

SINGING FROM SEPARATE HOMES: CHURCH CHOIR SINGERS'
PERSPECTIVES ON CHORAL PARTICIPATION BEFORE AND
AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The choral music experience was one of the countless areas of daily life upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. The St. Paul's Episcopal Church Choir¹, primarily comprised of volunteer congregation singers, transitioned to a fully virtual choir format from March 2020 to May 2021. During this time, the choir members recorded their voices from home to create over 200 virtual choir performances. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to investigate participant perspectives of an established church choir program's transition into and out of a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this study was to answer the following questions: (1) What do participants cite as influences on their choice to participate or not participate in the Virtual Choir? (2) How do participants describe their perceived benefits of their Virtual Choir participation? (3) What do choir members value most in their church choir participation?

Data were collected in fall 2021 as the choir returned to in-person singing. Thirteen volunteer choir members participated in the data collection which consisted of a written statement, one-on-one interview, and focus group discussion. Participants reflected on their experiences in the choir prior to, during, and after the COVID-19 quarantine. The participants' perspectives were compared to existing studies on community choral music participation.

Data revealed that participants described the Virtual Choir recording process as musically unsatisfying when compared to in-person singing. Some participants struggled with hearing their own recorded voice and missed the experience of sharing music-making in the moment with their fellow choir members. Despite their frustrations, participants found motivation in supporting the church community and the continued virtual social interactions with the choir. Participants benefited from a virtual social outlet through weekly Zoom choir rehearsals which allowed for continued contact and check-ins with fellow singers. Some participants stated that they benefited

¹ All proper names have been changed to pseudonyms

from musical gains as the Virtual Choir provided a reason to sing when in-person opportunities became unavailable. Others cited how the weekly recorded process prevented musical skill deterioration as they could practice and monitor their vocal progress through their isolated recordings. Data also revealed that participants valued the church choir community more than the music itself. Participants care for their fellow choir members and their choir participation led to a choir family dynamic described as special and unique compared to other areas of their lives.

Findings were compared with existing community choral music participation research to identify many consistencies between the motivations, benefits, and values of the Virtual Choir participation. Despite the similarities, key differences highlighted how the Virtual Choir led to stress and frustration for many participants. Music-making with the Virtual Choir was described as unsatisfying and more challenging than the in-person format. Findings demonstrate that continuing adult music education should not be overlooked by music educators, directors, and teacher educators. Adult music education provides opportunities for choir members to pursue a lifelong love of music and music learning. While the virtual format increased accessibility for choir members during the quarantine, educators must consider supporting singers' vocal self-efficacy as to not exclude potential ensemble members. As virtual music-making continues to evolve, educators, directors, and teacher educators should consider professional development and training to be prepared for virtual music-making opportunities within their programs.

For the choir.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Community music is a categorization of music-making that depends on the social context in which it exists (Veblen & Olson, 2002). Community music researchers have studied a myriad of social, physical, cognitive, and emotional benefits from participating in musical experiences, including community choirs (Bird, 2017; Clift, 2010; Drummond, 2012; Gick, 2011). Choral singers from across the globe varying in age, gender identity, cultural background, and socio-economic status have identified choral participation as an important activity that relieves stress, builds community relationships, and serves as an outlet for continued adult music-making (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Creech et al., 2013; Drummond, 2012; Lee et al., 2016; Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Li & Southcott, 2018; Parker, 2010). Faith-based music ensembles, such as church choirs, reflect longstanding common musical traditions in places of worship (Rohwer, 2010). Since church choirs can offer opportunities for individuals to volunteer in the church community, engage in music performance, and continue their own personal music education through their participation, these choirs can be studied and examined as examples of community music (Rohwer, 2010). Despite the common nature of church choirs, scant research exists regarding the perspectives of church choir participants and their motivations, benefits, and values of church choir singing.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted countless areas of everyday life including communal experiences like music ensemble participation. Singing in choirs was identified as a high-risk activity that increased the spread of the disease and in one high-profile case, group singing led to the infection and death of multiple adult choir members (Tingley, 2021). As the world quarantined, people isolated within their own homes and shifted to virtual forms of contact, and as a result, in-person choirs were halted indefinitely. With the use of multitracking audio and video recording technology, some community and school choirs created opportunities for

members to “perform” in virtual choirs in which individual, isolated performances were compiled into a single, digital product (Galván & Clauhs, 2020).

In Pennsylvania, the choir at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church² pivoted to virtual music-making in spring 2020 as the group established a method for choir members to sing together from their individual homes. Each week, the choir, which consists of 15-20 volunteer members from the congregation, eight hired section leaders, and a choirmaster/organist, performed and recorded hymns, anthems, and psalms in isolation. As a music staff member, I compiled individual recordings to create audio performances which were then included in the church’s weekly livestreamed Sunday services. In addition, the choir maintained contact and communication through Zoom social meetings and virtual “rehearsals” each week.

The St. Paul’s Virtual Choir continuously recorded audio for weekly services from March 2020 to May 2021 and created two, pre-recorded video services for All Saints’ Day and Christmas in 2020. In September 2021, the choir returned to in-person singing at rehearsals and services with COVID mitigation strategies in place. This instrumental case study sought to examine participant perspectives of this church choir during the transitions in and out of the Virtual Choir period during the COVID-19 pandemic and to answer the following questions: (1) What do participants cite as influences on their choice to participate or not participate in the Virtual Choir? (2) How do participants describe their perceived benefits of their Virtual Choir participation? (3) What do choir members value most in their church choir participation? Thirteen study participants contributed written statements, met for one-on-one interviews, and/or joined a focus group discussion to reflect on the motivations, benefits, and values of their church choir experience. Findings are compared to existing studies on community music participation. While there are many parallels and connections between the St. Paul’s Choir and community ensembles described in extant literature, the nature of virtual music-making throughout the pandemic

² All proper names in this study have been changed to pseudonyms

introduced unique challenges and considerations for choral singers, directors, educators, and teacher educators. As this study was situated in the specific faith-based community of the Episcopal church, the following definitions will be useful to the reader as they reflect terms and key phrases used to describe the music and time period throughout this study.

Anthem - In the Anglican church music tradition, an *a cappella* or unaccompanied sacred choral piece performed during a church service (Temperley, 2001b).

Anglican - Derived from the Church of England (The Episcopal Church).

Audio Editing/Audio Compilation - The process in which participants' individual audio recordings are equalized for sonic clarity, mixed, and compiled into a Virtual Choir performance.

Choirmaster/Organist - The director, conductor, and accompanist of the church choir. Brian performs both choirmaster and organist roles at St. Paul's Church.

Church Choir – A faith-based choir ensemble that performs in church services.

Church Service - Sunday morning worship services.

Hymn – Accompanied songs, often consisting of familiar texts or melodies, performed throughout an Anglican church service, and typically performed with congregational singing. (Temperley, 2001b). In this paper, hymns refer to Anglican Hymns. St. Paul's Choir performs hymns published in *The Hymnal 1982*.

Ministry – Acting in service of the church (The Episcopal Church).

Mixing – The audio editing process of balancing audio track levels and other audio enhancements.

Post-Virtual/Return to In-person Singing – For this study, the time period spanning September 2021 – present.

Pre-pandemic – For this study, time prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantines in March 2020.

Psalm – Performed as Anglican chant. “Harmonized formulae used for the singing of psalms and canticles in the liturgy of the Church of England” (Temperley, 2001a, para. 1).

Section Leaders – Professional singers hired by the church to support the choir in rehearsals and service.

Virtual Choir Period – For this study, the time period in which the Virtual Choir actively recorded and met via Zoom from March 2020 – May 2021.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing Community Music Research

Community music is a flexible and fluid categorization of music-making and the label is dependent on the social context in which it exists (Veblen & Olson, 2002). Veblen (2008) considered community music in relation to the following factors:

1. The kinds of music and music making involved in a community music programme;
2. The intentions of the leaders or participants,
3. The characteristics of the participants,
4. The interactions among teaching-learning aims, knowledge and strategies; and
5. Interplays between informal and formal social-educational-cultural contexts. (Veblen, 2008, p. 6)

This broad definition characterizes voluntary community music ensembles that provide opportunities for participants to connect not only through music but through common, uniting experiences such as choirs organized specifically for aging adults which facilitate social opportunities in a music-based setting, for example (Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Kennedy, 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Li & Southcott, 2018). Scholars have studied an array of community choral ensembles consisting of members connected by age, cultural heritage, gender, sexual orientation, or interests in continuing musical engagements (Bird, 2017; Hallam & Creech, 2018; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2014a; Lee et al., 2016; Louhivuori et al., 2005; Svenningsen, 2013; Tamburri et al., 2019; Wood, 2010).

Despite the wealth of scholarship on community choirs, research regarding church choirs as examples of community music is largely absent from the literature. Extant church choir literature appeared practitioner-based and in some cases, did not include peer-reviewed writing (Ballou, 2020; Hawn, 2007; Petijević, 2020; Poterack, 2020). Noting this deficiency in a relatively small study, Rohwer (2010) analyzed church choir participation in relation to common

themes in community music research. Rohwer observed general parallels between church choirs and community music ensembles such as voluntary participation, recruitment methods, and varying levels of musicianship. Rohwer stated her findings regarding church choirs and community ensembles could not necessarily be generalized and additional research is still needed. As a longstanding tradition in places of worship around the world, church singing is a major field of choral music performance and a means for continuing adult music education. Because of church choral music's prevalence, more scholarship is needed to better understand the broader experiences of choral music participants.

Benefits of Community Choral Singing

The benefits of choral singing for individual participants have been well documented in extant literature. In this study and in existing choral participation literature, benefits are defined as personal gains experienced in the moment or in the relatively short term (Bird, 2017; Clift, 2010; Creech et al., 2013; Drummond, 2012; Gick 2011; Grape et al., 2002; Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Judd & Pooley, 2014; Lee et al., 2016; MacDonald, 2013). These benefits are a byproduct of choir participation. Researchers have described how choral singing promotes better psychological health, physical health, cognitive ability, and social, emotional wellbeing (Bird, 2017; Clift, 2010; Creech et al., 2013; Drummond, 2012; Gick, 2011; Grape et al., 2002; Joseph & Southcott 2018; Judd & Pooley, 2014; Lee et al., 2016; MacDonald, 2013). In an oft-cited study of the benefits of amateur group singing, Kreutz et al. (2004) found that group singing leads to an increase of secretory immunoglobulin which promotes physical wellbeing, strengthens immune systems, boosts an individual's positive mood, and reduces negative moods. Choral singers have asserted that singing in a choir functions as a distraction from illnesses or physical conditions, temporarily easing pain and discomfort (Lee et al., 2016; Southcott, 2018). Participating in choirs has been cited as a joyful and uplifting activity that has a therapeutic effect on singers (Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Judd & Pooley, 2014). Musical experiences in the choir rehearsal room and in performance

can be a unique opportunity for singers to relax and energize (Bartolome, 2018). Group singing is associated with positive psychological development and influences positive psychological wellbeing in singers with low psychological wellbeing (Clift, 2010). Choral singing is an engaging activity that benefits singers' cognitive wellbeing. Amateur singers cited the process of learning, rehearsing, and memorizing music as a mental benefit of choir participation (Joseph & Southcott, 2014b; Southcott, 2018). In a case study of older adult participants in a community choir, musical engagement provided singers with mental activity and stimulation resulting in positive aging (Creech et al., 2013). In addition, group singing and music therapy interventions alleviated some of the effects of sundowning in dementia patients (Lesta & Petocz, 2006). Researchers have also determined that patients with Alzheimer's benefit from intergenerational choir participation as singing with younger individuals improves quality of life and psycho-social wellbeing (Jang, 2020; Tamburri et al., 2019).

Social and Emotional Benefits

Musical experiences in a variety of contexts can fulfill an individual's needs for social involvement and community (Balsnes, 2017). Making music with others provides networking opportunities, social stimulation, and a place to develop social capital (Jones, 2010). Indeed, community music researchers have found that group music-making helps individuals of different ages, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, or musical ability levels, combat loneliness and promote social engagement among members (Bartolome, 2013; Hallam & Creech, 2018; Harris & Caporella, 2014, 2019; Joseph & Southcott, 2014b, 2018). Singers form bonds through choir participation and have described the relationships created in choirs as special and unique compared to relationships in other social groups (Drummond, 2012; Louhivuori et al., 2005). Choir members' interactions and connections with fellow singers boosts individual social confidence and builds a supportive network among choir members (Hallam & Creech, 2018). In studies of individuals from marginalized populations such as prisoners and people who are

homeless or living in poverty, joining a choir was an opportunity to connect with fellow singers and with a larger society from which the singers were typically ostracized (Bailey & Davidson, 2003, 2005; Cohen, 2012). Whether in or out of the rehearsal room, choral participation provides unique opportunities for singers to fulfill social needs and foster social connections with fellow members in benefit of social wellbeing.

Singing and choir participation can become therapeutic as individuals experience heightened wellbeing and can alleviate feelings of depression (Bailey & Davidson, 2002, 2005; Balsnes, 2017; Kennedy, 2009). In community music studies, singers frequently described that singing boosts self-confidence, self-esteem, and relieves stress (Bailey & Davidson, 2003; Kennedy, 2009; Silber, 2005; Southcott, 2018). Individuals with mental illness or disabilities cited choral singing as a positive influence on their own personal perception and positivity in daily life (Dingle et al., 2012). In an intergenerational choir consisting of college students and adults with Alzheimer's disease, participants cited choir membership and collaboration as means to dismantle the stigma of the disease (Harris & Caporella, 2014, 2019). Older adults enrolled in weekly singing classes in China identified positive feelings as a result of their choral participation; one member stated that "singing gives me something to live for" (Li & Southcott, 2018, p. 289). Choir members describe the rehearsal process as a ritualistic practice in which members leave feeling empowered, euphoric, and relieved (Jacob et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2009; Wood, 2010).

Motivation and Values of Community Choral Participation

The existing literature on community choirs describes the reasons and motivation behind individuals' participation in a choir and their values of a choral experience. In this study, motivations are the factors influencing participants to continue their involvement in a choir. Viega (2016) defined axiology, or the study of values and emphasis on what is valuable, in an arts research context as "value can arise intrinsically through intuition and satisfaction (subjectivist),

extrinsically materialized through felt engagement (constructionist), or placed on the qualities of the object itself (objectivist)” (p. 7). In this community music ensemble research, the values of a choral experience are the innate, personal meanings, and reasons for participation that are derived from one's own experiences in a choir. According to Viega, with a subjectivist approach, one can value the satisfaction of music-making and performing in choir. In a constructivist approach, a singer may value the engagement in the music-making activities and interactions among peers. Through an objectivist lens, one may value the music and choir ensemble itself.

Continuing Musical Engagement Through Community Music

Amateur singers may be motivated to join choirs because of the unique opportunity for musical engagement in adulthood (Creech et al., 2013; Drummond, 2012; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2018). Drummond (2012) explained that adult music making is voluntary and stems from an intrinsic motivation to participate in an ensemble. People who joined community choirs in adulthood or older adulthood typically had some sort of musical experience earlier in life and had a desire to continue their musical experiences (Creech et al., 2013; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2018). Singers often reflect that performing in a choir is a uniquely engaging and challenging activity unlike any other area of their daily lives (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Balsnes, 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Tonneijck et al., 2011). Because choir membership is unlike other daily activities and commitments, singers were motivated to maintain and improve upon their musical skills (Bailey & Davidson 2002; Rohwer, 2010). Singers in community choirs value the opportunities to continue pursuing their musical passions, hone their skills, and engage in a form of music-making unavailable outside of the choir space.

Strengthening Identities Through Community Choirs

Choral ensembles can reflect spaces to share, strengthen, or amplify a common cultural identity of singers. In an Italian-Australian men’s chorus, the singers emphasized the importance of being cultural custodians of Italian musical traditions and their shared heritage was the driving

factor in joining the choir (Southcott, 2013). From their participation in the choir, members took ownership of their choral participation and described a camaraderie and commitment to the continuation of their organization. Bird (2017) analyzed the reasons behind member participation in a New Zealand LGBTQI choir in the 2010s. While members cited a variety of benefits from performing in the group, their motivations prioritized affirming and maintaining the singers' LGBTQI identities. Svenningsen (2013) examined that among members of a Norwegian community choir, it was not the simple act of singing but rather "*this singing*" (p. 189) that strengthened their cultural identities together through a meaningful and musical experience. Through unified choral performance, singers strengthened and amplified their identities in a shared space. Similarly, African American Gospel choirs provide a space for belonging among members, a celebration of African American culture, and a continuation of Gospel musical traditions (Parker 2017; Strayhorn, 2011). Through concerts, public outreach, and community engagement, choirs shared their identities, cultural experiences, and heritages with diverse audiences. Choirs share and present the core values and uniting factors of an ensemble through public performances (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Bartolome, 2018; Bird, 2017). In performances, members strengthen their own identities and experiences and create connections with their audiences not otherwise possible.

Shared Experiences Through Community Choirs

The camaraderie and the connections through shared experiences in choirs is a frequently occurring theme in community music research. Choir participants value the shared experiences in a choir and these experiences motivate their continued choir participation. Balsnes (2017) described how the act of group music-making is also an act of group expression, and fellowship for singers in an older adult choir. High school choir members described how experiences like rehearsals, performances, and choir trips helped students develop a sense of belonging through their unique, shared experiences together (Bartolome, 2018; Parker, 2010). University students

who joined a choir for leisure explained how they looked forward to seeing their friends at rehearsals and enjoyed being in an ensemble with fellow “like-minded nerds” (Jacob et al., 2009 p. 189). In a case study of three Australian community choirs and their perceived benefits from choir participation, all the groups reported social interactions and community building as motivating factors for choir participation (Joseph & Southcott, 2014a). The social and communal aspects of an ensemble motivates singers to continue their involvement and develops strong bonds between members. Singers have also described how their choir participation developed a sense of trust and rapport among the members (Bonshor, 2017; Lee et al., 2016). Choirs facilitate positive interactions and relationship building for singers; this building of social capital also helps build relationships among culturally diverse groups of singers (Bartolome, 2018; Cohen, 2012; Joseph & Southcott, 2018).

Existing literature often includes a description of the choir functioning like a family (Bartolome, 2018; Langston & Barrett, 2008; Svenningsen, 2013). Choir participation creates a social network and community of care among members and the strong bonds formed between members extend beyond the choir rehearsal room. In a study of a South African children’s choir, the singers expressed the care and comfort they feel among their choir peers. The singers explained how they can be themselves around their choir family and that their connection from making music is different from other friend relationships (Bartolome, 2018). Langston and Barrett (2008) observed that shared trust and fellowship among a Tasmanian community choir helped build family-like social networks among the choir members. While singing in a group setting is a primary focus of a choral ensemble, the participation in a choir fosters interrelatedness among singers. Singers are bonded together by the communication, collaboration, and social experiences of being in a choir.

Choir Leadership

Choral singers have cited their directors and conductors as a major source of motivation and support. While a conductor can serve as a musical role model and voice teacher for choral participants, singers have described the conductor's role in influencing group identity (Durrant, 2005). Rather than exclusively focus on control, error correction, or technical skills in the rehearsal room, Durrant asserted that conductors of community, university, or children's choirs have a responsibility to support singers, assist in healthy vocal development, and promote artistic expression. In a study of amateur singers' choral confidence, Bonshor (2017) found that a caring and emotionally open conductor allowed for a stronger communal bond among singers. Likewise, peer support and sharing power and responsibility among choir members strengthened singers' sense of togetherness. The establishment of a caring and communal environment supports singers' belonging and identity in the scholar setting.

Spiritual Experiences in Community Choirs

Choir participation can have spiritual benefits and effects for singers and these spiritual effects have been experienced in both sacred and secular contexts. For an African American church choir, singing was an opportunity to minister to the congregation and celebrate a "loving of God and gospel music" (Parker 2017, p. 68). Indeed, Rohwer (2010) explained how participating in a church choir has both social and spiritual implications. Rohwer found that singing is an extension of worship and a church choir is a choir in service. Shared music-making also helps participants connect with secular spirituality that results in deep, emotional experiences. Singers described community music experiences as emotionally uplifting, making life fulfilling and instilling senses of peace, joy, and purpose (Drummond, 2012; Joseph & Southcott, 2014b; Lee et al., 2016; Southcott, 2018). Kennedy (2009) described a choir's rehearsal process as a ritual and healing practice as singers connected through a shared focus on

singing and would occasionally dedicate time to collectively reflect on members who had passed away.

Virtual Music-Making and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Virtual music learning, ensembles, and performances have emerged strongly within the last decade. While technology continues to rapidly evolve, so does the scholarship on music education and online learning. Online music communities provide opportunities for flexible interactions among a wide variety of collaborators and continue social interactions between ensemble members outside of the rehearsal room (O’Flynn, 2015; Waldron, 2018). Virtual ensembles and performances also afford opportunities to create unique musical products for online streaming (Cayari, 2016; Emmet, 2016). Fancourt and Steptoe (2019) found that singing in virtual choirs was associated with a greater sense of social presence than in-person singing and noted the surprising nature of these findings given the low levels of social interaction in the recording process. Konewko (2013) analyzed Eric Whitacre’s influence on the development of virtual choral performances with his choir projects that began in 2010. The high production value and popularity of Whitacre’s virtual choirs demonstrated that thousands of singers from across the globe could collaborate and perform together in a virtual musical format.

In 2020, virtual music participation quickly shifted from an emerging field to a necessity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, a choir rehearsal was cited as a high-profile super spreader event as the act of choral singing in a rehearsal led to the spread of COVID-19 via aerosol particles and to illness and death of multiple choir members (Hamner et al., 2020; Tingley, 2021). As the pandemic continued, organizations such as National Association for Music Education and American Choral Directors Association offered guidance for choral singing during the pandemic which involved transitions to virtual learning and performance platforms ultimately pausing in-person choral experiences (Nápoles et al., 2020; National Association for Music Education, 2020). Due to the recency and ongoing nature of the

pandemic, scholarship on COVID-19's effect on choral music is still developing. Gibson (2021) observed that the shift to online music-making platforms required intense technological training and support for participants. Additionally, due to the permanence of online performances, higher recording standards were expected and led to a struggle between inclusivity and technological abilities.

Some scholars have already studied the experiences of singers during the pivot to virtual music-making and performances during the pandemic. Theorell et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study of Norwegian and Scandinavian choral singers and surveyed singers on the aspects of choir missed in pandemic times. A majority of the amateur singers in the survey reported that the loss of social interactions between fellow choir members was the most significant loss due to the pandemic. Daffern et al. (2021) conducted a similar study surveying nearly 4000 choral singers in the United Kingdom on their musical experiences during the pandemic. Though some singers were engaged in virtual choral ensembles and others had no functioning choral ensembles, participants reported an overall sense of loss as typical choral activities had been upended during the pandemic. By contrast, high school singers appreciated the virtual choir experience during the COVID-19 pandemic as it offered an opportunity to continue collaborating and performing choral music when it was the only option (Galván & Clauhs, 2020). These studies observed a large body of participants but did not gather the perspectives of one specific ensemble and the member's experiences. I was unable to locate any studies that examined church choir participation during the pandemic.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to investigate participant perspectives of an established church choir program's transition into and out of a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to answer the following essential questions: (1) What do participants cite as influences on their choice to participate or not participate in the

Virtual Choir? (2) How do participants describe their perceived benefits of their Virtual Choir participation? (3) What do choir members value most in their church choir participation?

The timeframes used in this study are based on this particular choir's transitions into and out of virtual music-making. Pre-pandemic is defined as any time prior to when the choir paused in-person singing in March 2020. Mid-Virtual Choir is defined as the time between March 2020 and the end of the Virtual Choir program in May, 2021. Post-Virtual Choir is defined as the return to in-person singing in September 2021 and onwards. Motivations are defined as factors that contributed to participants continuing their involvement in the Virtual Choir (Joseph & Southcott, 2018; Langston & Barrett, 2008; Lee et al., 2016) . Benefits are defined as personal gains experienced in the moment or in the short term from their Virtual Choir participation. Values are defined as beliefs about what one cares about (Viega, 2016). Church choir participation remains an under-researched area of music education and community music scholarship. Research on church choirs can contribute to emerging research on the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will help music educators, choral directors, and choral musicians better understand the situational and global motivations and benefits of choir participation.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Qualitative Research and Case Studies

Qualitative research describes holistic inquiry into complex interrelationships through contextual observations and analyses to interpret the meaning assigned to people's experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Frierson-Campbell, 2022). In order to "make the world visible" and examine a study's topic, researchers use a variety of interpretive practices such as observation, interviews, historical data, personal experience, and/or artifacts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). An inductive design can be used to answer these questions by building from data collection up to analysis and interpretation. For this study, I chose a qualitative method of inquiry to understand what happened to one church choir and its choir members during a specific time in history, that of the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand these participants' experiences, I wanted to study their perspectives, feelings, and experiences in their own words. Because of the lack of research on choir participation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I could build this research and understanding from the bottom up.

A case is a specific, complex, and integrated system in which researchers focus on the object rather than processes or events and a case is bounded together by time, membership, place, or experiences that occur naturally (Stake, 1995, 2006). The instrumental case study is a qualitative approach that examines a case that can be considered ordinary or common with an established frame of reference or comparison. In instrumental case studies, a researcher will examine a relatively common or ordinary experience that is unique enough to provide valuable information applicable to other similar cases (Stake, 1995). The examination of an instrumental case can lead to new insights and understandings of the existing case and its generalizations.

I chose to conduct an instrumental case study to investigate the experiences of an ordinary church choir during the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participating in a church choir or other faith-based music programs is a common experience, yet each participant's experiences are unique. For this study, I bounded the data collection to this particular group of volunteer choir members, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their participation in a Virtual Choir program. The Virtual Choir was an unusual and unique experience for this church choir and sets this case apart from others. This instrumental case study presents an opportunity to study this specific case and the particulars of the Virtual Choir and how this group compares to other church choir ensembles.

Positionality

I was an employee at this church prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and remain an employee at the time of this study. As a choir section leader, I support the choir's tenor section by attending all rehearsals and Sunday services, singing solos and chamber works, and providing musical and technical insights in rehearsals. During the Virtual Choir period, I held two positions as a section leader and Virtual Choir audio specialist and I was compensated for each of these roles. As the audio specialist, I collected, compiled, edited, and mixed the Virtual Choir recordings each week. I regularly communicated with the choir about recording expectations and technological advice and with Brian, the choir director, I oversaw the weekly recording schedule and deadlines. Over my time working at the church and with this choir, I have built relationships with the choir members and church community. Though I had no experience with church choirs or the Episcopal church prior to my employment at St. Paul's, over these five years with the church choir I have developed a greater understanding of the musical and worship traditions of the Anglican church and this church community in particular. As a researcher and choir member, I hold a deep understanding of the work, expectations, and time commitments required of the choir members throughout the 18 months of the Virtual Choir program. Additionally, throughout my time facilitating the Virtual Choir, I regularly communicated with choir members over email and Zoom meetings and heard the frustrations, joys, and concerns of my fellow choir members. I

developed my research and research questions based on my own experience living through the Virtual Choir experience alongside my fellow choir members. Because of my role as both a choir leader and researcher, I have the benefit of understanding the group dynamics, relationships, and experiences of this choir on a deeper level than an outside researcher investigating this choir. As a researcher, my goal is to investigate the perspectives, feelings, and values of the choir members and how they experienced the Virtual Choir.

My dual roles as researcher and choir member may lead to unintentional biases. Throughout this study, from participant recruitment through member checking, I strove to separate my roles as a researcher, choir member, and Virtual Choir leader. My experiences with the Virtual Choir helped inform my research questions, interview conversations, and field note reflections and existing relationships with the choir members provided an established rapport that aided me in my data collection. I hoped that this personal connection would encourage the participants to feel comfortable and be honest even though I am an employee of the church. It is possible these personal relationships might have led the participants to feel hesitant about sharing their honest thoughts or opinions with me, however this was not the case during data collection. Prior to all interviews and focus group discussions, I reminded the participants that their responses are confidential and would not be shared with church leadership or fellow choir members. Because of my personal connections with the participants and my role as audio specialist, I did not want participants to feel pressured to compliment my audio work or leadership and since the study was about their experiences, I often reiterated in interviews that my own feelings and ego were irrelevant as a researcher. I also reminded participants that my role as researcher was to collect an accurate and honest reflection of the participants' experiences throughout the Virtual Choir and the transition back into in-person singing.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

I began the study design in May 2021 with this specific church choir in mind. The church and Temple University Institutional Review Board approved the study in summer 2021 (see Appendix A) and I started recruiting participants in August 2021. The St. Paul's Choir consists of a choirmaster/organist, eight paid section leaders, and 15-25 volunteer members from the church congregation. By nature, qualitative researchers benefit from small, information-rich sample sizes as they have distinct personal knowledge and experiences related to a given topic (Patton, 2015). As two of my research questions centered on motivations and benefits of church choir participation, I chose to only study volunteer members of the choir only since, unlike the section leaders, they participate in the choir without employment status. This population was chosen because of the unique case and participants were involved in the transition to or from the Virtual Choir in varying degrees. Because of their relationship to the case, I engaged in key-informant sampling. Key-informants are knowledgeable about a specific topic and are willing to share their experience, expertise, and understandings with researchers, typically in an interview setting (Patton, 2015). Since the volunteer choir members are uniquely knowledgeable about the workings of the church choir, have insider knowledge of participating in the Virtual Choir, and possess an understanding of the transition back into in-person singing, this appeared to be an effective approach to studying the study participants' perspectives throughout the transitions to and from the Virtual Choir.

Days before the choir's return to in-person rehearsals in September 2021, I sent an email inviting all the volunteer members of the choir to participate in my study and included the research purpose, questions, and a brief overview of the expectations for the study participants (see Appendix B). To investigate my research questions, I invited any volunteer choir members to participate regardless of their level of involvement in the Virtual Choir as their variety of experiences and reflections remained valuable to this research. At the first in-person rehearsal, I

provided another brief overview of my study and distributed consent forms to those who raised their hands with interest to participate (see Appendix D). A week later, I sent an email reminding the volunteer choir members of my study and collected all the consent forms at the following rehearsal. Thirteen choir members elected to participate in this study. Table 1 includes the 13 participants, their years in St. Paul's Choir, their Virtual Choir Participation, and involvement in this study. The participants, choir leadership, and the church were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Years in St. Paul's Choir	Virtual Choir Participation	Study Participation
Amelia	48	Only participated in the Evensong and Christmas recordings.	WS/FG
Betty	17	Participated every single week of the Virtual Choir.	WS/I/FG
Bridget	9	Frequently recorded in the beginning. Gradually began to phase out her participation by the end.	WS/FG
Claire	34	Recorded frequently.	WS/I/FG
Dan	15	Initially recorded frequently but began to phase out his recording participation by Christmas 2020.	WS/I/FG
Jane	5	Recording almost every single week	WS/I/FG
Jim	3	Rarely recorded for the Virtual Choir. Mainly focused on the Evensong and Christmas recordings.	WS/I/FG
Joanne	6	Recorded frequently.	WS/FG
Lindsay	25	Recorded frequently	WS/FG
Liz	5	Recorded frequently. Gradually phased out her participation in spring 2021.	WS/I/FG
Margie	3	Never recorded for Virtual Choir.	WS
Sandra	32	Never recorded audio. Did record video for Evensong and Christmas.	WS
Tommy	8	Recorded frequently.	WS/I/FG

Note. **WS** – Written Statement; **I** – One-on-one interview; **FG** – Focus Group

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of three phases, including written statements, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group discussion. I chose this structure to gather multiple data sources

which could include general and specific reflections on the Virtual Choir. This variety of data sources also assisted me in triangulation, which involves the use of multiple data sources to increase credibility and to provide the most accurate portrayal of the participants as possible (Frierson-Campbell, 2022). I designed the data collection phases in this order to first investigate the general experiences and feelings of the participants and determine potential one-on-one interview candidates through their written statements. The participants' responses to the written statements informed the conversations and questions for the one-on-one interviews as I noted topics or issues that would require finer detail and additional discussion. From those who completed written statements, I planned to invite six to 12 participants for one-on-one interviews. I chose interview candidates who represented a variety of experiences across the study participants to depict a holistic view of the choir, such as some who recorded weekly, some who recorded infrequently or ceased recording, those who enjoyed the Virtual Choir, and those who disliked the Virtual Choir process. The interviews facilitated a space to discuss the time-bound transitions to and from virtual music-making with a focus on individual participant's experiences and thoughts. I chose the focus group as the last phase in December 2021 so participants could engage in a culminating discussion about the Virtual Choir and discuss the first three months of their return to in-person singing as they reflected on experiences together. Topics from both the written statements and the interview sessions helped frame this group conversation and it provided an opportunity for the participants to share and compare their experiences with one another.

Written Statements

At the beginning of the data collection, all study participants were invited to complete a written statement survey via Google Forms in September 2021 and were asked to submit the completed form within two weeks. The written statement was designed to survey the general feelings and experiences of the participants and the form contained general questions requesting

information about the participants' history with the choir, their level of involvement with the Virtual Choir, and offered opportunities for brief open-ended reflections on the return to in-person singing (see Appendix C). I asked questions to create a general profile of the study participants and their prior experiences with the choir and COVID-related transitions. After receiving participant responses, I condensed their data into a Word document which I reviewed to understand the experiences and points of view among the participants. Some responses were highly detailed as the participants reflected on the emotions of their Virtual Choir participation and explained their rationale for either participating or not participating in the Virtual Choir. Others were succinct and very briefly described their experiences in single sentences or a few words. As I reviewed this data, I realized some participants felt very positively toward their virtual singing experience while others felt negatively. Some of the participants explained their reasoning for attempting to record every single week while others provided insights as to why they either stopped participating through the Virtual Choir period or in some cases, never recorded at all.

One-on-One Interviews

Based on the written statement responses, I selected eight participants who represented a variety of experiences with the Virtual Choir and provided information that I wished to explore with greater specificity in a one-on-one interview. In mid-October 2021, I sent emails inviting these eight participants to a one-on-one interview. Of the eight participants, seven responded and accepted my invitation. With no explanation, the eighth person did not respond nor choose to participate in the one-on-one interview but did participate in the focus group discussion two months later. Due to COVID mitigation and scheduling concerns, I conducted all interviews via Zoom beginning in November and concluded in December 2021. Meetings were scheduled at mutually convenient times and I conducted the virtual interviews from my home office. All participants joined these meetings from their homes. At the beginning of each interview, I

requested that participants to re-consent to audio and video recording their interview with the aim to transcribe afterward. Once they consented, I began the Zoom recording function. The interviews were all video and audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed for my review later. In these 30-minute to one-hour long conversations, I asked the participants to reflect on their Virtual Choir experiences and participation as we discussed the transition to and from virtual music-making from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 to the return to in-person singing in fall 2021. Using a list of pre-written questions, the participants recounted their feelings and thoughts about their Virtual Choir participation throughout the duration of the 18 months of Virtual Choir (see Appendix C). Additionally, I presented questions directly related to my research questions as we explored the motivations, benefits, and values of their choir participation. Depending on the individual, I encouraged the participant to explain their rationale for participating in the Virtual Choir or not participating. I occasionally veered from the scripted questions to probe participants to describe their reflections further with clarifying questions to ensure I understood their responses. Throughout the interview process, I took note of the participants' recurring themes, experiences, and topics. Their unique and common experiences informed possible topics for the focus group discussion in which all of the participants would reflect and discuss the Virtual Choir together.

Focus Group Discussion

After the final one-on-one interview interviews concluded, I sent email invitations to all 13 participants for the focus group discussion in December 2021. The focus group discussion protocol was designed to investigate the participants' choir experiences together and explore commonalities and unique perspectives on the Virtual Choir process and the return to in-person singing. Because the choir had been singing in person for nearly three months by this point, the focus group discussion also included more in-depth conversations regarding the transition back into singing together in-person. I developed a list of questions for the group and I highlighted the

questions that directly related to my research questions about motivation, benefits, and values of church choir participation to ensure I discussed them during the group session (see Appendix C. 10 participants communicated that they were available to participate while others had personal scheduling conflicts.

Before the focus group discussion began, I described the general format and expectations for our conversation and requested the participants' consent to record the Zoom audio and video of the discussion. All the participants had their cameras on but muted their microphones when they were not speaking. I facilitated the conversation with questions and prompts from my pre-determined list and encouraged the participants to discuss with one another, ask questions and respond to each other as well. Occasionally, I redirected the discussion to move the conversation back on topic and posed probing questions for the participants to provide more detail or reflections. The focus group session lasted about one-hour in length as we discussed a majority of the topics on my pre-determined list. At the end of the session, I encouraged participants to discuss anything they felt we did not already cover throughout our conversation. Following the discussion, I collected and edited the transcript for my data analysis.

To heighten reflexivity and act as an additional data source, I maintained a researcher's journal and collected fieldnotes. Journal and fieldnote entries focused on observations and relevant interactions between choir members during rehearsals and Sunday church services throughout the fall and winter of 2021-2022. During breaks in rehearsals and following rehearsals, I quickly jotted down short notes of what I saw and heard among the choir members on my phone's notes application and expanded on these observations in greater detail in a Word document after I arrived at home after each interaction. In my field notes, I noted developments and concerns of the choir members throughout fall 2021 as they navigated COVID mitigation strategies and adjusted to singing in person once again.

Data Analysis

In January 2022, I began transforming interview data by transcribing audio files into text documents and checking transcripts for accuracy. I imported all of the written statements and transformed transcripts into the cloud-based, data coding software, Taguette. Upon reading the interview transcripts, I noticed the emotional descriptions the participants used to share their experiences with the Virtual Choir. Emotional coding is a first-cycle method of coding that highlights the feelings and experiences of participants in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Saldaña (2013) described that emotional coding falls into a category of eclectic coding and functions as a first round that must be revised and expanded upon in proceeding rounds. Emotional coding provided insight into the general perspectives and opinions of the participants regarding their motivation, benefits, and values of their church choir participation. Though emotional coding helped to grasp participants' general feelings and experiences, at times, I struggled with linking emotional codes to my research questions. I chose to engage in focused coding, a second round of coding that is highly specific as I searched for data that directly related to motivation, benefits, and values (Saldaña, 2013). This round of coding established clear connections between the data and research questions as I highlighted the data with the tags "motivation," "benefits," and "values." At this stage of coding, I had many highlights related to these three broad codes and could identify some of the general trends that would inform my findings.

Prior to my third round of coding, I engaged in peer-coding to heighten my reflexivity and add trustworthiness to the analysis. Through my thesis advisor's recommendation, I contacted another Temple music education graduate student with experience in qualitative data analysis. In February 2022, I provided my peer-coder with my research purpose, research questions, excerpts of transcripts throughout my data collection that best represented a variety of experiences and Virtual Choir involvement levels, and my exported Taguette codebook. The peer-coder provided

suggestions to streamline my coding process and suggested possible sub-codes to refine my broad, question-based codes. After peer-coding, I simplified and reviewed my question-based codes with sub-codes for greater specificity and organization. In March 2022, I completed data analysis with 42 total codes and sub-codes related to emotions, motivations, benefits, and values (see Table 2).

In addition to the written statement and transcripts imported to Taguette, I frequently referred to my field notes and researcher's journal which I used to track the passage of time and in-person observations at choir rehearsals and Sunday services. I found that these notes best helped me observe emotional reactions to the return to in-person singing. I compared my field note observations to the descriptions provided by the participants in their written statements, interviews, and the focus group conversations. In some instances, I used my field notes to inform my interviews with specific participants. For example, I observed one participant appearing nervous and excitedly anxious prior to the first in-person church choir service. During our one-on-one interview, I asked about her experiences that day and to describe how she was feeling. This helped me confirm the accuracy of my observations and that these notes and codes reflected the perspectives of the participants. These in-person observations contributed a real-time dimension to my data collection and analysis.

Table 2*Data Analysis Codes and Sub-Codes*

Code	Number of Highlights
Benefits	
Choir as an outlet	3
Musical skill improvement	15
Routine and structure	8
Social benefits	39
Emotion	
Adjusting to the in-person return	59
Adjusting to the virtual experience	37
Adjusting to virtual technology	3
Disliked the virtual experience	21
Enjoy the choir community	13
Enjoyed virtually being together	22
Enjoyed the virtual recording experience	17
Excited for in-person singing	7
Excited for virtual experience	5
Frustration with the virtual experience	20
Gratitude	23
Guilt for not participating in Virtual Choir	7
Love for in-person singing	25
Loved the virtual experience	14
Meaningful cooperation	31
Meaningful for community	32
Missed being together	25
Musical skill improvement	15
Sad about ending Virtual Choir	4
Sense of accomplishment	5
Stress over virtual social experience	12
Unfamiliar toward virtual experience	13
Vocal self-consciousness	59
Motivation	
Choir leadership	7
Improving vocal/musical skills	8
Love of music	2
Motivated to not participate in Virtual Choir	31
Routine	2
Supporting the church community	10
Virtual Choir as a duty	8
Value	
Choir ministry	4
Choir community	27
Ensemble participation	12
Love of music	21
Musical engagement/challenge	6

Trustworthiness

Frierson-Campbell (2022) states, “A coherent study stitches all components into an interconnected and engaging whole” (p. 146). I gathered multiple sources for data collection to fully understand and analyze the experiences of the participants in this study and to depict a holistic presentation of the participants. The combination of fieldnotes, written statements, one-on-one interviews, and the focus group discussion served to triangulate the data and increase the credibility of my findings (Frierson-Campbell, 2022). To further increase the credibility of my research, I engaged in member checks in late March 2022. I sent the interview transcripts to the individual participants via email and briefly explained my findings and how our interview conversation related to my research questions (Frierson-Campbell, 2022). For some participants, we discussed the findings in more detail in person at choir rehearsals or before and after Sunday church services. By early April, I had received responses from all seven interview participants as they reviewed the data and my explanation of findings and I received their approval. The combination of member checking and peer-coding were valuable opportunities to share my work with others and reassured me that my findings reflected the experiences provided by my participants.

Due to my role as a researcher and choir member in the Virtual Choir, I had a heightened awareness that I possessed more knowledge about this choir and the Virtual Choir period than a reader or third-party. My thesis advisor and peer coder encouraged me to provide background information about the role of this church choir and the work of the Virtual Choir that could help an outside reader understand the experiences of these participants. I often had to remind myself to take myself out of the researcher-participant role to ensure I was describing this population with clarity and authenticity to an audience with no familiarity with this particular case or church choirs in general.

CHAPTER 4

CASE PROFILE

It is 7:20pm on a Thursday evening. Cars wind their way through a tree shaded neighborhood that is tucked away in a quiet town in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Up the meandering, single lane road, the trees give way to an open clearing, a cemetery, and two buildings perched on a hill that look out at neighboring communities and the highway. Drivers park and make their way into the larger, barn-like building for their weekly church choir rehearsal. They carry water bottles, black folders, and excitedly greet one another with waves and mask-covered smiles from a distance as they make their way into a gathering space in the basement. In one of the event rooms, chairs are spread out in arched rows centered around a piano and large windows are opened for additional airflow. Energetic conversations continue as members reunite with one another while others nervously take their seats in anticipation. Tonight marks the first time this group of masked choristers have gathered in the same room in 18 months. Despite time spent physically apart, the singers have been in regular contact and collaboration with one another in the form of a Virtual Choir. In their pandemic-induced isolation, some of the church choir members continued singing every single week while others have not sung whatsoever since the last in-person church service nearly two years ago. The clock strikes 7:30, Brian, the organist and director, sits behind the piano and the choir rehearsal begins.

This study followed an Episcopal church choir consisting of 15-25 volunteer congregation singers and eight hired section leaders. Established 60 years before the American Revolution and with deep roots in the Anglican church, the choir has been a longstanding tradition for generations at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. The choir sings for two Sunday services each week and performs a repertoire ranging from renaissance choral music to brand new commissions. The choir's storied history includes countless Christmas and Easter services, choral

Evensongs, residencies at Westminster Abbey, and as of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Virtual Choir.

I have been a member of this choir for five years as a hired section leader. In addition to singing with the choir, I also work in sound engineering and audio recording technology. When the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantines began, the choir ceased all performing and rehearsals in March 2020. The Virtual Choir began as an experiment between me and some of my fellow section leaders when the church sought musical offerings to supplement the weekly livestream in the beginning of the pandemic. In an attempt to provide choral music in the spirit of the St. Paul's Choir tradition, Mark, Rich, and I each individually recorded our voices singing tenor-bass motets to a metronome from our own homes. Once they sent me their recordings, I then edited, compiled, and mixed our voices to create the effect of an octet. The final mix was included in one of the livestreamed church services and was well received by the congregation, clergy, and fellow choir members through emails and Facebook Live comments.

Soon after this first foray into virtual choral singing, Brian and I began expanding this multi-tracking experiment to include all of the hired section leaders. After a few successful weeks of virtual choral performances, the Virtual Choir opened itself to any and all of the volunteer choir singers. The choir continued the routine of weekly Thursday night "rehearsals" which doubled as Zoom check-in meetings and technological support as the singers navigated audio recording software, hardware, and Google Drive.

As the Virtual Choir became an established weekly program, Brian developed a rigorous choir recording schedule which was nearly identical to a typical, in-person choir season. Each week, the choir recorded an anthem, a chanted psalm, and three hymns. Brian and I developed a system in which Brian first performed and recorded an accompaniment track on piano or organ, depending on the musical selection. The section leaders accessed the accompaniment track and sheet music from Google Drive, listened to Brian's track with headphones, and recorded their

isolated voices on smartphones or computers. I then collected, edited, compiled, and mixed the section leaders tracks to create reference guide tracks for the volunteer choir. On Google Drive, the volunteer singers could download recordings with their voice part predominantly mixed or a full choir blend for their practice and recording sessions and had about a week to record and send me their recordings. I would then mix the volunteer singers' and section leaders' recordings all together and submit a final mix to the church two days before each weekly service. Typically, a traditional, in-person choir season at St. Paul's runs from September to June with a summer recess. Instead, the choir maintained this recording routine continuously from March 2020 to May 2021. During this time, the choir created 211 recordings which consisted of 123 hymns, 50 anthems, and 38 Anglican chant psalms.

In the fall of 2020, the Virtual Choir expanded as the choir prepared video presentations for an All Saints' Day Evensong service and a Christmas Eve Lessons and Carols service in addition to the existing weekly recording regimen. For special services, the choir prepared the audio using the same routine for a weekly service. Once the audio was complete, choir members dressed in their choir robes and recorded videos of themselves singing along to all of the service music from their homes. Lee, a choir member and St. Paul's video specialist, compiled all the videos and audio to create a full, cinematic final product which was livestreamed both on the church's YouTube and Facebook pages.

Throughout the duration of the choir's quarantine, the Virtual Choir maintained a steady group of volunteer singers who recorded each week in addition to the hired section leaders. For a variety of personal or technological reasons, not all of the in-person choir members recorded for the Virtual Choir. Even when choir members did not record for the weekly services, Brian encouraged all members to participate in the weekly Zoom rehearsal and social meetings to continue their personal engagement and connections with their fellow members. A majority of participants recorded for the Virtual Choir; some recorded every single week while others never

recorded a single note but observed the Virtual Choir's work each week. Some enjoyed the quarantined recording experience while others detested it.

At the end of the 2020-2021 season, the choir had amassed enough recordings to begin reusing repertoire for livestreamed services, which prompted an end to recording in May 2021. During the same period, COVID-19 vaccinations became available and local case numbers began to decline, which prompted some congregation members to attend in-person services while others continued to watch the weekly livestream at home. In August 2021, Brian and the clergy began to formulate a plan for a return to in-person singing for the upcoming, 2021-2022 choir year. After Zoom meetings to determine the choir member's comfort levels, the choir unanimously decided to return to in-person, masked, and socially distant rehearsals and performances in September 2021. With the exception of some changes in the hired singer personnel, all of the choir members from before the pandemic returned to sing with the choir again. The singers were excited and anxious to be finally reunited with their peers and to sing with one another in the same room.

While the choir returned to in-person singing, it was far from a "normal" choir year. Throughout the 2021-2022 season, many members isolated or quarantined due to COVID or COVID-like symptoms and during the omicron variant surge, the entire choir went on hiatus from Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021 to late February 2022. Instead of returning to the Virtual Choir format during this time, I provided the church with previously recorded repertoire from the Virtual Choir's library which was included in the livestreams and played through loud speakers for the in-person congregation. The hired section leaders returned to in-person singing in mid-February 2022 and the full choir returned to regular rehearsals and services again in March 2022 and continued singing in-person until the end of the choir year in June 2022.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

The findings from the data address the research questions that focus on participants' experiences, specifically benefits and motivations, while engaging in a Virtual Choir during the pandemic. When I began this research study, I intended to study what the participants valued in their Virtual Choir participation exclusively. During the data collection however, the participants often described choir-related values in the present tense and viewed their Virtual Choir participation as part of a longer and ongoing choir experience at St. Paul's Church. Therefore, to best reflect the experiences of the participants, the values-related findings demonstrated what they have valued throughout their long-term church choir participation.

Some concepts appear in multiple sections of these findings based on how the participants' reflections and descriptions fit their definitions of motivations, benefits, and values. Some of the participants' experiences were specific to the Virtual Choir period while others transcend either virtual or in-person singing. For example, the social aspects of the choir were coded as a benefit and a value as participants described personally benefiting from choir social connections during the Virtual Choir period and they valuing the community connections of the choir. Demotivating factors were a prevalent theme in the data collection process. These factors will be identified first to provide greater context for the participants' motivations behind their Virtual Choir participation.

Demotivating Factors

Participants often described demotivating factors that discouraged them from recording. The data revealed the following codes: Singing Context, Vocal Self-Consciousness, Time, and Technology. These factors reflected frustrations to some and slowed down participants' recording process. For some others, these factors made them cease recording entirely. Of all the participants in this study, two chose not to record for the Virtual Choir.

Singing Context: Alone Versus With Others

The singing context and the process of recording hindered some participants' motivation to participate in the weekly Virtual Choir. Some participants described the process of singing while isolated in their own homes as unsatisfying, unnerving, or depressing. Most of the Virtual Choir participants had little experience singing solo and removing the security of singing while surrounded by others in the same room caused singers to struggle. Amelia reflected that she "wasn't really interested in my one voice. I want to hear my voice with the other parts and it just didn't make any sense to me at all." For Amelia, the choir experience was more than the act of singing itself but the act of singing *with* others. Removing the in-person and in the moment experience of ensemble singing negatively affected her motivation to record for the Virtual Choir.

In his one-on-one interview, Jim echoed the importance of singing with a group as he explained how his love of singing in an ensemble motivated him to join the choir in the first place. Removing the ensemble experience and isolating his music-making to take place only within the four walls of his own home became a source of anxiety. On the occasions Jim did record audio for the Virtual Choir, he felt uncomfortable singing choral music out of context and separated from other live singers. He explained, "I didn't join choir for stress, I joined choir because of my love of music and singing in an ensemble." This led Jim to only record Virtual Choir performances for only special occasions including Evensong and Christmas.

Vocal Self-Consciousness

Participants cited vocal self-consciousness as a considerable stressor within the Virtual Choir. A majority of the participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with their own singing voices. In some cases, this self-consciousness discouraged participants from participating in the recording process or led singers to take breaks from the weekly recording process. Most of the singers had no prior experience hearing their own voice isolated prior to the shift to the Virtual

Choir format. For some of the participants, listening to the playback of their recording submissions was disheartening and anxiety-inducing.

Bridget experienced intense self-consciousness around recording as her recording submissions were frequently accompanied with self-deprecating messages or personal critiques about her singing voice. She frequently encouraged me to not include her recordings in the final mixes in fear that her voice would diminish the quality of the choir's overall sound. Bridget's frustrations with her own voice never subsided throughout the Virtual Choir experience. She was so "disheartened and discouraged" by the sound of her own voice in her recordings that she ultimately decided to take an extended break from the weekly recordings. For Bridget, her frustrations and vocal self-consciousness continuously compounded and she said, "I started to hate singing and began to feel that I would never really enjoy singing again." Though Bridget's experiences were more intense than what other participants described, all participants highlighted self-consciousness as an ongoing experience during the Virtual Choir period.

Participants cited a reluctance to sing within the proximity of family members and attempted to find the most secluded spot in the house to record themselves including but not limited to basements, closets, or bathrooms. Not only did the singers wish to isolate for the sake of eliminating disruptions or background noise in the recording, they worried their families would hear them. Citing his introverted personality in his one-on-one interview, Dan described struggling to sing solo in the presence of others. He feared being overheard by his wife and adult children during his recording sessions and, as a result, did not sing "full out." Because of his tamped down singing, his recorded performances did not meet his personal expectations, saying, "I found it almost excruciating to listen to because I did not sound nearly as good as I wanted to." Dan's self-consciousness and resulting frustrations led him to participate less frequently and he eventually stopped recording for the Virtual Choir entirely.

Time

Due to the flexible nature of the Virtual Choir recording process, some participants expressed that the lack of a set routine demotivated them from participating in the recording process. In addition to his vocal self-consciousness, Dan mentioned a growing frustration with the amount of time his recording sessions were taking, a common complaint among choir members during the Virtual Choir period. Choir members explained how the process could take hours as they would situate themselves in their recording space, warm-up, rehearse, and then take multiple attempts to record a performance they deemed acceptable for submission. Furthermore, participants contrasted their elongated recording routine with the traditional in-person choir rehearsal which lasted two hours weekly. In hindsight, Jim realized how much he appreciated the routine of the in-person choir rehearsal process and his Virtual Choir participation could not replicate or replace an authentic choral singing experience. Having a physical place to go each week motivated him to honor his commitments to the choir and continue his participation. The Virtual Choir format removed this routine and he likened creating time for recording at home to daily irritations within the same four walls like planning meals and working from home.

Technology

Lastly, participants described technology as a demotivating factor. At the beginning of the Virtual Choir period, participants cited a steep learning curve as they learned new software, hardware, and technology routines which made recording possible. For the self-proclaimed “dinosaurs,” accommodating new technology skills proved to be a challenging transition and adjustment. Of all the participants in this study, Sandra and Margie both cited the technology requirements as their rationale for not participating in the Virtual Choir. At the outset of the transition from in-person to virtual, Sandra determined that coordinating the technology was too difficult and time consuming for her to participate in the recording process. Margie concluded

that she did not have the appropriate hardware available to make recording possible and also chose to abstain from recording.

Motivation

Despite the many headaches, frustrations, and obstacles the St. Paul's choir members faced, the Virtual Choir program ran continuously for 18 months. While a number of demotivating factors were challenges for the participants, the singers also described what motivated them to continue their participation in the face of these demotivating challenges. The data analysis revealed the following Motivation-related codes: Supporting the Church Community, Virtual Choir as a Duty, and Choir Leadership.

Supporting the Church Community

The most commonly tagged positive motivation-related code was “supporting the church community.” The Virtual Choir participants viewed their weekly recording work as a mission in service of the church and its community. Early on in the Virtual Choir period, participants realized that their recordings provided a unique opportunity to support the entire church community as they contributed to the livestreamed Sunday church services. Participants who struggled with the tedious nature of the recording process described the feedback from the church community, such as Tommy who said, “I really hung on to the inputs that we got from Brian about how the congregation was responding positively... And that was a real hook for me.” The congregation regularly offered their thanks and praise to the Virtual Choir through Facebook Live comments, emails, and discussions on church community related Zoom meetings. The congregation was particularly thankful for the continuation of St. Paul's musical traditions which provided a feeling of normalcy during the uncertain times of the pandemic.

Virtual Choir as a Duty

In addition to Virtual Choir in service to the church, some participants described their participation in the weekly recordings as their job. Lisa explained, “this is my job, this is what we

have to do to stay together so just knuckle under and do it.” Participants recognized that recording in isolation did not provide the gratification of performing in an in-person ensemble. As Liz said, “it was hard to describe participation as part of an ensemble when we were still doing it individually... Knowing that the end result was the ensemble was enough.” Participants understood that their isolated voices would be combined to sound like the full, in-person choir and as such, they did their best to set aside frustrations or challenges in the recording process with this eventual final product in mind. As Tommy succinctly said, “this is our job...we're hearing from people that it matters so you know I would say to myself, ‘suck it up buttercup just get it done.’” As participants heard the final mixes each week, they recognized the value of their work, which propelled motivation to continue the weekly recording process.

Choir Leadership

Participants identified the choir leadership as a source of support and motivation to participate in the Virtual Choir process. They also appreciated the range of engagement that leadership offered, whereby singers could be involved in whatever capacity possible. Brian, the choir director, Lee, the video specialist, and I frequently communicated with the singers, offered musical or technology advice, and helped alleviate the stress choir members felt throughout the recording process. This available contact and communication may have boosted morale for the choir. Bridget encapsulated the importance of the choir leadership as she explained how they offered more than technical or musical advice but also became a line of emotional support, especially for those who were often frustrated by the Virtual Choir experience. She said, “I was hanging by a thread and it was the leadership [that] kept us going, which I think was a Herculean task... Honestly, it could have easily gone south.” She cited the frequent communication and cheerleading of the choir leadership as a reason why she continued to be a member of the congregation during and following the quarantine period. At times when Bridget described feeling useless or even like a burden on the choir’s quality, she remembered Lee’s point that

“every voice matters.” During the focus group discussion, participants appeared moved by Bridget’s points with head nods and comments echoing the sentiment. The choir leadership kept the singers motivated, engaged, and singing during a period of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety.

Benefits

Participants reflected on the benefits of their Virtual Choir participation. They discussed personal gains either experienced in the moment or the short term following their Virtual Choir participation. The data analysis revealed the following codes around benefits: Social Benefits, Musical Skill Improvement, and Weekly Structure During the Quarantine.

Social Benefits

Many participants, church choir members for more than 10 years, identified the social connections they enjoyed with their fellow choir members as a longstanding and important benefit of participation that began prior to the pandemic and strengthened during the pandemic. Lindsay summed up the feelings of many choir members when she said that the choir community is the most important aspect for her. “As much as I love the music, I would come to choir if they didn't have any music... Just to see the people.” Jim echoed this sentiment as the social aspect of the choir is second only to the music itself because “that’s the other reason for doing it... you get to hang out with other people who have other interests you don’t see any other time.” When isolated in their homes during the COVID-19 quarantine, the Virtual Choir offered participants the opportunity to maintain these social connections with their fellow choir members.

For some, the Virtual Choir represented a comforting contrast to the stress, uncertainty, and isolation of the pandemic. Choir members connected with each other through weekly choir Zoom rehearsals and social meetings. Multiple participants explained in their interviews that at a time when they had nowhere to go and had no people to see in-person, choir meetings became a social lifeline that served as a source of connection. Tommy recalled, “we were all kind of in this

big lifeboat” as the choir members met to check in with one another, discussed the Virtual Choir music, and held general conversations. He also said that while the virtual meetings were not a perfect replacement for the usual in-person interactions of the choir, “it was a nice reminder” of the choir’s camaraderie and was “a help to a lot of us.” Multiple participants reflected on the benefits of having a consistent social outlet each week as they spent their quarantine time either alone or with their immediate family in the house. Betty stated that she was fortunate to not feel depressed during this quarantine time despite living alone. She cited virtual meetings and social times as opportunities to connect to the community while still apart. Dan, a self-described introvert, said throughout his 10 years in the choir, he did not socialize with many of his fellow choir members, with the exception of a small few. The pandemic and the choir Zoom calls made Dan more aware of his social needs and he recognized that keeping in contact with the Virtual Choir was important to him during the “depths of the lockdown.”

Despite being apart during the COVID-19 quarantine, participants described the strengthening of social bonds among the choir as a benefit of the Virtual Choir experience. Unlike in-person choir rehearsals, the regular choir Zoom meetings included dedicated time for choir members to talk with one another and discuss topics outside of the weekly recording assignments. Longtime choir participants described how these personal conversations and social time provided beneficial opportunities to learn more about the other choir members on a personal level. Liz noted how the full choir meetings bridged together choir members who typically did not sing for the same Sunday services. Joanne recalled, “we all worked really well together before the pandemic. We kind of had this corporate caring for each other... but now that we’re back together, I think that’s even stronger.” Other participants observed similar changes in the church choir social dynamic. In both her one-on-one interview and the focus group discussion, Jane spoke highly of the Virtual Choir experience and fondly recalled the joy of connecting with other choir members each week through the virtual meetings. She said the virtual interactions brought

the camaraderie and community of the church choir “to a whole new level.” Jane was optimistic and enthusiastic about returning to in-person singing with this newfound appreciation for the individuals in the choir.

Musical Skill Improvement

For most participants, the church choir reflected the only music-making outlet in their daily lives. The weekly Virtual Choir recording submissions offered opportunities for participants to maintain and exercise their musical skills at a time when in-person singing was no longer possible. Participants described how having repertoire and recording assignments to sing each week kept them “from getting really far behind the eight ball” in their singing abilities. Through increased listening and increased independent practice, some participants benefited from improving upon their musical skills through the Virtual Choir period. Participants described listening to their own voices more than ever before and developing an increased awareness of their timbre, pitch, and vocal technique. In their one-on-one interviews, Liz and Betty both described how they reflected on their singing voices when listening back to their recording submissions. Their focused self-assessment helped them understand their personal vocal capabilities and inspired them to improve their performances with each submission.

Participants cited recording resources as a beneficial model for vocal improvement throughout the Virtual Choir period. Brian shared a recording of familiar warm-ups the choir would typically sing at the beginning of in-person rehearsals and the singers were encouraged to use these exercises prior to a practice or recording session. The participants reflected that these warm-ups became a useful way to engage their voices and practice proper vocal technique when singing from home. The hired section leaders were responsible for recording all of the musical selections before the volunteer singers. The section leader guide tracks were a resource for the volunteer singers to practice their voice parts and then sing along to the performance. Jane reflected on the benefits of the guide tracks as she looked to the professional singers as a role

model in her own singing. She spoke highly of her section leader and stated she learned about diction, intonation, and tone quality from listening to the section leader's voice alone. Jane said that she considered these guide track recordings to be like a personal voice lesson where she worked to mimic the section leader's performance and improve her own recordings as she continued to build positive choral singing habits.

In the one-on-one interviews and focus group discussion, participants described developing stronger musical literacy skills through their Virtual Choir participation. They observed that their sight reading gradually improved as they continued to record from week to week. Betty described how the multi-modal nature of the Virtual Choir lent itself to these improvements as "I had [the sheet music] in front of me, I had a voice in back of me, I was reading the music and I could be intentional about reading it." Without the close physical proximity of others singing with them, participants explained that they relied on their own ear and music reading skills more intently than usual and could not "coast" along with the other voices of the choir. As they continued to adjust to the recording process, they described stronger associations between the notes on the page and the sounds of the guide tracks and their own performances.

Participants who recorded infrequently or stopped recording altogether throughout the Virtual Choir period noticed backsliding in their own vocal performances and musical skills. Two participants frequently noted how rusty they felt upon returning to in-person singing. Dan described his first few experiences of singing in-person again as "frustrating, because I'm not as good as I used to be, dammit." He acknowledged that had he continued recording each week for the Virtual Choir, he would have likely returned to the in-person choir feeling more prepared and in better vocal shape. Jim described the return to in-person singing as "brutal." During his one-on-one interview, he reflected on how he had to actively retrain his voice and rebuild his vocal range. He noted how his tone and breath control "went into the gutter" and after two months of

in-person rehearsals and services, he was just starting to maintain consistent vocal techniques and quality that was close to his pre-pandemic performance.

Weekly Structure During the Quarantine

In a time when daily life and routines were completely upended by the pandemic, some choir members benefited from the weekly assignments and routines established by the Virtual Choir. In one-on-one interviews, participants appreciated having a set routine that kept them busy and engaged in something they cared about each week when they were not leaving the house for any reason. Many of these participants described themselves as “routine people” who thrive on having structure in their daily activities. Betty, who is retired, recalled that “I didn’t have to work, so this was my work. It was my discipline and I think it was good for me.” Jane agreed with Betty’s description and realized “I must be a routine person as well, it gave me a structure while having no one else in the house most of the time... [It] gave me a routine and rhythm to the week.” In her one-on-one interview, Clair spoke very fondly about the Virtual Choir because it gave her something to look forward to each week as she was also cautious about leaving the house at any time during the pandemic. Clair recalled being sad when the Virtual Choir year came to a close after what she described as “many months of a nice routine.”

Some of the participants described benefiting from the flexible nature of the Virtual Choir recording schedule, whereby they could complete their recording assignments over a week’s time and record at a time convenient for them. Some choir members opted to record all of their music in one sitting while others chose to divide their recording duties across the week. Jane often recorded her music across multiple days. She explained her demanding work schedule throughout the pandemic and the flexibility of the Virtual Choir allowed her to add singing to her daily routine rather than reserving a single, dedicated night for in-person choir rehearsals.

Values

In choral and community music participation research, values are a deep-seated belief about what one cares about (Viega, 2016). These values can be intrinsic, based on personal intuition or extrinsic, based on external outcomes, and have personal, innate meaning for the participants based on their experiences (Viega, 2016). During the data collection, the participants reflected on what they value in their entire choir participation past and present, rather than only their Virtual Choir participation. The data analysis revealed the following values-related codes: Value of Choir Ministry, Love of Music, Value of Ensemble Participation, and a Value of Community.

Valuing Choir Ministry

Participants value their unique ability to contribute to church services. Although value codes regarding choir ministry were mostly absent in the data collection until the focus group session, valuing choir ministry is a key aspect of the choir experience for the participants. In discussion with one another, the participants recognized their choir ministry as more than an outlet for making music and the choir's role in elevating the worship service. When asked to identify the most valuable aspects of their choir participation, Clair answered, "The musical glorification of God and worship... I can't add anything more to that because that's what it's about to me and it always has been, since I was a kid." Clair's description changed the direction of the group conversation as others echoed her point and went on to describe the importance of their choir ministry for themselves and the church community. Jane recalled how prior to the pandemic, she used to view her choir participation as an opportunity to indulge in her love of music and singing. Through the Virtual Choir period, she realized:

I'm very keenly aware that what we give is something that people really value and really adds to the service... We're very lucky that all of us love to do this but hand in hand with loving to do this, we do provide something that's very valued by the congregation.

Love of Music

The participants all had a variety of musical backgrounds but are united in their love of music and performing. Some noted that music and choir participation sets them apart from other church congregation subgroups, explaining that performing has always been an important part of their lives. In her one-on-one interview, Clair explained, “Music has always been something I’ve loved and to give it up would be killing.” She explained a similar feeling during the focus group discussion, saying:

We love each other, and we would go the extra, extra, extra mile for anyone in the entire choir. Not just for the Virtual Choir but for all of us, because we are all in this music, love of music, worship together.

During her one-on-one interview, Jane frequently explained how singing in choir is an important way for her to enjoy a hobby she has had since she was a young girl. She particularly valued the Virtual Choir because she had more opportunities to sing throughout a regular week, providing a positive contrast to her work and other daily obligations.

The participants described their innate desire to make music and explained they are driven to continue making music a part of their lives. Jim captured this feeling when he explained why he joined the choir:

Being someone who spent so much of his early life being a musician... in a semi-professional way. I kind of got away from it as my life was going... I still had a little bit of musician in me so being a part of this choir was great for me and has been great for me because it's given me something else to do with my life.

When I asked Jim if the pandemic changed his perception of what it means to participate in choir he responded, “it just reinforced what I already felt in my heart and what I had already known from when I was young... The entire live music experience and going through it in real time is something that's just quite awesome.” Dan shared a similar experience when asked what he

missed most about the choir during the pandemic. He said he missed being able to “sing something really well” with the choir. Not having the opportunity to sing during quarantine made him realize how important music making with others is to him. “I realized that I missed singing... which is not something I realized in previous years. It emphasized to me that this is an important interest of mine.”

Valuing Ensemble Participation

More than making music, participants described their value of participating in an ensemble as a means to make music with others. According to the participants, the ensemble represents a collective unit in which the musical product is greater than any one of the individuals. The participants described an energy and aura surrounding the act of making music in person that they struggled to replicate in other areas of life. Bridget explained the importance of making music with others in-person as, “Coming back just makes all the difference, I mean you sing with one voice, when you're singing with just yourself it's just... it's just sad.” Amelia echoed Bridget’s thoughts when she reflected on why she only rarely recorded audio for the Virtual Choir, “singing for me has always been about the community and the thrill of the sound made by many. Without that, it was simply a chore with no reward.”

Tommy recalled the thrill of singing with the choir in-person and appreciated the excitement of performing together as he can contribute one piece to a larger choir puzzle. Jim and Clair described how this in-the-moment energy and excitement contributed to a unique feeling that the choir members loved. The participants valued this deep connection to the music and each other and this connection was an important reason they continued in the choir.

“To be a little part of that and to hear that around us... To hear the Christmas service, when the choir’s going at it and just taking it all in... I'm like man, this is worth all the tuition because I'm hearing things everybody down there can't hear, and this is awesome.”

(Tommy)

“I get kind of that same feeling if we're really on it and everybody's in line and everything's coming together the way it's supposed to come together... I don't need to look at Brian to know that we're on it, you can feel it... and you can hear it.” (Jim)

“The energy that we all give to one another. is important... I would not want to give it up until somebody struck me with lightning.” (Clair)

Valuing Community

Across the data collection, the participants spoke of how the choir community contributed to their participation. Described as more important than the music itself, they cited that the choir community is like a family and the pandemic was a disruption to the choir community's weekly in-person gatherings. Lindsay reflected in her written statement, “most choir members are more like family to me and not seeing them was very painful.” Even though the choir maintained connection with each other through the virtual meetings and gatherings, participants reflected that it was not the same as being together in-person. As Tommy observed, “we were together and I know we all missed that.” Virtual meetings became an important lifeline that maintained this community and familial relationship between the choir members. Many participants expressed not knowing how they would have coped with the pandemic isolation without their choir family.

Enduring the pandemic through the Virtual Choir and virtual Zoom meetings appeared to strengthen participants' value of the choir community. As Lindsay said, “as much as I love the music I would come to choir if they didn't have any music... Just to see the people.” These observations were especially intense during the focus group discussion as the participants reflected on the importance of the community with one another. During this discussion, Jim said:

You have no idea that at this point in time, this particular group of people are going to be able to have this type of opportunity to sing in this type of ensemble for the church. After the pandemic, the fact that it actually survived and we're all back together and singing

again, I just don't want to ever take that for granted again, because it was such an important reason why I joined to begin with... And it just gives me a greater appreciation for all of you people that you're still doing it and that we're all still there.

Jim's poignant observation changed the direction of the focus group discussion as the participants went on to reflect on the choir community with one another and the experiences they have shared together over the years including past performances, traveling abroad for choir residencies, and social gatherings. While holding back tears, Betty said to the group, "we've had incredible experiences together and, and you've been there for me in some difficult points in my life... So the other people are really important to me." Clair helped bring the conversation to a close with her final remarks:

Love is what it's all about right there... We love each other and we would go the extra mile for anyone in the entire choir, not just for the virtual choir but for all of us, because we are all in this music, love of music, worship together... I can't say it enough, I love every one of you, I love everyone else in the choir... We're in it together and that's what it's all about... And God watches over us.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to investigate participant perspectives of an established church choir program's transition into and out of a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual format of this faith-based choir differed from the community choral ensembles studied in extant literature as researchers focused on in-person choirs for aging adults, LGBTQ+-identifying singers, university students, singers with shared cultural heritages, and church choirs, among others (Bird, 2017; Hallam & Creech, 2018; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2014; Lee et al., 2016; Louhivuori, 2005; Svenningsen, 2013; Wood, 2010). Although virtual music-making separates The St. Paul's Choir from these other community choirs, there are parallels and consistencies between this choir's experiences with the findings of prior studies. Participants in this study reflected on the importance of their connections to the choir community throughout the pandemic and during the return to in-person singing. While some of the participants acknowledged the value of recording for the Virtual Choir as a musical outlet, some chose to cease recording or never recorded whatsoever. Instead, participants described that maintaining and strengthening the choir community was equally, if not more vital, than the music during and after the pandemic. Opportunities to socialize, communicate, and connect with the choir family helped participants combat loneliness and isolation during quarantine. Participants also identified spiritual and musical factors which influenced their motivations, benefits, and values of their church choir participation. The themes and findings from this study were organized based on the strength and frequency throughout the data collection. In this chapter, I review the data analysis, address limitations and changes, and offer suggestions for future study as researchers continue to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ensemble participation.

Community

The data revealed that community was an overarching unifying factor in participants' Virtual Choir experience. Participant themes related to connectedness, social interaction, and working with others were important and in some cases, more important than the music itself in Virtual Choir. Throughout the pandemic and the return to in-person singing, participants described how the choir community was a central personal factor in their church choir participation. This time of quarantine strengthened their care and value of the choir community, especially when they missed sharing the same physical space as their fellow choir members. These community themes are also consistent with extant literature. Daffern et al. (2021) described how the choir singers who chose to participate in a virtual choir did so as a "stopgap" measure to maintain choir continuity and normalcy during this uncertain pandemic time (p. 11). Likewise, participants in this study recognized the Virtual Choir was a means to keep in touch and stay connected with a community meaningful for them. Participants also described their value of the social and community aspects of the St. Paul's Choir throughout the data collection. Their choir membership helped them connect with peers and group experiences and build upon these connections to form long lasting relationships. School students and adults alike can benefit from choir participation as it provides a unique setting to foster social engagement and develop bonds among members through shared experiences. Educators, directors, and school administrators must remember that in addition to music learning, choral interactions may meet individuals' social needs as singers build relationships and friendships through their shared music-making.

In addition to building a community within the ensemble, the St. Paul's Choir demonstrated how choir participation can be meaningful for the larger church community. Throughout the pandemic, members of the congregation praised the Virtual Choir for their work and described how the weekly recordings were meaningful and moving, especially amid the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants described an awareness of how the church choir

functioned in service of the church and that through choral singing, the choir enhanced the congregation's worship experience. Similarly, choral ensembles in schools and communities have the power to inspire and make a difference within the community through public engagement, performance, and service. Music educators can engage in public outreach to involve their school, community or faith-based choir to build connections outside of the choir's own organization.

Belonging

The community-related findings from this study reflect extant literature regarding in-person community music participation. The participants described a sense of belonging with their fellow choir members and their years of singing together led to strong bonds and rapport among the whole choir. These findings are similar to those of researchers who identified that amateur adult choir participation built fellowship among singers (Balsnes, 2017; Bonshor, 2017; Lee et al., 2016). As Lindsay stated, she would come to rehearsals "just for the people" which she viewed as more important than the music itself. In studies of community choral singers, they also cited social interactions and community building as major motivating factors behind their choir participation, similar to those in this study (Joseph & Southcott, 2014a). Participants in this study reported feeling engaged and connected to the Virtual Choir due in part to the regular contact through their regularly scheduled Zoom meetings. They explained how these social connections were a lifeline and important social outlet during the COVID-19 quarantine. Despite not seeing one another in-person, participants still identified the social connections as a vital aspect of their choir membership. In school and community music settings, directors and educators must remember that ensemble memberships consists of more than music-making but that the social aspects of choir participation is an important and valuable to singers. A connected choir community motivates participants to continue their involvement in an ensemble and makes the choral experience meaningful and socially beneficial.

Shared Experience

Community music participants in extant studies described the nature of choir social connections as unique from other areas of social life as participants shared interests in music and developed group camaraderie with peers (Drummond, 2012; Jacob et al., 2009). The St. Paul's Choir singers identified the church choir social dynamic as different from any other church subgroups and social circles due to the shared choir experiences and connection through music. While the choir members are united by their common love of music and singing, in both one-on-one interviews and the focus group discussion, participants also reflected on their past performances, traveling stories, and social interactions as key to fostering this special relationship. Participants identified shared events such as holidays, special church services, and choir residencies in England as uniting and strengthening their social bonds.

Familial Bond

In this study, the participants cited the familial bond among choir members as a reason why the choir managed to endure the pandemic together. Researchers have described the relationship between various community choir members in a similar manner as choirs provide community building opportunities to build trust, support, and care both in and out of the rehearsal contexts. (Bartolome, 2018; Langston & Barrett, 2008; Svenningsen, 2013). Langston and Barrett (2008) identified fellowship as an under-explored theme in extant community choir literature and that the choir family dynamic supported long-lasting relationships among singers. For some of this study's participants, the Virtual Choir period strengthened the familial bonds among the choir as Zoom meetings allowed for more opportunities for check-ins and personal conversations. Since rehearsing music together in person was not possible in a virtual format, the choir Zoom meetings allowed for more opportunities for emotional and social connection and conversation. This virtual fellowship helped choir members continue and strengthen the personal relationships and allowed for more frequent personal contact than the routines of in-person rehearsals or church

services would typically allow. The participants' deep care for their fellow choir members and their choir participation, in-person and virtual, continuously strengthened this choir relationship. Connecting with fellow choir members throughout the quarantine was a meaningful aspect of the Virtual Choir experience and was cited as both a benefit and value by many participants. The social connections fostered through community and educational music are vital for creating an environment which engages choir members and motivates them to continue their music participation. School educators and community music facilitators should consider incorporating opportunities to build community and foster social-emotional learning within their ensembles. The participants demonstrated that their peer relationships and choir family dynamic supported the success and endurance of the St. Paul's Choir before and after the Virtual Choir period.

Role of Choir Leadership

In this study, choir leadership represented a significant motivating factor in the Virtual Choir participation. Extant literature described the significant role of choir conductors on leading and motivating community ensembles as influential choral conductors across the globe inspire, motivate, and energize choir participants (Bailey & Davidson, 2002; Durrant, 2005). Due to the unique nature of the Virtual Choir format and production process, the traditional definition of choir leadership and the role of choir director was upended. Not only did Brian program musical selections for the choir season, he also invited choir members to the weekly Zoom meetings regardless of their Virtual Choir recording participation. He ensured that choir members shared and communicated in these meetings and helped maintain the choir family dynamic while the singers were apart. Participants cited Brian's influential role in keeping the choir together by organizing weekly Zoom meetings, encouraging participants to continue singing, and helping keep track of the weekly recording schedule. Brian's "cheerleading" motivated participants to continue recording each week and reflects research on in-person choir leadership (Bailey & Davidson, 2002; Bonshor, 2017; Durrant, 2005; Lee et al., 2016). As video and audio specialists,

Lee and I also assumed leadership roles in order to maintain a weekly recording and church service streaming schedule. Because the in-person choir routine had also been completely upended to a virtual format, the singers needed support to stay motivated and engaged as they worked with a rigid recording schedule. Participants described the ways the choir leadership team went beyond what was expected to provide consistent communication, technological support, and emotional support which helped keep some participants motivated to record each week. Many participants especially emphasized how the choir leadership team encouraged the singers to continue despite their many frustrations, bouts of self-consciousness, and stress during the pandemic and recording process. Participants frequently expressed gratitude towards the whole choir leadership team and cited the choir leaders as a major influence on continuing their participation in the Virtual Choir. The choir leadership team served as more than musical and technical guides but also personal and emotional supporters for the choir family.

Advanced music technology abilities were required to create and maintain a virtual ensemble like the St. Paul's Virtual Choir. Teacher educators may consider including opportunities for music technology in programs of study so preservice teachers have a familiarity with audio editing and engineering prior to entering the field. Through professional development, coursework, and conference presentations, teacher educators and preservice teachers will need to continue conversations of making music education accessible and equitable for all and determine how greater inclusion can be realized in classroom and ensemble settings.

Emotional Wellbeing

Community choir researchers have suggested that choral singing benefits singers' emotional wellbeing and promotes positive psychological development for singers of varying ages, backgrounds, and cultures (Bartolome, 2018; Clift, 2010; Judd & Pooley, 2014). The distinguishing difference with existing studies and the current inquiry was that in previous inquiries, group singing took place together in person. In this study, the Virtual Choir participants

learned, practiced, and recorded their music in the isolation of their own homes – what was once an activity with other choir members was now an independent musical experience that was compiled during post-production. This isolated Virtual Choir participation led to negative experiences for some participants, including self-consciousness, stress, and frustration.

Researchers described how group singing can be therapeutic for choral singers even if the singers perceived that their voice is not the strongest in the group, however the current study did not reflect those ideals (Bailey & Davidson, 2002, 2005; Kennedy, 2009). For example, Bridget recalled how she started to hate singing due to her frustrations with the Virtual Choir. Others recalled being upset and discouraged by the sound of their own voices in isolation. Jacob et al. (2009) found that choral rehearsals helped university choral singers feel joy as these rehearsals provided opportunities to forget the stresses of life, school, or work. For some participants in this study, recording for the Virtual Choir actively contributed to stress and ultimately influenced their choice to stop recording for the choir altogether. Despite loving singing with the church choir in-person, Jim reflected on his stressful and discouraging Virtual Choir experiences and said, “I didn’t join choir to be stressed.” This contrast to his in-person experience demonstrates the differences between the emotional experiences of in-person singing and isolated, virtual singing.

A few participants enjoyed the Virtual Choir recording process and maintaining a weekly singing routine, citing their engagement, energy, and connection to the choir community. Betty, for example, explained that she did not feel depressed during the COVID quarantine due in part to her Virtual Choir participation. These exceptions reveal some consistencies with existing literature as scholars have suggested that choral participation can help older singers alleviate depression and stress (Bailey & Davidson, 2002; Balsnes, 2017; Joseph & Southcott, 2018). However, most participants described singing for the Virtual Choir in negative terms and associated the experience with a worse emotional wellbeing than their in-person singing experiences. Daffern et al. (2021) observed a similar experience among virtual choir participants

in the United Kingdom. While some appreciated the opportunity to pursue some form of continued music-making and used the recording process to continue building musical skills, many reflected it was a “better than nothing” experience, and some were disappointed and discouraged by the multi-track recording process (p. 12).

Spirituality

Choral music singers have described spirituality in sacred and secular contexts in which they feel connected to either religion or where they have deep-rooted, emotional experiences from their choir participation. In extant community music research, participants described emotionally spiritual effects from choral singing, noting that singing in a choir is uplifting and fulfilling (Drummond, 2017; Joseph & Southcott, 2014a; Lee et al., 2016; Southcott, 2018). Choir singers in secular university and community-based ensembles experienced musical highs that left them feeling empowered and instilled within them a sense of greater purpose (Jacob et al., 2009; Kennedy, 2009; Li & Southcott, 2018; Wood, 2010). While not rooted in faith or religion, this secular spirituality included feelings of empowerment and purpose through community choral music.

Scholarship regarding sacred relationships between spirituality and choral music participation is generally limited. Studies including volunteer church choir participants found that singers are motivated by their faith to participate in a church choir (Parker, 2017; Rohwer, 2010). For an African American church choir, Parker (2017) found that loving God and continuing the church choir tradition were important reasons for singing in the choir. Likewise, at St. Paul’s Church, participants reflected on their sense of duty to continue the church’s long-standing choral music traditions during the pandemic and provide the congregation with reminders of normalcy through the virtual musical offerings. Rohwer (2010) observed that unlike other community ensembles, spirituality was equally as important as social and musical factors in the participants’ church choir experiences. Rohwer found that in church choirs, singing was more than an act of

leisure but an act of service and an extension of worship. The findings in this study have some consistencies with existing research. Despite singing in a church choir, most participants did not directly discuss spirituality or faith regarding the Virtual Choir. During his one-on-one interview, Jim described the spiritual sensation of traveling to church choir rehearsals, feeling uplifted, energized, and euphoric from singing in-person with others. His description matched the experiences of secular community choir members in extant literature. He further explained that this in-person choir experience did not transfer to the virtual format during his few recording attempts which is why he ultimately stopped recording for the Virtual Choir entirely.

I was surprised that participants reflected on their choir membership as an extension of worship and service only in the focus group discussion. Despite being in a church choir, participants rarely discussed their faith in their one-on-one interviews and they more frequently focused their reflections on the logistics and emotional experiences of participating in the Virtual Choir during the pandemic. I recognize, too, that my interview protocol focused on logistics and emotional experiences so these questions did not introduce reflection on their worship or service to the church. In the focus group discussion, Clair determined that the purpose of the church choir is for the “musical glorification of God” and others agreed with this sentiment. Some of the participants became more aware of their role as worship leaders in church services through their participation in the Virtual Choir and the return to in-person singing. For example, Jane, in the focus group, recalled that her church choir participation used to feel like a self-indulgence in her love of music. After contributing musical offerings for the Virtual Choir, she recognized that her choir participation was a way to enhance the church experience for herself and the congregation. Reading the social media and email reactions from the congregation and clergy helped her realize the unique role of the choir in the worship service. Jane returned to in-person singing with an understanding that her singing served a greater purpose beyond her own musical enjoyment.

Participants also did not describe spirituality or faith with regard to their individual recording sessions, different than extant studies where singers in faith-based or secular choirs described deep-rooted, spiritual feelings from singing together in rehearsals and performances (Drummond, 2017; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2014b; Kennedy, 2009; Lee et al., 2016; Li & Southcott, 2018; Wood, 2010). Unlike these in-person experiences from singing with others, the Virtual Choir singers described stress, self-deprecation, and anxiety when singing in isolation. Some participants felt a begrudging sense of duty to keep the church choir and community alive through their Virtual Choir participation. As Parker (2017) noted, church choir participation can be a means for singers to help maintain their church's musical traditions; however, some of the participants here did so but with little joy. Regardless of the emotions associated with this isolated recording experience, they did describe a sense of purpose and obligation to the church and participated for the sake of the congregation and the church despite their own frustrations.

Musical Gain

Continuing Ensemble Participation

Extant literature has suggested that community music participants are motivated by and benefit from pursuing their musical interests through ensemble participation. Many community music participants have prior musical experiences from earlier ages and join ensembles to continue their musical engagement (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Creech et al., 2013; Jacob et al., 2009; Joseph & Southcott, 2018). Indeed, many of the participants in this study described participating in choirs for decades and for some, remarked that choir has almost always been a part of their lives and felt the Virtual Choir was vital to continue their personal musical traditions. In the one-on-one interviews, participants reflected on their early singing experiences in church, community, and grade school choirs and that the St. Paul's Choir was an opportunity to continue pursuing these ensemble experiences. Clair described how she sang with choirs for nearly 70

years and she could not imagine her life without singing. Because of her longstanding choir engagement, she was motivated to participate in the Virtual Choir recordings as often as possible. Jim, a participant who only occasionally recorded for the Virtual Choir, reflected that the time away from in-person singing during quarantine, “reinforced what I already felt in my heart and what I had already known from when I was young.” As someone who has participated in vocal and instrumental ensembles from a young age, Jim was energized and motivated to continue his pursuit of music-making upon the return to in-person singing.

These long-term choir experiences reflect Parker’s (2017) findings that for long-term participants in an African American church choir, choir participation was a pivotal part in the participants’ personal and spiritual development and growth throughout their lives. Choral singing was a staple in these singers’ lives and church choir participation, whether virtual or in person, reflected a space for continued musical engagement. The seeds for these participants’ lifelong pursuit of musical engagement were planted in their childhoods. These participants had music education opportunities which made a lasting impression through their entire adult lives. Advocates for music education should recognize the importance and value of childhood music education opportunities as students can discover their preferred musical activities and interests. Not only are childhood music opportunities important but avenues for adult music-making allow former music education students to continue their pursuit of lifelong music learning and participation.

Musical Challenges and Growing Musicianship

Community music participation reflects an opportunity for continuing adult music education and this study reveals community music’s importance in adult life. Music education is not limited to PreK-University experiences and this study provides evidence that community and faith-based choral ensembles provide important educational opportunities for their members. Many participants reflected on their personal choral experiences from childhood to adulthood as

the St. Paul's Choir provides an important and vital opportunity for these members to pursue their love of music-making and share this love of singing with others.

Though the Virtual Choir was not an exact replica of the in-person choir experience, participants valued the opportunity to continue making music when their primary musical outlet was no longer possible. The participant's desire to maintain their musical skills was consistent with existing literature as community music participants have described being motivated by their ability to grow and hone their musicianship in their adult lives (Bailey & Davidson, 2002; Balsnes, 2017). The Virtual Choir required independent practice and self-sufficient musical skill building as recording isolated performances provided participants with opportunities for self-assessment and reflection. Some participants recalled using these recordings as a way to monitor their vocal abilities and they strove to improve week to week. Participants reflected that upon the return to in-person singing, and they continued to practice these self-monitoring habits in order to improve their musicianship within the choir. These data evidence that church choir reflects an educational opportunity for members to continue a pursuit of lifelong music learning as they develop their musicianship through ensemble performance. Betty worried that not singing during the pandemic would lead to her losing the musicianship she practiced in weekly choir rehearsals. She enjoyed having an opportunity to practice developing her singing voice and work on maintaining her musical skills in the Virtual Choir. While Liz stated that she "won't be winning a Grammy," she was able to develop a new awareness of singing voice and described personal improvement because of the recording sessions. Choir members who did not record regularly or stopped recording for the Virtual Choir recognized that their musical skills had been negatively affected by their hiatus from regular singing. Some participants had struggled with a significant backslide in their musical skills and vocal abilities which they described as a disadvantage during the return to in-person singing.

Though some participants benefited from the independent nature of the Virtual Choir, others were severely discouraged from participating altogether. Throughout the Virtual Choir period, multiple participants ceased their recording due to technological logistics and vocal self-consciousness and this may be an important takeaway for music educators. It was impossible to replicate the strength in numbers experience of physically singing with others in the same room and stress that drove participants away from the choir during the pandemic. Thus while virtual music-making provided an inclusive means for participants to continue music-making, some may perceive virtual music-making as exclusive because of low solo singing self-efficacy or challenges around the technology required to record in isolation. If virtual music-making becomes more prevalent in the future, music educators must be prepared to address these concerns or will face further risk of discouraging or excluding potential ensemble members. School districts or community ensemble organizations should consider the technology requirements for music-making and available resources to determine if virtual music-making is an accessible option for their populations. Music educators should work to promote confidence and emotional wellbeing within their ensembles and be aware of the needs and concerns of their students or members. By leading through example, educators and community music leaders can establish a respectful and caring learning environment which can foster a supportive and familial choir community.

Research Synthesis

Data analysis revealed that the transition to and from the Virtual Choir format provided participants an opportunity to reflect on why their church choir participation matters to others and more often, themselves. For many participants, the absence of in-person singing for 18 months made them aware of the uniquely important role the choir plays in their lives. Participants were drawn to the church choir by their interest in making music but sharing this experience with others has kept them engaged and motivated throughout their time in the choir. Choir members

missed singing with others in-person and vividly described the thrill of performing, rehearsing, and hearing the sound of other voices within the same physical space again. While the Virtual Choir provided singers with an opportunity to maintain musical skills and continue some form of musical engagement, the Virtual Choir could not replicate the experience of what it was like to sing in-person. Participants like Jim, Bridget, and Amelia frequently mentioned how they loved to sing with others and the isolation of the pandemic did not satisfy their love of the in-person choir experience. Like Jim explained, the Virtual Choir experience “reinforced what I already felt in my heart.” For many, the pandemic renewed their love of shared music making and strengthened their appreciation for the in-person ensemble experience.

Throughout the pandemic, the Virtual Choir was more than a music-making opportunity but rather a social and emotional lifeline for these participants. While some valued the opportunity to continue making music virtually, they acknowledged that a shared sense of choir and church community was far more important during quarantine. In written statements, interviews, and the focus group discussion, participants recalled the stress, uncertainty, and fear they felt during quarantine and the beginning of the pandemic. They also acknowledged the role the Virtual Choir community played in easing the loneliness and isolation of the moment. Reflecting extant literature, community choir participation may alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression for singers of many backgrounds and choir may provide a special and unique sense of belonging different than other areas of singers’ lives (Bartolome, 2013; Hallam & Creech, 2018; Joseph & Southcott, 2014a, 2018). Singing in a choir provided opportunities for community members to connect and collaborate with like-minded participants and experience social validation, something participants often do not find in other social contexts (Bartolome, 2013). Older adults described community choirs as a way to socialize after retirement, create new friendships, and build a meaningful community united in music (Hallam & Creech, 2018). Participants in this study described similar new and unique social bonds formed through their

church choir membership and their common interests in music and singing. They identified these bonds as unlike other social interactions and personal interests in their lives. In the isolation, stress, and anxiety of the pandemic, the Virtual Choir family provided a unique opportunity to combat this loneliness and connect with one another through Zoom meetings and online correspondence. As Tommy recalled, “We were all kind of in this big lifeboat” as the choir began meeting via Zoom at the outset of quarantine and worked to combat the isolation of staying home. Dan, a self-described introvert, previously viewed himself as an outsider within the choir community despite a shared interest in music. The regular contact maintained during the “depths of lockdown” helped him realize that the choir community provided a more important social outlet than he had realized. He reflected that he valued this connection more than he did before the pandemic. The choir community was a theme in all three of my research questions regarding motivation, benefits, and values of the church choir experience. The singers in this choir share a familial bond with one another which kept them engaged. As Lindsay said, “I would keep coming to choir just for the people” and for some, the music is secondary.

This study revealed that making music with others matters because sharing musical experiences builds and fosters relationships, connections, and community. The pandemic changed the definition of “music with others” as the choir members worked together to create musical performances by singing in isolation. Many participants expressed discontent and frustration with the experience of their isolated recordings but they persisted for the sake of the choir community. While the participants in this church choir are united by their faith and a passion for music, through their choir membership, they also created and maintained a choir family. With some holding membership for decades, singers created, maintained, and strengthened bonds through the members’ shared choir experiences which included performing, traveling, socializing, and now, the Virtual Choir. This family-like dynamic provided a welcoming space where the singers could feel at home and experience a sense of belonging either in a rehearsal room or a Zoom meeting.

Despite many of the participants' lifelong love of music, this church choir was ultimately held together by the familial bonds between the choir members. The Virtual Choir recordings instilled purpose and a reason for participants to continue singing while apart, and the virtual meetings provided an even more vital social outlet during quarantine. The St. Paul's Choir family weathered the pandemic because of singers dedication to one another through regular social check-ins, and frequent virtual meetings. In this study, the participants described how they value the choir's musical opportunities but more strongly expressed the love they have for their fellow choir members and the choir community as a whole. The Virtual Choir provided a sense of normalcy and connectedness during a stressful and unusual time; this consistent connection continued to strengthen their familial bond whether together or apart.

The data also revealed that singing choral music independently was unsatisfying for many participants and reflected an antithesis of what choral singing should be. The participants did not just enjoy the act of singing but they valued the experience of singing with others. Even when physically apart, participants were primarily motivated by their fellow choir members to keep the church choir alive during the pandemic. Participants also benefited from maintaining these social connections during a period of increased stress, anxiety, and isolation due to the pandemic. As a result of the 18 months of Virtual Choir, many participants realized how much they valued their church choir community and the opportunities to sing music with their choir family. Community music participation reflects a social and musical activity in which individuals are not passionate about making music alone but are passionate about making music together. This study reveals that music is more satisfying when it is made with others and shared music-making experiences foster meaningful connections among choir members.

Reflections, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Study

Miriam (2015) described how the focus of a qualitative study gradually emerges throughout a study and as a result, the researcher must be willing to shift the focus of the study to reflect the data observed. When beginning this inquiry, I intended to examine and compare the motivations, benefits, and values of church choir participation before, during, and after the pandemic period. The pandemic has continued for two years and as such, I adjusted my focus to participant experiences of transitions to and from a virtual ensemble format during the pandemic. Initially, “before” included everything that occurred prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantine. I believed the “during” phase would include March 2020 to September 2021. This time period included the Virtual Choir program’s beginnings, the fully virtual choir season, and meetings about a proposed return to in-person singing for next season. The “after” phase would have consisted of the first in-person choir rehearsal up to the present day. However, during the data collection and analysis, the emerging data revealed that participants did not view their choir experience in three specific phases. Rather, participants viewed the Virtual Choir as interwoven with other past choir experiences reflecting their involvement in St. Paul’s Choir as a whole. To better analyze the data and reflect the experiences of the participants, I altered my two research questions regarding motivation and benefits to focus on the experiences of the participants during the Virtual Choir period. I also adjusted my research question regarding values to focus on the participant’s overall values regarding the church choir, not during any specific time period. Since the participants viewed their choir participation more globally, I expected that a global view of what they value would reveal more about the importance of this church choir in their lives.

I noted in the findings and discussion that faith and worship were not major themes or topics during the data collection. I recognize that my research questions did not specifically address or investigate faith or worship. This research is based on prior studies of community music ensembles and as this is a faith-based choir, I expected religion-related themes to emerge

organically throughout the data collection due to the participants' shared faith. While the participants did discuss religion and worship during the focus group meeting to some extent, probing interview questions and additional focus group prompts may have revealed more about the role of faith in the participants' choir participation. Additionally, that religion was ultimately not a major part of the data collection may also reveal that the participants were focused on other aspects of the Virtual Choir experience during the data collection. If I were to recreate this study, I would consider including interview and focus-group questions specifically regarding faith to better depict a clearer picture of the church choir participants and their experiences. I would not revise my research questions to include religion as many of the motivations, benefits, and values discussed by participants in this study are universal beyond faith-based ensembles.

While there are connections to existing community music literature, more research is needed to better understand church choirs, virtual choirs, or virtual church choirs. This is one case study of a particular church choir during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore, these results may not be generalizable to all faith-based or secular virtual ensembles during this time. Replications of this study will help researchers both understand and document the experiences of in-person faith-based ensembles that transitioned to a virtual format amid the pandemic. As scholarship regarding faith-based choirs is generally limited, additional studies of church choirs can reveal participant perspectives, motivations, benefits, values, and the importance of music participation in sacred contexts. Faith-based music ensembles are a form of continuing adult music education as individuals continue to learn, practice, and grow in their musicianship. As such, scholars should continue to examine the educational benefits and practices of faith-based choirs to inform educators, church musicians, and teacher educators of the value of the educational opportunities outside of a school setting. Since this study did not directly address the role of religion in the motivation, benefits, and values of the singers' experiences, scholars may

also wish to examine the role of faith in church choir and other faith-based ensemble participation.

While researchers have studied virtual music-making prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this field has grown in this unprecedented time and additional research can reveal the effects of virtual music participation. Participants in this study described being motivated or demotivated to participate in the church choir due to the virtual format, thus researchers can examine the motivating or demotivating effects of virtually participating in educational, community, or faith-based choirs during the pandemic. Daffern et al. (2021) and Theorell et al. (2020) identified virtual choirs as a stop-gap method for music participation at a time in which in-person music-making was not an option due to the pandemic and participants in this study described similar feelings towards the Virtual Choir. Future studies after the pandemic may reveal the motivations, benefits, and values of choir members who choose to participate in virtual music-making when in-person singing is a viable option to them.

Many participants in this study described the Virtual Choir as an opportunity to maintain and develop musical skills at a time when they had no other opportunity to do so. Some participants explained that not participating in the Virtual Choir led to a backsliding in their musical skills which were prevalent upon their return to in-person singing. As the COVID-19 pandemic is an ever-developing situation, more research will be needed that studies the effects of the pandemic and quarantines on vocal and instrumental ensemble education and participation to better understand how community and educational music practitioners address, recover, and rebuild from this historic time. Research regarding the experiences of individual musicians and ensembles can examine the experiences of musicians during the transition into and out of quarantine when in-person performances were not possible. Music educators may wish to examine the effects of virtual ensembles or the ceasing of ensemble activities altogether on

participants' musical growth and experiences. Data can help music educators, directors, and teacher educators prepare students and musicians for independent practice and skill maintenance.

CHAPTER 7

POSTLUDE

It is 10:15am on a rainy September Sunday morning at St. Paul's Church. A sense of calm carries across the grassy and green church campus as the Sunday morning service is set to begin in an hour. A soft murmur from the church basement crescendos as a small crowd of choir members donning choir robes shuffle into the 300-year-old church. Cheerful greetings and catchup conversations meld into one as the singers make their way towards a narrow flight of wooden stairs in the back of the church. With black folders, water bottles, and hymnals in hand, one by one, they ascend to the loft complete with pews and a pipe organ console at the center. Only a few choir members wear masks as they file into the cramped pews and take their seats before the choir warm-up. One marvels at the size of the choir this morning, "it feels like Christmas Eve up here!"

While this scene is familiar to many longtime members of the St. Paul's Choir, it is simultaneously new. The faces in the choir are mostly the same but on the inside, everyone has changed after the experiences of the past two years. The previous two Septembers included a completely virtual choir season and then a choir season marked by everchanging COVID-19 safety mitigation strategies without a clear end in sight. Despite the uncertainties, stress, and time away from one another, the choir reunites in full today and members display a new form of appreciation for each other and their singing. The time spent together while physically apart emboldened their love of music, choir ministry, and above all, the personal connections to their fellow choir members more than ever before.

The excitement and positivity is palpable as the choir members are crammed in three to a pew and discuss the music selections for the day, an upcoming choir residency trip to Dublin, Ireland next summer, or decompress from their week of work. A single chord sounds from the organ as Brian catches the attention of the buzzing group and welcomes the choir back to what

will assuredly be a banner year for St. Paul's Church. The singers rise from their seats and begin singing their routine warm-up, ready for the first of many more Sunday morning services to come.

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APPENDIX A
IRB PROTOCOL AND SITE APPROVAL



Research Integrity & Compliance
Student Faculty Center
3340 N. Broad Street, Suite 304
Philadelphia PA 19140

Institutional Review Board
Phone: (215) 707-3390
Fax: (215) 707-9100
e-mail: irb@temple.edu



Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects Research that is Approved as Exempt

Date: 16-Aug-2021

Protocol Number: 28706
 PI: PARKER, ELIZABETH
 Review Type: EXEMPT
 Approved On: 16-Aug-2021
 Risk: Minimal risk
 Committee: A1
 Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
 Project Title: "Singing from separate homes": Church choir singers' perspectives on choral participation before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The IRB approved the protocol 28706.

The study was approved under Exempt review. The IRB determined that the research does not require a continuing review, consequently there is not an IRB approval period.

As this research was approved as Exempt, the IRB will not stamp the consent or assent form(s).

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee ("MRC"); Radiation Safety Committee ("RSC"); Institutional Biosafety Committee ("IBC"); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee ("TUSCC"). Please visit these Committees' websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit the following:

- **Modifications** - Any changes to the research that may change the Exempt status of this study must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Examples of such changes are: including new, sensitive questions to a survey or interview, changing data collection such that de-identified data will now be identifiable, including an intervention in the methods, changing variables to be collected from medical charts, decreasing confidentiality measures, including minors or adults lacking capacity to consent as subjects when previously only adults with capacity to consent were to be enrolled, no longer collecting signed HIPAA Authorization, etc. Please reach out to the IRB Staff with any questions about if a change to the study warrants a Modification.
- **Reportable New Information** - Using the Reportable New Information e-form, report new information items such as those described in HRP-071 Policy - Prompt Reporting Requirements to the IRB within 5 days.
- **Closure report** - Using a closure e-form, submit when the study is permanently closed to enrollment; all subjects have completed all protocol related interventions and interactions; collection of private identifiable information is complete; and analysis of private identifiable information is complete.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to confirm that Michael Trycieckyj has site approval to conduct research for Temple University at [REDACTED] Michael is permitted to work with the choir to conduct on-site interviews, collect field notes and observations, and create audio/video recordings. Please contact the rector, [REDACTED] for any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
Rector, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX B
RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear choir,

I am very much looking forward to making music with you in person again soon! I am working on my graduate thesis at Temple University in music education and I am studying the experiences and perspectives of the volunteer choir members at [REDACTED] before, during, and after the pandemic (please find the purpose statement and research questions below my signature). My study has been approved by Temple's Independent Review Board and [REDACTED]

I write to invite your participation in this study which will take place this fall. If you agree to participate, I will ask you to complete an online form that asks questions about your experiences and reflections on participating in [REDACTED] virtual choir and the re-entry into in-person singing this fall. Following the online form, I will invite some participants for a one-on-one interview and about a month later, a focus group discussion. Please know your perspectives and opinions are valued regardless of whether you recorded every single week or did not record a single audio track last year.

As per the requirements for a research study at Temple University, I will be distributing consent forms at our first rehearsal on [Date TBD]. I will then follow up with the first steps for my research.

Please feel free to reach out with any questions. I do hope you will consider taking part in this research and I can't wait to see you soon!

Sincerely,

Michael Trycieckyj

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this instrumental case study is to investigate participant perspectives of an established church choir program's transition into and out of a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this study is to answer the following essential questions: (1) What do participants cite as influences on their choice to participate or not participate in the virtual choir program? (2) How do participants describe their perceived benefits of their choir participation pre-, mid-, and post-pandemic? (3) What do choir members value most in their church choir participation pre-, mid-, and post-pandemic?

APPENDIX C

WRITTEN STATEMENT, INTERVIEW, AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Written Statement Prompts

What year did you begin singing in the [REDACTED] choir?

Why did you initially join the choir at [REDACTED]?

Please describe your experience with recording technology prior to the virtual choir.

Think back to the first time you recorded the first full-choir virtual anthems and hymns, how did you feel while recording? If you watched the final product, what was it like hearing the final product for the first time?

Did you record for the virtual choir during the summer of 2020? If so, please describe the experience.

Please describe your recording process for a typical Virtual Choir service. How did you prepare for a recorded selection? Where did you record? How long did it typically take? Did you record everything in one sitting?

Did you attend the weekly choir zoom meetings? If you were not actively involved in recording for the virtual choir and feel comfortable sharing why, please do.

A few months into the recording process, the choir switched to sung guide tracks recorded by the section leaders. What was it like to sing with the section leader guide tracks compared to the original electronic tracks?

Please share here any other observations about singing with the choir during the pandemic.

One-On-One Interviews

Did you participate in the virtual choir during the spring of 2020? Did you participate in the fall 2020 virtual choir? What were these experiences like?

Did you participate in the weekly Thursday night Zoom meetings? If you did but were not actively recording, why?

What did you enjoy about the recording process for the weekly services? What challenges did you face?

Please tell me about a time when you hesitated to complete your recording, stopped recording, or took weeks off from virtual recordings.

Tell me about your experience with the filmed Evensong service.

Please describe the audio recording process. (If you participated)

What was it like to record your video portion?

How did you feel seeing the final product of the service for the first time?

If you did not record audio or video, please tell me about the circumstances around your choice.

Did you watch the Evensong service? What did it feel like to see the choir perform?

When you prepared for the Lessons and Carols service, what similarities or differences did you notice compared to preparing for Evensong?

How would you describe your experience about singing with the choir during the pandemic? Did your opinions about singing change during this virtual choir experience?

How did you feel about your singing voice in the virtual choir experience?

What motivated you to continue on with the recording process during the virtual choir period?

How would you describe the social dynamic of the [REDACTED] choir during the virtual choir period? How does this compare to your prior experience with the choir?

How did you feel after finishing the 2020-2021 program year?

How did you benefit from participating in the virtual choir at [REDACTED]?

Please talk about your current experience with the [REDACTED] Choir. What did you think would happen in our 2021-2022 choir year?

What did you miss about singing with the choir in-person at [REDACTED]?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Focus Group Questions

What were your initial reactions to singing in-person together again?

How did you feel after our first rehearsal? What did you miss about singing with the choir in-person?

How does your in-person singing experience compare to your virtual singing experience?

Reflect on your virtual choir experience. What aspects, events, feelings stick with you the most in hindsight?

What kept you motivated during the virtual choir experience?

Has your perception of the choir experience changed since we returned? If so, how?

What do you value most in the choir at [REDACTED]? Has this changed since before the pandemic?

Is there anything else you'd like to discuss about singing here at [REDACTED], during the virtual choir or afterward?

APPENDIX D
RESEARCH SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

Title: “Singing from separate homes”: Church choir singers’ perspectives on choral participation before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Protocol No.: Protocol number

Investigator: **Principal:** Dr. Elizabeth Parker

Associate Professor of Music Education, Boyer
College of Music and Dance at Temple University

2001 N 13th St, Philadelphia, PA 19122

elizabeth.parker@temple.edu

Student: Michael Trycieckyj

Graduate Student MM Music Education

Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple
University

michael.trycieckyj@temple.edu

Daytime Phone Number: [REDACTED]

RESEARCH CONSENT SUMMARY

You are being asked for your consent to take part in a research study. This document provides a concise summary of this research. It describes the key information that we believe most people need to decide whether to take part in this research. Later sections of this document will provide all relevant details.

What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. Whether you take part is up to you.
- If you don’t take part, it won’t be held against you.
- You can take part now and later drop out, and it won’t be held against you
- If you don’t understand, ask questions.
- Ask all the questions you want before you decide.

How long will I be in this research?

We expect that your taking part in this research will last 5 months (Sept 2021 - January 2022).

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Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to investigate the experiences of a church choir program's transition into and out of a virtual singing format during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?

If you decide to take part in this research study, the general procedures include observations during choir events, completing an online form, participating in a one-on-one interview, and participating in a focus group discussion regarding the virtual choir experience.

Could being in this research hurt me?

The most important risks or discomforts that you may expect from taking part in this research include a risk in loss of confidentiality from participating in the interview or focus group.

Will being in this research benefit me?

It is not expected that you will personally benefit from this research.

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