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Issues In Pluralism: A Unique Gospel Choir's Experience

Katherine A. Barone

I sit here approximately one month after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in an intellectual community that is reaching out for healing and understanding. I decided after the attacks that this should be the semester I write about the experience of Lesley University's Gospel Choir, UNITY. I've been researching, writing, and presenting about gospel music, spirituality, and cross-cultural work for several years (see Barone, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2000; Barone & Bedell, 1998). I'm an insider in UNITY as I have been its advisor/coordinator and a singer since its inception. I've also presented about the themes of gospel music from the perspective of healing from trauma using Harvey's extension of Judith Herman's work (Harvey, 1996; Herman, 1992; Barone & Bedell, 1998). That healing has seemed particularly apt this semester. The choir's experience may begin to elucidate the power and the controversy in singing gospel music, stretching inside cultures in a true pluralistic and multi-cultural way for solace and courage to go on with our lives.

History of UNITY and the Development of the Coordinator's Role

An African American undergraduate student, Nakia Campbell, founded the choir in the 1993-1994 academic year. Nakia saw the choir as a way to provide a "church home" for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, hence the name UNITY, but especially for African American students. Nakia's background in music and her church affiliation led her to conduct UNITY as a traditional gospel choir (see, for example, Linton, 1998). This included prayer said at the beginning, end, and sometimes mid-rehearsal. The choir members were white and black Christians who, even if they were non-participants at their own churches, understood the messages of the music and accepted, even perhaps expected, prayer as a part of their choir participation. Nakia invited her own minister to Lesley to open a concert and preach at intermission, a common practice at other local college gospel choirs. UNITY was popular with students on the undergraduate campus and was invited to sing at various campus events including ALANA celebrations, Family and Friends Weekend, and Admissions recruitment events. The choir sang off-campus at churches and at a local college Gospel Fest.

My work with the choir as an advisor began in 1994. A life-long singer, raised by two musicians, I was happy not only to advise, but also to join the group. Undergraduate activity advisors generally have a supportive role, while the group's procedures and functioning are left to the students. When Nakia decided to leave Lesley to pursue her other interests, the choir was left without a director for a year. Concern was expressed, even on the Lesley Board of Trustees, that the choir not be allowed to languish too long since it was seen as a positive symbol of the university's commitment to students of color. As faculty advisor, I was the person to whom both students and administrators referred in terms of the choir's continuity. I was asked to solicit resumes for a new director. Nakia had been funded through a student scholarship for her directorial duties.

To hire a professional director, I asked for help from both the undergraduate school and the Dean of Students' office. Funding came forward with a commitment to open the choir as the university's first cross campus activity. After reviewing several resumes, a group of 10 singers and I auditioned Linda Brown San Martin in 1996. The university hired her based on our recommendation and she has been our director since that time. Linda Brown San Martin, an African American woman from a religious background, has conducted various gospel choirs, including several college-based choirs, church choirs and even one for women in recovery at a local drug rehabilitation facility. She currently teaches music at a local elementary school, serves as Minister of Music at her church, and occasionally works with a mostly white, large choral group, and her own small vocal ensemble.

With the opening of the group to cross-campus membership, my role became differentiated; I was to now recruit members, address any issues for the director and for the administration, and generally support the cross campus nature of the endeavor. The faculty coordinator role is recognized by the administration in my workload, by the choir director in her work with me around the group's pedagogy and procedures, and by the choir members, who have referred to me as the group's "cheerleader". However, the role is not always understood. My perspective on my role is that it is part 'theologian', part amateur musician, part psychologist, and part faculty member. I included my own pedagogical philosophy in the running of the group because of the need to establish procedures for auditions and rehearsals, to conduct member outreach into various Lesley constituencies, and to negotiate how spirituality was to be voiced during rehearsals and concerts among other issues.

My pedagogical and clinical practice philosophies were forged at the Center for Multicultural Training in Psychology (CMTP) in Boston. The emphasis at CMTP was on going inside cultures to share their strengths and to view people not solely from the mainstream. My own clinical work and teaching have focused on working with marginalized groups, sometimes across languages, around stress and trauma issues. The CMTP model is also reflected in feminist thought across disciplines that address issues of marginality (see, for example, hooks, 1994; Hill Collins, 1991). Thus, as a white female faculty member and as the UNITY faculty coordinator working with an African-American choir director, I am often thinking about insider-outsider statuses. I am an insider because of my faculty position, in relation to university functioning and politics, and an outsider in terms of my relation to the African American spiritual community, often referred to as the 'Black Church'.

Underlying the development of the coordinator's role is my attempt to share power among the director, the members of the choir, the institution, and myself. My own beliefs are that the functioning of UNITY should and can address the marginality that has been assigned by dominant groups to African Americans and others in this society. I do not always announce the multi-cultural, feminist, and anti-racist views I attach to my role as coordinator, but I believe they can be seen in the functioning of the group and in my co-leadership with the director. I believe this mostly unannounced empowerment subtext is possible because Lesley's pedagogy addresses so well what other institutions are only beginning to address: learning from the insider's view. This is what bell hooks (1994) calls "engaged pedagogy", where both teacher and student are responsible for the learning community. I believe UNITY portrays this active

learning community where all gain knowledge from each other in an atmosphere that promotes respect and debate.

The Importance of Inclusion, Public Presence and Continuity

Lesley's focus on diversity and inclusion extends to its co-curricular activities. Of the college gospel choirs I have visited in the Boston area, UNITY seems to emphasize inclusiveness as one of its main goals; for example, no other choir has consistently had a cross campus membership. UNITY has had over 120 singers under the direction of Linda Brown San Martin including the Dean of Students, a Lesley University trustee, the university's chaplain, faculty, staff, students, and alumni from all parts of the University. Among the students who participate are students from Lesley's Threshold program, an on campus non-degree program for young adults with diverse learning disabilities and other special needs. These students need to make an extra time commitment to learn the music and the director and I work hard to devise pedagogy that reaches them.

In terms of its diversity, UNITY is a multi-cultural group that includes students of color from many different religious backgrounds; white students of differing ethnic and religious origins; students with differing sexual orientations; and international students, primarily Japanese undergraduate women. In terms of status levels at the university, faculty and others with power and status at the University participate in the choir as equal members with students, with the same requirements in terms of learning music and movement. Finally, in terms of differing ability levels, for Threshold students, and others struggling with musicality, UNITY offers views of how inclusiveness might work in a setting governed by pluralism, with ways for all to participate. For example, not all members may be able to memorize all the music or movements for a concert, and members are allowed to participate in as much as they are able to. Many members report that UNITY is the most diverse experience that they have on campus and that it gives them a sense of being equal with others (e.g. Bedell, 1999).

This inclusion stance extends to spirituality and religious background. The director's experiences at other colleges and human service agencies, where she was asked to lead clients in gospel singing, and the University's emphasis on open participation support a non-sectarian position in terms of choir membership. Nakia and I had discussed this when the group was first founded; I wondered what her views were on non-Christians joining the group. We eventually agreed that people find their way to gospel music for different reasons and she made no attempt to question people's beliefs. This debate about diverse spirituality among UNITY's members created a strong tension in the group and across campus in its first few semesters because the gospel tradition is distinctly a Christian, Black Church experience (Petrie, 1998; Campbell, 1995, Boyer, 1978). In terms of procedures and policies, UNITY's open participation and honoring of the Black Church origins of the music needed to be addressed. I will consider these below.

As an activity supported by a private, non-sectarian university, UNITY should be able to provide a model for open participation and spiritual diversity. UNITY does this in several ways. First, members who wish to offer a prayer do so voluntarily, although the most common practice is silent prayer in a circle of joined hands. Second, the director and I have encouraged members who want to pray aloud to do so from their own traditions. The director has also supported this

effort by stretching the musical repertoire of the choir to include spiritual music of other cultural traditions including Jewish and South African. This is a clear demonstration of how to institute policy and procedures allowing for open participation.

The choir's existence and its continued support by the administration as a cross campus activity demonstrates Lesley's commitment to building public space for diversity work. It is rare for people who are not members of the Black Church to be invited to sing gospel music in an on-going way (Boyer, 1978; McQuaid, 1999). There are some semesters where the choir may have only one or two African American members. However, while not all black and other minority community members and students may join the choir, the presence of UNITY is important to them. In fact, the Dean of Students, who states that she is not a strong singer, felt that she needed to participate in UNITY during several semesters to make that point precisely, that the choir is important. There are currently more white students than students of color in the choir, but there are many students and community members of color in the audience at the concerts each semester, which speaks to the importance of a continuing presence for the choir. A unique part of UNITY's concerts is the director's practice of inviting audience members on stage to sing with the choir during a portion of the concert. Many of these participants join UNITY in subsequent semesters or are seen connecting with each other on campus after the concert. Long term audience members as well as members of the choir have talked about what UNITY means to them. Most often, they mention opening up to whatever their own spirituality is as well as being strengthened and energized (e.g. Bedell, 1999).

Do Spirituality and Empowerment Really Go Together?

In the field of psychology and at academic institutions, the tightly held premise of the separation of church and state has been used to exclude the need to address spiritual issues as a part of academe. The "me" decades of the 1970s and '80s spawned a civic and spiritual impoverishment that helped to change that premise. It is well described by Cornel West (1994) in *Race Matters*:

We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks – family, friends, school – that sustain some sense of purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of spiritual communities that in the past helped Americans face despair, disease, and death and that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence and elegance (p. 5).

The nihilism of the 1990s increased the academy's recognition of the need to broaden our understanding of spirituality and other practices that might facilitate civic engagement. West is echoed by bell hooks (1994) who critiques academe:

It was difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of an intellectual as someone who sought to be whole – well-grounded in a place where there is little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul (p 16).

Many have written that in black communities, the secular and the spiritual are not separate (West, cited in Njeri, 1997; Rogers-Dulan, 1998; Wilson & Stith, 1991), and this has served as one model against nihilism: the civically engaged religious participant. In the context of the history of the Black Church having civic as well as moral authority, West speaks to the

empowerment offered by the Black Church:

...specifically within the Black Church context, we are talking about forms of counsel and advice, forms of sustenance that can keep us going when we, are radically...against the odds"(in Njeri, p 303).

After a UNITY rehearsal an African American graduate student commented to me on the still lingering mind-body-spirit splits in academe. She felt that UNITY was the first place at Lesley where her experiences as a black Christian woman empowered by her faith were honored; this student felt that what was being reinforced in some class discussion and assigned reading was that Christianity was oppressive. This could appear to be a response to certain repressive and conservative Christian churches, but also to the portrayal of white Christians' experiences, as compared to black Christians' experiences, as the template on which to evaluate Christianity's impact as a whole. I see this view when I try to recruit students and others to the choir; even if they have been church involved in the past, many currently do not see spiritual or religious involvement as empowering. They see, for example, only anti-womanist or homophobic messages in their church backgrounds.

It is only in the last five or so years that there has been willingness in psychology and in medicine to study the empowering aspects of spirituality, spiritual well-being, and participation in organized religion; Lesley's Institute for Mind-Body-Spirituality is one such example. Spiritual well-being and religious participation are now seen to positively affect physical and mental health (see for example, Koenig, 1998; Jacques, 1998). I have conducted analog research to look at what the lyrics of gospel music speak to in terms of dealing with stress and trauma (Barone & Bedell, 1998). Besides the music therapy benefits that come from actually singing (see, for example, Holland, 1996; Moon, 1998; Montello & Coons, 1998), the words themselves speak specifically to empowering yourself through connection to a higher power. Thus, I try to educate others that coming from the history of the Black Church and its members' struggle with oppression, gospel music can be empowering.

But Does It Reach Everyone? Engaged Pedagogy And Gospel Choir Participation

Derrick Bell in his book *Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival in an Alien Land Called Home* (1996) describes a fictional character's interaction with gospel music. He believes that gospel music can reach everyone. Bell states (1996):

There is in gospel music a universality capable of touching all who hear and need its comfort, its consolation ... Perhaps gospel music is the much-sought link that can unite the people of this nation, across barriers of race and color, class and creed ... (p 4)

In my own research on gospel music, I have not been able to locate many feminist views on the empowerment of learning to sing gospel music within traditional or non-traditional contexts. Greta Edwards' recent talk (9/24/01) at the Episcopal Divinity School was an exception. A consultant to the Women's Studies program at Harvard, she encouraged and cautioned future ministers to consider gospel music both based on its history and on its healing power, a power intrinsically tied to black women's voices. She made it clear that she felt there were many issues

to be tackled before gospel music could be brought into largely white church settings, but she implied that it was not impossible if all were willing to journey together.

My own response to singing gospel music is to see it as liberating. It is interesting to see how bell hooks' (1994) ideas about engaged pedagogy could be applied to gospel music participation. I have considered how singing the music and absorbing the lyrics seem to empower students to find their ways to healing, to become more assertive, and to see themselves as equal to others. How is this done?

Reaching UNITY's members means reaching (primarily) women students (both graduate and undergraduate) who, in some way, are searching for voice and their own sense of self in the world. The outcomes of learning to sing gospel music – a high volume, emotional expression of spirituality – have real impacts on them (Bedell, 1999). In research I sponsored, Sheri Bedell found that this empowerment is experienced at even higher levels by groups who are doubly or triply oppressed. By the semester's end, many, if not all previously timid young women, are belting out notes with visions of "Viking Women" in their heads. This is a visualization invented by the director to connote that the students should aspire to be as strong in their singing and presence as opera divas so that the messages of gospel music can be powerfully delivered. It is not difficult to imagine how this experience could promote increased assertiveness in the lives of these young students.

hooks' (1994) explanation of the development of a learning community where all participate and all journey is seen at UNITY. In terms of leadership, members witness a an educational setting where a black woman leads, since she has more skills and is ensconced in the cultural tradition, and a white woman does the background work of supporting the group. The director and I cooperate and debate, both behind the scenes and in front of the group, in terms of explaining and learning about different points of view on teaching techniques and spirituality. Perhaps because the group is engaged in the cooperative task of producing music and because of the model of leadership, respect is high on all sides in UNITY (Bedell, 1999). It allows members to immerse themselves, admit when they don't understand something, or ask for explanations of unfamiliar scriptural references in the song lyrics. Sometimes members also share their own techniques for learning songs since working from tapes without sheet music is a new experience for many singers.

All of the above variables and the commitment required for members with busy lives to search for time to listen to tapes, learn a part, learn new movements, etc. results in a transformation where an 'unfamiliar' (for some) language and mode of interacting becomes, in some way, their own. Not all members can make this journey, (about 15-20 complete each semester) but it is heartening that many who don't complete a semester often try out again later and come on stage during the audience participation part of the concert program. This speaks to the impact of participation in what many see as an egalitarian effort.

Politics- Who's Talking About What To Whom Or On Being White In The Wrong Places

At an early point in the group's history after the professional director was hired, a public

performance at a campus event sparked a chain of events and discussion that appeared to elude my every attempt at input and intervention. The incident, now only a footnote in the group's six years of work with the professional director, was an attempt at a family weekend talent show to invite everyone in the audience to participate. A family complained to the undergraduate dean that they felt their daughter was being "coerced" into Christianity and threatened a lawsuit if the choir performed at other campus functions, citing separation of church and state.

This and other early issues were raised with the dean and discussed by administrators. They included a white student's concern that the prayer circle and African American focus at UNITY did not support her spirituality (and one would assume her cultural identity); some administrators' concerns about whether there were 'enough' students of color in the group; and the exclusion of some singers, many times Threshold students, from singing, based on their level of musicality. On all of the issues, I tried to join in conversation, but I believe I was seen as too much of an advocate and not dispassionate enough about the group's methods and centeredness inside African American culture. My own participation in African American culture through my long term partnered relationship and my knowledge of what went on at other college-based gospel choirs weren't enough – I was the 'outsider.' I ended up thinking about an APA conference meeting where white and black women were invited to discuss similarities and differences; one of the black women organizers asked me why so many white lesbians were interested in this work. When I answered that I felt lesbians were also oppressed and that a feminist consciousness should include anti-racist work, she didn't seem convinced. When conflicts came up with UNITY, I wondered, if the coordinator were black and male, would his views on the multi-cultural learning in the choir be taken more seriously?

The Dean of Students finally convened an advisory board, which met several times with very tense discussions on church vs. state issues and the place of a gospel choir at an academic institution. That group included the President's Special Assistant for Affirmative Action, the Dean of Students, Threshold faculty, student services administrators, and me. We attempted to educate each other about differing perspectives and came to a general agreement that both supported the choir and changed some language and actions to recognize UNITY's unique place at an institution of higher learning.

Conflict and Growth: Clearly Supporting a Spiritual Mission

I speak only for myself when I say what I believe to be the outcome of this politicking, but some of it has been clarifying and of benefit to the group in terms of freedom to function. The first was the placement of UNITY, as Nakia had meant it, along with Hillel, the Catholic community and Christian student groups as well as the University Chaplaincy, as a voluntary spiritual and musical experience. Thus, we emphasized that there were other opportunities for students to express their spirituality on campus and that they could start their own groups, as UNITY had been started, based on students' interests.

This also meant supporting other opportunities for students and others to sing on campus and around Cambridge. We asked the undergraduate humanities program, which supports the Lesley Community chorus, to open their group for cross campus membership. Other singing possibilities were listed in the undergraduate student handbook. We made clear that spirituality

was at the center of the group, but we have emphasized a diverse spirituality, not religion. When students themselves ask for an explanation of the theology of song lyrics, the director gives it, along with biblical scripture references. She is often likely to say, "Religion is complicated; God is easy: God is love." While that does not even begin to explain her religious beliefs, it does honor the diverse religious and spiritual traditions in the group's members and the empowering messages from the Black Church found in gospel music.

Anti-Racist Work

This validating of the group's broadly spiritual mission with an ecumenical membership has allowed me as coordinator to confront some misguided and / or inappropriate requests for the choir's performance at certain events. Invitations to sing at any campus event have been generally considered, but the university chaplain and the ALANA student organization have been the most frequent requesters. A request to perform at a reception for an African American speaker caused me to pause. I ascertained from the event planner an assumption that the choir would 'add a little bit of color' and liveliness to the proceedings. The request dismissed the possibility that the speaker would not want a gospel choir at her reception and also that perhaps she was of another, non-Christian religious background. I denied the request, citing "policy" that the group only perform at spiritually oriented events.

I have come to support this view as congruent with the anti-racist work of the group. Many writers note that African Americans' cultural gifts, including gospel music, have often been co-opted with the mistaken and racist idea that one can import a 'bit of culture' for entertainment only (e.g. Edwards, 9/24/01, Boyer, 1973). The question of who should carry on the traditions of the African diaspora is often raised when I attend talks about gospel music. Some deride gospel music's performance in secular settings as troublesome (Boyer, 1978) or even as a bastardization used to "make people feel better between episodes of *Ally McBeal*" (Edwards, 9/24/01). As removed from gospel music's African American history or apart from any attempt to explore what transformation is necessary to truly witness gospel music, secular performance runs the risk of perpetuating and invalidating oppressive experiences that marginalized groups have. In the current climate of crisis, though, some critics have softened their views, allowing that all paths to healing are necessary in troubled times. UNITY's performances off campus have most often been requested by churches in the gospel tradition or by churches engaged in anti-racism work as they see their membership grow in diverse ways. These performances address the concern about whether listeners are merely being entertained or are engaged in learning about or preserving African American cultural heritage.

"Are Black People the Only Ones Who Can Sing Gospel?"

When UNITY first started, I was often teased by the African American members of my family about how bad a multi-cultural, multi-racial gospel group would sound. The director has also joked that St. Peter will say to her at heaven's door, "Oh, you're the one" (teaching gospel cross-culturally). Other more serious concerns about the small percentage of black members in the choir have often been answered by looking at the relatively small size of the minority student population of Lesley's on campus programs in Cambridge and Boston and the very busy lives of many students. But I believe that Lesley's mission and its understanding of true multiculturalism

in a pluralistic society means that UNITY's purpose can not be solely to support African American students on campus, but also to engage all people in learning from inside cultures. I recently posed the above conservative view that only black people can 'rightfully' sing gospel for discussion with Lesley University's chaplain, Nancy Richards. Her answer echoed Cornel West's (1994) assertions that the cultural exclusivity promoted by some Afrocentrist writers is a "...gallant, yet misguided attempt, to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile....out of fear of cultural hybridization..." (p. 4). In other words, as the chaplain noted, "Are we supposed to hide our cultural gifts and keep them all to ourselves?" (N. Richards, personal communication, 9/25/01).

A black singer in UNITY commented to Sheri Bedell that she was glad the choir did not look to her as the expert on this style of singing (R. J., interview with Bedell, 1999). White students, and others, for example, out homosexuals or Jews, who may accurately perceive discrimination against them by some, more conservative Black Christians, have asked me carefully, "Is the choir for everyone – is it all right if I come?" Clarifying the open nature of the group means explaining that some students will be having a cultural immersion experience and some students will be 'going home' as singers in the choir.

It also means a stated commitment to allow those for whom the choir is a new experience time to 'catch up,' learning syncopation and minor chords if they've never sung them before. This has extended to Threshold students who are accepted as singers on the basis of their current musicality. A commitment was made by both the director and the Threshold program to support Threshold students who were willing to work on their basic musicality. At one point that included the Threshold program finding voice lessons for a student who tried out for two semesters in a row and didn't make it through auditions. With individual voice lessons, she was able to sing the next term. Everyone in the choir cheered for her. It was an affirming and powerful moment

Conclusion

Lesley's commitment to work with learning disabled students, with classically trained graduate level music therapists, with the Japanese students, as well as with members familiar with the Black Church's gospel traditions, makes us unique among Boston's college based choirs. UNITY fosters a transformative learning experience where an African American cultural experience is seen as valuable learning in and of itself, without reference to the mainstream or any other cultural norms. The experience with UNITY truly demonstrates that multi-cultural, feminist and anti-racist empowerment perspectives and engaged pedagogy can exist even in co-curricular activities. The transformation gained by members of the choir in their own lives is proof enough of the benefits of struggle to honestly validate and honor the learning possible in truly pluralistic academic settings.

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