

El Coro Latinoamericano: Redefining the Choral Model for the Latino Congregations of The Episcopal Church

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In July of 2009, the Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministry of The Episcopal Church in the United States published a document known as *The Episcopal Church's Strategic Vision for Reaching Latinos/Hispanics*.¹ This publication was an effort to recognize “the promise for transformation that can occur with the encounter between The Episcopal Church and Latinos.”² The committee that developed this study included market strategists, church planters, clergy, and lay leaders who carried out interviews in nearly one hundred congregations in the United States. These interviews revealed some of the key strengths driving the vitality of these communities. “Engaging music with strong integration, participation, and volunteer choir” was defined as one of the strengths.³ This description is appropriate, as the choirs of our Latino communities in The Episcopal Church are not just a sign of vitality or strength, but also witnesses of the resiliency, hope, tenacity, and even stubbornness that is unceasingly driving our Latino communities toward success. But what is this strength in the practical way? Can we name it and point at it? Where does it come from? What is nourishing this strength?

The following essay aims to answer these questions from three different perspectives. First, as a Hispanic choral director working with Latin American congregations in the United States, I want to use

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¹ The Episcopal Church, Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministry, *The Episcopal Church's Strategic Plan for Reaching Latinos/Hispanics* (Los Angeles: The Episcopal Church, 2009), 1.

² Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministry, *Strategic Plan*, 2.

³ Office of Latino/Hispanic Ministry, *Strategic Plan*, 5.

the story of el Coro Latinoamericano at Christ Church Cathedral as a case study that explains how, in defining an evolving musical identity in a major Episcopal Cathedral, the entire Latino ministry was brought from the margins to a center-stage presence in the life and mission of the congregation. Second, this essay will offer a critical appraisal of the main songbooks used for the past nineteen years at the cathedral by Coro Latinoamericano. Finally, I will state how liturgical inculturation and reformation, as explained in the work of liturgical historians Germán Martínez and Allan F. Deck, could be used as the lenses that explain why Latino choirs have become signs of vitality and strength in The Episcopal Church today.

El Coro Latinoamericano at Christ Church Cathedral

The story of el Coro Latinoamericano at Christ Church Cathedral is the story of how, in only five years, in the search and sometimes fight for establishing its own musical identity, this choir went from being perceived as second class to a rightful position as a first-class choir, enjoying the same benefits and bearing the same responsibilities as the main English service choir, known as the Cathedral Choir of Choristers and Adults (a professional vocal ensemble that preceded the Latino Choir in the cathedral by about one hundred years). Christ Church Cathedral was built in 1837 and today is the last church building present in downtown Indianapolis. It is also, since the late 1970s, one of three endowed parishes, thanks to the generosity of a Ruth and Eli Lilly endowment.⁴ Music at Christ Church Cathedral has long played a pivotal role in connecting choristers and congregation to each other, to the church's history, to the Episcopal tradition, and to God. Its famous Choir of Men and Choristers was founded in 1883, and is long established as one of the most prominent choral programs in the Midwest, hiring professional male singers, mainly from the prestigious Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, and offering the Curriculum of the Royal School of Church Music for children. This ensemble has sung the weekly evensong and the main English service on Sundays for over a century. This ensemble of about twenty men just recently started hiring professional women and has opened the possibility for young female singers to continue participating in

⁴ Lilly Endowment Inc., "History and Founders," <https://lillyendowment.org/about/history-and-founders/>.

the choir even after they turn sixteen. Other less controversial, but meaningful, changes have taken place at Christ Church in music: the repertoire has widened to include more music from the African American tradition, a piano now also accompanies the choirs, a Jazz Vesper service has been established, and almost all major liturgical celebrations are done bilingually with music from different cultural traditions.

One of the least anticipated changes, which ended up having a great influence in the musical life of Christ Church Cathedral, was the creation of a mission geared to the Hispanic population back in the year 2000.⁵ Christ Church decided to start a Hispanic mission inside the cathedral building with the idea that the Hispanic congregation would grow enough to occupy a different building, rented with the financial support of the cathedral's vestry. Fortunately, the Hispanic congregation never left, and Christ Church is about to celebrate twenty years of Latino presence at the cathedral.

The Hymnals

From the year 2000 until the year 2013, the Latino congregation continued to establish itself at Christ Church as a parallel congregation coexisting in the same church building, with its own volunteers committed in all areas of liturgical guild and formation, and with a volunteer choir.⁶ Throughout this time, there were different leadership approaches and sources used in the hope of establishing a group of volunteers that could provide music for worship. This group was led by about five different music directors with skills that ranged from amateur to semiprofessional. Some of the directors used music from known hymnals such as *El Himnario* (Episcopal hymnal), *Flory Canto* (Roman Catholic hymnal), *Mil voces para cantar* (Methodist hymnal), and loose sheets of lyrics and xeroxed copies of Episcopal songbooks from Honduras, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica.

Two of the first hymnals to which the choir was introduced were *El Himnario*, which we would call the official hymnal of The Episcopal Church for Latino congregations, and the first edition of *Flor*

⁵ Christ Church Cathedral Vestry Meeting Minutes, November 1999.

⁶ Veronica Godinez, interviewed by Yuriria Rodríguez of Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, August 2018.

y Canto.⁷ Today, both hymnals are considered foundation hymnals for Spanish-speaking congregations and Latino ministries across different denominations. These hymnals are very similar in format as well as in the way the content is organized. In terms of content, there is a great deal of overlapping of important authors, such as Cesario Gabaráin and Juan Espinosa from Spain, Hurd and Shiovone from the USA, and Pagura from Argentina. In terms of the way the music is printed, both hymnals present the lyrics under the music staff with lyrics syllabically divided under each note. Each hymn page has a title, a number, a liturgical season for which it can be used, and the name of the composer, arranger, and copyright owner.

There are some important differences between these hymnals, however, that need to be mentioned. Only *El Himnario* establishes the country of origin of each hymn. *El Himnario* also provides music content in chorale form, where both the melody and the harmony are part of the right and left hand of the organ accompaniment. *Flor y Canto* first edition presents the music in a three-staff format, where the melody is separated from the accompaniment. *El Himnario* has six different indexes so the user can search the hymns by biblical reference, by name of the original tune, by author, by metric, by first line, or by liturgical topic. *Flor y Canto* first edition has one index in alphabetical order. *El Himnario* has many more songs in English and offers bilingual versions of well-known songs in both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic traditions, such as “Pescador de Hombres.”⁸ Finally, *El Himnario* contains a few hymns that, while written by Catholic composers, have been historically seen as underground Catholic music, such as “Vos sos el Dios de los pobres”⁹ from the Misa Campesina Nicaragüense, by Carlos Mejía-Godoy. The music selections in *El Himnario* are much more varied and represent a more diverse international community.

After looking at the format and content of these hymns, and comparing them to each other, there are important questions to ask: Who is supposed to be reading and singing from these hymnals? Who is the person capable of mastering navigation through these six indexes in *El Himnario*? Who is the person conducting these bilingual, English and

⁷ *El Himnario* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1998). *Flor y Canto*, 1st ed. (Portland, OR: Oregon Catholic Press, 1989).

⁸ *El Himnario*, 313.

⁹ *El Himnario*, 387.

Spanish texts? Who are the choir members learning this music, and how are they learning these songs? Are all capable of reading music? The answers to these are found reading through the preface and music content of both *Flor y Canto*, first edition, and *El Himnario*.

The title *Flor y Canto* is a very intentional, effective, and conscientious marketing effort to capture the spirit of Hispanic worship while using the Spanish words to the Nahuatl "In Xochitl, In Cuicatl," a dual term meaning the flower and the song, used by the Aztecs to name both poetry and a very specific collection of poems that were one of the most important forms of high culture in the Valley of Anahuac in precolonial Mexico. These poems were dedicated to telling the stories of the Aztec civilization, their wars, their struggles, their relationship with the cosmos and the gods.¹⁰

The third of its three-part preface is a letter by Rosa María Icaza of the Institute of Hispanic Liturgy, whose intention is to validate the indigenous roots of Hispanic spirituality.¹¹ The second is a letter from Monseñor Cesareo Gabaráin,¹² one of the best-known composers of Spanish hymns and author of hymns such as "Pescador de Hombres," "Juntos como hermanos," "La paz esté con vosotros," "Levántate," and many more. He writes a flash worship in Spanish 101, encouraging singers to sing with joy, but also to do it well because what they are doing is very important!¹³ The first part of this preface is a letter by the Most Reverend William J. Levada, Archbishop of Portland in Oregon. He writes, "The music gathered here is from the Mexican, Spanish, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American experiences. As we listen to the songs and stories of these peoples, they become ours. Thus, *Flor y Canto* helps bring the gifts of the past and present to us, to each other . . . for our common future."¹⁴

It is important to notice that, although these songs in the first edition of *Flor y Canto* are indeed part of the Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central and South American experience, it does not mean that they are original to these countries. In fact, most of the hymns are not. For instance, in the group of hymns selected for the Advent season in the first edition of *Flor y Canto*, there are twenty-eight hymns,

¹⁰ James Maffie "Aztec Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec/>.

¹¹ *Flor y Canto*, xx-xxi.

¹² *Flor y Canto*, iii.

¹³ *Flor y Canto*, ii.

¹⁴ *Flor y Canto*, i.

of which eighteen are from Spain, five are originally from France, two are from the United States, one is from Bolivia, one is from México, and one is from Cuba. Thus, the need to have Mons. Gabaráin write a letter to validate the continuous authority of Spain in matters of worship for the Latin American people. The preface from *El Himnario* clearly states the purpose of this hymnal: "a response to the expressed need of the Spanish Speaking Christian people to have an appropriate worship resource adapted for today's world."¹⁵ It talks about the editorial committee, and its desire to have this hymnal be a true expression of faith and a tool to unify Spanish-speaking congregations across the country and across Christian denominations. Furthermore, it discusses the norms that the reader needs to take into consideration when reading the text and when interpreting the music:

El Himnario will reflect the diversity of traditions that prevail today in the participating churches and will try to provide relevant materials to the future of the Church. . . . The melodies will be accessible for congregational singing, in a vocal register that is comfortable. . . . In order to facilitate music reading, as much as possible, the lyrics will be directly placed under the music staff.¹⁶

The preface to *El Himnario* does not tell us where the hymns are from; it states, however, that it contains hymns sung since several centuries ago in the church, joined by some contemporary hymns from different sources of different regions in Latin America.¹⁷ And while it is true that *El Himnario* does have more music originally from Latin American countries than *Flor y Canto*, if we count the amount of hymns in a specific section, we can prove that the majority of the hymns are not from Latin America. For instance, there are twenty-one hymns selections in the Advent section of *El Himnario*; of those, five are originally from United States, five are from Germany, three are from Spain, three are from France, one is from Italy, and one from England. This means that eighteen of the hymns have a non-

¹⁵ *El Himnario*, x. "As a response to the need expressed by the Christian people from Hispanic speaking countries, to have a resources for worship that is appropriate in today's world."

¹⁶ *El Himnario*, x.

¹⁷ *El Himnario*, xiv.

Latin-American origin, while one is from Mexico, one is from Brazil, and one is unknown.

The Impact of Vatican II and Inculturation

Liturgical historian Germán Martínez describes the liturgical reformation of the last twenty-five years as “the most concrete pastoral fruit of Vatican II.”¹⁸ This is extremely relevant in the history of Latino Episcopal Ministry and its music, because, as Martínez writes, this liturgical reform “responded to cherished Hispanic values: communal and active participation, traditional popular singing, the renewed sense of celebration and ‘fiesta,’ and the centrality of liturgical piety,”¹⁹ values that not only traveled with the Hispanic people to the Catholic congregations of the United States, they also made their way into the heart of many of the Latino priests, worship and lay leaders of The Episcopal Church, and many other denominations that embraced Latinos. This is an issue of great importance, particularly in the history of *El Himnario*, which seems to almost align with Martínez’s description of the liturgical reform that came with Vatican II. He describes three post-Vatican II stages of liturgical reform: there is first the “translation of liturgical texts to modern languages; second, the reform of all the sacramental rituals; third the adaptation to different groups, regions, and peoples according to the genius and traditions of their culture.”²⁰

The spirit of liturgical reformation stated by Martínez can be traced through the evolution of *El Himnario*. In the history of *El Himnario*, there is a process of translation, present in the years from 1907 through 1961, and a clear effort to adapt and embrace the Latino culture with a different approach in 1998. Although not chronologically aligned with the stages of liturgical reform presented by Martínez, both predecessors of *El Himnario* (1998) were published translations wherein the editor translated or copied the music selections from their English predecessors, used the exact same music as printed in the English predecessor, and added a Spanish translation of the hymn. In that way, the first edition of *El Himnario* published in 1907,

¹⁸ Germán Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship: The Process of Inculturation,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11, no. 2, Evangelization and Culture (Spring 1993): 80.

¹⁹ Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 81.

²⁰ Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 82.

by James H. Van Buren, Bishop of Puerto Rico, contained Spanish lyrics of Anglican hymns intentionally translated to Spanish. In 1961, The Episcopal Church made an even greater effort to produce a hymnal that would look exactly like the 1940 Hymnal of The Episcopal Church, but in Spanish, as decided in the General Convention of 1955 in Honolulu, an effort led by the churches of the Caribbean.²¹

What these examples tell us is that even before Vatican II, The Episcopal Church was well into that first stage of liturgical reform mentioned by Martínez, when worship resources were being translated, in this case to Spanish. By the time the Office of Latino Ministry of The Episcopal Church and Church Publishing produced *El Himnario* in 1998, it is not surprising to find a preface that starts with a series of recommendations reflecting a diversity of traditions, a desire to incorporate congregational singing in the popular style, and a need to make the lyrics more accessible. These steps brought them much closer to that third stage of liturgical reformation stated by Martínez: “the adaptation to different groups, regions, and peoples according to the genius and traditions of their culture.”²²

The Typical Volunteer Singer: Back to El Coro Latinoamericano

There is a major disconnect between the purpose of creating these two hymnals (*Flor y Canto* and *El Himnario*) to capture the “genius and traditions” of Latino culture and the expectation for the singer who actually makes use of them. After reading the prefaces, comparing the number of hymns and their origin, and analyzing the music content of these hymnals and their predecessors, one can conclude that the person that is expected to be reading from these hymnals is a singer who is

1. able to read music
2. willing to sing in English and Spanish
3. familiar with singing English chorales
4. comfortable singing with organ accompaniment
5. comfortable being led by an organist
6. able to reproduce the sound of the English choir

²¹ *El Himnario* (Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1961).

²² Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 80.

In other words, not your typical Latino volunteer singer. Therefore, it is fair to ask, Who is the typical Latino ministry volunteer singing in the Latino choirs of The Episcopal Church today, and more importantly, how did the volunteer singers learn the music when working with music directors who used hymnals such as *El Himnario* and *Flor y Canto*?

The Rev. Canon Anthony Guillén, Missioner for Latino Ministries and Director of Ethnic Ministries for The Episcopal Church, explained in a 2017 Episcopal Latino Ministry Competency course that the landscape of Latino Hispanic ministry from the 1980s to 2000²³ in the West Coast was characterized by migration waves of Latin Americans who were following agricultural jobs, who are first generation or young second generation, who prefer hearing sermons in Spanish and singing in Spanish, and for whom education was just starting to become a priority in the 1980s.²⁴

In the Midwest, however, the majority of immigrants came from inside the United States. They were following other job opportunities by the year 2000, as illustrated by el Coro Latinoamericano at Christ Church Cathedral.²⁵ In the year 2000, a group of volunteers, all from the same family, started singing the Spanish Mass at Christ Church Indianapolis, in a choir where only one person besides the choir director could read music. Even today, there are two volunteer singers who read music: both of them are American, one of them is bilingual, and they both have a big heart for Latino ministry. The other fifteen to eighteen people in the choir are what some Latinos call *cantantes líricos*, that is, people who learn and sing “by ear.” Initially, most of the choir members were from Mexico; today, they have volunteer singers also from Colombia, Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Most of them are first-generation Latinos who are not comfortable reading music, singing bilingually, or being accompanied by organ music, and who think the music from the English service is not fitting for their worship experience or is just plain boring.

This is how these typical groups of Latino volunteers learn music. My favorite story is that of Julio, one of our volunteer singers, in

²³ United States Census Bureau, Population Division, Decennial Census (1990).

²⁴ Anthony Guillén, “The Landscape of Hispanic Ministry,” Episcopal Latino Ministry Competency Course presentation, 2017, Austin, TX.

²⁵ Renee Stepler and Mark Hugo Lopez, “U.S. Latino Population Growth and Dispersion Has Slowed since Onset of the Great Recession,” Pew Research Center, September, 2016.

conversation with the organ player during a rehearsal. The organist told the choir she wanted them to listen to a song they might know, and played it on the organ. A few measures in, Julio raised his hand and said he recognized the tune from the radio in his native Ciudad Juárez. In the words of Julio, it was “Pescador de Hombres” by no other than Lupe Esparza, el Bronco. If you are not familiar with banda music in Mexico, Bronco was one of the first famous Tex-Mex bandas in the 1990s, and though he did not write “Pescador de Hombres,” he did record it, in banda style, and it was a smashing success. So, Julio, who recognized the tune, proposed to bring his guitar and play it for the organist, so she could hear it the way he knows how to play it, not with an arpeggiated accompaniment but rather with a percussive way of playing the guitar, as befits the Ranchero waltz style. The following week, as soon as Julio began playing the guitar, all the other singers joined in, belting out with pride “Pescador de Hombres.” The organist was left thinking she had never heard them sing like that before.

Inculturation of the Hymnals

As Coro Latinoamericano evolved over the next seven years, singers and directors came and went, going back and forth between singing from pages that had only lyrics printed to trying unsuccessfully to read music from *Flor y Canto* and *El Himnario*. Sometimes with frustration, sometimes successfully, the volunteers’ commitment to having a choir remained alive, however, and in the meantime, Oregon Catholic Press realized *Flor y Canto* needed a major overhaul and produced the second edition of *Flor y Canto* in 2001.²⁶ In 2007, this hymnal made its way to Christ Church Cathedral.

The second edition of *Flor y Canto* was one of the most important efforts in music publishing in the United States, and had a great influence on Coro Latinoamericano at Christ Church Cathedral and many more choirs nationwide. This version was one hymnal in five different formats: a version with just lyrics for people who did not read music, a version with music notes for the literate singers, two volumes for guitar accompaniment, and three volumes for keyboard accompaniment. They also recorded all over seven hundred songs in fifty compact discs. On top of that, the volumes with guitar accompaniment had the names of the chords both in English and Spanish,

²⁶ *Flor y Canto*, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: Oregon Catholic Press, 2001).

allowing the guitar player to choose to read the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, or Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si. There was an appendix with diagrams²⁷ for all the guitar chords, and an explanation of Latin American rhythms. Even more meaningfully, in the second edition, the editors incorporated common popular music practices such as the use of capo or *cejilla* for pieces that were written in keys that were harder to perform for the average popular guitar player, and included the adapted chords for such practice.²⁸ This was done especially for foreign songs adapted to Spanish, songs that were written in F major and B flat major, both more common tonalities for keyboard instruments. Examples of these adaptations can be found especially in the section of Christmas songs, where some popular Christmas carols like "Silent Night" and "Angels We Have Heard on High" are adapted to Spanish. Another important addition to the second edition of *Flor y Canto* was the clear designation of refrains, or *estribillos*, and verses, or *estrofas*, in all binary form songs.

In a way, these changes represented the effort of the Catholic Church to validate aural skills, improvisation, common practice, guitars and percussion instruments, and even binary song form as the more authentic Latin American ways to worship, thus becoming one of the most resourceful collections of Latin American Christian hymns for the twenty-first century. Could this effort by OCP and the Catholic Church be read in the light of the liturgical reformation of Vatican II? The Constitution of Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, presented this reformation as the "adaptation to different groups, regions, and peoples, according to the genius and traditions of their culture."²⁹ If we say it is, then we would have to accept all European hymns present in *Flor y Canto* as part of the Latin American heritage of hymns that were inculturated, were brought or rediscovered, and then reinculturated here in the United States. That could be the case of hymns like "Pescador de Hombres," "Danos un Corazón," and "Santa María del Camino." However, it is necessary to question whether the process of inculturation of these hymns is a true and honest adaptation of the expression of the experience of faith

²⁷ *Flor y Canto*, 2nd ed., guitar, vol. 1, appendix, 2.

²⁸ A capo is a clip on that is used to lower or raise the key of a song without changing the chords in the left hand of the guitar.

²⁹ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 37–41, in Martínez, "Hispanic Culture and Worship," 80.

of the Latin American people, especially given the large presence of European hymns in these hymnals. In other words, is it true liturgical reformation and inculturation, or is this an effort to preserve musical colonization? The answer to this question has to do with much more than the musical and cultural complexity of this issue. It has to do with the fact that there cannot be inculturation without liberation. To measure how truthful liturgical reformation and inculturation is, we need to transcend beyond music, culture, integration and translation, and realize that as a congregations we are called to meet our Hispanic congregants where they are in their life journey. As stated by Germán Martínez, “Evangelization is certainly broader than sacramental spirituality and personal conversion. It encompasses the transformation of oppressive social structures, because ‘action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.’”³⁰

A New Profile for a Director of Music

Another valid question that arises after the analysis of this hymnals is this: With this evolution in the most important hymnal of the twenty-first century, who is the musical director who is supposed to manage and balance the use of all these resources? When we look in the pages of *Flor y Canto*, second edition, it is clear that the music leader should have the following characteristics or traits:

1. able to read music
2. bilingual
3. able to play guitar, or with volunteer guitarists who are able to accompany the liturgy
4. fluent in different notation systems (Gregorian chant, standard Western notation, guitar chords in English and Spanish, and even jazz charts)
5. values and understands aural skills and common musical practices for Spanish speakers
6. able to adapt tonalities
7. possesses cultural and musical competency

³⁰ “Justice in the World,” Synod of Bishops Second General Assembly, 1971, quoted in Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 90.

By the year 2001, this was a description that would have been met by several American music directors, organists, and singers, and more than likely this description would have been exceeded by a Latin American church music director with training in the United States, a very rare and scarce commodity. But such people did exist. One of these very special musicians was Skinner Chávez-Melo, an organist, composer, and conductor who was Music Director at St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church in Manhattan. He died in 1992 at the age of forty-seven. Chávez-Melo was born in Mexico City and completed his musical studies in the United States, receiving degrees from Easter Nazarene College and the Union Theological Seminary, pursuing further studies at Juilliard. He toured internationally and conducted orchestras in Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. As a composer he wrote works for organ, choir, and orchestra, and he contributed hymn settings to several published hymnals.³¹ In fact, he is the only composer who, in addition to having music published in both hymnals *Flor y Canto* and *El Himnario*, was also involved as a consultant, translator, and arranger for both editorial committees in the creation of both hymnals.

Christ Church Brings in a Latina as Associate Director of Hispanic Music

Therefore, in 2013, although difficult to find, it was not a total surprise that Christ Church Cathedral would finally find a native Latin American musical director with degrees in classical music, and with extensive training in Latin American popular music and jazz; she is the author of this essay. When I asked the volunteer singers what they wanted to do with the choir, they all answered, “We want happy music that sounds like Latin music” (“Queremos música más alegre y que suene más Latina”). With that in mind, the choir set goals to establish their Latin American identity. At the same time that they explored using more authentic rhythms with just guitar and voices, they learned to sing in tune, to breath together, to sing together, and they committed to rehearsing once a week. After the first six months, the cathedral hired another professional guitar player to help with accompaniments, as well as a professional percussionist. After a year,

³¹ *New York Times*, “Obituaries,” Jan. 28, 1992. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/28/obituaries/skinner-chavez-melo-church-musician-47.html>.

the choir was alternating the use of the choir room for practice with the other choirs, signing a Christmas carol with the Choir of Adults and Choristers in Spanish for their first bilingual service, and were expected to have dinner with the other choirs before rehearsal. After a year and a half, el Coro Latinoamericano was able to hire three more professional singers to act as section leaders, to teach correct singing and breathing techniques, and to help with sectional rehearsals. As a result, the congregation was able to experience high quality Latin American music during worship, and the volunteer choir members took ownership of their ministry and felt proud of the music they were singing. They realized that through the search for an authentic Latin American character in their music, they were growing spiritually and musically, and had gained important recognition within the community. They were able to discover those gestures, customs, symbols and traits of the Latino people's expression of faith.³² In other words, the choir and the congregations were able to participate in a process of inculturation as defined by Allan F. Deck: "Inculturation occurs when people become sensitively aware of their own culture, its values and disvalues, when they relativize their absolutes and see Christian faith as incarnated in flesh and blood in a diversity of ways that may be puzzling or appear threatening at first."³³

Indeed, the ways of Coro Latinoamericano seemed puzzling at first. Some elements were key in the implementation of positive changes, such as the use of a Latin American musical texture that combined professional and volunteer musicians and singers, as well as the use of more typical Latin American instruments such as guitars, congas, cajón, and maracas. The choir used resources to meet the needs of those members of the choir who needed just lyrics, and those who needed to read music. This required access to music writing software, and time to create music charts. In that way, those who needed to read music were given a chart with music notes and chords, or would read from the hymnal, while those who felt more comfortable would use only lyrics.

Another very successful tool was the use of Latin American motives in the implementation of psalm chanting. Since psalm chanting is so characteristic of Anglican liturgy, as music director, I set out to find forms of chant in Latin American culture that were expressive,

³² Allan F. Deck, "The Spirituality of United States Hispanics: An Introductory Essay," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 9, nos. 1–2, *Hispanic Catholics: Historical Explorations and Cultural Analysis* (Winter–Spring 1990): 141.

³³ Deck, "Spirituality of United States Hispanics," 143.

portrayed an improvisatory character, and could be identified as Latin American music. I figured that the Phrygian cadence, which is so characteristic of gypsy and Flamenco music, could be easily implemented as chanting in a psalm setting, and can be beautifully and simply harmonized using parallel fifth in the responses. Another genre of chanting that inspired us to develop psalm canting with a Latin American character is the Afro-Cuban *Lucumí* songs. Much in the way that Latin jazz has borrowed rhythms, textures, and melodic motives from the Afro-Cuban tradition, I created a pentatonic melodic motive, driven by a 6/8 guaguanco clave and rhythmic pattern that can be used to chant not only psalms, but also litanies, trisagiums, the kyrie, and even the Eucharistic Prayer. I believe this has proven successful because the melody is easily recognized by the congregation, and it also has a driving rhythmic element that deepens our spiritual connections as a community, even though we all come from different Latin American countries.

El Coro Latinoamericano discovered that there were some common practices from Latin American popular music, such as *cantar la segunda voz* (singing a secondary melody—harmony), that could be easily applied to choral singing, such as improvised parallel thirds and sixths, and simple points of imitation. These practices can easily be improvised and taught if practiced for a period of time, especially when the singers understand the musical parameters that allow for this practice to function.

Finally, I set out to rediscover Latin American sacred works. In 2017, the cathedral's Coro Latinoamericano decided to do a concert, just like the other four major choirs in our Diocese do every year. When looking for larger music works, we came across *La Misa Campesina Nicaraguense*, composed by Carlos Mejia-Godoy in 1976, a work with lyrics inspired in the practice of liberation theology that also resonated deep in our congregation and friends, given the hate and divisive rhetoric that the government was starting to use to generate fear in our immigrant communities. We were able to get two digital manuscript copies through Bernard Gordillo, a Nicaraguan scholar at UC Riverside, and with those two copies, and with the help of the Coro's musicians, I rewrote the whole Mass for choir, tenor soloist, two guitars, double bass, clarinet, violin, and two percussionists.³⁴

³⁴ J. M. Vigil and A. Torellas, *Misas Centroamericanas* (Managua, Nicaragua: CAV-CEBES, 1988), and Carlos Mejia-Godoy and Alejandra Spewak, *La Misa Campesina Nicaraguense* (Managua, Nicaragua: Miniserio de Cultura, 1981).

The Conclusions

It is necessary to recognize the relevance of hymnals like *El Himnario* to the effort, at the end of the twentieth century, to connect with more authentic Latin American music. For The Episcopal Church, it represented an attempt to create and to behold something truly and authentically Latin American and Anglican at the same time. Let us remember that before the publications of *Albricias*³⁵ in 1989, and of *El Himnario* in 1998, all efforts to create a Latin American collection of hymns were merely geared toward creating literal translations of the English hymns, with disregard for the cultural element of religion for Latin American congregations. Before *El Himnario*, the only official Episcopal hymnal in Spanish was *El Himnario Provisional*, published in 1961, which, other than the Spanish language, was a verbatim copy of the Hymnal 1940 (for use of English-speaking congregations), also known as the Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

In the search for a Latin American identity, el Coro Latinoamericano was able to find an abundant source of energy, a source gushing from the wealth of music, rhythms, and culture from all the different Latin American countries. This wealth travels with people's memories and heritages, and is a prophetic inculturation that would have not been possible without the vision of the cathedral vestry or the leadership of Dean Steve Carlsen (Christ Church Cathedral's Rector) to *Widen the Circle of God's Embrace with Heart and Voice*,³⁶ a mission statement that has materialized in the unparallel defense, uplift, and support of the immigrant community in Indianapolis. A true inculturation that, as described by Deck, "demands more than just translation and integration. It must include cultural and social transformation."³⁷

Strengthening the musical element of Latin American worship in Christ Church Cathedral has never lessened the identity of any other part of the congregation. If anything, it has enhanced participation, and the desire to learn more about the culture. It has positively changed the perception of the Latino presence at the cathedral and it has empowered the volunteer singers to take ownership of their

³⁵ Skinner Chavez-Melo, *Albricias: Coleccion de 38 Himnos para Congregaciones de Habla Hispana* (New York: National Hispanic Office, 1981).

³⁶ Christ Church Cathedral mission statement.

³⁷ Martínez, "Hispanic Culture and Worship," 90.

ministry and develop it with great pride. Because of that, el Coro Latinoamericano has become an example to be followed and replicated at many other congregations that may have experienced, or are experiencing, challenges. It is critical to create the spaces and resources to find the music leaders with the human qualities and musical skills to help all the Latino congregations of the United States to sing, to do it well, and to do it with a Latin heart. It is equally critical to take advantage of technology, and bring music education to our Latino choirs, to teach them to sing as a choir, in tune, breathing together, and establishing a discipline, all practices that will empower and help them grow in community, and will positively change the perception of Latino Congregations in the United States.

Finally, there is a greater, and far more important, message rising from this experience of our Latino choirs, one that goes beyond the musical experience: the strength of our Latino choirs may actually be a prophetic call from God to aim at a “respectful integration of differences within unity, as opposed to forced assimilation or outright indifference.”³⁸ As explained by Martínez, “The religious challenge requires both social and ecclesiastical support. There can be no preservation of the religious values and the liturgical expression of a (Latino) spirituality without a certain degree of stability and security. The Church’s acceptance and support must be based on confidence and pride in the Hispanic religious heritage.”³⁹

I believe our Latino worship ministers and choirs are being called to search within for their own sound and identity, and to join in on this strength. This strength of our Latino choirs feeds from the realization that the sound of our voices in our hearts is a sound that is pleasing to our Creator. We should not apologize for the strumming of our hearts, or the asymmetric beating claves that drive our spirit into song, because this sound is the product of our joys and struggles as a migrant people, walking toward liberation, lifted in one voice for those left voiceless at the margins and the borders, called to search for our own musical identity. Clearly, that is where the Spirit is taking us as a church.

³⁸ Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 90.

³⁹ Martínez, “Hispanic Culture and Worship,” 86.