

Volunteerism and Community Music-Making in Nigerian Church Choirs: A Study of the Anglican Diocese of Evo

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Abstract

Volunteerism remains one of the most significant pillars sustaining religious institutions across Nigeria, particularly within church music ministries where members offer their time, skills, and resources without financial compensation. This study examines the intersection of volunteerism and community music-making in the Anglican Diocese of Evo, Rivers State, Nigeria. The research investigates the motivations behind voluntary participation in church choirs, the role of choir activities in fostering community engagement and social cohesion, and the challenges affecting the sustainability of volunteer-based music ministries. Drawing on Community Music Theory and Social Capital Theory, the study adopts a qualitative research approach involving interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis among choir members, choir directors, clergy, and church administrators in selected parishes of the Diocese. The findings reveal that volunteer participation in church choirs is largely motivated by spiritual commitment, a sense of religious calling, opportunities for fellowship, personal musical development, and the desire to contribute to congregational worship. The study further demonstrates that choir activities function as important forms of community music-making, creating spaces for social interaction, cultural transmission, collective identity formation, and informal music education. Choir participation strengthens interpersonal relationships among members, promotes social capital, and facilitates the preservation of indigenous musical expressions within Anglican worship traditions. Despite these contributions, volunteer choristers face several challenges, including financial burdens associated with transportation and uniforms, limited access to musical resources, increasing occupational demands, and declining youth participation. The study argues that church choirs in the Anglican Diocese of Evo serve not only as liturgical ensembles but also as community institutions that foster social integration, spiritual growth, and cultural continuity. The article concludes that strengthening volunteer support systems, investing in music education, and promoting youth engagement are essential for sustaining community music-making within Anglican churches. The study contributes to scholarship on church music, volunteerism, and community development by highlighting the social and cultural significance of volunteer choir participation in contemporary Nigerian Christianity.

Keywords: Volunteerism, Community Music-Making, Church Choirs, Anglican Diocese of Evo, Sacred Music, Social Capital, Nigeria.

Introduction

Music has always occupied a central place in religious worship and communal life across cultures and civilisations. Within Christianity, music serves not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a spiritual tool for worship, evangelism, instruction, and community formation. According to Merriam (1964), music performs numerous social functions, including communication, emotional expression, social integration, and cultural continuity. These functions are particularly evident in church settings where music facilitates both spiritual engagement and communal interaction. In many African societies, music remains deeply integrated into social, religious, and cultural activities, making it an indispensable component of communal identity and collective participation. Nketia (1974) argues that African music is fundamentally participatory and communal-oriented, while Nzewi (2003) emphasises that musical performance in African societies serves educational, spiritual, and social purposes.

These characteristics continue to shape contemporary church music practices across Nigeria. In Nigeria, church music has evolved into one of the most influential forms of musical expression. Since the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, church music has played a crucial role in shaping the country's musical landscape. Mission churches introduced Western hymnody and choral traditions, which were gradually adapted to indigenous musical cultures. Over time, Nigerian church musicians incorporated local languages, rhythms, and performance practices into Christian worship, resulting in distinctive forms of sacred music that reflect both African and Christian identities (Ekwueme, 2004).

Among the major Christian denominations in Nigeria, the Anglican Church possesses one of the most established traditions of choral music. Anglican worship places considerable emphasis on liturgy, hymn singing, choral anthems, and organised musical participation. Consequently, church choirs have become integral institutions within Anglican congregations, serving both liturgical and social functions. Choir members lead congregational singing, perform special musical presentations, participate in diocesan music festivals, and contribute to various community outreach activities.

A defining characteristic of church choir participation in Nigeria is its reliance on volunteerism. Most choir members serve without monetary compensation, dedicating their time, energy, talents, and resources to support church activities. This voluntary service reflects broader traditions of communal cooperation and collective responsibility that have long characterised African societies. Volunteerism in church settings often transcends mere participation, becoming an expression of faith, commitment, and spiritual stewardship.

According to Wilson (2012), volunteerism refers to activities undertaken freely for the benefit of others without expectation of financial reward. Within religious contexts, volunteer service is frequently motivated by spiritual beliefs, moral obligations, and a desire to contribute to the well-being of the faith community. In Nigerian churches, volunteerism remains essential to the functioning of numerous

ministries, including evangelism, youth development, welfare programs, and music departments.

Church choirs provide a particularly valuable context for examining volunteerism because they combine artistic participation with religious service. Through rehearsals, worship services, musical festivals, and outreach programs, choir members engage in collective music-making that strengthens social relationships and reinforces communal identity. Such activities align with the concept of community music-making, which emphasises participation, inclusion, and social engagement rather than professional performance standards (Higgins, 2012).

Community music-making has emerged as an important area of scholarly inquiry because of its ability to foster social cohesion, personal development, and cultural preservation. Scholars argue that participatory music activities create opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and community building (Turino, 2008). In church settings, community music-making enables individuals from diverse backgrounds to work together toward common spiritual and artistic goals. Through shared musical experiences, participants develop friendships, build trust, and strengthen communal ties.

The Anglican Diocese of Edo, located in Rivers State, is one of the Dioceses within the Anglican Communion in Nigeria. The Diocese comprises numerous congregations with vibrant choir traditions. Choir activities within the Diocese include regular worship services, diocesan choir festivals, conferences, evangelistic outreaches, and social functions. These activities depend heavily on the voluntary commitment of choir members and demonstrate the central role of music in fostering religious and community life.

Despite the importance of church choirs in Nigerian Christianity, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how volunteerism sustains community music-making within Anglican contexts. Existing studies have largely focused on church music history, liturgical practices, or indigenous musical adaptations, with relatively little emphasis on the experiences and motivations of volunteer choristers. Furthermore, contemporary socio-economic challenges, changing youth interests, and increasing demands on individuals' time have raised questions about the sustainability of volunteer-based choir ministries.

This study therefore seeks to examine the role of volunteerism in community music-making within the Anglican Diocese of Edo. Specifically, it investigates the motivations for choir participation, explores the social and cultural functions of choir activities, and identifies challenges confronting volunteer choristers. By doing so, the study contributes to broader discussions on music, religion, volunteerism, and community development in contemporary Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Church choirs constitute an essential aspect of Anglican worship and community life in Nigeria. Their activities depend largely on the voluntary commitment of members who invest substantial time and effort in rehearsals, performances, and church programs. However, contemporary socio-economic pressures, increasing work commitments, urbanisation, and changing youth interests have created challenges for volunteer participation in church activities.

In many Anglican congregations, choir members face financial burdens associated with transportation, uniforms, music materials, and attendance at diocesan events without adequate institutional support. Furthermore, the growing influence of commercialised music practices and secular entertainment options has contributed to declining youth participation in traditional church choirs.

These developments raise concerns regarding the sustainability of volunteer choir ministries and their capacity to continue serving as platforms for community music-making. While studies have examined church music and religious participation in Nigeria, insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how volunteerism influences choir sustainability and community engagement within Anglican dioceses.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the nature, motivations, benefits, and challenges of volunteerism among choir members in the Anglican Diocese of Edo and assessing its contribution to community music-making.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the role of volunteerism in sustaining church choir activities in the Anglican Diocese of Edo.
2. Identify factors motivating individuals to participate voluntarily in church choirs.
3. Explore the contribution of choir participation to community music-making and social cohesion.
4. Investigate challenges confronting volunteer choir members.
5. Suggest strategies for strengthening volunteer participation and community music initiatives.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Volunteerism

Volunteerism has been widely recognised as a significant mechanism for promoting civic engagement, social development, and community participation. Musick and Wilson (2008) define volunteerism as the voluntary contribution of time and effort for the benefit of others without financial compensation. Volunteer activities occur across various sectors, including education, healthcare, social services, sports, and religious organisations.

In African societies, volunteerism often reflects communal values and collective responsibility. Traditional African communities have long depended on cooperative labor systems, mutual aid associations, and communal support networks to address social needs. These cultural traditions continue to influence contemporary forms of volunteering, particularly within religious organisations (Anikpo, 2010).

Religious institutions remain among the largest beneficiaries of volunteer labor worldwide. According to Putnam (2000), religious participation fosters civic engagement by creating networks of trust and cooperation that encourage collective action. Churches provide opportunities for individuals to contribute their talents and resources toward shared goals, thereby strengthening both religious and social communities.

In Nigeria, volunteerism constitutes a fundamental aspect of church life. Church members frequently volunteer as teachers, ushers, evangelists, welfare coordinators, youth leaders, and choir members. Such participation is often motivated by religious beliefs and a sense of duty to God and the church community (Kalu, 2008).

Volunteerism in Religious Organisations

Religious volunteerism differs from secular volunteering in several respects. Whereas secular volunteers may be motivated primarily by civic responsibility or personal interest, religious volunteers often perceive their service as an expression of faith and obedience to divine instruction. Snyder and Omoto (2008) argue that religious values provide powerful incentives for sustained volunteer involvement because participants derive spiritual meaning and personal fulfillment from their service.

Studies have shown that religious organisations create supportive environments that encourage volunteer participation through shared beliefs, social networks, and collective identities. Such environments promote long-term commitment and foster strong interpersonal relationships among members.

Within church choirs, volunteerism involves more than musical participation. Choristers often contribute to event planning, fundraising activities, mentorship programs, and community outreach initiatives. Their involvement reflects a holistic understanding of ministry that combines worship, service, and fellowship.

Community Music-Making: Theoretical Perspectives

Community music-making refers to participatory musical activities designed to promote inclusion, creativity, and social engagement (Higgins, 2012). The social dimensions of music-making have long attracted scholarly attention. Merriam (1964) identifies music as a cultural behavior that fulfills important societal functions, including reinforcing social institutions and promoting group solidarity. Church choirs exemplify these functions because they provide opportunities for collective

participation while strengthening relationships among members of faith communities. Unlike professional music performance, community music prioritises accessibility and collective participation. It seeks to empower individuals by providing opportunities for musical expression regardless of technical expertise.

According to Small (1998), music should be understood as an activity rather than an object. His concept of "musicking" emphasises the social relationships created through musical participation. This perspective is particularly relevant to church choirs, where musical activities facilitate interaction, cooperation, and community formation.

Turino (2008) further distinguishes participatory music from presentational music. Participatory music encourages active involvement by all members, whereas presentational music is performed primarily for an audience. Church choirs often embody both forms, combining collective participation during rehearsals with public performance during worship services

Church Music and Choral Traditions in Nigeria

The history of church music in Nigeria is closely linked to missionary activities during the nineteenth century. Missionaries introduced European hymns, choral music, and organ accompaniment as part of Christian worship. Over time, Nigerian musicians adapted these traditions to local cultural contexts by incorporating indigenous languages and musical styles (Euba, 1990).

Ekwueme (2004) observes that Nigerian church music has undergone significant transformation through processes of indigenisation and cultural adaptation. Contemporary church choirs frequently perform compositions that blend Western harmonic structures with African rhythmic patterns. According to Okafor (2005), church music became one of the most influential avenues through which musical literacy, composition, and performance practices developed in modern Nigeria.

Nzewi (2003) argues that African musical traditions emphasise communal participation and social interaction. These characteristics have influenced the development of church music across Nigeria, contributing to the emergence of vibrant choir cultures within Christian denominations.

Within the Anglican Church, choral music occupies a particularly important place because of its liturgical significance. Choirs lead congregational singing, perform anthems, and support ceremonial functions. Annual choir festivals and competitions further reinforce musical excellence and communal engagement.

Church Choirs as Sites of Community Formation

Scholars increasingly recognise church choirs as important sites of community formation and social integration. Southcott and Joseph (2015) found that choir participation promotes belonging, friendship, and collective identity among members.

Similarly, Clift and Hancox (2010) demonstrated that choral singing contributes to psychological well-being, emotional support, and social connectedness. Through regular interaction, choir members develop networks of trust and mutual assistance that extend beyond musical activities.

In Nigeria, church choirs often function as social institutions that facilitate mentorship, leadership development, and community service. Members celebrate life events together, provide emotional support during crises, and participate in charitable initiatives. Such activities contribute to the accumulation of social capital and strengthen community resilience.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design.

Study Area:

The research was conducted within selected parishes of the Anglican Diocese of Edo in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Population:

Twenty choir members, three choir directors, and three clergy men were purposively selected from five different parishes within the Diocese.

Data Collection:

Data were collected through:

1. Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were conducted between March and May 2025.
2. Participant observation during rehearsals and worship services.
3. Review of diocesan documents and choir records.

Data Analysis:

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Emerging themes were categorised according to the study objectives and research questions.

Findings and Discussion

Volunteerism as an Expression of Faith and Ministry

The study revealed that volunteer participation in church choirs is primarily rooted in spiritual commitment. Most respondents described choir service as a calling rather

than a recreational activity. Participants viewed singing as a means of worshiping God and contributing to the spiritual growth of the congregation.

Many respondents indicated that their involvement stemmed from a desire to use their talents for divine service. This finding supports Snyder and Omoto's (2008) argument that religious volunteers are often motivated by deeply held spiritual values. The perception of choir membership as ministry rather than performance contributes significantly to sustained participation despite financial and personal sacrifices.

The findings also resonate with Kalu's (2008) observation that volunteer service occupies a central place in African Christianity, where believers frequently interpret participation in church activities as an expression of discipleship and stewardship.

Choir Participation and Community Music-Making

The study found that choir activities embody key principles of community music-making. Rehearsals, worship services, and diocesan events provide opportunities for collaborative musical engagement among individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Participants reported that choir membership enabled them to interact with people they might not otherwise encounter. Through collective music-making, members developed friendships, shared experiences, and strengthened interpersonal relationships.

This finding aligns with Higgins' (2012) assertion that community music promotes inclusion and social interaction. Choir rehearsals function as social spaces where participants negotiate relationships, exchange ideas, and build communal bonds through shared musical experiences.

The findings also support Merriam's (1964) view that music serves as a mechanism for social integration and group cohesion. Through regular rehearsals and worship services, choir members develop interpersonal relationships that extend beyond musical performance. The choir therefore functions not only as a musical ensemble but also as a social institution that promotes communal interaction and solidarity. Furthermore, the study revealed that choir activities serve as informal music education platforms. Younger members learn vocal techniques, music literacy, and performance skills from more experienced choristers. This process facilitates the transmission of musical knowledge across generations and contributes to the sustainability of church music traditions.

Preservation of Cultural and Religious Heritage

An important finding of the study concerns the role of church choirs in preserving cultural heritage. Participants emphasised the importance of performing hymns, anthems, and sacred compositions in indigenous languages. This practice reflects broader trends in Nigerian sacred music where local cultural expressions are incorporated into Christian worship.

Omojola (2012) argues that Nigerian composers and church musicians have increasingly sought to indigenise Christian music by integrating African melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, and linguistic elements into church compositions. The activities of choirs within the Anglican Diocese of Edo demonstrate this ongoing process of musical and cultural adaptation.

Respondents noted that local-language songs often resonate more deeply with worshippers because they reflect familiar cultural experiences and values. The integration of indigenous musical elements into Anglican worship demonstrates the dynamic interaction between Christianity and African cultural traditions.

This finding supports Ekwueme's (2004) argument that Nigerian church music has become a site of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Choirs contribute to preserving and transmitting these musical traditions to future generations.

Social Capital and Community Development

The findings indicate that choir participation generates significant social capital within the Anglican Diocese of Edo. Members frequently support one another during personal and family challenges, including illness, bereavement, weddings, and financial difficulties.

Choir networks provide emotional, social, and sometimes material support, creating strong bonds among participants. Such relationships enhance trust, cooperation, and collective responsibility within congregations.

These findings strongly support Putnam's (2000) Social Capital Theory, which emphasises the role of social networks in facilitating cooperation and community development. Through regular interaction and shared experiences, choir members cultivate relationships that extend beyond musical activities.

Challenges Confronting Volunteer Choristers

Despite their commitment, participants identified several challenges affecting volunteer choir participation.

Financial constraints emerged as a major concern. Many choristers bear personal expenses related to transportation, uniforms, sheet music, and attendance at diocesan programs. These costs can be particularly burdensome given prevailing economic conditions.

Time management also poses difficulties. Respondents reported challenges balancing choir responsibilities with employment, education, and family commitments. Frequent rehearsals and church programs require significant investments of time and energy.

Another challenge concerns declining youth participation. Several respondents observed that younger generations often prefer contemporary worship formats or secular entertainment activities, resulting in reduced interest in traditional choir structures.

These challenges suggest the need for strategic interventions to sustain volunteer engagement and ensure the continuity of community music-making within the Diocese.

Conclusion

Volunteerism remains the cornerstone of community music-making in the Anglican Diocese of Evo. Choir members contribute their time, skills, and resources to sustain worship activities and foster communal engagement. Their participation generates significant spiritual, social, cultural, and educational benefits for both individuals and congregations.

The study reveals that volunteerism promotes social cohesion, strengthens community identity, and facilitates musical participation within the diocese. However, challenges such as financial limitations, inadequate resources, and declining youth involvement threaten the sustainability of choir ministries.

The study further confirms observations by Nketia (1974), and Nzewi (2003) that music serves broader functions beyond entertainment. To ensure the continued vitality of church choirs, Anglican authorities should provide greater institutional support, encourage youth participation, and invest in music education and capacity-building initiatives. Such efforts will enhance the role of church choirs as centers of community music-making and volunteer service in contemporary Nigerian society.

Recommendations

1. The Anglican Diocese of Evo should establish financial support mechanisms for volunteer choristers. Regular music workshops and training programs should be organised for choir members.
2. Youth-focused choir initiatives should be developed to encourage greater participation.
3. Parishes should provide adequate rehearsal facilities and musical resources.
4. Recognition programs should be instituted to appreciate long-serving volunteer choir members.
5. Community outreach through music should be expanded to strengthen church-community relationships.

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