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Church Music as an Education Enterprise: Lessons to Learn

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While church choirs are commonly considered to be community music ensembles where music making takes place, there have been few systematic investigations of church choirs as learning environments whose members have instructional needs that must be met. Rohwer (2010) documented the strong worship-related perceptions of interviewed church choir musicians. This perception of worship being a primary reason for participating in a choir was different from other music education study results that cited reasons for ensemble participation as social and musical (Adderley Kennedy & Berz, 2003; Belz, 1994; Coffin, 2005; Coffman, 1996; Cooper, 1996; Darrough, 1991; Hylton 1981, Kennedy 2002; Pike, 2001; Rohwer, 2009; Rohwer & Rohwer, 2009; Seago, 1993). This additional factor of worship may mean that the challenges faced in church choirs may be greater than in other community music organizations, where the instructional focus is on meeting musical and social needs. The instructional challenges of balancing three instructional need entities instead of two may mean that more information is needed on how instruction can work ideally in church music settings (Rohwer, 2010).

The preparation of church leaders in terms of their musical, liturgical, and educational skills may be an additional challenge to church music settings as community learning environments. While Branscome (2009) noted that church music directors may need to take music education coursework in order to be prepared thoroughly for their jobs, church choir directors may feel that they lack either musical, liturgical, or educational skills, dependent on their higher educational track. Regier (1986) noted that pastors who were trained in seminary settings where pedagogy and music learning were superseded by worship-based learning may be challenged by the musical component of the job, and conversely, Sharp (2007) noted that ministers of music in Evangelical churches have often been trained as choral directors and may not have the liturgical knowledge to be able to meet the demands of the position. Even the type of university setting may determine the learning focus that can occur: for instance, denomination-affiliated institutions may emphasize ministry training more than secular-based universities (Yang, 2009). Ihm (1994) found that only one-third of music directors had degrees in music, with 43% of music directors indicating that additional training in conducting, worship planning, vocal technique, and theory would be helpful. Yet, while church employees may desire continuing education about church music topics, work, family, and financial constraints may be too weighty to avoid (Dawson, 2008).

While much research has addressed the preparation of future public school teachers, more information is needed on the necessary skills for church music settings. Rohwer (2010) noted that church musicians had concerns such as attendance, musical skill diversity, and recruitment, but there is a need for research to address the instructional skills and characteristics that church musicians perceive to be necessary in a skilled church music director. Because little research has been completed on church music as an educational enterprise, there is a need for an investigation of church music participants' perceptions of instructional needs in church settings. The purpose of the study was to describe the perceived learning needs of a group of church musicians attending a musical, religion-based summer camp.

Method

The questionnaire was completed by 62 church choir musicians at a 5-day national summer music camp with a Methodist affiliation. The population was mainly Caucasian ($n = 49$, with 13 not responding to the ethnicity question), with a larger number of females ($n = 41$) than males ($n = 16$), and 5 not responding to the gender question. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 81, averaging 51.73 ($SD = 12.61$), and the voice parts represented were soprano ($n = 22$), alto ($n = 19$), tenor ($n = 12$), and bass ($n = 4$), with 5 not responding. The participants came from 15 states: 2 Western states, 7 South Atlantic states, 4 East South Central states, 1 West Central State, and 1 Northeastern state (state groupings: US Census Bureau, 2010). The number of years that participants had sung in their home church choir ranged from 1 to 64, averaging 23.11 ($SD = 16.96$), with many of the participants with fewer years of singing in their home church noting that they moved often.

The questionnaire and consent form were distributed at the first music rehearsal at camp, and the participants had 4 days to complete the questionnaire, on their own time. Reminders were given during each rehearsal to complete and return the questionnaire, if they desired. The items on the questionnaire were 5 open-ended items asking about the participants' perceived instructional needs in church choir setting and 4 demographic questions. The items took approximately 15-30 minutes to complete.

A panel of two experts in the areas of music and church settings initially reviewed the questions for content validity. Three church musicians then reviewed the questionnaire for clarity. To estimate reliability of the responses, 5 individuals answered the open-ended questions twice, and an external evaluator documented that the general content of the responses was consistent across the two measurement administrations.

Results

The most commonly documented need-to-know issues for any church music director were person-based issues ($n = 43$), such as how to work with people and the important personal characteristics and beliefs of the director, such as patience and commitment to God. In relation to working with people, respondents stated:

Future teachers should focus more on learning to work with people, which many schools don't stress though it is a major factor in teacher success...things like maturity and professionalism.

I think choir directors need to take a class in ethical decisions when dealing with choral musicians. We are complicated and directors need to be prepared to handle us.

Know the needs of the choir members. Survey their interests and their concerns and their skills and then reach them at their level.

Ask the church musicians what kind of church music they enjoy, and be gentle with us. We are not professional musicians.

In relation to being committed to God, participants stated:

The goal should be to understand the purpose of the church first and foremost to serve and glorify God and be teachers with music as the vehicle to do that.

First, directors should be committed Christians and not focus so much on correct notes, but making a beautiful sound unto the Lord and worshiping as they give of their talents. They need to be aware of others in order to work with people. It isn't all about the director. The director is a servant of Christ. It is more than a job.

And, in relation to patience, participants stated:

They must be understanding when relating to a variety of ages and varying expertise levels in reading music.

Church directors need to be able to teach to every level of musician in the room, patiently and carefully. It's difficult, but inexperienced musicians need to understand what the director is saying. Beware of using terminology too much.

You are dealing with volunteers and cannot hold a grade over their head. The act of making music in worship needs to be motivational and "care-full" and the director needs to guide that.

The next most commonly cited need-to-know skill for church music directors was organizational skill ($n = 15$):

Church musicians of course need to be spiritually in tune with their ministry, and they should be much like teachers: well-prepared for rehearsals, organized having good time management skills.

Due to the limited rehearsal time, directors need to work fast and be prepared. They need to be flexible and understanding but establish clear expectations of membership and participation.

It is difficult to get a quality product from limited time with volunteers, but relying on the spirit in those times often helps. It also helps if the director is very prepared and educated so that higher quality can be achieved.

Organizational skill was followed by the need for music to be linked with the liturgy ($n = 14$):

Some church musicians really don't know much about sacred music and it's not their fault because a lot of college music programs don't emphasize it. However they should all have classes like hymnody and history of sacred music.

Church directors should have a portfolio of at least 6 weeks of planned music for the choir that goes along with the lectionary.

The music skills of the director were noted by 10 individuals in the context of a varied list of important attributes, with worship being the top priority, such as in the following quotation:

First of all a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a passion for worship. I think all directors should have some keyboard and rhythm skills as well as being good conductors, and they should have great interpersonal and time management skills.

The majority of respondents cited church music participation as purely a service activity ($n = 44$), while a smaller number cited participation as a combination of service and fun ($n = 18$). No respondents cited church music as purely a leisure activity.

I hope that my work with the choir is an expression of discipleship and not self-serving. As a choir member I feel that I am sharing my gifts that God has blessed me with. The fellowship of the choir is also an important part and strengthens the bond with the church.

Church music is service primarily which brings great pleasure. We are worship leaders, not performers. There has to be a balance with fun – not just intrinsic rewards. People won't keep coming back if they are treated like martyrs.

Because I love it so much it is hard to see it as service, yet I make great sacrifices to do it. On occasions where it requires me to give up something else, or if there's music I don't care for, or I have to get up really early it seems more like service. I think in either case what I need as a learner is for it to be somewhat enjoyable but also not a waste of my time.

It would be nice if people would look at church music participation as a worship opportunity as opposed to a leisure activity that we can be uncommitted to.

One set of participants believed that church music participation should be “for all” regardless of skill level ($n = 28$), while the largest set of participants believed that while there should be music choices for all, there should also be ensemble opportunities specifically for the more skilled ($n = 32$). Two participants did not respond to this question.

Reasons for music for all were cited as:

Church size is a big factor in the types of ensembles you can have. If you don't have many people to choose from, you must have the "for all" attitude. I tend, however, to have this attitude regardless of church size.

Directors should make all welcome in an ensemble and they should work with any who may need extra instruction. A good leader should be able to blend the different skill levels and the better folks should be mentors.

Church music should be for all. If it wasn't I would have never become involved nor would I have been able to realize or explore my talents.

A church's music organization is unique and should accept anyone that wants to be a part. There should only be one choir. The most important thing is worship, not excellence.

Reasons for both all and select were cited as:

There should be a place for everyone in a program, but maybe not for everyone in every ensemble. It would not be kind to encourage a beginner to join an ensemble with advanced members.

I think there should be levels if the church is large enough to support it. Higher level groups can do more challenging and extended works, while lower levels can meet more general needs. Music should be pleasing to the listener, so some restrictions must apply.

I think there absolutely should be more challenging opportunities for more trained singers. For instance, I had a vocal scholarship in college and want to be in ensembles that might do Faure or Mozart's Requiem for instance, and not just music I did in high school.

The idea of how musical excellence fits in church music was clearly a point of contention within this bigger issue of ensemble choice:

I believe church service should be open to all. I do struggle with members of music ministry who seem to be tone deaf, though. Perhaps the merciful thing for all would be to counsel out those whose spiritual gifting does not include choral music or instrumental gifting.

All should be able to participate. In one instrumental ensemble I was blessed to be a part of we had a young man who played tuba who kind of ruined our sound. He was always ahead, behind, played wrong notes, etc. We prayed about it – God took care of it. He is now playing in a heavenly ensemble.

For some musical styles I'd want to hear only those who are skilled to participate. I really prefer skilled musicians and vocalists in my worship experience.

Some individuals had contextual qualifications to their answers to the ensemble choice question:

The question has several considerations: size of church what type of community (college, rural, downtown); size of music program; do you have music readers, professional musicians in your program, and if so how can you best use their talents?

Balance is important, guided by theology of worship and ethos of a particular congregation. Balance of music as offerings of the people, imperfect as they might be, but emphasizing the value of offering our best to God, not music casually prepared.

In a small church skill level can be a sensitive issue. It works well for our music minister to select ahead of time those he would like to be part of an ensemble. There is a way for all to be included, who desire, at some point in time.

Everyone is not a soloist, so solos should be chosen based on ability. Directors should never say to a child or adult: "just mouth the words." It is devastating. The directors should give personal lessons to help remedy or solve musical problems.

The most commonly mentioned frustration and need issue was the dedication of the other church choir members ($n = 23$) which most commonly manifested itself in a plea for better attendance ($n = 17$):

I am bothered by people not taking church music seriously as a responsibility to the church and to God.

Everyone should practice outside of rehearsals so that they remember better for Sunday.

I get irked with people who show up late for rehearsal and miss warm ups and then complain about how composers make the bass parts too high.

Some of the dedication statements were philosophical in nature:

Church choir members should see themselves as a vital part of worship instead of performers of an anthem.

I would like for the leadership and the church members and the choir to view the role of music as an integral part of the worship service. Some people might be reached via a great sermon message but others can get as music or more out of a message delivered through song.

Beyond this most common issue, the responses were more varied: 9 participants were concerned with the leadership of the church and music ministry working together well, with 8 additional participants citing the need for more volunteers that work well in conjunction with the church leadership:

The Administration seems to not be focused on God sometimes when making decisions.

I am frustrated by directors who don't give enough time, dedication, and effort to the church music program.

Earlier planning needs to happen across the pastor, youth, music program, and staff. They just don't get how early the music program needs the sermon topics so that music can be chosen, purchased and rehearsed. Advent decisions can't wait until November! What is everyone thinking?

Nine participants were frustrated by the variety of musical levels of the other church choir members, with 8 additional participants being concerned with the contemporary versus traditional music choices of their church:

When not all singers are at the same skill level, this can lead to repetition which is sometimes boring. Directors need to do a great job of keeping rehearsals fresh and moving.

People who only want easy pieces or contemporary pieces are difficult.

Six participants were frustrated by the lack of time they had in rehearsals:

It is difficult to have only one 1-hour rehearsal each week instead of the daily rehearsals they have in schools.

We should probably have more rehearsals in a week, but that might be difficult for some people.

Five participants cited the size of their group as a concern, and 4 additional participants cited the need for better recruitment of new members:

A challenge is recruiting the transitory population of so many people, especially 20 and 30 year olds.

Delegate, invigorate, recruit. I know it is easier to just try and do it all, but the real work is in equipping others.

Five participants desired more support for youth music activities in their settings, such as in the following quotation:

Youth music is the cornerstone for the continuation of music ministry with adults. We need to concentrate on the youth instead of treating them like an afterthought. Instructors need to help them musically instead of just treating them like they are "cute" entertainment. Youth shouldn't be relegated to lay leaders.

Four participants were frustrated by the musical feedback that they received, such as in the following quotation:

We need honest compliments from directors (every piece can't be "excellent": we know otherwise).

Discussion

As in previous studies of adult musicians (Rohwer, 2009; 2010), the participants in the current study perceived people-related skill to be an important variable to address with future teachers of adults. More than musical factors, issues related to dealing with people may need to be included, strategically, in teacher preparation programs if students are to feel prepared to teach adults. Because of the content-related requirements that universities need to meet for certification agencies and the National Association of Schools of Music, musical content can sometimes supersede the important people skill content that exemplary teachers model. Based on the perceptions of the participants in the current study, however, universities may want to consider a balance of musical-pedagogical content and people skills scenarios in their courses so as to address this important community music skill.

Universities may also want to consider adding interviews to their audition procedures to advise students if personality variables are a red flag, or conversely, to encourage through words

and scholarships those applicants who not only have great musical skills and wonderful leadership experiences, but also have personalities that align with a career that requires personal interaction skills. Universities may also want to consider having observations in church music settings so that future teachers have an authentic perspective of the church music environment and can discuss the pedagogical similarities and differences that may be apparent in a variety of contexts.

In addition, universities modeled on the conservatory paradigm of conductor-as-purveyor-of-knowledge may want to consider how to highlight the multifaceted nature of the teacher-conductor position for the instructors in the teacher preparation program, since a one-sided conductor persona may be contrary to the desires of church choir musicians. Modeling how to be a nice, caring, God-loving, organized person, may align with the future career path needs of church choir directors more than the old-fashioned vision of a “maestro.” The traditional maestro model highlights the chasm that has existed in the past between performer and conductor; this may be an outdated professional model that may need to be modified for the sake of community musician desires. Clearly, if communication between the director, the pastor, the volunteers, and the adult and youth musicians is to be a goal, then directors need to care about the perceptions of all those involved in the church. This necessitates a certain kind of person who can balance the musical, the instructional, and the interpersonal. Universities that have instructors who can model and reinforce this kind of well-balanced persona may serve to benefit the future directors in their care.

In addition to having people skills, participants also cited the need for directors to be focused on God more than themselves. The desire for musical and instructional decisions to be made with a Christian focus instead of a singular-minded focus was documented in the current study’s responses. This group-worship focus was also noted in Rohwer (2010) where respondents cited their top reasons for participating in church choir as a combination of worship, music, and fellowship. Communicating this balance of musical, instructional, and liturgical-interpersonal strengths and considerations with future music ministers can be a first step in highlighting this delicate balance that these future professionals need to keep in mind throughout their careers.

Respondents also cited the need for directors to be organized and dedicated instructors who can be strong recruiters. In addition, respondents cited the need for the various members of the church leadership (staff, pastor, volunteers) to work together to plan cohesive church services. It appears then, that the job of a church director necessitates both a music education focus where music-related pedagogical aspects are practiced, as well as a ministry focus where liturgical aspects are addressed. It may be that the best degree path for those wanting to be skilled church musicians is to work toward a bachelor's degree in music education followed by a master's degree in divinity or church music. While that may be an extended preparation course, it may be difficult to find an undergraduate institution that can do the combination of musical, instructional, and liturgical functions well.

There was a lack of consensus in participant responses concerning whether their church music participation was service or leisure. This may mean that our understanding of leisure as a model for how music works in the community may be incomplete. Because many participants noted a feeling that leisure implied a cavalier attitude toward participation, they did not see their participation in that way. While some felt that their participation was service completely, others noted that they were dedicated, but that they wanted it to be fun, and hence it was a service endeavor with a leisure benefit. The terms leisure and service may be the culprits here, with a black and white definition from the participants clouding their grey participation perceptions.

It is clear that in almost every community music setting there may be members who are participating for a balance of what might be termed service and leisure reasons. The band members who were music majors and professional musicians in community bands may see their participation as a way to mentor and guide other struggling band members. This mindset is clearly different from the leisure concept espoused in leisure theories. And, there are many community musicians who may see their participation to be about benefiting them, but they are dedicated in their practice and attendance, showing up early and staying late. In the same way that they may be militant golfers, they are dedicated musicians. Many of these individuals had or still have successful careers where they were dedicated, and they have used community music as an extension of this organized life. The term leisure, then, may need to be extended in order to fit the new model of individuals that are pushing the boundaries of the term.

The issue of skill level in relation to whether groups should be “y'all come” groups or have select ensembles was another issue that lacked consensus across the participants. It may be that each person has within himself a mixture of wanting great music but wanting to be inclusive. On which side the overall group leans may need to be evaluated by the director through discussion. In other words, it may be important for the director to consider the ensemble questions through a perspective different from the traditional maestro perspective where decisions are often made unilaterally. Inclusive/exclusive decisions are contextual hotbeds that should be addressed ideally by the complete ensemble in order to come to an appropriate, agreed- upon outcome for the group.

As in Rohwer (2010), the most commonly cited frustration of church choir members was dedication, with a focus on attendance being a common dedication component. Some church musicians who were dedicated to their ensemble, found lack of consistent attendance among other members upsetting. To alleviate this situation, the director and the choir members might consider planning well in advance the pieces that they would like to perform so that music could have a long cycle instead of a quick turnaround that may not lead to quality performances. Advance planning in conjunction with the liturgical calendar may also make the link between the music and the service more apparent for the congregation. Having an organized rehearsal schedule that is communicated to all constituents may also help to alleviate the concern about amount of time in rehearsal, since small, sequenced steps could be taken in musical learning, thereby reinforcing past learning and leading toward greater progress in musical excellence. Small sequenced steps could also help those who have lower musical skills know what they need to prepare so as to ease their stress. Directors who can break down the learning into smaller sequenced steps may also be able to provide more accurate and specific feedback to the church musicians, which can lead toward more positive musical growth.

The job of a church music director is a challenging one; the director must be musician, teacher, liturgist, motivator, organizer, God-loving individual, and all-around good person. In order to be as prepared as possible, each future director should consider how to develop these skills and characteristics while also keeping at the forefront the gestalt idea of the joy of church music in the community.

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