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# CHURCH CHORAL MUSICIANS: A Survey of Mennonite Perceptions

*Roy L. Klassen*

How effective is the choral music training within Mennonite colleges in preparing music ministers for service in their constituent churches? What are the needs of the church in choral leadership?

## *Parameters of the Survey*

As part of a doctoral dissertation at Arizona State University, choral leaders of Mennonite churches in the United States were surveyed to ascertain the desired qualifications for choral musicians serving congregations. They were also asked to rate the compatibility of their collegiate music training with their current leadership responsibilities in the church. A separate questionnaire was mailed to the head choral director at each of the Mennonite colleges to elicit information about their respective programs in preparing musicians for church music ministry. The institutions surveyed were:

- The Mennonite Church (MC)  
Goshen College—Goshen, Indiana  
Eastern Mennonite College—  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

*Church musicians and college music faculty speak out. The dialogue between church and school must continue.*

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- The General Conference Mennonite Church (GC)
  - Bluffton College—Bluffton, Ohio
  - Bethel College—North Newton, Kansas
- The Mennonite Brethren Church (MB)
  - Tabor College—Hillsboro, Kansas
  - Fresno Pacific College—Fresno, California

The questionnaire was designed in part, for respondents to rate the applicability of their college courses to choral leadership within the church. Special attention is given in their report to persons attending Mennonite colleges. Of the 112 questionnaires mailed to the churches, 58 respondents noted that they had attended Mennonite colleges during their undergraduate study.

The choral professors from each of the six Mennonite colleges, all of whom attended Mennonite colleges during all or part of their undergraduate training, were asked to rate the same items. They were instructed to rate each category as to its value in preparing students for choral leadership in the church. Of the total respondents, 7 attended Bluffton, 10 went to Bethel, 14 were schooled at Eastern Mennonite College, 17 went to Goshen, 5 attended Fresno Pacific College, and 11 were trained at Tabor.

Church musicians who attended Mennonite colleges were asked to rate the importance of specific collegiate course work in preparation for their present church music responsibilities. The highest rated courses were choral ensemble (98%), private instruction and conducting (96%), church music, music history, and music education (80%), with hymnology and church history rating in the 70th percentile.

Table 1 shows how church and college choral directors rated course work in the order of importance.

**Table 1 Ranking of College Courses by College and Church Musicians According to Importance**

Colleges	Churches
1. Conducting	1. Choral Ensemble
2. Choral Ensemble	2. Conducting
3. Private Instruction	3. Private Instruction
4. Music Education	4. Music Education
5. Music History	5. Music History
6. Church Music	6. Church Music
7. Instrumental Ensemble	7. Hymnology
8. Hymnology	8. Church History
9. Church History	9. Christian Education
10. Church Choir Administration	10. Instrumental Ensemble
11. Christian Education	11. Church Choir Administration

The questionnaire also asked for comment on the availability of college choral and instrumental ensembles to the local church. This item is controversial because churches, according to the open-ended comments, sense that their only contact with their college is through performance groups who may visit only once every two or three years. Church choral directors indicated a desire to have ensemble performances more often so that they can experience a closer contact with the college. On the other hand, churches registered considerable dismay about the type of programming from the visiting ensembles. No restrictions of type or style of programming, however, were mentioned.

### *Reciprocal Influences of Church and College*

The most important aspect of this research was the influence of the church on the colleges they support and the colleges upon their constituent churches. One set of questions touched on the influence of the Mennonite Church on the Mennonite College choral music program. Of the total Mennonite respondents, 57% of those currently involved in General Conference churches rated their influence favorably. The Mennonite Brethren by 53% held that local church influence on the college was adequate, and the Mennonite Church choral directors judged that they have limited influence on their colleges (38%).

One open-ended question requested comments concerning "the greatest influences of your church upon the local Mennonite college choral music program/curricula." The area listed most frequently by church choral directors (18) indicated that their influence on the college was in recommending good students to the colleges. On the other hand, thirteen church musicians and one Mennonite college choral professor felt that their churches had no influence on the college. One stated that "it has not been sought by the college." Others indicated that they were too far removed from the college geographically, to have much influence.

Positive responses to this question included the statement that the churches produce students who have "a strong tradition of choral singing and a cappella congregational singing." At least one of the college choral directors agreed that the most positive influence from the church lay in the tradition that "gives our choral program a head start in quality and interest."

"Our church may influence the local Mennonite college choir in its selection of at least some of its music," was the notation by two respondents. Attending college musical concerts and financially supporting the college, were cited in other responses. One Mennonite college choral

director agreed that the greatest influence was probably financial, adding that, on occasion, donations of pianos and other gifts were appreciated.

Two professors agreed that the churches were “at a different place than the college” but one noted that this provided a healthy on-going challenge. The other was more critical claiming that “trends promoted by television in style and content (self-centered and sentimental) are being bought by the church.” He hinted that this influence is passed on to the students and then is strongly felt at the college. Yet another noted that “we are aware of criticisms that would help us to prepare our students to be more in tune with our local churches.” He went on to point out that very few music students were actually “ending up” in the Mennonite church. He suspected the reason was financial more than philosophical.

Other questions were intended to determine the Influence of the Mennonite College on the local Mennonite Church’s choral music program. Of the several denominations the General Conference choral leaders responded to this item the most positively: 65% of the choral leaders agreed that the college does, indeed, have a direct influence on the church choral music program. Mennonite Brethren respondents gave this item a 50% rating; the Mennonite Church 44%.

One open-ended question was reversed. “What are the greatest influences of the local Mennonite college choral music program/curricula on your church music program?”

One of the choral professors began by noting that “I don’t judge that we have much influence on the choral practices of our supporting churches” but went on to say that workshops were offered at the college although poorly attended by Mennonite church choral directors. Another college choral director indicated that music majors were “given a strong tradition of choral work in the church” and that they could, in turn, take this back to the church to “influence the quality of choral literature.” Another agreed by adding that the college upheld the choral heritage of the church and helped to “articulate a philosophy/theology of music in the church.” Another college conductor hoped to promote music “which is God centered...not merely sentimental.”

The most positive comments from church directors signified an overwhelming support of college choirs which come to perform concerts. Some judged that the influence upon the church music program was “stimulating” and that these opportunities are “models of good singing technique, tonality, vowel sounds and diction.” This type of exposure also gives the churches a “shot in the arm” and a “new appreciation for the youth,” according to some respondents. Another church director noted that “If we see and hear a choir that we enjoy, we try in some way to do the same in our music.”

Sixteen church choral directors were enthusiastic about the “graduated” students who come back and enhance the quality of music at their church. One respondent stated that “individuals who have graduated and return to the home congregation have acquired a greater awareness of the importance of music in the worshipping community and the continued development of a strong choral music program.”

Four respondents appreciated the relationship they have with the college choral director; two of these indicated their positive response when the director had been a guest clinician and soloist in their church. The occasional seminars, recitals, and workshops given by the college professors were greatly appreciated by eight other church musicians.

Yet others, it appears, sense that there is “very little influence” with one respondent indicating that “I wish there was a college that could make people available occasionally to churches who need help with leadership.” Again, some churches are too far away from the Mennonite colleges to sense much influence.

Three college choral conductors noted that their strength was in the touring groups, whether large or small, who serve in the churches as examples of the college. Two professors indicated that they encourage their students to become involved in the local church, either on a voluntary or paid basis. Another respondent pointed out that there was a strong emphasis on congregational singing/hymnology in their church music seminars. When one college director noted that his college provides workshops, he concluded that, as a result, “the constituency at least knows that we are trying to stay in tune with what is happening in church music and how to adapt new ideas to worship services.”

### *Desirable Undergraduate Course Components*

Some open-ended questions focussed on the undergraduate choral program. The first question asked, “What courses and/or types of experience not provided for in the undergraduate program should be included in the program to prepare better church musicians?” Five college choral professors and 45 church musicians responded to the first open-ended question. Both professors and church musicians agreed that the most important experience would be to add “hands-on” internship experiences for undergraduate music majors. One professor even suggested a “mandatory semester as church choir director.” Ten church musicians called for this added provision and others indirectly suggested such a program including one who preferred this type of training “rather than specializing in voice, piano, or organ.”

Most respondents, however, suggested certain content for undergraduate church music courses. Listed below are components, in order of importance, as suggested by both church musicians and professors.

- Hymnology. It was suggested that the content of this course include training in: a) how to teach congregational singing (especially for non-music majors); b) how to use new hymns in congregational singing; c) congregational song leading as a ministry; and d) creative hymn singing. This type of course was also suggested by two of the college professors.
- Church music administration and organization.
- Worship planning. Some respondents judged that training in both liturgical and non-liturgical styles of music would enhance creativity and broaden understanding of different elements of worship.
- Church music literature.
- Vocal problem solving. Three respondents indicated the vocal help here should focus especially on the problems inherent in church choir singers.
- Choral arranging
- Information on location of music - Related to this was information on how to select music suitable for a particular group of singers.
- Rehearsal procedure and scheduling
- Relational conflict training - Emphasis was on how to deal with people's preferences in music, how to stretch them, and how to deal with the "politics" of music ministry.
- Leadership training

Philosophically, church musicians noted that they would like to "narrow the gap between college music experience and the level of experience in the congregation." It was also noted that the colleges should "emphasize worship as opposed to performance", "spirituality, not music for music's sake", and that they should "prepare the musician as a minister."

The second open-ended request was: "List any additional comments regarding your undergraduate church music preparation." Four college choral conductors responded. One commented, "We don't have enough students interested in going into church music to warrant any special classes. Most of our majors are heading toward teaching in school." The respondent added, "While it is true that all of them will probably be involved in some sort of church music leadership, it is still our first priority to train them for their primary vocational goal." Another agreed that "music training of all kinds is preparation for work in the church." The

other two professors noted that there was very little interest so that specific courses in church music were not taught.

The majority of the respondents stated that their training came from the "hands on" years of singing in church choirs, playing organ, and directing choirs in the church when they were younger. Good workshops in conducting technique and music literature were listed as strengths in preparation for church choral music. Others noted that their church music training took place in post baccalaureate study after completing their work at Mennonite colleges. Two directors indicated that "some things are not realized until you are on the job."

Philosophically, attention was drawn to the need to expose graduates to the "realities of ministry" either by tying their undergraduate training to the seminary or by requiring internships, therefore training the "whole" person so that "going from college to church is not such a shock."

Finally, there were several directors who felt that the emphasis should be in "worship and effective leadership, not just to make beautiful noise."

### ***Program Assessments***

Two college professors pointed out that they perceived the most negative factor in their relationship with the church was that there was not enough contact between the church and the school, especially between the choral directors. Two other professors noted that an area of weakness was the literature selection for the traveling choir. However, both choral leaders agreed that this was not entirely negative; one indicated "We could do better at including more style variances in our curriculum and our performances." The other noted, "I believe dialogue between church and school would alleviate the fears that our churches seem to have when something unfamiliar is sung." Another college conductor stated more of a philosophical concern when he noted that there were too many requests for concerts from the churches. He added, "When ensembles are over-used it ceases to be educational."

Church choral directors indicated most frequently that the major weakness of the Mennonite college was the "long hair" music which the colleges promoted. Comments about the music included: too heavy; too 'highbrow', their music sometimes produces a negative relationship between church member and college; too sophisticated for the average church participant; programs are over the heads of the local congregation; lack of balanced repertoire; very little music...relates to the majority of church attendees; big gulf between the tastes of the college and congregation; music is not understandable to the average church member; choir and



director perceived with skepticism because of the reputation for doing art music; and music on tour is beyond immediate comprehension of the local congregation.

Other church musicians judged that the Mennonite colleges were not current with their styles of worship, especially in terms of the practical forms of contemporary choral and vocal music. One respondent felt that the need was for more emphasis on the "heart" of the music minister. Another perceived weakness was the inability of some Mennonite colleges to encourage students to return to their local churches and become involved as music leaders. One respondent even suggested that "they produce excellent musicians who are unable to secure jobs in the Mennonite churches or who don't have a vision for Mennonite church music and therefore are of little use in music leadership in the church."

### *Goals and Strivings*

The survey designed for college choral directors added a category which asked, "Comment on the effort, on the part of your music department, to associate curricula content to the church whenever possible."

One professor indicated that this association was a "stated goal of the music program." Another noted that "most of our classes have a dual purpose...preparation for the world and the church. The faculty is evaluated by the students and the administration on this very question." One college has a music program that requires internship in a local church, not necessarily Mennonite. Others indicated that they include church training as part of other courses or in seminar situations that students are expected to attend. The choral literature courses in two of the colleges include recommended materials for church use.

The Mennonite college choral directors noted that attention needs to be given to conference and seminary leadership in church music preparation. One respondent observed that "leadership of the churches, seminary, and the college do not agree as to the direction of worship and the role music should play in worship," while another professor stated that "there is not an effort, on the part of our conference, to see the importance of musical training for our pastors. For instance, our seminary offers no courses on hymnology or music preparation for the worship service." Another college conductor pointed out that "we are not getting music students interested in church music careers, especially in the Mennonite church." He and a colleague agreed that the likely reason for this apathetic viewpoint is that "very few churches pay even part-time persons." Consequently, more energies are given to areas where musicians can make a

living, namely music education. Another respondent reported that the “pool of Mennonite students is dwindling.” He suggested that this dwindling may result in a gradual weakening in relationships with the constituent Mennonite churches.

Research of the nature reported here offers an opportunity for both college professors and choral directors to have a voice. Now that statements and statistics are on record, the question becomes whether beyond speaking there will be listening. If the colleges are intent on linking with the churches, then the feedback from churches should be carefully weighed. Churches, on the other hand, would do well to understand the leadership roles which college professors see as important in safeguarding the quality of music in the church.