



THE CHURCH CHORAL DIRECTOR

LEADER OF THE SACRED, THE GOOD, THE BEAUTIFUL

Charlotte Kroeker

Despite a tendency to be overlooked in the cultural landscape, church choirs profoundly influence musical and social culture, possibly more than almost any other organized activities in society. There is evidence to support the value of a church choir and reason for choral directors to invest time in its development and well-being.

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Singing in Choirs: Fulfilling What it Means to Be Human

All God's creatures got a place in the choir
Some sing low and some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
Some just clap their hands....

These lyrics are by Bill Staines, an American folk musician and singer-songwriter from New England, made popular as sung by Celtic Thunder. They allude to a simple, broad definition of "choir." Indeed, expression of music is basic to being alive, affecting us in ways more fundamental than language.

Humans sing, but so do all God's creatures. Singing expresses the most profound emotions and is often done in communities where it bonds us, marks events, and helps share journeys we do not want to experience alone. Daniel Levitin, in *This Is Your Brain on Music*, argues convincingly that music is at the heart of being human. In addition to the expression of emotion, music is critical to how our minds work and how we experience and respond to stimuli. Contrary to ideas that art and music belong to the right brain and language and mathematics are left brain functions, neuroscientists now demonstrate that music is distributed throughout the brain. Broader distribution of music in the brain explains why persons diagnosed with Alzheimer's who can no longer speak can sing songs with words, or why individuals with motor coordination difficulties can still play the piano.¹ Music unites both persons with each other and unifies a person within him/herself.

Recall how the late Pete Seeger used folk songs and spirituals to energize groups to sing about causes for social justice that moved people to action. Seeger, the son of a concert violinist and a musicologist, was drawn to music with ethnic and rural roots that found its expression in communal singing. He understood the power of music to change people. His "concerts" often became a singalong, where he borrowed shamelessly from hymn tunes and spirituals, changing religious lyrics to texts that promoted a cause for justice. Hymn tunes, which are so often folk music and easily singable, became vehicles for empowering causes for the greater good. "We Shall Overcome" is an example of music Seeger adapted that was to bring oneness of purpose to the Civil Rights Move-

ment. Though secular in his beliefs, he often worked with churches and religious groups to achieve common goals. "My job," he said in 2009, "is to show folks there's a lot of good music in this world, and if used right it may help to save the planet."²

So it is with singing in church, so aptly described by Garrison Keillor in his description of Lutherans:

Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage. It's natural for Lutherans to sing in harmony. We're too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison. When you're singing in the key of C and you slide into the A7th and D7th chords, all two hundred of you, it's an emotionally fulfilling moment. I once sang the bass line of "Children of the Heavenly Father" in a room with about three thousand Lutherans in it; and when we finished, we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other. I do believe this: People, these Lutherans, who love to sing in four-part harmony, are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!³

Keillor captures both the delight of being part of singing in a group and the joy of being a member of a community that cares for one another. Linked with singing is a moral imperative: if I am singing with you and making beautiful music, I cannot ignore you as a human being and must care for your concerns as my own. Thus, singing together shapes the people we become. Singing together creates common understanding, bonds people together in community, and energizes them to action for good.

In 2009, Chorus America published an important research report, *The Chorus Impact Study*,⁴ that demonstrates choral singers are good citizens. The findings are

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profound for anyone who cares about choral music of the church:

- 216,000 of 270,000 total choirs in the United States are religious choirs. *80% of all choirs are in churches or temples.*
- Choral singing is the most important form of cultural participation in the United States, involving 22.9% of households. *Healthy choral programs are an indication of healthy artistic cultural activity.*
- Adults who sing in choirs are remarkably good citizens: they are avid patrons of the arts, are more philanthropic than non-choir singers, exhibit greater civic leadership than average Americans, and cite membership in a choir for helping them be better team players in other areas of their lives.⁵

These qualities correspond to goals of nearly all religious denominations for their members to offer service beyond the church. Further, *The Chorus Impact Study* findings are important for children, whose personal, social, academic, and moral development is improved by singing in choirs.

- Children who sing in choirs get better grades and show improvement in their academic work.
- Parents of choir children report characteristics conducive to learning such as memory skills and study habits and abilities to be team players along with increased social skills.
- Educators are even more emphatic than parents about the benefits of chorus for children's educational and developmental well-being, including their self-discipline.
- Many educators believe choir can keep children engaged in school who otherwise might be lost; three-fourths of educators say they can tell which children are in choirs; half recommend choir to children.⁶

The church can impact children in profound ways by

investing in choir programs for them and/or augmenting and supporting existing programs in the community.⁷ Music, not sports, builds moral character. A recent study of character education for forming moral values and character in public, private, faith-based, and non-faith-based schools in the United Kingdom showed surprising differences between children's participation in sports and the arts. "Contrary to the widely held public belief that sport builds character, British students claiming to participate in sporting activities did not perform better than those who said they did not practise sports when asked to respond to moral dilemmas. However, students who said they were involved in music or choir or drama outside of school performed better than those who said they were not and did not."⁸

Current scientific and statistical research documents the importance of music in worship practices from the earliest times. Mark Chaves in his important research of congregations finds more live music is made in churches than in all other venues in our society.⁹ Most sources agree that somewhere between 30% and 60% of a worship service consists of music. Hymns of the church date from the earliest writings of Christianity and contain the accumulated wisdom of centuries of believers. Psalms have formed worshippers spiritually since earliest recorded history. Biblical writers, who so often say "Sing to the Lord," knew, perhaps instinctively, what neuroscientists are uncovering about how the brain works.

Researchers in neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have a new approach to brain imaging that shows specific neurons respond to music. Non-musical sounds, such as a dog barking or a car skidding, leave musical circuits unmoved. The M.I.T. team demonstrates speech and music circuits are in different parts of the brain and function independently. The brain gives specialized treatment to music recognition. Scientists believe music sensitivity may be more fundamental to the brain than speech, suggesting speech evolved from music. Neuroscientists are certain that "music works as a group cohesive. Music-making with other people in your tribe is a very ancient, human thing to do."¹⁰

The music we learn at an early age and continue to reinforce has capacity to give back in important ways. Those working with cognitively challenged patients find the ability to sing and play an instrument remains when

speech or capacity to write are no longer possible. Unresponsive people can sing a known hymn or song. An Alzheimer's patient who had been unable to feed himself due to lack of hand coordination was wheeled into a social area with a piano. He proceeded to play pieces he had known from years past. A woman who came to the United States from England as a young bride many years ago, now in advancing dementia, when asked what I might play on her out-of-tune Steinway, said "God Save the King." As I played the tune we know as "America" (My Country 'Tis of Thee), she stood erect and sang all three verses of "God Save the King," oblivious to a queen's ascent to the throne.

Choir singers exhibit values and lifestyles consistent with a moral life and fulfill the mission of the church to serve the world beyond the local church.

Music communicates when we think nothing can. The Hon. Carolyn Wright, who sang in church choirs for many years, was in a coma for two months. When she awoke, she asked, "Where is the choir?" Her family said there was no choir, nor had there been. But she was insistent and spoke the lyrics of a song she heard them sing. She was so certain the choir had been there that she told her family it was rude to leave the choir in the hall. The family then realized the lyrics came from a recording of a gospel choir the family played repeatedly during her coma. When she became agitated with the feeding tubes, ventilators, and dialysis procedures, her heartbeat would spike to dangerous levels. The medical solution was to restrain her or give more sedation. The family asked if they could play the music of gospel choirs. Her blood pressure would go down and she would stop fighting the tubes. Upon waking, she could remember only working hard to carry a heavy cross and following people with lights who were praying for her. She believes the music helped her carry the cross, to survive, to come out of the coma.¹¹ A reading of the lyrics helps to understand why this particular song was so powerful to her recovery:

Be blessed my brother,
be blessed my sister,
be blessed wherever this life leads you,
let me encourage you,
let me speak life to you,
You can depend on God to see you through,
You can depend on me to pray for you

You might be hurting,
you might be crying,
you might be worrying and frustrated too,
let me encourage you, let me speak life to you
you can depend on God to see you through,
you can depend on me to pray for you

Pray I'm gonna keep on prayin,
Pray I'm gonna keep on prayin for you,
you can depend on God to see you through,
you can depend on me to pray for you

I see you in the future.
and you look better,
I see you walking in favor and prosperity too,
let me encourage you,
let me speak life to you,
you can depend on God to see you through,
you can depend on me to pray for you.

I pray for you,
you pray for me,
and watch God change things.¹²

Would the patient have recovered without the music? We don't know. Would speaking these words have had the same effect? We don't know for sure, but we do know she did not remember any words spoken to her during the coma. She only remembered the words sung to her by a choir who were the people leading and praying for her. The music provided the means for her to feel surrounded by prayer that was offered by people leading her to a better place.

Music marks the important occasions in our lives and helps us remember them. This is particularly the case for church music, as the rituals associated with marriage, birth, and death are often tied to the church. The music

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we choose for these rituals gives them meaning, and the music makes the events become firmly implanted in our collective memories and lives. The music acts as a powerful retrieval cue for these important milestones in our lives when we hear it.¹³ For example, “That was the anthem sung at our grandparents’ wedding and we want it sung at ours.” Or, “When we sang the final hymn today it brought tears to my eyes because it is the hymn we always use at our family’s most important occasions.”

Levitin talks about the power of a hymn sung at his grandmother’s funeral, a woman who had saved her entire family from the Nazis through the force of her will. As her casket was lowered into the ground, the family sang Psalm 131 to an ancient Aramaic tune with its Middle Eastern minor sound and exotic intervals.

Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty;
Neither do I exercise myself in things too great,
Or in things too wonderful for me.
Surely I have stilled and quieted my soul;
Like a weaned child with its mother,
My soul is with me like a weaned child.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth
and forever.

It was not the memorial speeches that brought the tears but strains of the hymn releasing trapped feelings. This hymn helped to accept the death of a grandmother, to mourn appropriately, to share the realization corporately, to seal it with a song.¹⁴

How Do Choral Directors Fit into the Landscape of Church Music?

Church musicians, keepers of the song of the church, have long understood the power of music to carry praise and prayer of the faithful and to connect faith to everyday living. J. S. Bach wrote on the title of his *Orgelbüchlein* (Little Organ Book), a collection of chorale preludes for the church year:

“To the honor of the most high God alone, to the neighbor, that he may learn from it.”

Following the preface of *The United Methodist Hymnal* are

those wonderful “Directions for Singing,” 1761, from John Wesley (my favorite is “Sing modestly. Do not bawl...”). What is missing from the list is the prefatory sentence:

“That this part (i.e., the musical part) of Divine Worship may be the more acceptable to God, as well as the more profitable to yourself and others...”

Note the two-part emphasis both these musical theologians give to church music, first addressing God, and then our neighbor, the vertical and the horizontal. Not one or the other, but both. Both Bach and Wesley found their vocations rooted in Scripture. Both define music making in terms of the Great Commandment, to love God with all our heart and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. The Great Commandment forms a cross, the basic symbol of Christianity; the vertical, loving God with all of our being; and the horizontal, serving and loving our neighbors with as much respect as we give to ourselves. Bach and Wesley join countless others through history to the present who are musician-theologians or theologian-musicians, powerfully weaving together music and theology in concept, practice, and as life vocation.

Choir members who regularly praise God by singing texts of the gathered wisdom of the ages also develop into persons who serve the needs of humankind and find beauty and hope in God’s creation.

Working in the church is different from any other job in music. It is not music performance, not music education, not music therapy, not music business, and yet a church musician uses all of these skills. Relationships in a church environment are defined by a faith that demands selflessness, service, and a commitment beyond personal goals and ambitions. Working as a professional in a church implies respect and trust between people in the professions of theology and music. In most faith traditions, clergy have the authority and responsibility for worship either by denominational ordinances, practices, or both. Offering music in worship is a complex task over which musicians may have little or no official authority.

Academe, as it is organized in the United States, does not naturally prepare clergy and musicians for work in the church. The academy is organized by disciplines where we

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learn the language and tools of our field of study. Clergy study theology; musicians study music. Each develops a language appropriate to the chosen field. Of 6,161 degrees awarded by seminaries in 2014, 64 anticipated working in full- or part-time music positions.¹⁵ Only two church music programs are dually certified in theology and music in the United States. Theologians study very little about worship and nothing about music. Musicians study little service music and no theology. As a result, clergy and musicians arrive in the parish unprepared for the task ahead, each with a language the other does not understand.

Recent data raises concern about how decisions are made about music and worship. The latest study of congregations by Duke University indicates worship in the United States is mirroring an increasingly informal culture. Though organs and choirs are still found in a high percentage of churches, they are less frequently a part of

worship than in prior studies.¹⁶ Given the importance of choirs to the mission of the church and core of worship, thoughtful questions must be asked in order to make informed decisions about music. At stake is not only the music of the church; the music decisions will be predictive of the nature of worship, which will determine the effectiveness of the church itself.

We can move beyond the assumption that younger generations want popular music in church and that in order to “attract” them to worship we must consider the historical forms and repertoire of liturgy and music irrelevant. The Episcopal Church launched a study that halted plans to revise *The Hymnal 1982*. Interestingly, those most opposed to a new hymnal were in age groups over sixty and under thirty. One younger person says:

“I think there is a huge assumption made that the younger generation wants guitar- and piano-



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based praise and worship music. ...What we want to hear in a Sunday Eucharist are the classic hymns played on organ. And occasionally we want to chant. Church is the one place where our musical taste is not based upon fad, but instead links us with a much more important, more elegant tradition. If I wanted to listen to acoustic guitar and piano, I'd pick up Dave Matthews or Ben Folds. If I wanted rap, I'd listen to Lil Wayne. ...For worship, I want music that connects to me a world outside of the in and out of my daily life."

— Twenty-two-year-old congregation member respondent¹⁷

How we think about worship matters. The word from which liturgy derives, *leitourgia*, translates loosely "the work of the people." Worship is not the work of the clergy or the music leadership; it is what the people do. Søren Kierkegaard provides a succinct definition of worship as drama: God is the audience, the leaders are prompters, and the congregation are actors. Musicians trained as performers sometimes have difficulty in making the transition to being a prompter, as do some clergy. But when worship is owned by the people the church becomes a powerful community for itself and for those beyond its walls.

Some of the finest church musicians in history thought of themselves as theologians. A wonderful instance in the music world was a challenge by the *New York Times* music reviewer Anthony Tommasini to his readers in January 2011 to name the top ten greatest classical music composers who ever lived. His result may not have been a surprise to many,¹⁸ but it should give all in church music a moment of pause. After all, we understand the commitment of J. S. Bach to his craft that regularly included *solī Deo Gloria* on his manuscripts. Bach is not only a consummate musician who deserves to be named the number-one composer in a *New York Times* poll, but he is a musician who practiced his craft because of his deep faith commitments that informed the character of his life and work. Would Bach have been so fine a musician without this faith commitment? We will never know. What we do know is that some of the finest music ever written is by those who attributed their inspiration to their ultimate Creator.

Whether we are clergy, musicians, or members of a

congregation, we are working toward the same goal: the worship of God. History shows the worship of God can be one of the most rewarding personal and communal human experiences. Let us look at some successful models that can help.

Models for Church Choral Musicians

What is the nature of the choir for the choir director in church? The noted church musician, theologian, scholar, professor, and Lutheran pastor Rev. Paul Westermeyer is helpful in thinking about "choir" in worship. Westermeyer labels the congregation the "unrehearsed choir," the singing body that does most of the work. The "rehearsed choir" then offers more difficult music on behalf of the congregation, either singing an anthem, for example, for the benefit of the congregation, or helping them sing hymns or service music better. While the rehearsed choir might seem not that different from a school or community choir, its *function* in worship and the *motivation* of the singers might be quite different. Yet all the standards and practices applied to another type of choir may continue to operate in similar fashion.¹⁹

As choir and congregation-as-choir begin to reach their maturity musically and spiritually, they create community. Theology and scripture, when set to fine music, make it memorable and formative. Music sung in community is powerful for sensing needs and motivating singers to fill them, making servants of the singers to a world in need of love and care. Thus, the mission of the church is accomplished, the neighbor is served, justice rains down, and all live for the greater good.

For those who plan worship, finding resources that work week-to-week that have capacity to form these deeply honed values for the long term is difficult. Scripture is the foundation. Denominational planning guides, hymnals and their related companions, and commercial publishers that list their music by liturgical season are all helpful. The Church Music Institute has created a major online searchable database of choral anthems, the eLibrary, which at this writing has over ten thousand titles searchable on twenty-four criteria.

Most important is the capacity to search by scripture—by chapter and verse, liturgical day and season, or theological topic, along with the expected voicing, hymntune,

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level of difficulty, etc. (See www.churchmusicinstitute.org)

Of interest to choral directors wanting to see successful models for music ministry may be the study of nine congregations, three each of Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian (PCUSA) denominations.²⁰ All nine of the congregations subscribed to the criteria that come from the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, now embraced universally across denominations, that the liturgy should include: 1) Full, active, conscious participation of the people; and 2) Sacred song closely bound to the text, forming a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.

Here are some characteristics of these nine congregations:

- Clergy and music leaders saw themselves as servant leaders.
- Clergy and music leaders were good listeners of their congregations
- Clergy and music leaders were formed in the church both musically and spiritually from an early age.
- Musicians were in place for multiple clergy persons.
- Musicians saw themselves as educators.
- Musicians were trained professionally.
- Congregations made decisions for their future based on what had worked for them in the past.
- Development of a core repertoire unique to each congregation is important to their identity.



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- Older members of congregations valued music and worship above all other church activities.
- Congregations with strong congregational singing also have some of the strongest choirs.
- None of the congregations had endowments to support their music programs. The correlation is between quality and people, not funding.

Here are some quotations, the first on good clergy-musician relationships:

“The clergy and musicians who experience the smoothest and most productive working relationships embrace servant leadership styles in which their common tasks and respect for each other are the dominant factors.”²¹

It was interesting to note that most of the clergy in the study had been in children’s choirs in church and all had grown up singing in worship. The musicians all had a church musician who encouraged them in music study at important points in their early formation, for example, finding the right teacher who would challenge them, or helping them to choose a college with a good music department. On musical leadership, from the pastor’s perspective:

“The best musicians take people just to the edge of their capabilities and then stretch them to the point where they can do it, at which point the people say, ‘Wow!’ It is an art to know how to do that. Frequently music leaders either take them not far enough, and you have a sort of pedantic approach, or they take them too far, and they’re frustrated. An artist knows the balance.”²²

Excellence was a recurring theme, shared not only by the leaders but by the volunteers in the choirs. It was the commitment to excellence and the ability of the musician to help the volunteers achieve it that drove the music programs. On self-knowledge and selflessness as a leader:

“A good leader is someone who has learned how

to read people well enough to know when to pull them, when to push them, and when you just have to get out of the way. This ability...requires enough self-knowledge, ego strength, and selflessness to affirm others who do things well, and the willingness to let them have the credit for it.”²³

All of the most successful leaders knew how to keep their egos in check yet had strength of character and purpose. They were continual learners in their own fields, from each other, and from the people in their congregation they enjoyed so much. On the power of music, from a pastor:

“I think all of us who preach secretly wish that our words had the power of music. If only we could understand and appreciate that power and use it in the best sense.”²⁴

Several of the musician and clergy teams said that they had learned most about each other’s field from the other. Musicians often arrived in the congregation with good musical skills but had to learn theology from the pastor. Even when pastors had some musical training, they found they learned much from the musician about how music worked in the church.

Profound implications arise from the study, derived from conclusions that crossed denominations, ethnic, economic, and cultural differences. They speak volumes about what can be done to create better worshipping congregations for the future.

- Music must be acknowledged alongside theology in importance in its function in worship.
- Church musicians must be given the courtesy and standing of professionals, just as clergy are afforded these rights.
- Clergy must be educated in music.
- Musicians must be educated in theology.
- Congregations need to be prepared for liturgy, the work of the people.

- Harmonious leader relationships should be the norm not the exception.
- Teaching our children the song of the church is a crucial tool for spiritual formation.

The Church Choral Musician: A Calling

“Why should I care about a part-time job in church music when I cannot make a living as a church musician, I already have a full-time job, and when the circumstances are so difficult?”

Indeed, most church music jobs are part time. They are filled by musicians who love the church and the people in the church and who want to see the music of worship flourish. These musicians are willing to encounter a few obstacles to reach the greater rewards, which are many. Among them is the opportunity to be rooted in a caring community not always encountered in lives of professional musicians, and where musical skills are rarely taken for granted. Beyond personal rewards is the opportunity to change the church in positive ways, to choose music with wisdom and beauty capable of forming human beings with moral and spiritual sensitivities who then will change the world within and beyond the church. Fine church music will: renew our capacity for song; enrich music in our churches, communities, culture; enhance our ability to pray and praise; link head and heart; prepare for service; and revitalize the church.

In an era of confusion about the future of the church and its mission, musicians have something profound to offer. Who can resist this opportunity? 

NOTES

- ¹ Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music* (London: Penguin Group, 2006): 8-9.
- ² Pete Seeger in Phillip Lutz, “Pete Seeger, Still Singing His Message at 89,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2009.
- ³ Garrison Keillor, “Singing with Lutherans,” in the newsletter of Chorus America, 1999. Copyright Garrison Keillor. All rights reserved.
- ⁴ <https://www.chorusamerica.org/publications/research-reports/chorus-impact-study>

- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.
- ⁷ Stephen Thoma, Randall Curren, and Michael Roberts, *Character Education in UK Schools: A Research Report*, The Jubilee Centre, University of Birmingham, 5-6.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁹ Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 188.
- ¹⁰ Josef Rauschecker, Georgetown University, quoted in Natalie Angier, “New Ways into the Brain’s ‘Music Room,’” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2016.
- ¹¹ Conversation with Hon. Carolyn Wright, Chief Justice, Court of Appeals, Fifth District of Texas at Dallas, February 17, 2016, about her recovery from a coma.
- ¹² Bishop Paul S. Morton, “Be Blessed” from *Memorable Moments* (album). Lyrics by Paul Morton; Artist Paul Morton.
- ¹³ Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009): 190-191.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 227-228.
- ¹⁵ Information provided by the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for U.S. seminaries.
- ¹⁶ Mark Chaves, “Changing American Congregations: Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study” (2014): 10.
- ¹⁷ *The Hymnal Revision Feasibility Study—Report to the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music*, The Church Pension Fund Research Group, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Anthony Tommasini, “The Greatest,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2011.
- ¹⁹ Paul Westermeyer’s *The Church Musician* (Augsburg Fortress, 1997) is a standard in the profession. His latest book, *Church Musicians: Reflections on Their Call, Craft, History, and Challenges* (MorningStar, 2015), theologically illumines roles for clergy, musicians, and congregations and healthy practices for church music making.
- ²⁰ Charlotte Kroeker, *The Sounds of Our Offerings: Achieving Excellence in Church Music*, Alban, 2011.

- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 186.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 149.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.