

# A Gay Men's Chorus of O.C.'s Own

**Music** • The new Men Alive, singing a holiday program tonight in Irvine, was inspired by the success of groups in Dallas and L.A.

By **CHRIS PASLES**  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**M**en's glee clubs have a long history but gay men's choruses are comparatively new. Now Orange County has its very own: Men Alive made its debut Tuesday in a fund-raising concert at Woody's at the Beach in Laguna Beach.

The chorus will give a formal concert, a holiday program, today at the Irvine United Church of Christ.

According to the mission statement of the group, the goal is "to establish a quality musical organization for men to musically and spiritually express themselves in the community."

The ensemble is the brainchild of conductor Rich Cook, an ASCAP songwriter, a minister of music at St. George's Episcopal Church in Laguna Hills and an Orange County resident for 30 years.

The idea came to him six years ago during a visit to Dallas, where he heard a similar chorus sing.

"I thought, this should be happening in Orange County," Cook said in a recent phone interview from his production company offices in Laguna Beach. "But for personal and business reasons, I put the idea on the back burner."

His interest was renewed when he heard the Los Angeles



The new chorus includes Thomas Buschnell, left, Tony D'Amico, Chris Macaluso and conductor and founder Rich Cook.

Gay Men's Chorus sing last summer at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

"I sat there, knowing we could do this. That night when I got home from the concert, I found a voice mail from my priest [at St. George's]. He said, 'It's time to start an Orange County Gay Men's Chorus.'"

Cook and several friends began putting up posters around the county announcing auditions in September.

"I had made an agreement with myself: 'If you have 12 guys, go ahead,'" Cook said. "I had 13. Now we have 23, and we have people standing at the door."

Although number is not a priority, Cook said he would like to have a larger group. "The Los Angeles Gay Men's Chorus is 170. The New York chorus is large. They are some of the

originals. But they all started somewhere."

Members range in age from early 20s to mid-60s.

"We have great voices. Some are professional musicians who wanted to do something like this. Some are music teachers. And some are guys who are good and just like to sing."

**T**he concert today will span a range of holiday repertory, from classical and traditional to pops. It will also include an enactment of the writing of "Silent Night" in 1818 and a spoof about a shopper in a mall.

"There's a family touch to this," Cook said. "Kids could come to this."

Cook was born in Bloomingdale, N.J., and began lessons with his mother, a church pianist and organist, when he was 5.

"Being from the church world, I wanted to use my talent for God," he said. "I went to a church school in Springfield, Ill., and was hired by a large church in Anaheim when I was 23—Melodyland, across from Disneyland. They were new, I was new. This was the early '70s. I became a self-made music director at that point. I started writing and orchestrating. Our music program grew immensely. Three times a year we put on these big productions. That was pre-Crystal Cathedral show days."

He also began writing music for TV ministries.

"I felt I was called to the ministry, and I believe that I still am," he said. "My frame of reference was to be a minister behind the pulpit, without realizing at the time that there were many kinds of pulpits. But my talent is music. I just kept growing in the area of music."

"My business does well. Songs are part of my destiny, being at this church is part of my destiny. Yet I still felt there was something more to do. Starting this gay men's chorus is a part of that."

The chorus will return to Woody's to sing a gospel brunch concert in February on a date to be announced. Another full-length program is planned for May. Singers interested in auditioning should call the chorus ticket line at (949) 494-8167.

Said Cook: "The doors are open."

*Men Alive, Orange County Gay Men's Chorus, will sing a holiday program at 5 p.m. at Irvine United Church of Christ, 4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine. \$20 in advance; \$25 at the door. (949) 494-8167.*