



# Inclusive choirs for those living with dementia

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## About *Alchemy Chorus*

*Alchemy Chorus* was begun in Canberra in 2016 by Brian Triglone OAM, based on the Giving Voice Choirs in Minnesota.

We chose the name after a poll of early members and volunteers. Alchemy means the blending of various elements to produce something valuable and that seemed to fit our aims. We started with about 40 members and now have 95 registered members. Attendance with our membership group will always be uncertain but we average about 80 each week.

We are completely independent and a not-for-profit, self-funding incorporated association. No-one is paid.

We've been covered extensively in the media including segments on the ABC's Australia Wide program, ABC radio and several magazines and newspapers. For more information, visit: <https://alchemychorus.com/>

## How we operate

### **An Inclusive Working Choir**

*Alchemy Chorus* is not a dementia choir. We are a working choir which welcomes those living with dementia who, along with their care partner, are still able to benefit from and contribute to practices and performances. There are no auditions and every voice is valued.

There are several reasons for targeting this group, but probably the most important one is that we offer an activity which can be enjoyed by both carer (a relative or friend) and participant (those living with dementia). The responsibility on a carer is enormous and often unrelenting and so we offer a weekly opportunity for the couples to engage in a normal, enjoyable activity where integration is paramount and where carers in particular can share their experiences. For this reason, our choir is not designed for paid carers.

**Whilst we target those mainly in the early to mid-stages of dementia, we never ask anyone to leave as their dementia progresses.**

## **Practices and Performances**

As a working choir we perform at least twice each year in concert and there are often opportunities to entertain at appropriate functions too.

So, while our practices are great fun, we incorporate into them most of the things a regular choir would include such as a warm-up and parts singing. We encourage soloists, especially from those with dementia and we've had some wonderful and very moving discoveries of hidden talent.

At the end of each term, we have an in-house concert where any member is welcome to perform. There is usually a long list of performers and it's a lot of fun. We also have visiting performers such as Keith Potger from *The Seekers*, as well as local soloists and a ukulele band and we have combined with another community choir to put on a great concert with about 90 voices.

The *Alchemy Chorus* uniform is white top with black bottoms and a gold scarf, provided by the choir.

## **Practice Format**

Our practices start at 10.00am but there is coffee and tea available prior to that for early birds. We sing till 11.00 when we have a break of about 20 mins, after which we sing again till 12.00. Morning tea is a vital and popular part of the day when all members can share experiences with others in similar circumstances.

Most weeks we also ask one couple to give us a potted history of their lives. The aim of this segment is to recognise people's contribution to society, to remind us that there was a life before dementia and that this illness can strike people of all intellects, vocations and abilities.

Each week we sing about 14 songs unless we're practising for a concert. We divide the choir into two sections and often teach one side an easy part to a song while the other sings the melody. We also divide along gender lines for some songs and teach two fairly easy harmonies. Sometimes the parts are SATB, but it depends on the song. It's largely a case of making the song interesting to the carers and volunteers and still within the capabilities of those with dementia. We use the free musical notation program Musescore to help learn parts.

## **Volunteers**

The volunteers are vital to the structure we use. As well as practical support, they provide a solid musical base, helping the participants in particular to find their part. Male volunteers are especially important in encouraging men who, like most men of that era, are reluctant to sing because of the unflattering remarks their music teacher may have made about their voice in primary school!

## **Songs**

We've found that those with dementia roughly fall into the age group 60 -85 so we choose songs that they'd have sung or heard in their teens or early adulthood. While we do quite a few melancholy songs, the most popular are the livelier songs.

Of course, we take suggestions from the members.

We always conclude by acknowledging birthdays (the birthday people conduct "Happy Birthday") followed by "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand" and "Now is the Hour".

## **Charges**

We charge \$10 cash per couple each week and average about 80 attendees per week. The aim is to charge as little as possible, but to allow for unexpected costs such as a temporary replacement conductor or pianist. Volunteers are not charged.

We operate on school terms.

## **Name tags**

Everyone is given a name tag which is marked P (Participant - person with dementia), C (Carer) or V (Volunteer). The name of an emergency contact is written on the back of every name tag.

## **Song Folders**

Everyone is given a black A4 folder with the song lyrics. This can also be used in performances, but we find that many of the members, including the participants, can sing quite a number of the songs from memory which enhances performances considerably. The *Alchemy Chorus* logo, with a space at the bottom for a name, is slipped into the front cover.

### **Carers' Responsibility**

We ask every carer to sign a declaration that they will remain with the participant for whom they are responsible during the practice. If the carer is unable to attend but the participant still wants to come, we arrange for a volunteer to meet the participant and act as their carer for the day. This is always only a temporary arrangement.

### **Member Liaison and Care**

We have a member liaison person who handles any matters relating to the welfare of our members, following up on sick members, reporting family events such as new grandchildren, hospitalisations etc.

We always have at least one trained first aid officer at practice.

We also have a Choir Manager who is responsible for all the practical matters including volunteer rosters, initial interviews and membership enquiries.

### **Database**

We run a protected database which holds everyone's name, status, address and contact details.

We also register attendance each week to help us with our budgeting and to balance our takings.

### **The value of singing**

Finally, recognising that wholehearted singing is most beneficial for lifting the spirits, try to encourage that and discourage timidity. Our unofficial motto is "let it go!"

And we might add that all of us involved in *Alchemy Chorus* find it incredibly rewarding and lots of fun. If you'd like to share this wonderful experience by establishing an *Alchemy Chorus* in your area, we would love to hear from you.

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## Establishing an *Alchemy Chorus*

### What's needed summary:

1. **Determine the need for a choir in your area.** Although we do not have any formal relations with them, talk with organisations such as Dementia Australia and aged care providers to help assessing the number of suitable people in your area and referring them to the choir.
2. **Our target group** is those living with dementia who, together with a relative or close friend, are still able to benefit from and participate in practices and performances. *However, no-one is ever asked to leave because of a deterioration in their dementia.* To be feasible, you need a minimum total of about 30 people including volunteers-see 11 below.
3. **Find a conductor.** This is the crucial step of course. The conductor needs to have a bright personality, musical and conducting skills including the ability to write simple harmonies, (not necessarily formal training, but it helps), patience and above all a sense of humour. You probably won't be able to pay the conductor-at least during the early stages.
4. **Find an accompanist.** Ideally this should be someone who can play by ear as well as from a score. Our song book only has lyrics. Most scores for the accompanist can be purchased on-line. You should budget to pay the accompanist. You should also have backups for both conductor and accompanist.
5. **Find a venue,** preferably with a piano or keyboard and a sound system. The venue is likely to be your one of your largest expenses but you might also find that some organisations are happy for you to use their hall at no charge. It's important to consider parking, lighting, heating and cooling and facilities for morning tea which is a very important part of the practice. It's the time when carers in particular can share experiences.
6. **Form a committee** (You really don't need too many. Check the rules for incorporated associations for your state). That committee becomes the association and the choir attendees are clients.
7. **Register as an incorporated association.** Register the name *Alchemy Chorus* - name of city. We encourage the use of the name *Alchemy Chorus* mainly to help us develop a national profile which helps encourage others to establish choirs and enables you to use our logo. However, you may decide to use another name. (If so, please try to avoid names that focus on dementia! Remember, this is an inclusive choir)

8. **Check funding sources.** Dementia Australia, Government grants, charitable foundations, clubs such as Rotary, Probus, commercial sponsors such as banks, law firms etc.
9. **Set up a bank account.**
10. **Public liability Insurance** can be arranged through the Australian National Choral Association (ANCA).
11. **Seek volunteers.** This is often best done through an existing choir. The number depends on the number of participants, but we work on about half the total number of participants and their carers, so the choir will be roughly 1/3 each of those living with dementia, their carers, and volunteers. All volunteers should apply for a *Working with Vulnerable People Certificate* or its equivalent. This is essential for the clients and for the credibility of the choir.
12. **Appoint a qualified First Aid Officer** (St John's Ambulance runs courses) and purchase a basic First Aid kit.
13. If one is available, **ask volunteers to attend a training course in dementia.** The local branch of Dementia Australia generally runs at least one free course per year on dementia awareness. The University of Tasmania also runs excellent short online courses on understanding dementia.
14. In the early stages, **publicity is vital**, so appoint a Publicity Officer who is computer savvy and imaginative to write press releases and articles for local media. You'll find most media outlets very willing to cover the choir.

**We will provide:**

- One Song book (currently about 100 songs)
- Suggested format for practices
- Ongoing support
- Our logo
- A link on our website