

# The Ringing in of Christmas Morning

A simple but effective way to make handbells a meaningful part of a late Christmas Eve service by welcoming Christmas morning at the stroke of midnight

by **Dr. William Payn**

## The Concept

At the stroke of midnight, the church bell or lowest C handbell strikes 12 times. Once the 12th chime is rung and dies away, three to five groups of handbell ringers, each stationed around the sanctuary, begin to play peals in C Major (without damping) until all groups are ringing at once. At this point, the organist plays Joy To the World in C Major with full organ as the bells continue to peal. The congregation stands and sings this joyous carol with the organ as the bells still continue to play the peals as strongly as possible. The ringers (on cue) stop playing the peals and damp all bells except C, E, and G on the last line of the last verse so that when the singing finishes, the only bells to continue resonating are those notes within the C-Major tonic triad. As the minister immediately pronounces the benediction, the C-Major chord dies away and the Postlude begins.

## Assigning Bells

Assign groups according to the charts in figure A. Note that duplicate C's are needed. Perhaps they can be borrowed from another organization in the community or, if the ringing-in of Christmas morning becomes a tradition, key people in the church can be asked to purchase these special Christmas Eve bells as a memorial.

**Figure A**

*There are a number of ways to assign your bells depending on the size of your set and the number of ringers.*

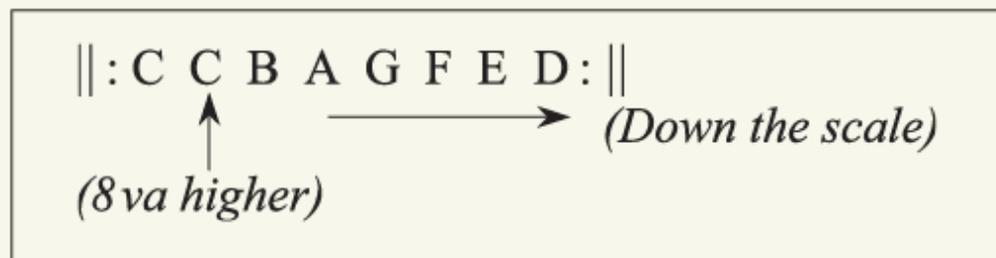
<i>American Bells</i>				
<i>Group D</i>	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>Group C</i>	<i>Group E</i>
C <sub>3</sub> C <sub>4</sub>	1 C <sub>4</sub> C <sub>5</sub>	1 C <sub>5</sub> C <sub>6</sub>	1 C <sub>6</sub> C <sub>7</sub>	1 C <sub>7</sub> C <sub>8</sub>
B <sub>3</sub> A <sub>3</sub>	2 B <sub>4</sub> A <sub>4</sub>	2 B <sub>5</sub> A <sub>5</sub>	2 B <sub>6</sub> A <sub>6</sub>	2 B <sub>7</sub> A <sub>7</sub>
G <sub>3</sub> F <sub>3</sub>	3 G <sub>4</sub> F <sub>4</sub>	3 G <sub>5</sub> F <sub>5</sub>	3 G <sub>6</sub> F <sub>6</sub>	3 G <sub>7</sub> F <sub>7</sub>
E <sub>3</sub> D <sub>3</sub>	4 E <sub>4</sub> D <sub>4</sub>	4 E <sub>5</sub> D <sub>5</sub>	4 E <sub>6</sub> D <sub>6</sub>	4 E <sub>7</sub> D <sub>7</sub>
(2 Ringers with 4 mallets)	(4 Ringers)	(4 Ringers)	(4 Ringers)	(4 Ringers)
			3 octaves	
			5 octaves	
<i>Whitechapel Bells</i>				
<i>Group D</i>	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>Group C</i>	<i>Group E</i>
29C 22C	22C 15C	15C 8C	8C 1C	1C 01C
23B 24A	16B 17A	9B 10A	2B 3A	02B 03A
25G 26F	18G 19F	11G 12F	4G 5F	04G 05F
27E 28D	20E 21D	13E 14D	6E 7D	06E 07D
<i>Dutch Bells</i>				
<i>Group D</i>	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>	<i>Group C</i>	<i>Group E</i>
1 13	13 25	25 37	37 49	49 61
12 10	24 22	36 34	48 46	60 58
8 6	20 18	32 30	44 42	56 54
5 3	17 15	29 27	41 39	53 51

For 3-octave choirs, a duplicate C5 and a duplicate C6 are needed. For 5-octave choirs, a duplicate C4, C5, C6, and C7 are needed.

When each group is assigned, the peal will sound as in figure B.

**Figure B**

*The peal should sound as shown.*

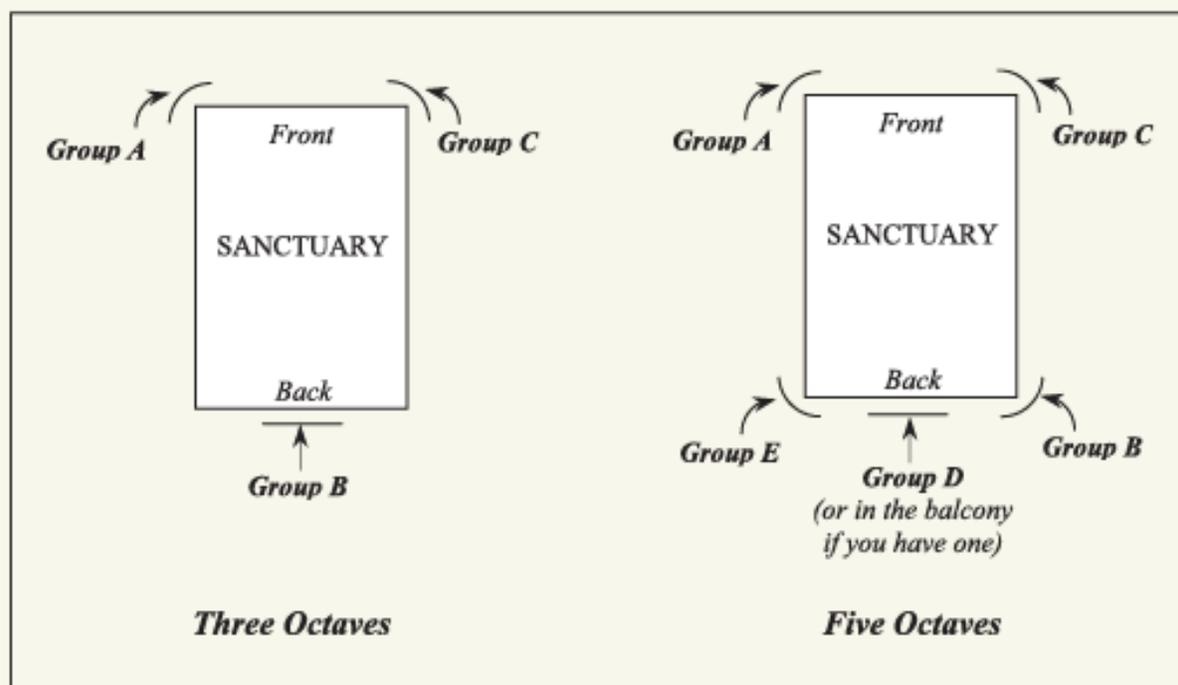


Use the diagrams in figure C as a guide in stationing the ringers around the sanctuary. For five-octave choirs, only two ringers are needed to ring the bells in Group D. This can be accomplished by suspending the bells and ringing them with 4 mallets (one in each hand). Most churches are fortunate to have a carpenter or wood-working hobbyist who can construct a unique frame on which the bells can be suspended. It is imperative that the bells DON'T SWING when struck by mallets. Use large yarn-wrapped mallets.

To ring these low bells by hand, eight ringers are needed to play one bell each.

**Figure C**

*Station your ringers around the sanctuary as shown, depending on the number of ringers.*



## How to Begin the Peals

Once the 12th chime is rung and dies away, Group A begins to peal their bells at any speed they choose (Ringer 1 determines the tempo). Group B follows (in a different tempo) after Group A has pealed for approximately ten seconds. Finally, Group C follows Group B in the same manner.

For five-octave choirs, the same method is used. Start, however, with Group D and follow thereafter (in the same manner as explained above) with Groups A, B, C, and E, in that order.

The object of starting each group in ten-second intervals is to gradually build up sound with increasing volume and bells. **DON'T DAMP THE BELLS WHILE PEALING.** The expectancy of Christmas morning and the birth of Christ is thus exemplified, culminating with the singing of "Joy To the World, the Lord Has Come!"

## Other Notes

1. Let a graduating senior have the honor of striking the low bell that strikes twelve times at the very beginning.
2. It is extremely important that the ringers stop playing on the last line of the last verse. Since the ringers become mesmerized by the sound of their own pealing bells and are concentrating on allowing the bells to peal in a smooth, uninterrupted pattern, it is virtually impossible for the ringers to hear much of the singing. Therefore, it is suggested that four members of the congregation be stationed, one at each corner of the sanctuary, to discreetly raise their hand (on the last line of the last verse) so that Ringer 1 (the ringer who is holding two C's) can see the signal, stop the peal and, in turn, give a cue to his/her group to damp all bells except C, E, and G. If Group D is in the balcony, a fifth member of the congregation will, of course, be needed.
3. To begin the Ringing-In of Christmas Morning, each group of ringers should enter the sanctuary as quietly as possible during the striking of the low bell.
4. If the Ringing-In of Christmas Morning follows a candlelighting ceremony, it will be necessary to work out logistics with the ushers so that sanctuary lights can be raised (about half way) during the singing of "Joy to the World." Candles should be extinguished during the "ringing-in," since it is dangerous to manipulate hymnals and candles at the same time.