

## Madrigal Dinner Supports Needs of Church

BY JUNE A. VETTER Special to The Pilot Dec 2, 2017



Robert Cox at the Congregational Church of Pinehurst, where he is rehearsing with pianist Robert Wicker for the upcoming Madrigal Dinner.

TED FITZGERALD/The Pilot

It was on one of those cold November days that hovered just above freezing when I met Robert Cox at the Congregational Church of Pinehurst to discuss the Madrigal Dinner he is planning to conduct on Dec. 8-9 as a fundraiser for the church.

He arrived hastily, dressed in paint-covered Bermuda shorts, and quickly explained how pressed he was to finish a couple of painting jobs before the forecast of temperatures dipping below freezing after dark became a reality.

An energetic, multi-tasked individual, Cox owns his own handy-man business, is music director of the church, music director of the Golf Capital Chorus, and weekly conducts a chorus in Winston-Salem and another in Raleigh once a month.

But now it is the Madrigal Dinner that consumes much of his attention.

“We started the dinner and performance here four years ago because it is a good way to raise money for a charity and also for us as a church,” he says. “In past years we have worked in tandem with charities like Back Pack Pals and Hearts for Heroes. This year, however, we are presenting the program just for the church to support upcoming needs we are facing.”

A graduate of East Carolina University, Cox first acted in Madrigal performances in college, which he describes as fun to participate in personally, and fun for attendees.

“When I began working with the church choir, I found myself excited about all the talent and dedication of its members,” he says. “This choir is great, and I knew they would be very capable to put on something like the Madrigal that has so many different aspects.

“In addition to the choir, for instance, there is the Lord and Lady and of course the Jester — all in wonderful costumes. We have constructed a set complete with chandeliers on the main platform in the church, and it is in that set where much of the activity takes place.”

He excitedly goes on to describe various ingredients of the program.

“Music is a highlight of course, but there are also games interwoven as well as poetry and skits,” he says. “And in the Court Dance, we invite members of the audience to join us which really makes the whole evening a ‘party!’ And through it all, one hears ‘Fa La La La La’ — which is sort of a hallmark of a Madrigal song.”

With great enthusiasm, Cox emphasizes that this is “not just a show.”

“It is a Christmas party to which all are invited,” he says. “We do not have a Christmas concert or cantata during the season, because we have a number of singers who leave to visit with family. But this program allows a little bit of everything — Christmas carols, a lot of laughs, and dinner too.”

A Madrigal play itself is often timed to be interspersed between the many different courses of the meal served, however, because a simple meal is planned for the church event, guests will eat dinner and then move into the entertainment portion of the evening.

“Rather than depend on pot luck or a catered dinner,” Cox says, “we decided to buy ingredients for a homemade stew, vegetable soup, hearty bread and apple crisp, and have asked members to make it. This will add to the community gathering we love in this church. We have even suggested that anyone wanting to dress in medieval costume would be welcome.”

A native of Wilson, Cox grew up with a sister and brother in a family where his father was a professional photographer for 67 years and his mom was a high school secretary. After college, he taught high school choral music for a few years, the last one in Wilmington, where he continued to live for about 10 years. When recruited by a church in Sanford as a full time church musician, he moved to the area and later started his own window washing business, which now includes handyman services.

Cox also joined the Golf Capital Chorus. That was four years ago, and since then he directs them, along with Mark Stock, at their annual show (always scheduled during the first weekend in November), and at other public performances held on Memorial Day, Veteran’s Day, and often at a tree lighting in December, as well as other special events.

Cox’s interest in music harkens back to his childhood when he was always in church choirs. He also played the saxophone and as a young person, wanted to be a band director until he realized there were more girls in chorus than band and started taking voice lessons.

Years later, while teaching school in Wilmington, he began directing a barber shop chorus after he met the participants when they rented his room at the school for practice.

“They hooked me by making me assistant director and paying my dues,” he says. “Three months later, the director retired, and I moved into the director slot. My association with the Golf Capital Chorus and the Congregational Church began about four years ago when the young man who was directing both of those ensembles went to graduate school. I was hired to fill both of those positions at the same time.”

Cox also directs the Master's Men, a four-part, all male a cappella group in Raleigh that sings sacred music, usually twice a month, in different churches. He also directs a chorus in Winston-Salem each week, which will soon perform at an annual show for the Food Bank. He is proud that the latter group has won the District Championship, which he describes with pride as a "real feather in our cap!"

While music and his personal business take most of his time. Robert Cox has other interests as well, the latest being the 1961 Cadillac he wants to restore.

"It's dead in the water right now," he says with a laugh. "This is definitely going to be a winter project and a long row to hoe!" adding the vehicle is drivable but not yet roadworthy. "Unfortunately it was originally a pink car — not unusual in 1961 — that was later painted with a light coating of white," he says. "But taking out the pink dashboard to paint it a different color is going to be a nightmare. I'll probably have to have some help with that."

Cox has also dabbled in woodworking.

"I have all the tools, and when I started I made some beautiful pens but after I gave one to just about everyone I know, there wasn't any need to make any more," he says with a grin. "In all fairness I could never really say I was a woodworker. Now my interest is in the car."

Returning to a discussion of the Madrigal Dinner, Robert showed me into the church to describe how the room would be set up to accommodate the stage and the dinner tables. Then, looking around he told me he loves Congregational Church "because of our inclusiveness, our diversity, the interesting people, the understanding, and the love and care we have for one another"

Tickets for the Madrigal Dinner are available for \$20 (adults); \$10 (children under 12) by calling (910) 695-6727 or (910) 639-9096.

*June Vetter is a local freelance writer.*