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How Singing in a Seminary Choir Influences Episcopal Seminarians’ Formation

Sarah Knox
Marquette University, sarah.knox@marquette.edu

Kevin A. Tate
Marquette University, kevin.tate@marquette.edu

Graham Knowlton
Marquette University

Clara E. Hill
University of Maryland - College Park

CHORAL MUSIC IS CENTRAL TO many religious traditions, including those of the Episcopal Church (EC), whose seminarians frequently engage in choral singing, whether as part of a choir or a congregation. Given this centrality, we wanted to learn more about the experience of singing in an EC seminary choir.

Although some writers have discussed how engaging in music may affect well-being,1-3 and many have examined the influences on vocational development,4 few have discussed religious vocations—that sense of a divine call that EC seminarians must demonstrate before they enter seminary training. In addition, as asserted by Daniel Aleshire (2006), “Education in sacred music ... competes for limited educational space in a crowded curriculum to prepare future pastors ... theological schools have a limited involvement in the education of church musicians ... [and] very few schools require a course in sacred music.”5 Thus, the existing literature on vocational development may well not reflect the experiences of those pursuing Holy Orders, and seminaries themselves may be hard-pressed to include such training in their curricula. Furthermore, we found no literature examining how participating in a seminary choir influences seminarians’ religious or vocational development. We seek to fill these gaps in the literature.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

We invited all seminarians singing in the Choral Scholars Choir (CSC) at Nashotah House Theological Seminary (NHTS), in Nashotah, Wisconsin, to participate in this project. All consented, as did one seminarian who was a past member of the CSC, giving us a total of eleven participants. Most participants were in their 20s and 30s, nine were men, all were white, and ten were pursuing a master’s of divinity degree. Seven identified as Anglican and four as Episcopalian; two were in their first year of seminary training, four in their second year, and five in their third year. On average, they had sung in the CSC for nearly 1.5 years. Participants had sung in choirs (EC, non-EC, and non-church) for about five years. Although four had no formal musical training, three had completed an undergraduate degree in music, and four had studied a musical instrument.

After providing informed consent, each participant was interviewed by Sarah Knox in a 45–60 minute audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, we began data analysis, using consensual qualitative research,6 a well-known qualitative research method in the social sciences. In CQR, research team members reach consensus in each of the three steps of data analysis: (1) researchers identify domains, or topic areas, into which the transcribed data are organized (e.g., Why seminarian auditioned for CSC; High point of CSC experience); (2) the data in each domain are abstracted to capture their core or essence (called “core ideas”); and (3) the researchers compare the core ideas for all participants within a domain, looking for common themes across participants (cross analysis). The themes that emerge in all or all but one case are considered general, those that emerge in at least half are considered typical, and those that emerge in at least two and up to half of participants are considered variant.
FINDINGS
Participant Background and Its Relationship with Music/Choir

Participants typically auditioned for the CSC to enhance their professional and vocational development, and to enrich their formation. One stated that he wanted to understand church music so that when he “talks with church musicians, they won’t think I’m an idiot.” They also typically auditioned as a way to continue their earlier music and singing experiences. Variantly, participants auditioned to receive the stipend provided to CSC members, or for the opportunity to build a sense of community (e.g., “It was a great way to meet people”).

With regard to what they contributed to the CSC, participants typically referred to their musical abilities and experience: “I know the music, so I contribute my experience and training.” They also typically contributed through their ability to lead, model, or mentor. One participant, for instance, felt it his responsibility to set the tone for others. Variantly, participants contributed their passion for and dedication to the choir, and also their support for the choirmaster (e.g., “I keep the choirmaster sane”).

Benefits of Singing in CSC

Singing in the CSC contributed to seminarians’ daily lives in multiple ways. Generally, they ranked the CSC very highly among all of their seminary activities (“It’s what keeps me here”), and also generally found it a source of community. Typically, the CSC was an enjoyable activity (“a way to blow off steam”), provided a chance to participate in good music, deepened their worship experience (“singing is praying twice”), and fostered intrapersonal growth (“I learned to be more patient with myself”). Variantly, the CSC provided an opportunity to learn more about music, and also provided structure and discipline to daily life (“It was a healthy ritual that at 4:00 P.M., no matter what, I am at rehearsal; that’s a sacred time”).

The CSC also nurtured seminarians’ personal development. Typically, the choir strengthened their musical skills, knowledge, and appreciation (“I have a better understanding of music’s different time periods and theological underpinnings”). Variantly, the choir enhanced seminarians’ awareness of their role as leaders: “I learned about being a leader, which is hard to come by for a young guy.”

Similarly, participating in the CSC fostered seminarians’ religious development as future clergy. Typically, they commented that the experience of singing was transcendent, reminding them that “great religion or faith is not just a mental construct, but has to be all-encompassing, expressed in ways that written words cannot do alone.” Variantly, the CSC complemented and enhanced their academic learning: “The Scriptures come alive for me in music.”

In addition, singing in the CSC nurtured seminarians’ vocational development. For example, their CSC experiences generally strengthened their formation for leading liturgy (“As a priest, I will be called upon to be the understander of music and heal moral injury and develop people”—and thus will have to make decisions about music”). Typically, being in the CSC increased seminarians’ understanding of the role of music in church: “I have a greater understanding of how choirs work and how they interface with liturgy, so I have ‘inside knowledge’ of how things work.”

nally, their CSC experiences typically reinforced seminarians’ desire to support the role of music as clergy (e.g., one participant intended to advocate for music because of the value of music and choir in church).

As high points of their CSC experiences, seminarians typically identified the singing of special services, such as Advent Lessons and Carols or Holy Week. Variantly, performing exceptionally well was a high point (e.g., “I am taken out of the present . . . taken up into Heaven to experience what the angels experience . . . I have a real and momentary sense of peace and grace”).

Drawbacks of Singing in CSC

Despite the numerous benefits of singing in the CSC, seminarians did note that the CSC sometimes detracted from their daily life. They generally commented on the substantial time and energy required by the CSC, describing it as second only behind their coursework. Variantly, CSC members’ attitudes and demeanor negatively affected the experience. One seminarian commented, for instance, that the occasionally humorous approach to choir “can be a danger if it detracts from the seriousness of what they’re doing as an act of worship.”

As low points of their CSC experience, seminarians typically commented on others’ occasionally disturbing attitudes and the associated interpersonal tension and negativity. As an example, one seminarian experienced discomfort when some CSC members were “dismissive of others’ expressions of faith.” Variantly, seminarians iden-
Singing in the chapel of St. Mary the Virgin at Nashotah House

not consider any other seminary: "I
had only two choices for seminary,
and it really wasn't a choice, because I
wanted to go to Nashotah. Why would I
go anywhere else?" Finally, seminari-
ans said that they would continue to
sing in a choir after graduation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Singing in an Episcopal seminary
choir seemed to have a powerful influ-
ence on seminarians' religious and voca-
tional development. With regard to
religious development, singing in the
CSC deepened their worship experi-
ence and was transcendent. In terms
of vocational development, singing in
the CSC strengthened their forma-
tion, increased their understanding of
the role of music in church, and rein-
forced their desire to support this role
of music when they served as clergy.

These are potent findings, indeed, for
they illuminate the vital contribution
of choral engagement to the essential
mission of any seminary: formation.
For these seminarians, their involve-
ment in the CSC was foundational to
their priestly formation.

Relatedly, we also learned that these
seminarians sought to sing in a semi-
ary choir to enhance their professional
and vocational development, as well as
to continue their earlier music and sing-
ing experiences. To the CSC they con-
tributed this musical background, as
well as their willingness to lead, model,
and mentor—desirable traits for all
clergy. Singing in the CSC played a
substantial and much-enjoyed role in
these seminarians' daily lives; they
found it a strong source of community
and friendships, as well as an opportu-
nity for intra- and interpersonal
growth and a chance to sing good
music. In addition, the CSC enhanced
their musical skills and appreciation. Being a
member of the CSC re-
quired significant time
and energy, but these de-
mands were gladly met,
for the most part. Singing
special services were particular high
points of their CSC experience, where-
as low points reflected occasional ten-
sion that arose from others' distressing
attitudes. Thus, participating in the
CSC fostered personal, religious, and
vocational growth; provided a sense of
community; and enhanced the under-
standing of, appreciation for, and sup-
port for the role of music in church.

For those reflecting upon the role of
a choir in their own seminary, or even
in their own church setting, the find-
ings described here are indeed relevant.
As stated at the outset of this article,
choral music plays a central role in
many religious traditions, and for both
clergy and laity, often serves as a way
to connect with the Divine. For semi-
narians, a seminary choir is a vehicle
for a profound and multidimensional
effect on their development, and a vital
component of their daily lives, echoing
Guenther's assertion of the impor-
tance of seminarians singing in a choir.
The same may well be true for mem-
bers of congregations, who seek spiri-
tual growth and fulfillment via choral
music. Amid these many benefits, it is
also important to attend to the occa-
sional difficulties that arise in choral
endeavors. As such, choral directors,
clergy, and choir members themselves
may need, from time to time, to ad-
dress their interpersonal processes and
dynamics to ensure that the benefits of
engaging in choral singing outweigh
any negative elements. As noted by
several of the seminarians, singing is
indeed "praying twice." What a tre-
 mendous gift to offer to all who wish
to partake, both clergy and laity.

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Sarah Knox sings in the Cathedral Choir at All Saints' Cathedral, Milwaukee, Wis. She and
Kevin Tate are faculty members in the depart-
ment of counselor education and counseling
psychology at Marquette University, Millwau-
kee, where Graham Knowlton is a doctoral
student. Clara E. Hill is a faculty member in
the psychology department at the University of
Maryland, College Park.