

# Houston church honors Easter tradition with virtual choir

April 16, 2020

South Main Baptist Church in Houston met two seemingly irreconcilable goals—refrain from gatherings to protect public health and keep alive a beloved Easter tradition at the church—by putting together a virtual choir.

The offertory anthem during South Main’s worship service on Easter Sunday morning—as presented on the church’s [Facebook](#) page—featured a 65-voice [virtual choir](#) of church members singing the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Virtual choirs—in which individual singers record and upload videos of themselves that are then synchronized and combined into a single choral performance—have become a social media phenomenon since stay-at-home orders across the country to halt the spread of COVID-19 began several weeks ago. However, American composer and conductor [Eric Whitacre](#) pioneered the technique more than a decade ago, said Carey Cannon, minister of music at South Main.

Cannon noted inviting members of South Main to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah” was a longstanding part of Easter Sunday worship long before he joined the church’s staff in 2013.

“How could we not do the Hallelujah Chorus on Easter?” he asked.

Given the short timeline, members of the pastoral ministry team at South Main had “varying levels of confidence” in the church’s ability to include a virtual choir of its members singing the “Hallelujah Chorus” in its online Easter worship service, but Cannon felt certain it could be accomplished, said Susan Moore, minister of administration for communication at South Main.

“The main thing I learned from this was when Carey has a vision for a project, let him run with it,” Moore said.

## **With a little help from his friends**

Cannon enlisted the help of [Joshua Lee Turner](#), a professional musician in New York who mixes and produces his own music videos.



Yuri McCoy, organist at South Main Baptist Church in Houston, provides accompaniment for the virtual choir’s rendition of “The Hallelujah Chorus.” (Video Screen Capture)

Cannon—former minister of music at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., and associate conductor of the Charlotte Children’s Choir—knew Turner from their time together in North Carolina.

Turner agreed to edit and produce a video of the virtual choir if Cannon could get it recorded and send him the elements he needed.

First, Cannon made a recording of himself conducting the “Hallelujah Chorus,” accompanied by organist Yuri McCoy, and sent it to four section leaders of the sanctuary choir at South Main who recorded themselves singing the bass, tenor, alto and soprano parts.

Each member of the choir then received a digital file of the recording for his or her voice part, along with a PDF of the musical score. Cannon invited the choir members to record themselves on a smartphone or computer singing the Hallelujah Chorus and then send that recording to the church.

# Overcoming obstacles

The first obstacle Cannon discovered was lack of equipment. Not everyone who had a computer or smartphone had headphones or earbuds with a microphone to go with it.



Carey Cannon

Once he was able to round up the necessary equipment, members had to get over their reluctance to record themselves singing a classical piece of sacred music—preferably with as few bloopers and outbursts of frustration as possible.

“I’m pretty sure my name is mud as far as some people are concerned right now,” Cannon said.

The first week, response was slow, he acknowledged. But by the time he reached Turner’s deadline for receiving recordings, 65 people participated.

“Some of the choir was pretty uncomfortable,” Moore said. “And yet, they did it.”

Cannon sent the digital files to Turner, who spent at least 10 hours on audio and 10 hours on video, mixing and producing a broadcast-quality presentation using Avid Pro Tools and Adobe Premiere software.

“He hit it out of the park,” Cannon said.

## Viral response, national exposure

The virtual choir presentation was incorporated into the Easter worship service on Facebook Live, which then was posted for later viewing on both the church’s Facebook page and its website.

If the number who watched the livestream at 10 a.m. on Easter didn’t quite live up to Cannon’s expectations, the viral reaction later exceeded his wildest dreams—particularly after the choral presentation was part of a national newscast.

Steve Wells, pastor of South Main Baptist Church, told a neighbor who works for the Houston NBC-TV affiliate that the church was including the virtual choir singing the “Hallelujah Chorus” as part of its online Easter worship. She forwarded the information to the network, and the national [NBC Nightly News](#) April 12 broadcast included a clip of the choir’s performance.

“Of course, we appreciate the exposure for our church, but we’re more  grateful for the gospel impact,” Cannon said. “On Easter Sunday evening, viewers of a national TV news broadcast experienced ... a celebration of the Resurrection.”

*South Main Baptist Church produced a brief “behind the scenes” video of how the virtual choir presentation was developed—both to satisfy curiosity and as an aid to other churches that are considering a similar project. View the video [here](#).*