Singing the Gospel, Forging the Ties That Bind? Ethnographic Study of a Youth Gospel Choir

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Abstract
How do religious practices forge meaningful social bonds? Building on the provocative claim (Putnam and Campbell 2010) about religious social ties leading to better citizenship, I analyze one of the most common American religious practices—choral singing—to explore how ties are formed. An ethnographic study of a youth gospel choir reveals that the collective emotional experience of making music, the shared understandings of religious narratives in songs’ lyrics, the ritual of performance in church services, and repeated co-presence in the sacred space of the church building create strong bonds among church members. Gospel choir singing binds youth to the organization of the church and symbolically to the local and global black community.

1. Singing the Gospel, Forging the Ties that Bind

If you come to Bethel Baptist Church1 of Trenton on a Wednesday night, you’ll leave dark and eerily quiet city streets and enter a hive of activity. The church is three stories, and at the top, where you’ll enter the building, a pianist will be warming up with scales on a grand piano in the sanctuary. Middle-aged church members, all African-American, mostly women, stream in for choir rehearsal with the appearance of having just left the office. Take the stairs down a level, peek in the window of a Sunday school classroom, and sweatsuit-clad women in their 60s and 70s are practicing aerobics together. Go down to the basement, following the scent of meatloaf, ravioli, or collard greens emanating from the church kitchen. You’ll encounter two dozen children buzzing around a gym-multipurpose room, having just finished a supper prepared by some of the old women of the congregation. Eventually their choir director Brenda, a professional woman arriving harried from a 40-minute commute, will settle them into their seats with the assistance of a microphone and some helpful parents.

1 The names of the church and its members are pseudonyms.
On a Wednesday in October, 17 boys and 17 girls ages four to twelve come to be seated in rows of chairs. They warm up by singing a song they know well:

*Even at my age, I still know that God is good*
*Even in my youth, I still know that God is real*
*I feel him moving way down in my soul*
*What about you, can you feel him?*
*Can you feel him in your soul?*

At the end of the song, Brenda pauses to ask the children some questions:

―Does God only love adults and not children?‖

―No!‖ the children cry.

―Does God love the teen choir more than the children’s choir?‖

―No!‖ Several children laugh at this.

―Are you sure God loves you?‖ the director asks.

―Yes!‖ reply the children in unison.

―I know God loves me,‖ Brenda continues. “I can walk, I can see. I can drink water, I have juice at home.” She’s begun to take on the rhythms of a preacher. She walks among the rows of children. “No one broke into my house. I’m not in a gang. I’m not sick. God takes care of me every day.”

―But I’m sick!‖ pipes up a girl of about five. This pigtailed child, her feet dangling from her chair, has stumbled into the problem of theodicy. I wonder how Brenda will handle this. She walks to the girl. “You’re sick?” she asks with the exaggerated sympathy appropriate for a small child. She lays her hand on the child’s forehead, bows her head, and prays over her, asking God to heal her, “binding with the blood of Jesus.” Brenda opens her eyes: “I’m healed by the stripes of Jesus—repeat it.”

―I’m healed by the stripes of Jesus,‖ the child whispers.
At this Baptist church probably no one in the room expects that the girl would be instantly cured of her illness thanks to Brenda’s prayer. Each Sunday morning the church prays over a list of the sick and injured, and one week the pastor acknowledges, “It seems sometimes that the list just gets longer.” But on this evening, the sick girl is in a building filled with infants to the elderly, eating, exercising, making music together. She has seen that when she is sick one of these church members will stop everything, lay her hands upon her, and intervene for her before God.

2. Questions and Contribution

This paper is an ethnographic study of the children’s and teen gospel choirs of a black Baptist church in Trenton, New Jersey. The scene above hints at patterns I observed throughout my fieldwork: musical training married with religious instruction, the development of strong social ties between generations, and the distinctive place of gospel choirs as part of a religious and racial community. Scholars have long recognized black churches as the source of cultural resources that feed community involvement and political action (Frederick 2003, Harris 2003, Higginbotham 1994, McKenzie 2007, McRoberts 2003, Patillo-McCoy 1998, Vander Zanden 1963). After Putnam (1993, 2000) popularized the concept of social capital in discussions of civic engagement, sociologists of religion took up the task of elaborating the links between religion and social capital (Ammerman 1997, Becker and Dhingra 2001, Chaves et al. 2002, Cnaan et al. 2002, Mitchell 2007, Park and Smith 2000, Smidt 2003 and 2008, Wuthnow 2002). Most recently, Putnam and Campbell (2010) have made the larger claim that members of religious congregations are “better citizens”: they donate more money, they volunteer more often, they are more likely to vote. Putnam and Campbell’s research identifies religiously-based social networks—close ties within religious congregations—as the crucial factor that makes people
better citizens. Yet these findings leave important questions unanswered—how are these ties formed? What is the link between the religious activities of congregations, like the making of music or the offering of collective prayer, and the cultivation of the strong social networks that seem crucial to engaged citizenship? What is distinctive about religious ties as compared to other sorts of social ties—even other “morally intense” ones (Putnam and Campbell p. 478)?

The “thin” way that Putnam and Campbell measure religious social networks-- the number of close friends in one’s congregation, membership in congregational small groups, and the frequency with which one talks about religion with family and friends—does not say much about the qualities of relationships forged in religious groups, much less about the distinctive features of religion that forge those relationships. Putnam and Campell’s survey-based account of social ties built through religion can be enhanced by taking seriously Durkheim’s ideas about the power of religion to create meaningful collective experiences that knit individuals together. Accounting for the ways in which religious practice creates particular types of social bonds is consistent with Lichterman’s (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, Lichterman 2006) elaboration of the concept of group style. He claims that we need thicker, qualitative understandings of civic groups—interactional qualities that the concept of social capital cannot measure—in order to know whether groups in fact promote deep, Tocquevillian modes of citizenship (Lichterman 2005).

My contribution is to build on Putnam and Campbell’s findings, offering an answer to the question of how religious organizations form strong ties among members. My research demonstrates that some people develop these ties as children and adolescents, and that the religious practice of singing in a choir is one way in which ties among youth and between young and adult church members are deepened and loyalty to the church as an organization is cemented.
DeNora (2002:19) has written about music as a “medium through which social relations are forged,” and other scholars have noted the potential of choirs to create civically meaningful social bonds \(^2\) (Baggetta 2009, Heider and Warner 2010), particularly when there are significant overlaps among family, musical, and religious groups (Clawson 2004, 2011). This paper illuminates the link between the practice of making religious music and the formation of the strong bonds between people and organizations that, according to Putnam and Campbell, yields better citizens.

Though they do not speak in terms of social capital, the members of Bethel prize the bonds among members, between members and church, and between church and community. The opening vignette illustrates the church’s deliberate effort to cultivate those ties and to be a socially dense institution through the rehearsal and performance of sacred music. One approach would be to analyze this relationship through the Durkheimian (and Collins’ neo-Durkheimian) lens of ritual. After all, most gospel choir singing takes place within a church service, the ritual par excellence; an analysis along the lines of Heider and Warner’s (2010) examination of Sacred Harp singing would likely reveal that gospel choir singing yields shared values and group solidarity, two of Collins’ (2004) ritual outcomes. Instead, I employ the concept of practice. This concept has the advantage of drawing attention to the quotidian ways in which a religious activity must be taught and learned (what Mahmood [2006] calls the “pedagogical process”) and to the relationships and institutions in which the activities are embedded. Analyzing gospel singing from this theoretical perspective best allows me to link the distinctively religious things that churches do to the formation of meaningful social bonds.

\(^2\) Putnam himself cites choruses as an example of civic associations that promote vigorous democracy in his work on social capital in Italy (1993).
I proceed in the paper with a discussion of my field site and research methods and then consider at greater length the concept of “practice.” The central section of the paper uses data from ethnographic observation and interviews to illustrate how youth learn the practice of gospel singing at Bethel. After discussing what the practice of gospel choir singing is and how Bethel’s youth learn it, I explain how this practice is the means by which meaningful bonds are forged between individuals, between youth and the church, and symbolically between the church and the black community.

3. Site and Methods

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted at Bethel Baptist Church from October 2009 to May 2010, with additional follow-up observation and interviews from October to December 2010. During those months I attended rehearsals for the children’s (ages 4-12) and teen (ages 13-18) choirs, weeknight dinners and Bible studies, Sunday morning worship services at which the choirs performed, and the 2009 and 2010 Christmas concerts. I conducted semi-structured interviews with directors of both choirs and members of the teen choir, as well as with the director of the Bethel Youth Ministry and the church’s head pastor. As I sat at dinner tables in the church cafeteria and in seats in the back of auditoriums I engaged in many informal conversations with choir members, parents, and Bible study leaders.

Though I approached the topic with general interests in the relationships among choral music, religion, and community, my specific questions emerged only after several months of fieldwork. Interviews with members of the teen choir took place in spring and fall of 2010, after I had become a more-or-less taken for granted fixture at the church. The interviews were
digitally recorded with an iPod, transcribed,\(^3\) and coded according to my emerging research questions.

The choice of Bethel as a field site bears explaining, since any number of religious congregations could be used to study the relationships among religion, music, and community. I was particularly interested in studying a gospel choir because of the historical links between the musical genre, race, and the church as an institution. While the work of Bach and Mozart, sacred music in the European tradition, has been institutionalized in professional arts organizations, the genre of gospel music sung at Bethel was born in and continues to be performed largely in African American churches (Marini 2003). Church choirs remain a significant part of black religious experience; the 1999 Arts and Religion survey found that half of black Americans attend churches that sponsor adult choirs and nearly the same share sponsor children’s choirs\(^4\).

I selected a Baptist church in part because of my knowledge of the denomination’s basic theology and liturgy thanks to my own religious upbringing. This knowledge mitigated in a small sense the social distance between the black church members and myself as a white researcher, and moreover it allowed me to focus my attention on the way that religious “content” was expressed musically. Finally, the choice of Bethel was fortuitous because of the range of members’ socioeconomic status. The pastor described the members of the church as one-quarter to one-third upper middle class, one-half middle and working class, and the remaining quarter or

\(^3\) Quotes in the paper come from transcribed interviews, except for the opening anecdote and the description of the Christmas concert in section 6.3, which are based on detailed field notes. These transcriptions were edited to remove common verbal tics (“um,” “like,” “you know”) and false starts, but were not corrected for grammar.

less as poor. Forty percent of members live in the city of Trenton, while the rest live in suburbs. This division was roughly mirrored among members of the youth choirs. If the creation of social bonds in religious congregations is important, as Putnam and Campbell argue it is, the ability of gospel choir singing to forge strong social ties across vast socioeconomic differences is especially worth noting.

The General Baptist Convention to which Bethel belongs, with the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) and A.M.E. Zion denominations are generally considered the “high churches” of the black Protestant landscape. These denominations were founded in the 18th and early 19th century, are characterized by worship that is more reserved and formal than that practiced in charismatic or Pentecostal churches, and today attract most of their members from the black middle class. When Bethel Baptist Church was founded in the late 1880s, Trenton was a small but thriving industrial city. The Brooklyn Bridge, fifty miles to the north, had been completed several years earlier thanks to the new steel wire rope invented by Trenton’s Roebling and Sons Company. Bethel was the first African American Church to be incorporated in a city that drew thousands of Italian, Jewish, and Hungarian immigrants near the turn of the century. In the decades that followed, the church became a center of black leadership. The church’s pastor in the mid-1950s was elected to the State Legislature and rose to become Speaker of the State House. De-industrialization and the 1968 riots in Trenton following Martin Luther King’s assassination led to the flight of many of the city’s middle class residents. Bethel has remained a hub of African American leadership in the decades since; Barack Obama visited the church during his term as a Senator, and Bethel’s pastor was recently invited to give the morning invocation for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Today a de-industrialized Trenton muddles through thanks largely to the presence of the
state capital and its 20,000 workers that commute into the city each day from the suburbs. The economic divide between Trenton, about seven miles wide, and the suburbs that adjoin it is striking: over one quarter of people in Trenton were living below the poverty line in 2009, compared to 10% in the suburb to the east and 5% to the northwest (U.S. Census Bureau). Bethel remains in the neighborhood where it was founded more than a hundred years ago, but today many of the members who drive to the church on Sunday mornings or evenings during the week come from these comfortable suburbs. The individuals who come to Bethel each Sunday—and in many cases, several evenings during the week—choose to do so when they could choose churches of any denomination, black or multiracial, urban or suburban, or could forego church membership altogether. But members prize the fact that many of Bethel’s families have belonged to the church for multiple generations. Others express pride in the church’s historical role in Trenton’s black community. Despite the suburbanization of its members, Bethel still understands itself to be a fixture of the city of Trenton, and the performances of the choirs are opportunities to express this symbolically.

The youth gospel choirs contribute to the maintenance of a socially dense organization in which strong ties are built between members of generations, between individuals and the church, and between the church and the community. By drawing on practice theory, on which I briefly elaborate below, I am able to link the act of singing gospel music to the social relationships in which the act is embedded.

4. Practice: A Brief Theoretical Discussion

A *practice* can be defined most simply as something that people do, but the word has taken particular shades of meaning in the literatures of anthropology, sociology, and political philosophy. In the anthropological tradition that developed from and with Pierre Bourdieu’s
work beginning in the 1970s (Calhoun et al. 1993, Giddens 1979, Ortner 1994, Sahlin 1981), the concept of practice emerged to deal with a theoretical problem: how can we reconcile the ways structures constrain human lives with actors’ potential to change existing social patterns? A practice, in this sense, is human behavior that is grounded within particular social contexts. By “practicing” in these contexts individuals develop particular dispositions that reflect larger social structures, yet are capable of challenging them (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The concept of practice therefore marries Foucault’s (1978, 1980) claim that power is present in all relationships with the understanding that culture is reproduced not just by socialization or with symbols, but through daily patterns of action and interaction. Anthropologists’ attention to practice has demonstrated that social structures are contested not just through formal political action but in smaller forms of resistance in daily life (Dirks et al. 1994).

Studies of religious practice in the “lived religion” tradition typically draw on this sense of practice as “culture in action,” which illuminates ways that “individuals both reproduce structures and change them” (Hall 1997, p. 6). In terms of religion, practice suggests “the tensions, the ongoing struggle of definition, which are constituted within every religious tradition and that are always present in how people choose to act” (ibid.). Underlying this is the idea that although religious traditions can hand down rituals or doctrines, people must constantly struggle to make sense of them within their own lives. As a consequence studies of lived religion often look at religious practice outside of religious institutions (e.g. Bender 2003, Frederick 2003, Orsi 1985).

Less often used in studies of religious practice is the notion of practice elaborated by MacIntyre (2007 [1981]) and Stout (2001 [1988]). In this tradition a practice is a human activity that is social and cooperative, that is complex (more than just a technical skill), and that has
“internal goods,” or qualities of excellence that can only be achieved by participation in the practice. MacIntyre comes to the discussion of practice as part of a greater inquiry about virtue; virtues, in this scheme, are defined as traits that allow one to achieve excellence in a practice. There are parallels in MacIntyre and Stout’s writing to Bourdieu’s understanding of the way that social practices imprint individuals with particular dispositions. For MacIntyre it is only possible to attain the goods internal to a practice by possession of particular virtues. The development of a subjectivity—here, a virtuous self—takes place in tandem with the exercise of a practice.

In both traditions of the concept, practices are inherently social. MacIntyre and Stout emphasize the way that the “rules” of a practice, its standards of excellence (internal goods) and necessary virtues are established by practitioners over time. A novice practitioner must first learn the “rules of the game” and submit to the authorities of the community of practice in order to become adept at the practice. While the tendency in anthropological discussions of practice is to highlight resistance, MacIntyre emphasizes practice’s element of discipline. Practice involves submission “to standards of excellence and obedience to rules . . .To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards” (190). Yet a defining quality of a practice—as opposed to a technical skill—is that its standards of excellence are not permanently fixed. Stout writes, “Practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time—painting has no such goal nor has physics—but the goals themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity.” (194). What constitutes greatness in the practice of painting is redefined in the wake of the Da Vincis and Van Goghs. Thus, the social dimensions of a practice have to be understood partly in terms of history: “To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have proceeded us in the practice” (ibid.) As I will discuss
further on, the members of Bethel have a strong sense of historical continuity that weaves together religion, music, and racial history.

The social dimensions of practices can also be viewed in terms of the institutions in which they are embedded (Stout 2001). Just as the contemporary practice of medicine cannot be understood without reference to hospitals and insurance companies, my analysis demonstrates that the practice of gospel choir singing must be understood with reference to the church as an institution. Drawing on the MacIntyre-Stout tradition, Wuthnow (1998) depicts the role of religious institutions as becomes providing spaces for practice, as “facilitators, rather than as ends in themselves” (17). Wuthnow also draws on MacIntyre in his understanding of the discipline that spiritual practice demands of individuals. He calls this the moral dimension of spiritual practice: “rules that constrain a person’s behavior, in a way that shapes the person as well.” This theme of practice shaping subjectivity is also prominent in the writing of Mahmood (2006), whose discussion of the Egyptian piety movement focuses on the discipline of daily prayer and bodily management in order to cultivate a virtuous disposition.

Like Wuthnow and Mahmood, I employ MacIntyre and Stout’s sense of practice because of the emphasis on institutions and the role of what Mahmood calls “the pedagogical process” in the cultivation of a practice, or the way in which authorities teach a practice and initiates learn it. These emphases also serve to redirect attention to the sources of pedagogical authority and the institutions in which they are embedded. Though Bender and others rightly recognize that religious practice occurs in institutions that are not themselves religious, MacIntyre, Stout, and Mahmood urge greater attention to the institutions that provide the “rules of the game,” that provide the authority and discipline that structures the practice. Wherever else youth may take
and transform the practice of gospel choir singing, they first learn the practice in religious institutions—in the church.

5. Learning the Practice of Gospel Choir Singing

Ethnographic study allowed me to observe the “pedagogical process” by which youth learned the practice of gospel choir singing. While gospel choir singing is most prominently carried out during the sacred time of Sunday worship services, the pedagogical process that supports it is rooted in the institution of the church and its many activities and social ties: choir rehearsals, Bible studies, and the kin-like relationships between youth and adults. It is in these settings that youth learn the techniques of their practice and rehearse them.

In this section I discuss what the practice of gospel singing looks like and how it is taught at Bethel. This practice combines elements of raw musicality, religious lyrics, and a prescribed subjectivity during performance to make it a religious act. Each of these elements must be learned. The youth at Bethel, like the rest of us, may be born with qualities that allow them to appreciate the beauty of a melody or the driving force of a beat, but they must learn how to produce those sounds with their own voices. Not only must they learn the words to sing, they learn the religious narratives that are the source of lyrics and specifically the idioms of African American religion that flavor gospel music. Finally, the young people must learn to make music in the context of a religious ritual. My fieldwork illuminates the differences between the “ordinary” time of rehearsal and the “sacred” time of the worship service, and the way that youth are taught to manage their bodies and interior states during each.

5.1 Music

Religious music’s power to evoke emotions through rhythm and melody alone would be clear to any observer who walked through Bethel’s door on Sunday morning and caught the
organ, drums, and bass that typically accompany the choir in the middle of an instrumental break.

Members of the congregation stand and clap their hands; elders tap their feet while little girls dance. A 15-year-old choir member described the effect of music this way:

This is worship… and everybody can do it. Everybody can stand up, add to it, instead of, opposed to, sitting down and listening to just the pastor what he’s saying. You can join in. A lot of people feel it, they yell, just let all the emotion, all the anger and everything, just let it go. (Juwan)

Many members of the church told me about the importance of a “good beat” in music’s appeal or the “tone” of a musician as he or she sings. Adult members spoke of black church music having a particular “soulfulness” that reflected the people:

I think music communicates . . . because if you take an instrument away, you still have the rhythm and the soulfulness of what black music has meant. (Rev. Johnson)

I think of years ago in the old churches, even go back to Elvis Presley, you know, they were hanging around outside of the black churches to learn the quality of the music they needed to sing. I don't know what it is, but it’s very different. (Anne)

The choir’s links to the history of gospel music are embodied in people like David, the third-generation church musician who accompanies the choir on the piano. He can explain at length the genealogy of black gospel music, from its roots in Negro spirituals to the development of the stride piano style, to the cross-fertilization of gospel and blues in the mid-20th century.

David and the director of the teen choir, Nancy, typically reject sheet music in favor of teasing out harmony parts by ear from CDs. The youth learn their parts in rehearsal by ear, through repetition. This is one way in which the musical training in an African American church is distinctive; in an Episcopal youth choir the teens might have learned standard musical notation; in a Southern church in the early 20th century they might have learned to read shape notes. The “tone” of the singing is the brassy vocal style of R & B music rather than opera. Most of the songs contain a vocal solo that demands elements of improvisation. Children as young as five
are given solos to perform and are eagerly cheered by the parents who observe rehearsals. The results of this early training were audible at the Christmas concert in 2009, when I watched 12-year-old Alicia confidently perform a solo for the song “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”, filling it with the vocal embellishments. She sang with confidence and accuracy—and with competency in the demands of the genre. These solos notwithstanding, choir singing is fundamentally a collective practice. The overall quality of the sound depends on the ability of weaker and stronger singers to combine effectively. Singers stand close to one another, move their bodies in unison, and learn to tune their voices to the others that surround them.

Despite the powerful qualities of this music, youth and adults both warned me that a “good beat” was not enough to make music religiously meaningful, and that appealing musical qualities of a song can disguise the message of the words; it can “mask a lot of things,” according to Rev. Johnson. He continued,

Folk go dancing off to their death with a good beat and good rhythm. And so what is the content? What’s the message here? What are you trying to say to me? If you take all the trappings away, what’s the message?

Also essential to the practice of gospel choir singing is using lyrics to communicate religious messages to the audience, to God, and to one’s self.

5.2 Lyrics

In his study of African American worship, Nelson (2005) discusses the importance of shared meaning for collective religious experience. For a group of individuals to understand an emotionally intense experience like a musical performance as religious, the individuals must have common cognitive scripts to explain what is happening. Nelson’s discussion emphasizes how worship services are structured to provide shared understandings. But my observation revealed that much of the common scripts that establish gospel choir singing as a religious
practice is in fact constructed outside of services. Youth require more explicit instruction to harness the religious “message” to the emotive qualities of the music.

For the members of Bethel the religious message in the songs was what made gospel singing distinctive from other forms of artistic expression. Some singers understood singing as a means of direct communication with God, particularly when the words of the song used first and second person pronouns. Adults believed that by singing religious songs, youth would come to a better understanding of the religious narratives and expressions about which they sang. Leaders of the choir chose songs in part for the religious messages that the lyrics conveyed. But youth learned to *interpret* those messages during the Bible lessons that accompanied each rehearsal and during rehearsals themselves as leaders explicating the link between religious beliefs and religious song. As I observed rehearsals of the children’s and teen choirs I often heard the directors discuss the lyrics with reference to youth’s daily lives or topics discussed during Bible lessons. Alicia, the young choir member, confirmed this:

Q: Do you feel like you learned religious things from being in the choir?
A: Well, our director, Miss Brenda, before we sing a song she makes sure that we understand what we’re singing about. Like she’ll tell us, she said we can’t just sing a song if we don’t know what we’re singing. Like, if we’re singing “Amazing Grace,” and we know nothing about it what’s the point of singing? You can’t--you can’t sing and minister to somebody else if you don’t know what you’re singing about.

There are several ways the choir directors made these points. Brenda, the director of the children’s choir, used the rhetorical device of public prayer combined with direct instruction to convey the meaning of the words of the children’s song. At the beginning of a rehearsal in the autumn, Brenda prayed aloud and offered thanks for all of the children, the parents, grandparents and guardians who were at the church that evening. After the prayer was over, she posed questions to the children: “How many of you have a house? A bed? A mother or father or
grandma or poppy to take care of you?” After each question, all the children raised their hands. She told them, “You know God is real because you’ve been blessed.” The questions were meant to illuminate the message of gratitude toward a generous God. This was the theme of the song the children sang next:

_Technical terms and data_ 

_Better be grateful for all he’s done_  
_Better be grateful for all he’s done_  
_For food you have to eat, for a place you have to sleep_  

_You better be grateful for all he’s done_  
_You better be grateful for all he’s done_  
_For clothes you have to wear, for the brush to brush your hair_  

_Every time I get my plate_  
_That is why I say my grace_  
_Everybody don’t have food_  
_And I say:_  
_Thank you Jesus!_  
_Thank you Lord!_

For the teenagers, part of the discipline of membership in the choir is participation in a Bible lesson each week before rehearsals. These lessons were often a source of mild complaint among the youth, but they served to provide shared understandings of the religious themes that comprised the songs’ lyrical content.

5.3 Subjectivity for Performing

Finally, for gospel singing to be an act of religious practice, the singing must be situated within what Marini (2003) calls “a specific intention and occasion to praise divinity” (7). In Mahmood’s terms, it is the _subjectivity_ that singers assume that designates the act of singing gospel music as religious practice. Adults and youth both described this subjectivity as “worshipful.” A recent high school graduate had once been a member of a classically trained boy choir in addition to singing with the teen choir. He explained what was distinctive about singing with Bethel’s gospel choir: “You’re not necessarily just singing to sing, it’s more to the
point where you’re singing to worship instead of singing for anything else . . . with the teen choir it’s basically singing worship and to praise God.” (Nathan)

The leaders of the choir attempt to cultivate a worshipful subjectivity through instruction during rehearsals. Just as they engage in cognitive framing so that youth understand the meaning of the words, the directors give youth cues about the appropriate emotional and spiritual states for performing music. Frequently this took place when the teenagers became too rowdy and adults felt their behavior was inappropriate for church:

[One] day we was kinda talking a little excessively, so our pianist just started talking about how we’re playing around, how the group was playing around and not actually trying to sing this song. And they just started telling us about how God’s done everything in our lives and almost everybody in the choir started crying ‘cause we actually understood what he was saying. So he said to apply the song into our every day lives. (Daniel)

In this case the leader did not attempt to link the songs to sacred texts, but rather to invoke their own lived experience in order to generate an emotional response. By holding in mind one’s own spiritual experiences in mind youth were to have the appropriate disposition for singing. The leaders invoked “normative emotions” (Nelson 2005) that were appropriate for the practice of religious music.

The “occasion to praise” offered during the sacred time of worship services also transformed the behavior of the youth. The dress and bearing of the teenagers was dramatically different between their Thursday evening rehearsals and their Sunday morning performances. During the week the teens dressed in jeans, t-shirts, and hooded sweatshirts. Their ease was echoed in the ways they held their bodies, sitting, standing, or slouching against pews as they rehearsed harmonies. On Sunday the teenagers were attired in white collared shirts and black skirts or slacks. Serving as junior ushers, many of the youth wore gold badges pinned to their chests and demonstrated exquisite posture. In addition to changes in the young people’s physical
bearing during worship services, a prelude of prayer, reading of sacred texts, and other sacred
music before the youth choirs’ performances provided a context for assuming a worshipful
subjectivity. It was during these moments of sacred time in which their singing felt most
distinctly religious to the youth. Several singers described performances as spiritual experiences:

A few times in the choir we had a song that was so powerful that it spoke to all
of us, and while singing a couple people cried. A couple people felt the like the
song and the message coming through the song. . . [It’s ] like you can actually
feel Him like coming through your words, coming through the song. (Juwan)

The practice of gospel choir singing, properly executed, is understood as an opportunity for
communication with the divine. Seventeen-year-old Katherine explained, “I think that there’s
more ways of like talking to God beside dancing or preaching or talking. Also singing is how
you can also communicate with God.” Monika described singing as a moment when “something
out of your soul just like comes out and you have this spirit about you.” These moments are
especially poignant because Bethel is not a charismatic church; worshippers typically do not
speak in tongues, “shout,” or move their body in other “spirit-filled” ways during services.
Singing is understood as the principal way to have a visceral experience of God.

6. Religious Practice and Social Ties

The social context in which youth learn to practice gospel singing is a dense,
multigenerational network of church members and a church organization that understands itself
as a repository of black history and contemporary black leadership. In addition to the intragroup
bonds that are formed through the act of singing together, singers are bound to social networks
within the church. These networks undergird the pedagogical process, providing discipline when
it is needed and offering youth relationships that extend beyond their kin.

6.1 Intergenerational Ties
All but one of the 13 members of the teen choir that I interviewed had family members that also attended Bethel. Most of the teens had extended family, typically aunts or grandparents that also attended the church, and five of the teens were fourth-generation members of Bethel.

Charlene, whose son is a member of the children’s choir and is a fifth-generation member of the church, described the importance of these intergenerational ties:

My family has a lineage, I guess if you will, in the history in the church. My grandmother, you know, all her brothers, she has seven brothers and one sister. They all either played the organ, sang in the choir, was involved in a whole ton of other ministries and things like that … I would say for me I think it’s a privilege to be a part of this congregation and the history of the church. It’s important to me. And yes, that’s part of the reason why I stayed at the church… so that my son can then also be a part of the legacy and the history of our family with the church.

Charlene is a single parent who had to take a lower-paying job after the 2008 financial crisis. Despite her own tight budget, she contributed money to pay for choir uniforms for members of the children’s choir whose families couldn’t pay for them. The children’s choir has a substantial number of members whose parents do not belong to the church; they are neighborhood or school friends of children whose parents are members. But at the church, any adult takes responsibility for providing for or disciplining anyone else’s children as needed. Charlene recalls an incident where she disciplined a pair of young teenage boys who were misbehaving during a rehearsal. “I said, tell your mom and dad if you want, they’ll agree with me.”

The youth, though occasionally chastised by this close network of adults, mostly describe them as trustworthy and potential sources of help. Several young men told me they exchange text messages with the pastor, and two choir members referred to women in the congregation as “other mothers.” The metaphor of family came up repeatedly in interviews. One teenage girl felt that her trust had been betrayed when she spoke with an adult about a problem, but most youth spoke about the social environment of the church in other terms. Alicia said: “When I step
into the church it’s like a safe environment, like I know where I’m at. I know this is a place where if I ever wanted to come to I could just run and just come here.”

6.2 Ties Between Individuals and Organization

Bethel’s adult members model their attachment to the church as an organization. During a typical children’s choir rehearsal, mothers and grandmothers sit at the back of the multi-purpose room working on church committee business. Of the teens who have families that attend the church, all of the adults are involved in a committee or musical group in the church’s service. After attending the dress rehearsal for the 2009 Christmas concert, I noticed some teenagers did not exit the stage between acts because they were members of so many ensembles. Youth minister Anne later explained that their parents were immersed in the activities of the church, and so the children have been tagging along “since they were two or three, walking, you know, and so they’re used to it.”

The norm that youth are taught is that gospel choir singing is not an artistic or religious practice only for one’s own pleasure. It is a skill to be used in service to the church. The choir typically performs on the second Sunday of the month, when the youth of the church are charged with providing music, serving as ushers, and reading scripture. Adult members of the church describe these tasks as training for future leadership roles in the church:

We’re grooming them to become the leaders, the future leaders in the church, the future pastors, the future deacons and deaconesses. And they’re eventually gonna be where we are, running the church and encouraging other young folks to embrace God and move forward to be--to take over from them. So that’s the way I see them. (Cynthia)

Chantel, 17 years old, echoed this: “I think our role mostly is to help guide the younger kids in the right direction . . . And basically learn how the church operates so we can be those leaders of the church later on.”
So before beginning Thursday rehearsals, the youth were taught to pray for the church’s ministry committees. Amid learning the Bible stories that provide the lyrical content of the songs they sing, the young people learned the history of the church and visited a Trenton cemetery to see the graves of the founding members of Bethel. Presumably many of the names the youth encountered on headstones were not new; those who were not ancestors were featured in the photographs of the church’s century-plus history that the youth pass each time they walk the basement corridors.

An emphasis on shared history and racial identity is one way that class differences are smoothed at Bethel. Most of the church’s leaders are middle class, but many members have relatives—some of them who also attend Bethel—who are working class or who have skirted the problems of the urban poor. The rhetoric of sermons and prayers acknowledges these struggles: violence, poor schools, drug abuse. Brenda’s prayer, described in Section 5.2, was echoed in dozens of prayers I heard during my fieldwork that thanked God for providing the barest of necessities. Middle class and poorer members found common ground in viewing God as powerful and merciful. More concretely, members of different classes were bound by a commitment to the community of Trenton, which remained “home” as the ancestral site of the church, even when members—including the pastor—moved out to surrounding suburbs.

6.3 Ties from Organization to Local and Racial Communities

Membership in the choir serves to bind youth to the church as an organization, which in turn sees itself as part of the history of African American leadership in Trenton and as embedded in the local, national, and international black communities. The pastor told me, “Bethel’s history is almost inextricably liked with Trenton’s history.” On a during Black History Month, a teenager came to the podium to read a biography of a notable church member. The boy
recounted the life of Moses Higginbotham, a church member in the first decades of the 20th century. Higginbotham mortgaged his house in Trenton to help build Bethel’s 1902 church building. He was the first African American to be employed with a refrigeration firm in the city, and eventually brought relatives into the firm. He thrived there, and with a loan from his employer purchased a large tract of land in Ewing Hill, moving with some of his siblings’ families to become some of the first black residents of that town. Higginbotham was a deacon in the church, and his grandson, raised in Bethel, attended Yale Law School and went on to teach at several renowned law schools before becoming a federal judge, and eventually being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Rev. Johnson added, “He should have been a Supreme Court Justice instead of Clarence Thomas, and would have been under a different administration. He would have been the inheritor of Justice Marshall’s legacy.” Johnson emphasized that Higginbotham represents an important part of Bethel’s history, of Trenton’s history, and of black America’s greater history.

Singing gospel music symbolically links the youth of Bethel to this history. Rev. Johnson explained in our interview,

Music, besides being the international language, music in the black church has been the source of inspiration to keep us focused, steady, grounded through the most horrendous of life experiences. That if a man robs you of your soul, then they really have robbed you of who you are. And I think the music, the worship, the ability to praise God has anchored us even before we were able to read. It anchored slaves in the fields. It kept them going. It connected them to something greater even in the midst of horrific, you know, experiences from man. You know, and so the spirituals of American blacks, it’s a powerful force that just can’t be denied.

The links between the practice of gospel choir singing, Bethel as an organization, and the nested black communities of Trenton, the United States, and the world were powerfully displayed during the church’s Christmas concert in 2009. The concert was meant to be held a
month earlier, December 19, but was postponed because of a snowstorm. In the intervening weeks, the pastor and three other church members were part of a mission delegation to Haiti when the earthquake struck there. No one in the church knew of the group’s safety or whereabouts for a day after the earthquake. News that the group was unharmed came through just as a prayer vigil was getting underway at the church. Subsequently the church chose to donate all proceeds from the rescheduled concert to Haiti relief, and the ties between Bethel and all people of African descent—a theme I had heard before\(^5\)—echoed repeatedly during the concert.

The concert, held in the Trenton’s recently renovated, neo-classical War Memorial theater, was titled “One Christ, One Community, One Christmas.” As the curtain came up, the audience saw not a manger scene, but the iconic landmark of Trenton: a model of the steel bridge with its neon message “TRENTON MAKES THE WORLD TAKES.” The opening number of the concert began with a dramatically-read narrative of Trenton’s history as the capital of the state and—briefly—the capital of the nation (in 1784), continuing with the city’s past as an industrial power. As the piece continued, church members dressed in costumes walked across the bridge to signal the human contributions of the community today: first, Rev. Johnson and his wife, then doctors, soldiers, senior citizens, a girl scout, a woman in African dress waving an American flag. Finally, a young black couple dressed in imitation of Michelle and Barack Obama on the night of the inauguration crossed the bridge. “2009 was a momentous year,” the narrator said. “We dreamed of having a President and First Lady that would look like them.”

Next, the joint choirs performed a song called “God of the City,” in front of a painted backdrop

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\(^5\) Bethel visually depicts its Afrocentrism with images of a dark-skinned Jesus and other Biblical figures on display on classroom walls, as well as the wearing of African dress by the choirs during February.
of Trenton’s skyline. The notion of Bethel’s membership in the community extended further as Rev. Johnson discussed the church’s responsibilities to all people of African descent. At the conclusion of the “One Community” number, Rev. Johnson spoke:

I want to reiterate the theme of community. I think it’s the reason God postponed this night from December 19. . . I want us to feel a little uncomfortable for being in the comfort of America. Even in our worst cities, it will never compare with the poverty there [Haiti] BEFORE the earthquake. We need to realize that we breathe the same air, drink the same water, bleed the same blood. Maybe we can create the community that God wants us to create. We are part of a larger world community. We are inextricably linked with our brothers and sisters around the world. I want community to take on a new meaning. We are part of something bigger.

As Stout and MacIntyre remind us, practices are embedded in history, in institutions, and in relationships of authority. As youth learn to practice gospel choir singing they deepen relationships with other members of the congregation even as they strengthen their own commitment to the church as an organization and symbolically reaffirm the church’s place in local and racial communities.

7. Discussion

At the beginning of the paper I raised the question of how strong social ties within religious congregations are formed. I argued that through the religious practice of gospel choir singing, youth forge social bonds to individuals and to the church as an organization. Practice theory suggests that the way activities are taught and rehearsed creates specific moral languages and subjectivities. The youth of Bethel learn gospel choir singing as a religious practice. They submit each week to the authority of adults who instruct them in techniques of making music, in linking songs to religious messages, and in cultivating the worshipful subjectivity that makes the performance of gospel music a distinctively religious act. It would be a mistake, though, to see the youth as merely receptive, or as imprints of the church and its adult authority figures. In
interviews youth expressed a variety of personal religious beliefs. Some expressed religious doubts or were toying with rejection of what they were being taught at church. Several, at least, had strayed from the church’s moral teachings on alcohol and sexuality. Gospel choir singing is important because it was a way for youth to be religious in a structured and social way while maintaining a measure of spiritual autonomy.

What the youth had in common was the fact that they were re-creating social structures through their participation in the choir. The performances in Sunday services were the most visible instances of this; they were moments of Durkheimian collective effervescence that contributed to group solidarity. But as I have demonstrated, the practice of gospel choir singing extends beyond those ritual moments. The “backstage” moments connected with the practice of singing—the rehearsals, Bible studies, and shared meals—all contributed to building social bonds as well. Youth were taught the narratives of their faith that comprised the music’s lyrics. This explicit instruction allowed youth to interpret the music they sang so that shared meaning was possible. The practice of singing also demanded regular co-presence at the church, where youth were surrounded by members of different generations who engaged in the prosaic tasks of daily life—eating, exercising—and in the work needed for the maintenance of the organization. Church members’ presence at this particular place was important too; the church building represented continuity in Trenton’s history, and the photographs and news clippings of Bethel’s history that adorned the walls reinforced members’ sense of racial and organizational identity.

Membership in the church gospel choirs was distinctive from membership in other choirs or musical groups in that performance was understood to be in the service of a particular community. Even though youth were expected to develop individual skills, as the prevalence of vocal solos showed, singing in the choir was ultimately about contributing to worship services
and advancing Bethel’s ministry. That ministry, as the scene from the Christmas concert poignantly illustrated, was understood to extend to the uplift of Trenton and to people of African descent more broadly. For teenagers from the suburbs, returning each week to the city of Trenton to rehearse gospel music that would be performed for the benefit of the people of Haiti builds a very particular sort of social ties.

This paper has sought to put flesh on the bones of Putnam and Campbell’s argument about the link between strong religious ties and social capital. Choir singing is a widespread practice in American religion, but would we expect bonds to be forged the same way in a Hindu bhajan group or in the choir of middle-class Catholic congregation? I suggest several general conditions under which the practice of choir singing is more likely to cultivate strong ties. First, the practice of making music is central to the worship ritual. (Think of the difference between Bethel’s service and a typical Catholic mass in the U.S.) Second, the musical genre is distinctive to the religious tradition. In congregations like Bethel (or the churches discussed by Clawson [2004, 2011] where “white” gospel music is traditional), making religious music ties singers to a clear tradition that typically involves one’s parents and grandparents, which facilitates the building of intergenerational ties. Third, making music is closely tied to explicit religious instruction. Linking choir rehearsals to Bible lessons prevents the lyrics from being abstractions and makes performances akin to the recitation of a *credo*—a collective statement of belief.

In this paper I have offered shared music making as one answer to the question of how religious organizations create meaningful social ties. I suggested, more broadly, that religious practices are important—that the group solidarity forged in the powerful, emotional moments of ritual are made possible by the “pedagogical process” in which the practice of music is learned and group members regularly gather together in a place with symbolic ties to a shared
While my research illuminates ways that the distinctively religious activities of congregations forge meaningful social bonds, it also offers suggestions for examining how other “morally intense” collectivities are created. In short, we should look to shared practices. Stout writes,

[Our society] is richly endowed with widely valued social practices and goes to remarkable lengths to initiate new generations into them. So if MacIntyre is right about the relation between the virtues and social practices, we should find that the first moral language learned by Americans—the language in which we first learn to assess character and conduct—is as varied and as supple as those social practices. (271)

For while the religious practices—and particularly the way religious organizations bring together members of different generations—are distinctive, many other Americans find meaning and shared moral purpose elsewhere. Elaborating the ways those groups’ practices contribute to richer citizenship is a task well worth pursuing.
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