

Program for Christian Leadership: Liturgical Music Focus Group Report

A focus group was held Tuesday March 28th with 6 participants in the Liturgical Music Course that was held. The goal of the focus group was to understand better the production process student liturgical leaders follow in their work, the degree to which that process reflected what they had learned in the course and the degree to which course objectives had been fulfilled as evidenced by subsequent practice by the student liturgical leaders.

The discussion provided substantial evidence that the course had had a rich impact on what they did as they prepared and their understanding of why they did what they did.

RESULTS

A. General Description of Preparation by Student Liturgical Leaders

I'd like to start by having you take me through what you actually do as a liturgical music leader both in preparation and during a mass.

There were general similarities in the preparation process across student liturgical leaders who participated in the focus group. They would take about an hour to pick out music based on the readings, the liturgical season, and, in some cases, what the priest had to say. They would spend another hour practicing with their choir. With respect to the objectives of the liturgical leader course, there was substantial evidence of impact as noted below:

1. Participants did reflect in their description of their preparation a sense of a linkage to the liturgical calendar.

“As soon as school starts we have ordinary time, then after Thanksgiving there is the advent season. When we get back from Christmas we have a few weeks of Christmas time, then ordinary time until Ash Wednesday when we begin Lent until Easter and then Ordinary time for the rest of the year.” [Nods around the table in agreement]
“At the beginning of a liturgical season...”

2. There was substantial evidence that they looked at what the readings would be and attempt to choose songs tied to the readings. They were able to articulate a systematic approach to evaluating music based on the readings and congregation participation.

“We'll talk about what songs to pick what's in line with the readings, what the congregations knows. Sometimes if we are pressed for time we don't want to introduce a new song to the choir.”

“I have in mind what we did a couple of weeks ago and what we have coming up. The readings are on line at the US Bishops Conference Website the daily readings, and also there is Living Liturgy.”

“And so for instance if in the readings there is the theme about trusting God then I will think of songs that have more to do with trust. Later I will read the songs several times.”

“I’d say connections between the readings, connections to the Pastoral Mystery.”

“Basically connections between songs that we know and like what the songs really emphasize and try to connect songs that we know that the assembly is familiar with and kind of connecting that with what the reading is. So like if there is a really big thing on the Holy Spirit, then we will try and get a song that speaks about the trinity or something spirit related.”

“We look the readings up on line and we also use the lectionary because sometimes the readings on line are not the same like on special weeks.”

“If there is an option and it is a major feast day then we go with the major feast day. But if it is an option between two readings then we normally e-mail the priest who is doing our Mass and ask him which one to focus on.”

“I think it varies. We have it down where we do the same thing. We start from the beginning and work the way down in order [linkage to readings].”

3. Participants did use several of the books that provide appropriate songs for the liturgy.

We use a couple different books and normally the readings and psalm and common ideas and themes for the week.”

“Sometimes songs come to me and other times I will have to look through the different sections of the Gathering book.”

“We go straight to the book and look at the themes and what stick out.”

4. Participants also described interactions with the responsible priest both in advance and afterwards. Some met personally with the priest and some communicated primarily through e-mail.

“We take it on a week by week basis. I meet with Father Chris every Tuesday actually and we read the readings for the upcoming week and kind of talk about the themes that come out and he asks me what kind of speaks to me most and a lot of times things that come out of his homily later are things that we talk about which is really kind of cool.”

“Conversation with the priest every week.”

“We tell our priest what we have in mind to do and he will give his thoughts. He sometimes has his own ideas on what he wants, so there is some compromising.”

“The priest we have is very focused on being very precise on the liturgy and the music.”

“We don’t really meet with our priest at all. Whenever we finish picking out the songs I e-mail it to the priest and he will e-mail me if he really doesn’t like it but not normally. He tells us after Mass what he did or did not like.”

“Father Chris is pretty cool about what we choose. We e-mail him and he doesn’t really have issues.”

5. Student liturgical leaders had some sensitivity to whether the choir and the congregation would be familiar with the song and whether the song would be easy to sing. They expressed an understanding of the importance of participation by the congregation

“Also, how easy, how the song sounds. You want a song that sounds good and is easy to sing.”

“Basically connections between songs that we know and like what the songs really emphasize and try to connect songs that we know that the assembly is familiar with.”

“Sometimes we tell him [the priest] that this isn’t going to hit with the congregation/audience.”

“I come from a more pastoral background.”

6. As noted earlier, planning rarely took more than an hour of time.

“We do it several weeks in advance and may meet an hour or two to plan out a couple of weeks.”

“We do a little work before hand [prior to meeting of two leaders]. We’ll look over it ourselves and if we see anything that immediately jumps out at us we’ll jot it down and collaborate when we get together.”

“We meet on Tuesday and we try to plan as many weeks in advanced as we can. We can normally get three weeks done in an hour.”

7. Recruitment of choir members is an essential part of the task:

“I go around campus asking people if they will be able to sing. Yes we recruit.”

“The former choir leaders e-mail us the list of the undergrads from the previous year who might still be interested.”

“We went to all the campus ministry meets and talked about it and asked them if they wanted to get involved with the Mass.”

“The heaviest recruiting is defiantly during the beginning of the year.”

“I recruited for the entire first semester.”

8. Amount of choir practice varied but did not seem to exceed an hour and some with weekday Masses indicated they practiced for just a short period before mass.

“It depends sometimes we are very chit chatty.”

“It is once a week and then right before Mass as well...normally an hour before Mass.”

“He’ll give people solos to try and get them more involved that way.”

“We have a weekday Mass, so they come a half an hour before Mass. It is very laid back.”

“The weekday Mass are more loose than the Sunday Mass.”

“We set up the microphones, set up the music, write the songs on the whiteboard, the choir will show up and we will run through the songs, then Mass starts. For each song, I will make sure everyone knows when to come in and come out. We plan who is going to be our Eucharistic minister for the Mass.”

B. Perceptions of What a Student Liturgical Leader Should Be

Are there any specific do's or don'ts that you consider as you go about your job?

General themes with respect to what one should do emerged in the discussion. A student liturgical leader brought the choir together as a group and really put the focus on why they are there and what their job is.

“If you do things right, the music is the easiest part. A lot of the job is getting comradely between the choir and being a leader. If all the other components come together, the music just comes naturally.”

“They all like to sing in church, so when they show up they want to sing well and for it to go well.”

“If the choir is up there, and they are talking during the mass. It just doesn't look good.”

“We always pray together beforehand. We offer up intentions and say the Hail Mary. I think it is important to keep the focus.”

“I try to make sure I give the choir as much direction as possible especially about coming in. People are nervous about coming into a song. I make it clear as possible when to sing and not to sing.”

“Our Mass is a lot more laid back because it is a week day Mass. It is a lot less structured. The music is the least part of it because they all know the songs.”

Participants articulated the importance of not picking songs that were liturgically incorrect.

“Don't sing hallelujah during lent. Liturgically you are not supposed to say Hallelujah during lent.” [To general laughter and nods of agreement]

C. Perceptions of Time Required to be a Student Liturgical Leader

Participants in general felt that four or five hours was enough time to plan and practice and execute as a student liturgical leader. They also articulated some barriers to spending more time in terms of choir resistance to new songs and limits of accompanying musicians.

“About four hours. An hour of planning and then before Mass.”

“Probably about four hours.”

“Four to five hours. If I'm bored I will try to fine tune it. I will spend time researching new sources.”

“I try to look through Spirit and Song and try to find the good stuff. Even some of the standard books, just some songs are not in those books.”

“My former choir director had written a great number of songs and I brought some of those in, but I sort of have to space those out because they are new.”

“Our choir doesn’t really like change. Also our piano player plays by ear so it is harder to get new songs.”

D. Tension between Theory and Practice of Leadership

Talk to me about Theory and Practice of being a Liturgical Music Leader. That is, we have spent time talking about what you actually do as a Liturgical Music Leader. Is there a difference between what you do and what you should do in theory? What are those differences? What gets in the way of doing those things that in Theory you would like to do?

The group in general was satisfied with their performance as leaders. They explicitly talked about the role the class had played. Some acknowledged they could spend more time on planning, if they had the time in their schedule to do that.

“I’d say everyone’s pretty much on the ball to be honest because we are students and that is our first responsibility. Nobody’s been fired so nobody has lacked the expectations.”

“An expectation is mostly to be prepared and to do what we did learn in the class. The biggest one is just being prepared.”

“I think there is a lot more emphasis on picking songs that is liturgically correct.”

“I probably could spend more time planning.”

E. Reflections on the Course “Introduction to Principles of Liturgy for Church Musicians”

What role did the mini-course you took “Intro to Principles of Liturgy for Church Musicians” play in your development as a Liturgical Leader? If it altered your approach, tell me how...If it didn’t tell me why not? Thinking of the course aspects we just talked about, what were the best, or most meaningful to you and why? What changed you the most? Now, what were the worst parts and why?

Participants were extremely enthusiastic about the course and the instructor. They felt they understood far more clearly why the Church has the guidelines it has for the Liturgy. They articulated the notion that they had known what they were suppose to do before the course but not the “why”.

“We are more aware of the theology behind liturgical music. I think with that knowledge you feel that there are some actual reasons behind what is going on.”

“I have more of a theological background of why the Catholic Church has some guidelines for the liturgy.”

“I think it helped me have a better education of the liturgy. We are there to help people participate in the Mass.”

“I have more meaning behind what we can do and not do.”

“It helps when they want to know why they can’t do a song they want to do because you can explain why.”

“I have actually lightened up in getting harmonies perfect. If they don’t get it we’ll move on. I think music needs to be beautiful, but it’s not the focus, the focus is prayer.”

They reported that the course increased their appreciation of Mass. They also felt empowered by the variety of practical information that helped them be better liturgical leaders.

“I think we covered a lot of topics in a short amount of time, but it was good because they were all practical and things we could use right away.”

“The practical stuff was the most applicable but it was also cool to learn a little bit of the history but it made me feel knowledgeable.”

“I learned a ton about the ministry itself and pastoral mystery. I’m getting married this summer and have used what I’ve learned to write a letter to my priest to get a full Catholic Mass.”

“Encouraging the choir to be aware of the congregation. A lot of the guidelines about song leading and the congregation were at the top of the hierarchy in order of importance.”

“The course was good about pointing out that it is about a community.”

“I have been a lot more aware of raising my arm as much as I can to let the congregation know when to come in.”

“Making sure the congregation knows when to come in and also in picking out songs knowing if the congregation can sing it or if we will have to teach it to them.”

“If there is a particularly tricky song then we will take five min before Mass to go through the song.”

They viewed the guest speakers as well chosen because of their experience in following the guidelines.

“I would say that we had a lot of guest speakers come in and it was neat because we got to hear from people who are specialized in this.”

“We had one teacher come in who wrote some of the material we read and it made it more real because it was here experiences.”

F. Impact of Being a Liturgical Leader

So here we are...you’ve been doing this for a while, has being a liturgical leader had an impact on you? If so, what has been the impact? If not articulated, probe for connections to vocation and connections to other liturgical ministers.

Participants all felt their experience had given them a better appreciation of the Mass and readings. They noted they enjoyed Mass more now because they better understand the meaning behind certain aspects of the Mass.

“My background I didn’t sing or play guitar at all until coming to college. It has helped my singing and guitar abilities and it has helped my appreciation for the Mass itself. I enjoy Mass a lot more than I did.”

“When I am in the congregation, I have a different experience. When I’m in the choir I am more focused on what song is coming up next. It is cool to see what the choir gets out of it too.”

“I know when I go home, I’m always thinking if I would have chosen that song and where it fits in. I’m very aware of the messages in the reading in Mass. I feel like the liturgical season and the Mass are in the same direction. It has helped my spiritual life. I really pay attention in Mass and in the readings.”

“It impacts me on a daily basis with my interactions with everybody. Things that I see going on residency halls. Has liturgy affected that person at all?”

Almost all of the participants knew that they would continue to act as liturgical leaders once they left UD.

“I’ve known for sometime it’s something I’ve wanted to do.”

“I’ve made new friends because of choir. I don’t know if it’s changed what I want to do job wise but extra curricularly it is something I want to stay with. Know I feel like I could take up some more leadership roles.”

“In terms of job wise, vocation wise, I defiantly could see myself being involved with some kind of music ministry. If it weren’t for this I wouldn’t have as much confidence. Before this I’ve never seen music ministry as my thing, but because of this it has become more my own.”

“It has helped in the sense that my job uses music sometimes.”

“I don’t see it as my primary job. It will be something to stay involved in.”

G. Lessons for Future Student Liturgical Leaders

What do new student liturgical music leaders need to know? If you were in charge of training new student liturgical music leaders, how would you do it? What are the important elements of that training? What is the appropriate vehicle? A mini-course? A different approach?

Participants had several key points for new student liturgical leaders

“Be as organized as possible.”

“She e-mails everyone after choir immediately about the practice times and what they need to know.”

“If you mess up it’s not the end of the world. You will know it, but most everyone else is oblivious. It is more about if you are able to lead the assembly.”

“It is important to get people right away and to build up your choir members and encourage them to keep coming. You don’t want to loose people. Put an effort into recruiting.”

“Don’t get discouraged.”

With respect to training, there was sentiment for an on-the-job element coupled with a course and mentorship.

“Honestly, all right you are going to do this but just throw them in. You can teach and teach and teach, but got to get the experience.”

“It helped a lot to just be thrown into the situation.”

“I think the mini course was helpful because it explained things and it motivated you to do things correctly. They should know how to look at the readings and pick out what is important.”

“I think the mentoring thing is a really good way to go. Have the mentor be the leader and then later the mentored do the leading, so the mentor could give some feedback.”

“Being paired up with someone who has done it in the past helps.”

H. Reactions to Guidelines for a Liturgical Leader

A draft set of guidelines for Student Liturgical Leaders was handed out and participants were asked for their reactions (see Appendix for Guidelines). Some had seen the guidelines before.

In general, participants were comfortable with the guidelines. They did have some specific concerns however. They were concerned that people would be deterred by the time commitments suggested by the guidelines. At the same time, others liked having suggested time frames for practices.

“The rehearsal time of an hour and half is not realistic; I think at least for the weekday Masses an hour and a half is too long for the amount of material.”

“I think having the requirement to have some practice is good so that you don’t leave it until right before Mass.”

They were not sure that the mini-course needed to be two semesters in length.

“The only thing I’m worried about is a mini course both semesters; I think would be one straw that would break the camel’s back. It would deter a student who had a co-op or student teaching.”

“The time is hard because that is a time where you would take labs... the evening would be better.”

“I would have had a better attitude toward the course if it hadn’t been on Friday afternoon.”

“It was not clear on paper because it wasn’t back to back semesters.”

They also had reactions to other specific elements of the guidelines:

With respect to community building: “I like the community building programs.”

With respect to the orientation workshop: “With the orientation workshop, it is the first Saturday that you get back from school. I would suggest a little later or bring us in a day or two later.”

With respect to the seasonal worship workshops: “The seasonal worship is a good idea, but having more advance notice.”

APPENDIX

DA RULES

For UGMMs (Undergraduate Music Ministry Leaders/Co-Leaders/Asst. Leaders)

Definition of position distinctions and their hierarchy:

Leader: person who takes lead role in both planning (has more exp.) and musicianship (gives cues, rehearses cantors, etc.)

pay range: \$1250.00-\$1500.00/academic year

Co-Leaders: when both students share the primary leadership duties evenly. Both have similar amounts of experience, level of training, and both lead musically.

pay range: \$950.00-\$1150.00/academic year

Assistant Leader: person who takes a more supporting role in the leadership team. Has less experience with music selection and is less skilled and experienced musically.

pay range: \$450.00-850.00/academic year

Practical Expectations:

- **Music group.** All UGMMs will recruit and coordinate a choir or music group for their respective mass. Each mass group will rehearse for a minimum of 1.5 hours per week. If the mass that group serves does not occur that week, rehearsal is optional.
- **Music selection/liturgy preparation.** Each UGMM leadership team will meet together to prepare for their liturgy. It is preferred that UGMM teams plan several weeks or an entire season (such as Advent or Lent) in one longer session, but UGMMs may get together on a weekly basis for planning as well. 1 hour per week is the minimum time that should be spent on liturgical music selection.
- **Collaboration.** UGMMs are asked to send their selections in advance to their residence hall CM (if applicable), mass presider, and/or the Director of Music Ministry. UGMMs are strongly advised to seek out these people's feedback on choices and approach.
- **Private rehearsal.** All UGMMs are expected to spend an allotted amount of time each week in private rehearsal for your musical role in liturgy, whether it be cantor, accompanist, or conductor. This amount of time will be determined by individual needs and skills.
- **Two community building programs for music group.** Each UGMM team will arrange for one social and one service program for their music group each academic year. The social program will aim to build community, help group retention, and acknowledge and thank group members. The service program will help draw connections between liturgical music ministry and social justice. It may also include social elements (a treat before or after, etc.)
- **Liturgy Retreat.** [not sure if we should require them simply to attend, or to lead. not everyone could lead, too many people. perhaps Sunday leaders should form the core team? or we could ask them to apply to be on the core team? need Retreats Office consult]

Academic/Catechetical Expectations:

- **Orientation Workshop.** On the Saturday after classes begin in the Fall Semester, all UGMMs will participate in a beginning-of-the-school year workshop to orient new UGMMs and re-orient returning UGMMs. Returning UGMMs will assist in planning and help mentor those who are new. Workshop will be from 10:00am to 4:00pm and will include lunch.
- **Coursework.** In both Fall and Spring semesters, UGMMs must enroll and excel in a 1-credit hour mini-course on foundations and principles of liturgy for liturgical musicians, which will include practical application of course material. Spring course will be advanced level. The mini-courses will take place every Tuesday from 3:00pm-4:15pm. UGMMs must pass each mini-course with a C average or above in order to qualify for a paid music ministry position the following semester.
- **Seasonal Workshops.** UGMMs must attend one seasonal workshop on music ministry and the rhythms of the Church Year each semester (Advent/Christmas, Lent/Easter), and will last 2-4 hours in length. Dates are tbd.

Additional expectations for Sunday UGMMs:

- **Catechetical program on liturgy and/or liturgical music.** Once per academic year, Sunday UGMM teams will plan and implement a campus-wide event that provides catechesis to fellow students and the campus community on the Church's liturgy and music traditions. UGMM teams will submit event proposals for approval to the Director of Music Ministry in advance. UGMM teams are encouraged to collaborate with another UGMM team, but collaborations are limited to 2 teams for each event, and events which are the result of collaboration between 2 groups must reflect the labor of the additional team members, and thus be a larger-scale event.

Absences:

- It is permitted that each UGMM may miss 2 liturgies for which they are responsible per semester, and no more. However, advance notice of absence must be submitted to the Director of Music Ministry (except of course in emergencies or sudden illness), and UGMMs must find and train suitable replacements in advance of their absences. UGMMs are responsible for music selection and liturgical preparation despite a planned absence. Though 2 absences per semester are permitted, they are certainly not required.