



sing out! by Rick Jordan, CBFNC Church Resources Coordinator

“Everyone deserves an opportunity to sing in a choir,” says Tony Spencer. Tony, along with Diane Nelson, leads Cheerful Voices, a community choir made up of adults with physical and neurological challenges and acquired brain injury. Since October 2014, Tony and Diane have driven every Tuesday morning to the Rutherford Life Services complex to lead a 45-minute rehearsal with approximately 30 new friends. “These people are more themselves than we are,” Tony says, referring to their honesty and spontaneity.

Recently, I was able to attend a choir rehearsal. I met Tony and Diane at First, Forest City, where they have worked together in the music ministry for a very long time, Tony as the minister of music and Diane as the organist/music associate. “I’ve had to look at his profile for 22 years,” Diane laughs. Garin Hill, the church’s pastor met us before we left for the rehearsal. “I really liked the last issue of *The Gathering* about ‘As You Go.’ That’s really what this is. Tony and Diane are reaching out into the community, being a positive Christian influence. They just happen to be on a church staff. So this isn’t directly a church-sponsored mission, but it is a model that I’d love to see taken up by more and more of our church members.”

At the Life Services building, the men and women find their nametags and find a chair. One woman approaches me, “Who are you?” “I’m Rick. I’m here to watch the choir rehearse.” “Oh. Guess who got employee of the month?” “You?” “Let me show you something.” She pulled a card from her purse that was full of well-wishes and affirmations as well as a gift card. “I’ve got to show this to Diane,” she said as she walked away.

Tony called the rehearsal to order, held up two fingers, then one finger, then three. With each change of the count (and with no words spoken) the choir members sat on the edge of their chairs, sat back in a relaxed posture, and then stood. Tony held up a picture with a random-looking squiggle on it. As he moved his finger along the page, the choir members followed the squiggle to sing “ooo” higher or lower. Later, Tony told me, “I use the same techniques in my church’s children’s choir. I keep things simple.

We all have a great time and singing makes us all better people.”

The choir rehearsed half a dozen songs, most from memory, including “You Have a Heart,” “This Land Is Your Land,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In 2015, the choir sang for the CBFNC General Assembly. Last year, the choir sang the national anthem for sporting events, at civic clubs, and luncheons, and were featured at the North Carolina American Choral Director’s Association (ACDA) meeting. Tony is lining up this year’s concert schedule now. “This is a great partnership. Life Services takes care of all the logistics and it provides transportation to the events when they are during the weekday work hours.”

The choir was not a hard sell. Tony was already serving on the board of Life Services, an avenue of community involvement for him, as well as serving as the director of the Rutherford County Community Chorus. “In 2011, I wandered into an interest session at our national ACDA conference in Chicago about Joyful Noise, the featured chorus of 45 adults aged 17-70 with special needs. That morning, my idea about community singing changed forever. After that session, I contacted their director who told me all I needed to know to begin this as a sub-group of our local community chorus.”

In mid-verse of “This Land,” Tony stops the singing. “There is a rest there. That is time when no one sings. Some of you sang. Let’s try it again. You’re good enough musicians that I can be picky.” This is part of Tony’s goal – increasing self-esteem. It seems to be working. As the chorus stepped off the stage from singing at last year’s ACDA meeting, one of the men told Tony, “I bet none of those other choirs will want to sing now. We killed it!”

Christy Beddingfield, the activities director of the Life Center, said, “We’d always had a little holiday concert around Christmas, but Tony has taken us to a whole new level. And, this actually helps with discipline problems. Everyone wants to be on their best behavior so they can go sing in a concert.”

On the drive back, Tony confessed, “I’ve found that after every seven or so years of ministry, I need to reinvent myself. This choir has helped me to reinvent myself and to recharge my spirit.”