

Sing Fires of Justice: Exploring the Impact of a Community-based Music and Social Justice Tradition

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In a paper presented at the Festival 500 Symposium: The Power of Song, 2011, we concluded that through singing we are moved...mobilized into an action that advances our community and make clear the place of privileged people within Canadian society. Through Sing Fires of Justice, we explored a model where soulful, relevant, respectful and inclusive community is created, and lives of value and quality are cultivated and promoted.

The eighth annual multi-faith, cross-cultural community choral event known as Sing Fires of Justice took place October 4-5, 2013 with a focus on the “Stolen Sisters,” the more than 600 missing or murdered women of Canada’s aboriginal communities. As people entered the beautiful downtown Lutheran church, the smell of burning sweetgrass denoted that in this formal Christian worship space, a special sacred place was being created through the traditional aboriginal ceremony of smudging. One enters a place decorated with Christian iconography expecting to hear the organ playing. On this occasion, the entering music was provided by Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak (Ojibway for “Good Hearted Women Singers”), a drumming circle of aboriginal women, singing, dancing, and drumming the traditions of gathering and welcoming.

Our society faces unprecedented economic, environmental, social and cultural challenges. Sing Fires of Justice seeks to shine a light in dark places in order to raise public awareness and mobilize action. This is done by building a choral community comprised of university students, church and other faith based singers, and the public at large. Paul Friere's work notes that all around the world communities of oppressed peoples are finding their voice and seeking ways of liberation towards human flourishing. (Friere, 1986, 30 – 32). Sing Fires provides a forum where the voice of the oppressed is raised and thus, together with the music, the event provides a firsthand opportunity to innovatively turn some of the current societal challenges into opportunities, with the goal to improve conditions, and little by little create a value base in society that seeks peace and justice in everyday life.

On this most recent occasion, the internationally respected elder, writer, and orator, Lee Maracle, was our guest. Maracle is one of the most prolific aboriginal authors in Canada and a recognized authority on issues pertaining to aboriginal people and aboriginal literature. She is an award-winning poet, novelist, performance storyteller, scriptwriter, actor and keeper/mythmaker among the Stó:lō people from British Columbia. Accompanied by a projected slide show of images of the “stolen sisters,” Maracle’s spoken text, framed by musical selections from the massed choir and congregational singing, provided a multi-sensory impact on the participants.

Our research explores the impact of such events on the choristers, organizers, and to some degree, those who come to witness and participate in the annual public gathering. Based upon earlier research on what it means to sing in a community choir (Willingham, 2001) this study probed more deeply into the values of combining choral singing with a peace and justice cause.

Methodology included:

- Impact survey (research ethics approved);
- Comments and narrative inquiry;
- Volunteer completion at end of two day event;
- 32 respondents (out of 70 choristers.)

Previous research with community choirs revealed that people intentionally choose to invest time, energy, and resources in singing in order to gain experience in deepening or developing concepts of:

- Self-identity,
- Community,
- Discernment of quality (connoisseurship), and
- Restoration and healing.

Participants in the studies reported perspectives such as this example, “I would say that singing makes me truer... more true to who I have been created to be. It makes me more honest as to who I am...” (a choral singer).

This impact study probed into the rationale and thinking around the phenomenon of singing as enacting social justice. Rather than asking what impact does singing in a choir have on the chorister, the question is focused on the extra-musical effect. How does the experience of positioning the music as an agent for justice impact the values and the personhood of the singer? This question begs an exploration into the very nature of art experience, and as reported in the 2004 study entitled *Gifts of the Muse*, art has the capacity to communicate through direct experience. The experience is enriched through reflection, “...it typically stimulates curiosity, questioning, and the search for explanation” or one might conclude, a search for meaning (McCarthy et al, 2004, pp. 41-42).

Participants were asked to reflect and be mindful throughout the two-day Sing Fires of Justice choral workshop, rehearsals, nutrition breaks and meals, and the public event itself. Surveys (see Appendix A) were distributed and along with the prepared questions, there was an invitation to write any narrative commentary that they wished to communicate to the researchers.

Selected questions from the survey, and participant responses follow, accompanied by the researchers’ commentary to provide some context and rationale for the statistical results.

1. I feel strongly that music is an effective way to help focus on justice issues.

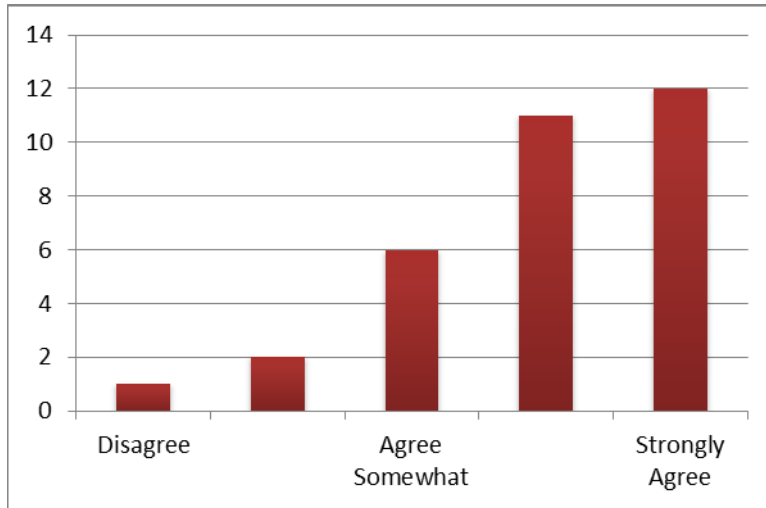


fig. 1

This was answered affirmatively by about 70% of the choristers. Since most of the singers volunteered and registered for a “social justice” event, and the sense that music is an effective agent for justice would have been previously established, this result comes as no surprise.

2. In uniting choral voices on behalf of a social justice cause, the possibility of change can be more easily realized.

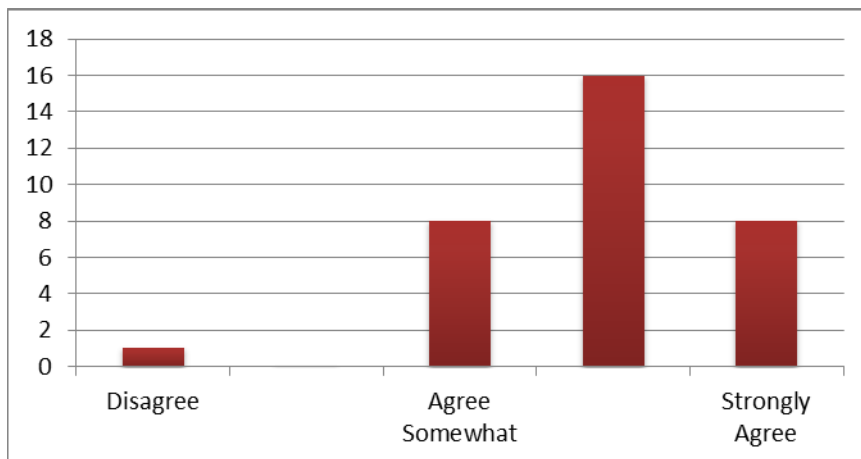


fig. 2

This question probes the belief system of the participants. They believe that music has power to communicate (question 1) but can it actually mobilize change? Again, there is strong agreement that it can.

3. I do not feel comfortable in using music for other causes other than music itself.

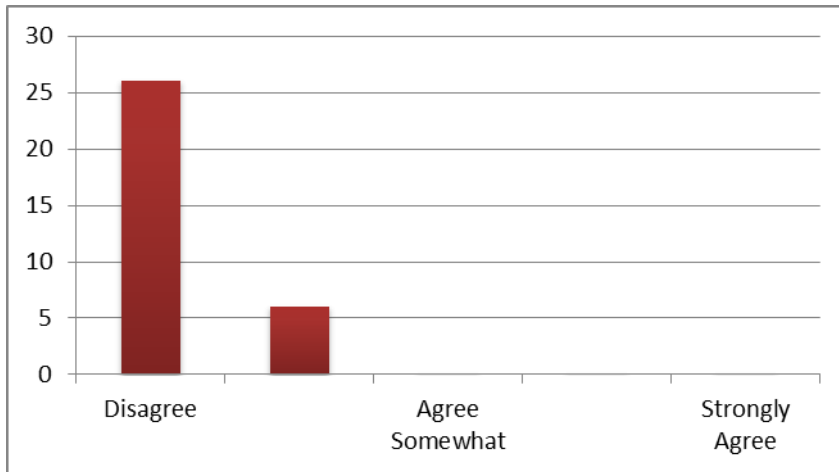


fig. 3

This question addresses the “music-is-for-music’s-sake” thinker, who finds making music the handmaiden for another cause of project problematic. Clearly, there were none who had concerns or personal issues with choral singing being a means to an extra-musical end.

4b. Singing in the Sing Fires event challenges and impacts on my spiritual life

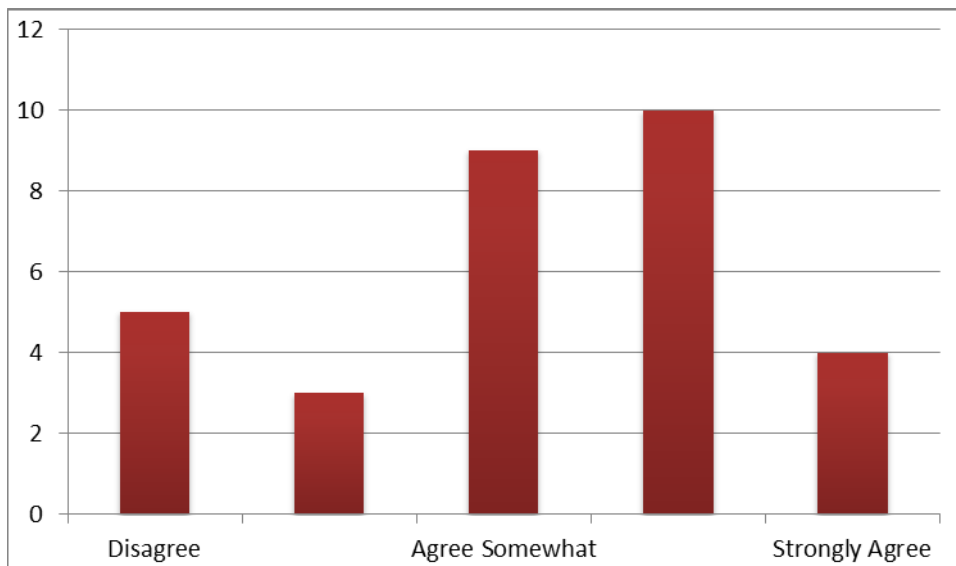


fig. 4

The responses to this question distributed quite evenly across the spectrum. The researchers did not attempt to identify “spiritual life,” nor was there discussion around what was meant by “challenges” or “impacts.” It is possible that some had not thought about the mind-body-spirit connections to the process of refining repertoire for public performance. It is evident that the participants knew they were in a church setting, and were a key part of a church-type event, but

the researchers conclude that so much time is spent fixing singing problems, eliminating mistakes, and interpreting and expressing, that the meta-physical, or spiritual aspects of the experience were not given much attention.

Part of the workshop planning in the 2013 Sing Fires of Justice for Stolen Sisters included a tobacco tying ritual, and a workshop presented by the Aboriginal Student Centre coordinator of our university. The ritual of the tobacco tying, and the presentation on bridging culture through song with a focus on the missing Aboriginal women, provided a rich contextual background. Connecting mind and spirit through singing was more evident through post-event commentary.

It cannot be assumed that singers will automatically move beyond the mastering of the musical expectations and connect the purpose of the event to the repertoire they are learning. It is incumbent upon the choral leaders to lead the singers into a contemplative and contextual place through the rehearsal process.

4d. Singing in the Sing Fires event challenges and impacts on my personal social values and beliefs

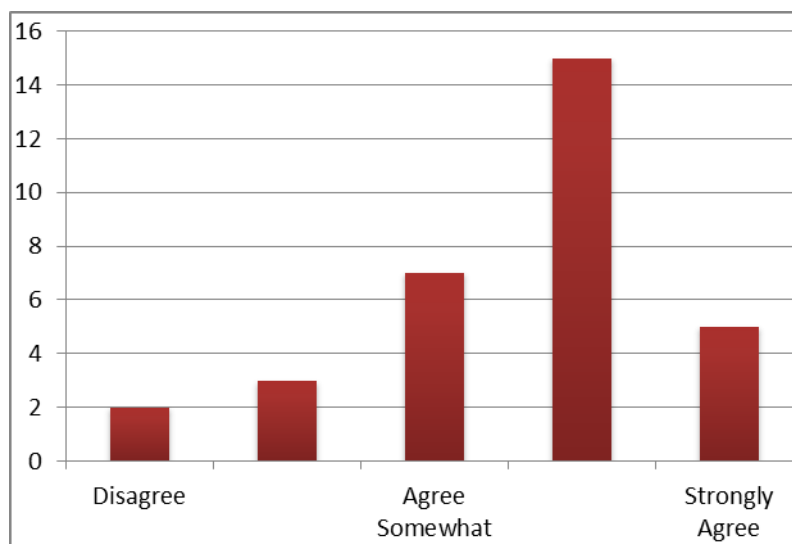


fig. 5

Most survey participants agreed with this statement. Again, the terms were not defined and the researchers can only infer that for a minority, this event did not hold a place of privilege in relation to their core beliefs.

5. A key personal goal in participating in Sing Fires is to improve my musical skills.

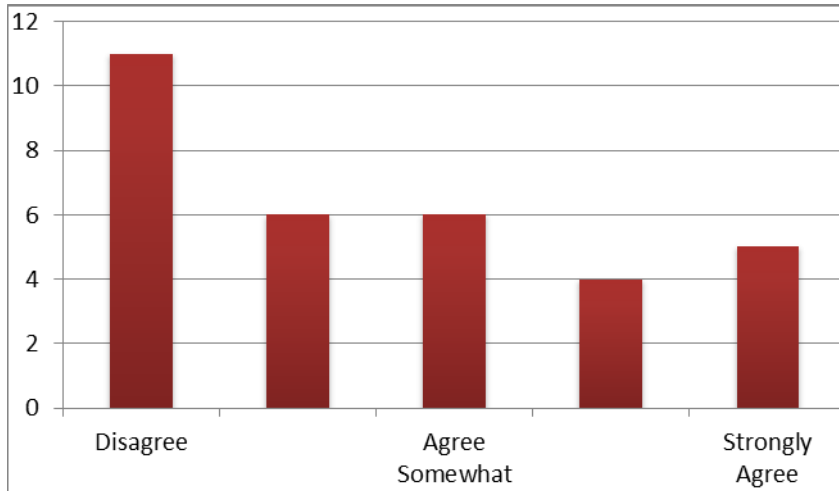


fig. 6

Sing Fires of Justice has roots in a choral workshop. Originally, church and community choral directors met to work on repertoire in order to gain insights and strategies in developing their own leadership practices. The group performed at a public event, and future plans to continue the workshops were made. The justice aspect was developed in a response to an expressed need to create an event that would give deeper purpose in bringing choristers together. This question addresses the original mandate of the event.

The response is interesting. There are participants who are advanced choristers, coming from auditioned university level chamber choirs. Very possibly, these singers would not consider the purpose of this event to build musical skills. On the other hand, community and church choristers come and find the music challenging, and the experience of singing with more accomplished singers does enhance their own singing skills.

6. A key personal goal in participating in Sing Fires is to deepen my sense and to increase public awareness by joining with others to witness through singing to the connection between faith and justice.

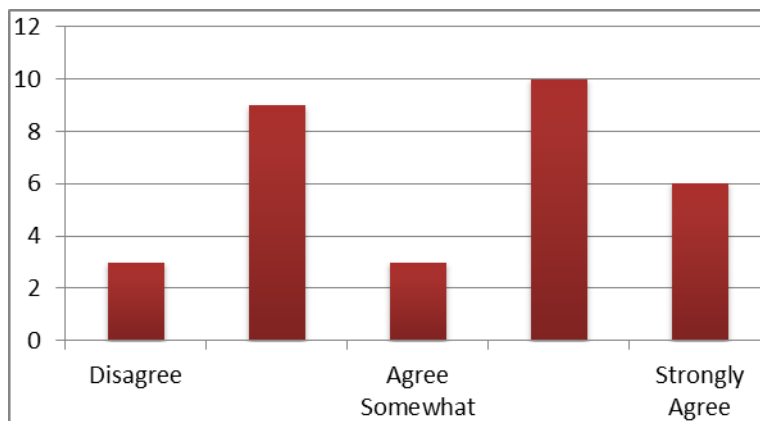


fig. 7

The inclusion of choristers who regularly sing for worship with those who may not participate musically in faith based events is likely the cause for this wide distribution of responses. This graph simply illustrates that faith and justice are intertwined for some, and for about the same amount, justice is not a product of faith practice.

7. The inclusion of multiple faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and others) is very important to me.

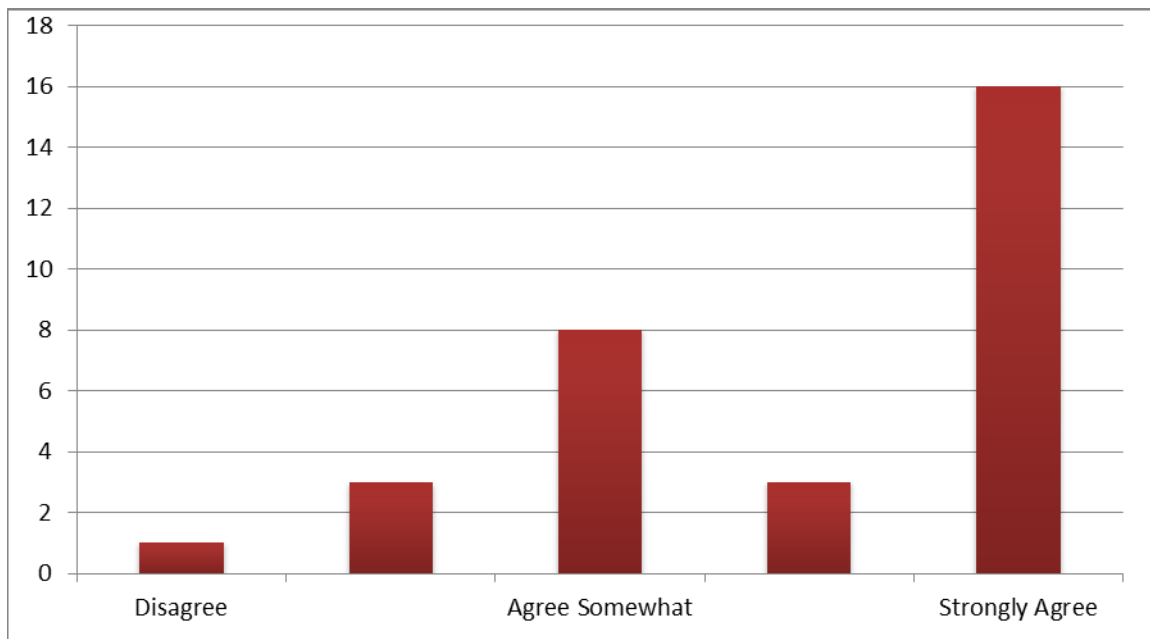


fig. 8

The researchers predicted an overwhelmingly affirmative response. It is there. However, the fact that a sizable percentage only *agree somewhat*, and a few *disagree* makes the response worthy of closer examination. The responders who indicate that the multi-faith component is of little or no consequence to them may or may not be indicating that it is what it is; it just is not that important. However, Sing Fires of Justice organizers believed that the full participation of Jewish, Muslim, and Aboriginal people in a Christian sacred space symbolizes a cultural and religious boundary spanning. It was a symbol of collaboration, respect, and the valuing of various diverse and mutual practices. To have 35% not strongly agree on the importance of this was startling, if not disappointing.

Perhaps, there is too much taken for granted, as pointed out in the explanation in question 4b. It cannot be expected, it would seem, that those fully participating in a carefully and strategically planned event would necessarily share its underlying values and principles.

Through narrative commentary, informal interviews, and post-event meetings, the impact of this annual experience emerges as strong, but as diverse as the population or participants. There is a “feel-good” quality, as indicated in the comments that follow.

“It always makes me more aware of my spirituality, not necessarily faith. Love bringing together other faiths. Beautiful!”

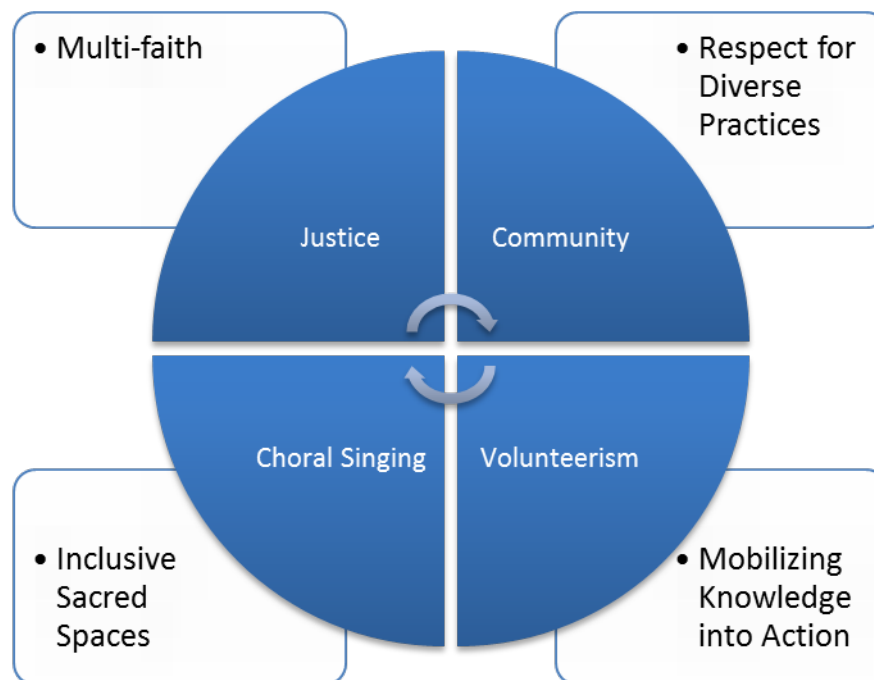
“It is a fun, challenging, exciting time!”

There is a sense of joy combined with a deeper awareness of respective traditions.

“I greatly enjoy the introduction of many different traditions of different religious observances, and I think it will lessen the cultural/discriminative gap between faith ethnicity.”

There is a reminder that through public music events it is important to “Accept everyone for who they are.”

The Sing Fires of Justice steering committee listens carefully to the feedback and seeks to provide experiences for participant musicians and audience alike, that will awaken the spirit of justice and peace, and will contribute to the richness of a diverse community. Sing Fires provides a network of human social and cultural capital from which many tangible, and often intangible benefits are derived.



Sing Fires of Justice Cyclical Matrix
Fig. 9

Our survey and narrative responses indicate that in most of the participants, there is a value base that responds to the goals of addressing the faultlines of modern society, the deep and perplexing problems that marginalize, judge, and prejudice the majority against various minority sectors. Sing Fires seeks to transform societal norms, that include:

- the significance we ascribe to instrumental reasoning, which can calculate the costs, but not the value, of everything,
- our reliance on the economy as the most important measure of meaning,
- the diminished sense of community in a world dominated by individualism and fear of “the other”, and
- our neglect, even at times disdain, for the intangible, the difficult-to-measure - intrinsic values, human feeling, inventiveness and imagination, the life of the spirit. (adapted from the Musagetes Foundation Declaration, 2007)

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Appendix A

Sing Fires of Justice Confidential Participant Survey

Dr. Lee Willingham, Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Music

Debbie Lou Ludolph, Dean of Chapel, Wilfrid Laurier University Seminary

Debbie Lou Ludolph and Dr. Lee Willingham presented a paper at Festival 500 Choral Symposium, St. John's Newfoundland outlining the ***Sing Fires*** project and its impact on the community. As follow-up to that paper, we are proposing a second paper that discusses the impact of this project upon those participating. The first stage of this research is a short survey that we are asking you to thoughtfully respond to.

This data will be analyzed and key themes will become the basis for our paper proposal to the Symposium, Festival 500, 2012.

In addition, our paper and the data analysis will become part of the Advanced Interdisciplinary Research on Singing (AIRS), Dr. Annabel Cohen, Principal Investigator, at the University of Prince Edward Island. (#3)

Both the initial paper, entitled ***Sing Fires of Justice: The Power of Song!*** and the proposed paper will be posted on the Laurier Centre for Music in the Community website [www.wlu.ca/musiccommunity/]. (#4) Hard copies are available upon request.

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This survey has been granted ethics approval by the Laurier Review Ethics Board, (#3363). Should you have concerns or questions about the ethics of this research, please contact the chair of the Review Ethics Board, Dr. Robert Basso at rbasso@wlu.ca, or 519-884-0710 ext 4490. (#1 and #2)

[Participants keep this page. Submit the following two pages.]

Sing Fires of Justice Confidential Participant Survey

Dr. Lee Willingham, Wilfrid Laurier University, Faculty of Music

Debbie Lou Ludolph, Dean of Chapel, Wilfrid Laurier University Seminary

Please take a few minutes and respond to each of the following questions. Circle the number that best represents your response. Your willingness to complete this survey indicates that you give your consent for the use of your responses in ongoing research and Laurier University.

1. I feel strongly that music is an effective way to help focus on justice issues.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

2. In uniting choral voices on behalf of a social justice cause, the possibility of change can be more easily realized.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

3. I do not feel comfortable in using music for other causes other than music itself.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

4. Singing in the *Sing Fires* event challenges and impacts on my:

a. musical life

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

b. spiritual life

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

c. cultural/music life

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

d. personal social values and beliefs

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

5. A key personal goal in participating in *Sing Fires* is to improve my musical skills.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

6. A key personal goal in participating in *Sing Fires* is to deepen my sense and to increase public awareness by joining with others to witness through singing to the connection between faith and justice.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

7. The inclusion of multiple faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and others) is very important to me.

Disagree Agree Somewhat Strongly Agree

1 2 3 4 5

Please add comments that express any other feelings, concerns, or ideas relating to your *Sing Fires* experience.

THANK YOU!!

(Research Ethics Board approval tracking number, 3363) (#2)

Please note that the data from this survey will be shared with the Advanced Interdisciplinary Research on Singing (AIRS) group, Dr. Annabel Cohen, principal investigator, at the University of Prince Edward Island. The Laurier Centre for Music in the Community is a partner in the AIRS multi-year project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). (#3)