

## **Sonke Multicultural Choir**

By Robyn Kilroy

Every Tuesday inside the small body of Galway's United Methodist Presbyterian Church, a peculiar sound can be heard emanating from its doors. Not the usual sounds of hymns and prayers, but noise of voices. They sing in repetition, with the echo from the nave of the church blending the voices of the small congregation together, as they repeat words from other languages. While many who find themselves on Victoria Place or within the vicinity of the church may not understand the meaning of the words, the repetition of the united voices is nothing but ear-grabbing.

Starting in 2008, Sonke Multicultural Choir (original name – The Big Sing) set out to create a more informal choir for Galway that embraces its continuously growing multicultural scene. “There are choirs in Galway, but they're fairly formal and there's fees to be paid, and they do public performances,” said member Liz Connolly. “So my understanding is that we're completely different from that. Any performances we do, they're not for money, and they're not really formal. They are for community groups who ask us.”

Liz is the current Treasurer of Sonke and one of the core members of the group. She joined because she liked idea of a singing group with a freer structure, rather than the more constrictive, traditional choirs.

“When I joined Sonke, I had also gone to the Galway Choral Society, which was fine. I auditioned and I got accepted. But, it was something like €200 a term, and you had to be there every Sunday night. We're more free and loose.”

She had just completed a part-time Masters in Human Rights at NUI Galway over three years, and looking for a hobby to fill the time with when she wasn't at work, or looking after the grandkids.

"I realised that I just don't want to sit at home," she said. "I want to get out and about and meet people and have some kind of social life. And I always enjoyed singing, I had never been amazingly good at it, but I've enjoyed it. So when I looked at all the choirs in Galway, I thought [Sonke] sounded the best.

Sonke's members sing folk songs from around the world. The majority of their repertoire consists of traditional African songs and chants, mostly West African and some Congonese songs. However, they also explore traditional songs from many other countries including Hawaii, Eastern European countries such as Macedonia, Maori songs and even dip into some traditional Irish songs.

The choir is heavily involved in community projects, and have performed as part of a plethora of cultural events and human rights projects.

"We do something for Africa Day, we've done some performances in care homes," said Liz.

"We do something on Culture Night, we're involved with Melting Pot Luck and Galway African Diaspora. We've also done stuff for Spirit Festival, the Galway Fringe Festival, and the Volvo Ocean Race."

The group also took part and performed a rally against the deportation of two men in direct provision in Galway, Theo Ndlovu and Mduduzi Ngwenya, organised by a number of advocacy groups, including Galway Anti-Racism Network.

No audition is required to become a member of the group, and neither is prior experience, and the group members come from all walks of life. If you have a passion for singing, and are interested in learning songs from different traditions, then you're welcome to join.

"I'm not musically trained," said Liz. "And most of us core members are not. It's more sort of a friendship kind of club, and people enjoy singing and that sort of thing.

The group of people who arrive at the Tuesday sessions practice and sing for roughly two hours. They gather themselves in a circle in front of the pew of the church, with choir leader, Wally directing the group. Each song they sing is based on repetition, which are easy to get the hang of despite of the difference in language. After the fifth or sixth repetition, it's hard not to join in on the song. Many of them close their eyes and sway to the call-and-response of the songs, while some of the newer members have their eyes glued to their songbooks, trying to pronounce some of the more complicated words. Even when the numbers are small at sessions, the echo of church provides a rich sound.

Paul, one of the other core members of the group joined over three years ago in 2016. He decided to join the singing group after seeing a performance during a cultural night at the United Methodist Presbyterian Church.

"I have never done singing before, and I just thought that it was good for you," said Paul. "I like all the songs from around the world. The songs that are chosen are songs that have nice melodies, and they're simple. There's a lot of repetition so it's not difficult.

"Why I stuck at it was because of the feel good factor of singing throughout the two hour practices. At the end of it you feel at a higher energy level."

Wally is a Congonese man now based in Galway. He arrived in Ireland in 2010 as an asylum seeker and spent his first years in the Direct Provision system. He joined Sonke in 2011 and is now the choir leader of the group.

“I was in Direct Provision, and I was so depressed,” he said. “Now I’m out of there since 2016. I was attending church, and one of the members of the choir saw me singing. She was asked me if I liked singing and I said yes I like singing! She asked me to join [Sonke], and I said yes.”

Wally found that joining Sonke really helped him through the difficult times he faced in Direct Provision.

“I found friendship, I found people supportive, and it really helped me. It kept me going.”

Wally brought his past experiences and influenced Sonke’s repertoire. He lived in South Africa for 18 years, so a lot of the African songs the group sing are in the Zulu dialect. During practice he helps the choir members through the different words and passionately leads the group in the call-and-response chants. He guides them confidently and often improvises over the small, chanting congregation, adding a layer of complexity to the timbre.

Despite the friendly and relaxing mood of the practice session, the choir has been through choppy waters recently. Membership numbers have dropped of the past two years, with only the four or five core members of the singing group often showing up to their practices. Liz highlighting their previous musical director leaving as a pinpoint for the groups decline.

“I’m not sure which way it’s going to go,” she said. “I feel at the moment the choir is kind of fading a bit, but that can be a seasonal thing. I hope we’ll get new interest in the coming spring time.

“But I have to get help from people to publicise, energise, circulate and network to spread the word.”

With Galway continuing to grow as a multicultural city, Sonke Multicultural Choir are helping to enrich this further by introducing the songs from other traditions into its sphere.

While the numbers of regular members have depleted over the past few years, what they lack for in bodies they make up for in passion. Above all, Sonke has provided a place for friendship and support for all in the Galway community who wish to test out their vocals without judgement.