

**Choir-mastership and liturgical music leadership
in the Anglican Diocese of Benin, Nigeria**

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Abstract

Choirmasters are important musical personnel in the Anglican Church of Nigeria. They are generally tasked with a wide range of responsibilities before, during, and after church services. This study examines the role of choirmasters and the broader dynamics of liturgical music leadership within the Anglican Diocese of Benin. The paper is based on personal observation from many years of service as choirmaster of Anglican Diocese of Benin, and data from interviews. The study reveals a shift in the role of the choirmasters - from purely musical directing to multifaceted leadership with evolving responsibilities, which extends to administration, pastoral care, personnel and financial management. The study concludes that choirmasters are the musical fulcrum connecting ecclesiastical authorities, the musicians, the choristers, and the congregation. The paper recommends that formalised support structures should be established in Anglican churches to enable choirmasters meet the demands of the 21st century ecclesiastical and cultural expectations.

Key words: Anglican diocese, choir-mastership, ecclesiastical authority, liturgical music, musical leadership

Introduction

The establishment of the Anglican Church in Benin City is closely linked to the broader history of Christian missionary work during the colonial period in southern Nigeria. The Anglican mission gained significant traction in Benin City during the early 20th century, mainly through education and health outreach. Churches were usually established alongside mission schools that promoted Western education, literacy, and basic hygiene. The early Anglican churches in Benin introduced hymn singing into both school programmes and religious services. These hymns, which were taught through memorisation and repetition, became a major way of learning biblical scriptures and expressing worship. This is consistent with the documentation by Aluede et al. (2025) that music served as a subtle method of enculturation whereby converts embraced Christian practices without rejecting their indigenous heritage. In the decades following independence, the Anglican Church in Benin expanded in structure and influence.

The Diocese of Benin was formally inaugurated in 1962 as part of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), which was then moving toward autonomy from the British Church. Today, the Anglican Church in Benin is known for its structured liturgy, strong choir culture, and focus on spiritual and moral discipline. Choirs have become vital medium, not just for Sunday services, but also for diocesan synods, weddings, funerals, and civic events. Each parish typically features a full choir, which is led by a choirmaster whose leadership is crucial to the sound and spirit of Anglican worship.

While the history of the Anglican Church and the formalisation of hymn and choral singing have been extensively discussed in the literature, there has been little academic focus on the real-life experiences, symbolic importance, and roles of choirmasters in contemporary Anglican church settings in Nigeria, which includes the Benin diocese of the Church. To bridge this gap in scholarship, this study examines choir-mastering and liturgical music leadership in contemporary times with prime focus on choirmasters' musical and administrative tasks and responsibilities.

Church music and liturgy in the Anglican tradition

Music holds a special place in Anglican liturgy. It serves as both a theological medium and a way to express emotions. Historically, the Anglican Church has kept a rich tradition of sacred music, rooted in its English heritage but adapted in many forms across the global Anglican Communion. In liturgical practice, music is essential and woven into the very fabric of worship through the rendition of hymns, chants, and anthems. The Book of Common Prayer, which is central to Anglican worship, specifies certain times in the service for singing psalms, canticles, and hymns. According to Anagwo (2024), Anglican liturgy is carefully structured in both word and song. Each season of the church calendar (including Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost), has its own musical character and theological focus. For example, penitential hymns highlight the seriousness of Lent, while triumphant anthems celebrate the victory of Easter. In Nigeria, although these

liturgical structures came from British missionaries, however, they have gradually developed a local character. Hymns were translated into indigenous languages, and African rhythmic patterns were included in the music. Mepaiyeda & Popoola (2019) discuss how church music in Nigeria shifted from strict Western styles to more culturally rich renditions. In the Anglican churches in Benin City, for instance, it is common to hear hymns sung with the Edo language tonal inflections, drum accompaniment, and local call-and-response features.

Despite these changes, the structure and theological core of Anglican music remain intact. Anglican choirs usually follow the SATB model (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass), and rehearsals emphasise sight-reading, vocal discipline, and harmony. Many choirmasters still use hymnals like *Golden Bells* and *The English Hymnal* to guide their selections. As Odewole (2018) notes, Anglican choirs in Nigeria navigate a delicate balance between liturgical formality and expressive freedom. The choirmaster plays a key role in choosing music that fits the liturgical season and sermon theme, which requires theological insight, musical knowledge, and emotional understanding.

Benjamins (2021) views church musicians as theologians calling to worship and leading the process in accordance to biblical prescriptions. Moreover, church music has educational purposes: hymns teach doctrine, psalms reinforce Scripture, and anthems reflect moral and spiritual themes. In settings where literacy is low or theological education is hard to access, music becomes an effective way to communicate Christian truths. For this reason, Anglican choirmasters are expected to be spiritually mature and theologically knowledgeable. Recently, there has been a growing tension between traditional Anglican music and modern gospel styles. Younger members often want contemporary choruses and upbeat worship songs, while older members and the clergy prefer the dignity of classical hymns. As a result, the choirmaster finds himself in the middle of this liturgical challenge, trying to blend tradition and innovation without weakening the spiritual depth of worship. Oikelome (2012) argues that this balancing act defines the modern church music director in Nigeria, especially in large dioceses like Benin.

Thus, the role of church music in Anglican liturgy is essential. It serves as a channel of grace, a teaching tool, and a source of beauty. Whether sung in English or Edo, and accompanied on an organ or drums, the music of the Anglican Church in Benin continues to uplift spirits and enrich worship experience.

The Choirmaster

The office of the choirmaster is one that has long been in existence in various Christian set-ups. However, in the Nigerian context (particularly within early denominations such as the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Baptist churches), it takes on a unique spiritual, communal, and relational character. A choirmaster is not just a leader of choral and instrumental music, but often functions as a liturgical

coordinator, music educator, spiritual guide and, sometimes, a custodian of local music heritage.

In church music history, the role of the choirmaster is traceable to early Western Christian traditions where the *magister choristarum* (which is the Latin for "master of the choristers") was tasked with the responsibility of training the choir, composing or selecting music repertoire for performance, and effectuating the musical essence of liturgical services. When Christianity was introduced and adapted to Nigerian contexts, the role was 'indigenised' to accommodate local musical expressions, cultural values, and communal realities (Ademiluka, 2023).

Unlike in some Western contexts where choirmasters are usually hired professionals, the choirmaster in Nigeria (who generally serves as both a music director and a spiritual leader within the worship context) are mostly volunteers who are trained either informally through years of service, or via formal music education. According to Marek & Lisiecki (2024), this dual identity - of being a music expert and a servant of the church - makes the choirmaster a unique figure in the performance and preservation of sacred music.

From ethnomusicological perspective, Oikelome (2012) observes that choirmasters in Nigerian churches often do more than just conduct choirs. They also mentor young choristers, write or arrange songs, interpret musical scores, assist with the selection of songs repertoire for services, and, in some cases, play multiple instruments. This multi-functionality is deeply rooted in the communal expectations placed on them. They are expected to inspire worship, uphold moral standards, and maintain discipline among choristers.

Gender dynamics also feature prominently in literature surrounding choir-mastership. Traditionally, the role is male-dominated, although female music leaders are fast becoming more prominent in pentecostal/contemporary musical worship settings than in the orthodox/art musical worship settings. Nwachukwu (2014) argues that while the term "choirmaster" is said to have masculine roots, there is a growing call for inclusive terminologies like "choir director," "music minister," etc, in more egalitarian church environments.

Training and capacity building for choirmasters have also received academic attention in the literature. In recent years, theological institutions and music conservatories in Nigeria offer church music programmes, which are designed to 'professionalise' music leadership in general and the role of the choirmaster in particular. The works of scholars such as Ossaiga & Igbi (2024) and Sunday (2025) support the view that formal music education is essential to enhance the capacity of church music leaders, especially in urban churches where high musical standards are expected.

Moreover, choirmasters are pivotal in balancing orthodoxy and modernity. Many churches in Nigeria grapple with the tension between preserving traditional hymnody

and embracing contemporary gospel sounds. Here, the choirmaster becomes a bridge. According to Adeogun (2006), Nigerian choirmasters often create hybrid repertoires that reflect both Western influences and indigenous tonalities, resulting in what is now known as “Africanised hymnody.”

In sum, choir-mastering in the Nigerian context transcends mere musical function. The role embodies mentorship, spiritual leadership, musical innovation, and cultural preservation. As a subject of scholarly discourse, it reveals how deeply music and religion are woven into the fabric of Nigerian society. Therefore, any serious conversation about liturgical music, church growth, or cultural sustainability in Nigeria must include the contributions and challenges of choirmasters.

Findings

The Benin Diocese consists of about twenty churches spread across the urban and rural areas covered by the Diocese. Each of the churches operates functional choirs ranging from ten to forty in number, a reflection of the numerical strength of each congregation. The choirs are headed by choirmasters who are generally tasked with the responsibility to direct their choirs, and perform other musical and spiritual roles in their churches. A critical discussion on choir-mastership and liturgical music leadership in the Anglican Diocese of Benin are as discussed under the following headings.

Criteria for selection as choirmaster

In the Anglican Diocese of Benin, the selection of a choirmaster is regarded not as a mere administrative exercise, but a highly sensitive spiritual and communal decision that is rooted in musical competence and ecclesiastical loyalty. To be considered, a prospective choirmaster is required to be an active communicant, baptised, and confirmed within the Anglican Church. In most cases, preference is given to individuals who have been longstanding members of the choir, even at the expense of a formal musical training.

In terms of skill, an appreciable and functional musical knowledge is expected to be possessed, including the ability to read tonic sol-fa or staff notation, along with some level of keyboard proficiency. Formal musical training is not regarded as a basic criterion for appointment, with the result that the role is often filled by music enthusiasts within the diocese. Moral conduct, humility, maturity, and submission to church authority are considered more essential in the choice of a choirmaster.

Musical roles of the choirmaster

Choirmasters are regarded as the musical backbone of parish worship. They are tasked with the responsibility to select appropriate anthems, canticles, hymns, and psalms in conjunction with the priest and in line with the Anglican liturgical calendar and liturgical seasons such as Easter, Christmas, and Diocesan synods, among

others. In doing this, choirmasters assume the role of a bridge between traditional Anglican musical heritage and local expressions of praise as means to establish cultural relevance among the indigenous worshipers. They compose or arrange songs, especially when culturally relevant, or where context-specific music is needed.

Expanded job description of the choirmaster

Beyond the primary musical roles, the choirmasters are tasked with a wide range of undocumented responsibilities. Even though the choirmasters are not necessarily ordained clergy, they are often looked upon for guidance in spiritual and moral matters. It is common for choirmasters to lead devotions, pray for the choir members, act as mediators between clergy and choir, and resolve conflicts among choristers.

Furthermore, choirmasters participate in planning the execution of liturgical events, musical concerts, and adjudication of music competitions within the diocese. In rural parishes, the full musical responsibility is often borne alone by individual choirmasters, whereas in urban centres, assistants, organists, and music directors may share the role.

The membership of the choir is expanded through growth strategies that are deployed by the choirmaster, often with the involvement of choir members. A musically-inclined priest can assist in recruiting choristers from members of the congregation. In churches where the priest is musically-inclined, his actions can become the backbone for the expansion of the choir, especially when it is established that the job of the choirmaster is to teach and guide the choir, excluding recruitment of choir members.

Remuneration

Remuneration for choirmasters in the Benin Diocese is determined by the financial strength of the parish and the structure of church leadership. There is no organised or Diocesan approved allowance structure. In some cases, choir-mastership is treated as a voluntary or honorary position. However, in some urban parishes, especially the Cathedral, a modest monthly allowance is offered. It is not uncommon to find a parish paying a higher allowance to its choirmaster than the Cathedral. Despite the seemingly poor allowances offered choirmasters, faithful service is still rendered out of personal conviction and passion for sacred music.

Authority of the choirmaster

The authority of the choirmaster is largely exercised on functional and moral grounds rather than on administrative considerations. Rehearsals are led and performances are directed by choirmasters, although certain decisions are subject to

clerical approval. In conservative parishes, permission from the vicar must be sought with approval before new songs or styles can be introduced. Within the choir, however, the choirmaster's word is often final on musical matters.

The authority of the choirmaster may, at times, be undermined by church politics or uncooperative choristers. The effectiveness of leadership is usually determined by the support of the parish priest, and the perceived authoritative music knowledge of the choirmaster, which usually elicits respect from choristers.

Training and capacity development

Opportunities for formal training are limited. In many cases, musical skills are self-taught or developed through long years of participation in church choirs. Some choirmasters have received training through diocesan music workshops or short-term programmes that were organised by private academies.

Key challenges

Choirmasters in the Diocese of Benin often face numerous challenges. Among the most recurring is inadequate support from parish leadership. Complaints have been raised about the lack of funds for musical instruments, costumes, and transportation.

Other challenges include low rehearsal attendance, indiscipline among choristers, outdated instruments, and lack of appreciation from the congregation. Generational conflicts also arise in mixed-age choirs, particularly when modern music styles clash with traditional liturgical preferences. Stress is also experienced when secular employment must be balanced with demanding church duties, especially during major church seasons.

Working under ecclesiastical authority

Because of the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church, strict functioning under ecclesiastical authority is required. In every parish observed, the vicar or parish priest is recognised as the head of the church's worship life, with maximum cooperation expected from the choirmaster.

The work of choirmasters is generally shaped by the disposition of the parish priest. Executing tasks is made much easier by supportive clergy, while creativity is often stifled by indifferent ones. In the Cathedral and archdeaconry headquarters, accountability is extended to the Canon in charge of music, or the Archdeacon.

Although a choirmaster's relationship with church leadership may be generally cordial, however, tension may arise regarding musical direction, the introduction of contemporary songs, or the scheduling of choir activities within crowded church calendars.

Conclusion

From this study, it has been shown that choir-mastership and liturgical music leadership in the Anglican Diocese of Benin are roles that extend far beyond the direction of hymns and anthems. The position is understood as one that combines musical artistry, pastoral sensitivity, administrative responsibility, and cultural negotiation. At the heart of Anglican worship in Benin, the choirmaster is recognised as both a custodian of tradition and a bridge to modern expressions of faith. It has become evident that choirmasters are not merely functionaries within the liturgical process, but they are seen as leaders through whom the spiritual life of the church is sustained. Their work has been shown to embody the delicate balance between inherited Anglican liturgy and the indigenous musical idioms of Benin. In this way, the essence of worship is preserved while its relevance to contemporary congregations is maintained. Yet, it has also been revealed that these responsibilities are frequently carried with little formal recognition, modest remuneration, and inconsistent institutional support.

The need for greater investment in the training, welfare, and professional development of choirmasters is emphasised by this research. We assert that the creation of formal structures, which recognise choirmasters' pastoral and musical contributions that would both ease their burden and enrich the quality of Anglican worship. Moreover, the vitality of church music will continue to be sustained when choirmasters are enabled to innovate, collaborate effectively with clergy, and adapt to generational and cultural shifts.

Conclusively, the choirmaster is a pivotal figure in the shaping of worship experiences that are spiritually uplifting and culturally resonant. In the Anglican Diocese of Benin (as in other Nigerian dioceses), this role must be continually nurtured so that the musical heritage of the church is safeguarded while addressing the evolving needs of the community worshippers.

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