chose or composed himself. The orchestra now in its 9<sup>th</sup> year. It is an important part of Brock’s musical history. They perform their concerts in the Bethel sanctuary, but it is not a part of the Bethel Lutheran music program.

In his first year at Bethel, Pastor Wahl requested that Brock direct all choirs currently part of the music program. This task he did gladly, and in subsequent years he added musical groups that fit the time and talents of those who volunteered to be part of the music program. It was not long until members of the



congregation began to see the variety and depth of Brock's ability. He has an energy and passion for well performed music that is remarkable. He makes full use of his professional training in his approach to recruiting and developing choirs and instrumental groups. He continues his education in order to develop more skills and expertise. He has a great deal of confidence in his performance and conducting that is tempered with an equal amount of humility. His passion for his work at Bethel is palpable whenever one has the opportunity to discuss his current projects.

Brock seemed to have been the "the right person at the right time." He is convinced of that fact by many experiences at Bethel. He proved this axiom when the pandemic hit the world in 2020. He states that he was not willing to just quit doing music when all the world shut down. During his college curriculum, he had taken training in audio/video editing. That allowed him to start a virtual choir during the pandemic. It took hours of recording his own voice singing each part, setting up a recording studio at Bethel, recording each choir member singing his/her part, editing all of these voices to make a unified sound that could be streamed online. He willingly used his time to accomplish all of these tasks. The end result was a continuation of choral music in worship services sent out to members. He soon was pleasantly surprised to find that choir members learned much about their own abilities and voices. They listened to themselves sing and thereby learned to blend with the other voices in a more accurate way than they had done before.

In the previous history of Bethel written by Bill Bakken, there is an account of the happenings during the pandemic for the music groups. Please refer to p. 109-110 of "The First 150 Years," Second Edition, July 30, 2023.

Several groups have changed under the direction of Brock and were influenced by pandemic adjustments:

Sing For Joy, the men's ensemble, grew from four men to now a total of 11. The number of men who sing at any performance varies depending on their schedules. Brock notes that it takes 5-6 years to work with a group to get them to the level of their best performance. This fact is true with the Sing For Joy group.

Blessings is the women's ensemble which began when Gary Thorn was Minister of Music. It has grown to having 4 sections with a total of 14 women singing. The



original members of the group were Chrissy Misso, Diana Vogt, Terry Wiltsie, Gladys Shea, Jean Rysavy, Linda Helberg, Marcia Odenbach, Deanna Von, Shirley Thorn, Julie Bisbey, Jodi Hanson, and Terri Wehrman. By 2024, Connie Post, Linda Tessmer, and Sandra Nelson joined the group as some of the original members are no longer singing. Terri Wehrman directed the group in 2021-2022. Blessings is directed by Brock Besse in 2024. He notes that this group has changes as women's voices age. Voices become lower and singers may take on a lower part with just as beautiful a sound, but in a lower register.

Bethel Orchestra became the Bethel Ensemble after the pandemic eased. Merle Savage assists Brock in direction of these groups. See the list of members on p. 23-24.

The adult bell choir became the Bethel Ringers and is directed by Gary Thorn with 14 people in the group.

Cantori is an ensemble that began under Brock's leadership. It is comprised of singers who desire an advanced repertoire. Ten people sing in this group and perform on special occasions during the church year.

The Men's Quartet is a group that Brock has now restarted after the pandemic. Dave Gross, Dave Moen, Merle Savage, and Ian Greenlund are members of this group. A second Men's Quartet has formed and includes Gary Thorn, Dave Moen, Merle Savage, and Norm Wahl.

Brock recognizes the continuous task of recruiting singers and instrumentalists. He is challenged by and loves the work of developing talented musicians.

Outdoor concerts in the courtyard were initiated by Pastor Anjanette Bandel with the musical colleagues and friends of Brock. The concerts were intended for congregants and community members who enjoy music in an outdoor setting. In 2021, there were 3 concerts; in 2022, 2 concerts were held; and in 2023, there was one concert, with weather conditions always the determining factor.

In addition, starting in 2022, outdoor worship at Bethel was offered at 10:30 a.m. once a month thanks to the planning of Pastors Wahl, Bandel, and Burggraff and Brock.



Brock continues to strive for excellence through furthering his education. He is currently enrolled in a PH.D. program at the University of Minnesota, studying composition and orchestration.

Brock's passion for performance is most readily seen in his occasional playing of the organ, which he does when Jim Bahler is not able to be in attendance at worship. His youthful exuberance is demonstrated in the complexity and energy of his performance.

His enthusiasm for the organ is additionally fueled by an addition to the organ that is in progress. Soon to be added are antiphonal pipes on the south end of the sanctuary. This addition will require the building of a new organ console. The console will be portable, which will allow it to be moved to several different locations throughout the wide chancel area. He explains that this addition will enhance performance in many ways, especially for the bell choirs.

### **Organ History of Bethel**

The importance of the organ in worship at Bethel is long standing and deserves a place of its own in this document. The purchase of an organ is first mentioned in the archives in 1883 with Ms. O.G. Hanson listed as organist and choir director.

In 1931, the Young People's Society purchased an Eastley Philharmonic Reed organ. It was noted that the organ added much to the music of the church.

Miss Sylvia Steiger was the organist from 1937-39. In 1939, Muriel Hansen became the organist. It was noted that the old organ should not be disposed of but instead be given to Mrs. Hanson, who had played it many years.

The disposal of the old organ was most likely needed to make space for a new organ because in 1943 a new Allen (electronic) organ fund was established to purchase the organ. The fund was established in memory of Grandma Hansen, the mother of Rev. A.G. Hansen. It was purchased in 1948 for \$5100. This organ was



played from 1949-1957 by Mrs. Marguerite McKibben. In 1957, a new sanctuary was being built, and a pipe organ was being considered for the 1957 building. Concern was expressed about the fate of the Allen organ. Some had the opinion that it should not be sold. It is assumed that the Allen organ was moved to the 1957 building until the pipe organ was purchased and installed in 1958. In March, 1958, the Allen electronic organ was sold.

In 1955-56, an organ committee was at work in selecting a pipe organ. The historic records note that Andy Urness, Herb Halverson, Norm Brecke, and Mrs. McKibben (organist) went to Alexandria to look at an organ. At that time, Andy Urness agreed to give a huge amount toward the purchase of the organ. The Board of Trustees gave final approval of the purchase in March, 1957. It was a 2-manual pipe organ with a cost of \$18,355 to be delivered to Bethel in 1958. Mrs. McKibben continued as organist until her retirement in June of 1964.

The pipe organ purchased in 1957 was sold when the new sanctuary was built in 2004. Through the efforts of Jim Bahler, who was then the organist at First Lutheran Church in Lake City, the organ was sold to that church and moved in July, 2004. Jim continued to play it for 3 ½ more years until he became the principal organist at Bethel.

When the 2004 sanctuary was being planned, an Organ Team was established for the purpose of installing an organ suitable for the new space. The first proposal was a Letourneau organ with a price tag of 1.3 million dollars. A fund-raising campaign yielded pledges for \$40,000. Therefore, a smaller, temporary organ, Van Daalen Opus 4400, was selected and installed in November 2005 and remained in use until 2007 when it was sold.

Another fund-raising campaign commenced in 2006. Please read the history written on p. 69 of the Bethel history written by Bill Bakken in "The First 150 Years," 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. That document chronicles the fund raising and installation of the Wicks Pipe Organ with 4,850 pipes. It is integral to the worship service at Bethel. Those individuals who made the trip to Highland, Illinois, to select the organ that was installed were Pastor Norman Wahl, Jim Bahler, Dale Mundahl, Gary Thorn, and Dave Gross. The organ was dedicated on May 16-17, 2009.

See the last paragraph of the above Brock Besse story to read about plans for the future enhancement of the organ.



## **Bethel Fine Arts Series**

In 2021, a new feature was added to the music program of Bethel. This series of concerts was set in motion by a generous gift from John and Eileen Quello of Sioux Falls, SD. John was a pastor at Bethel from 1974-78. During his pastorate, he developed close ties with many Bethel members and has maintained those ties since he moved to a different professional life and location. He gives this gift in recognition of the important role that Bethel played in his life. Later, Dale and Helen Mundahl were added as donors in memoriam.

The intension of the gift is to sponsor concerts or fine arts exhibits at Bethel. The goals are to foster closer relationships with ELCA colleges and to inspire the youth of Bethel and the surrounding area to prepare for musical/arts performance. These events are intended to be a separate and enhanced program of Bethel, beyond the established programs. Above all, the theme of the series is SOLI DEO GLORIA, TO GOD ALONE THE GLORY.

A chairperson for a founding committee was named and other music lovers in the congregation were recruited to serve in order to plan and execute the Fine Arts events. The committee members were Jean Mortenson, Chairperson, Pastor Anjanette Bandel, Jodi Dettmann, Pam Alpers, Anna McGeeney, VJ Anderson, James Gross, Brock Besse. James Gross was later replaced by Robert Anderson.

The results of this effort up until the current time are:

1. Gustavus Adolphus College Orchestra in October, 2021.
2. Luther College Orchestra in March, 2022.
3. St Olaf Choir in January, 2023, with more than 600 attending.
4. National Lutheran Choir in March, 2023.
5. Jon Ailabouni Jazz Quintet in September, 2023

Future concerts planned are:

November 10, 2024, Luther College Jazz Orchestra

January 18, 2025, The St. Olaf Choir

March 1, 2025, The Concordia Choir, Moorhead



### **Musical Moments at Bethel**

Musical moments are those times when the event is unforgettable because of the high quality of the sound and the profoundness of hearing the word of God clearly through music. After reading this list, you will have moments from your own memory that you will want to add.

1. Pastor John Quello quietly singing “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” accompanied by Dale Mundahl on organ at Christmas Eve services in the 1970s.
2. Andrew Stenson (son of the congregation) singing “O Holy Night” on Christmas Eve.
3. Caroline Worra (daughter of Joel and Margaret Worra) singing solos at services during summers.
4. Alison Alpers (daughter of the congregation) singing solos on special occasions.
5. Pastor Norm Wahl and Kari Wahl Solak singing “Borning Cry.”
6. Gary Thorn singing favorite hymns at funerals or singing “Were you there?” on Good Friday.
7. Vern Anderson singing “Thy Will Be Done” at worship services.
8. Marcia Odenbach or Pastor Anjanette Bandel singing “The Magnificat” from Holden Evening Prayer during Lent.
9. Pastor Jason Burggraff playing cello to accompany the chancel choir.
10. Pastors Norm Wahl and/or Anjanette Bandel singing the liturgy.
11. National Lutheran Choir singing “Praise to the Lord, The Almighty” standing in the sanctuary aisles and accompanied on the organ played at full capacity by their director.
12. St. Olaf Choir standing in a circle in Bethel Hall with hands joined and lights off singing in 8-part harmony “The Doxology”. It was a benediction to the concert just completed in Bethel sanctuary. Jodi Dettmann and Jean Mortenson witnessed this moment.
13. Synneva Hicks playing flute to accompany a choir.
14. Gentle strains of country music played on guitar and sung with beautiful voices by sisters Kim Kaehler Schmidt and Kathi Kaehler.



15. Cherub choir singing and directed by Lavonne Sasse followed by Dale Mundahl spontaneously playing the melody they just sang to usher them out of the sanctuary.

16. Brock Besse playing Toccata in F. by Widor on the organ, accompanying Holden Evening Prayer on flute, or playing the harp on Christmas Eve.

17. Many congregational members (too numerous to name) and Bethel guests who have given gifts of music, both vocal and instrumental for worship services or funerals.

Now readers, what are your favorite moments?

Send comments to: [jeanbmortenson@gmail.com](mailto:jeanbmortenson@gmail.com)



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**Heartfelt thanks to the following individuals:**

Personal interviews: Dale Mundahl, Jim Bahler, Gary Thorn, Merle Savage, Dave Gross, Brock Besse, Lavonne Sasse, Mark Smith, Greg Maddock.

Historic information: Bill Bakken, JoAnn Greseth, Gloria Pankow, Carol Lamberg, Don Buske, Julie Braaten, Pastor Anjanette Bandel, Terri Wehrman, Ian Greenlund, Cheri Brinson, Connie Post, Janet Hoffman, Sue Jenkins, Rachel Hasley, Dianna Vogt, Martha Schwartz.

Proof reader; grammar, syntax, and punctuation coach; all-around moral support: Curt Mortenson, husband of writer.