

Connecting Music with the Divine

She spent four years at Furman University as a music major while studying to be a high school band director, but Allison Shutt also had long been interested in youth ministry. Less than a year after graduation, she now leads two of the eight handbell choirs at DUMC.

As a performing student, she made music for the “now” or “moment” – with each piece delivered as a composition supported by time signatures, key changes and lines of notes. Returning to the music ministry program at her home church (she grew up at DUMC) Allison now gets to make music to the glory of God – it’s a pretty high calling. “In my new job, I’m privileged to perform music for worship and not just for the notes,” she says. “For me, it’s a way to connect the handbell choirs and those in the sanctuary through music with the divine...and each other.”



At present, much time is spent in musical logistics surrounding the set up and tear down of equipment while moving from one rehearsal location to another. The plan calls for a renovated space dedicated to the handbell choirs which will save hours each week in moving and assembling tables and gear. For Allison, extra time spent together in rehearsal means better performances and increased participation. There’s a lot of “elbow room” needed in ringing bells and any extra space would be a most welcome luxury.

DUMC has one of the most comprehensive handbell choir programs in the country with more than 100 participants at present. Together, they range in age from seven to 70 and are being increasingly called upon to support major musical performances for the congregation. That recently happened during the annual All Saints Day service.

The Chancel Handbell Choir performed *In Paradisium*, joining the Chancel Choir, the Carolina Brass Ensemble and organ as they rang a celestial closing to the work at the back of the church. It was a rare and unique perspective for the handbell performers as they were able to observe the powerful emotions displayed by members in the congregation as well as many of the fellow musicians standing before them. “That performance was a defining moment in my work here to so far,” recalls Allison. “It confirmed that what we do as individuals and collectively with our music as a team is important— it can make a difference in people’s lives.”

Allison works with dozens of bells now, although she never directed an actual handbell choir before starting her new position. When asked if she had a “favorite” bell she went to a table set up for rehearsal and confidently lifted a shiny brass middle C. With a smile she made it clear, “each one is important—that’s what makes us a choir!”