



## Chapter 3

### Why Choir?

In considering choral singing for positive change on a societal level in South Africa, the following questions merit inquiry: 1. To what extent is choral singing an authentic and significant cultural practice in this country? 2. What, if any, are the inherent characteristics and additional benefits of singing that validate this practice as an appropriate activity to promote individual and societal wellbeing? 3. How does the practice of choir singing relate and apply to factors encumbering transformation in a country typified by considerable racial and cultural diversity? Evidence of the beneficial nature of music, and more specifically *choir participation*, is examined.

An opportunity to study the experiences of members participating in a choir exemplified by vast diversities in culture, language and age presents itself in a cross-national Theatre in Development project, the Winter-Summer Institute (WSI). This chapter concludes with the findings of a 2008 survey that probed for indicators for choir participation as a vehicle to facilitate social and cultural bridging as well as teambuilding.

### 3.1 Eminence of choral singing in South Africa

Loots<sup>10</sup> told me that he had come to believe that the saying “The three s’s of the people”, which refers to soccer, sex and singing, is a common idiom in the language of the people (Hugo 2007).

African music and dance has survived “as long as we can remember the existence of humankind” (Egbo et al s.a.). Dating back thousands of years, the music tradition in Southern Africa has always existed as an integral component of rituals such as birth, weddings, ancestral worship, initiation ceremonies and death – indeed, the people of this region “do not do anything without the accompaniment of song” (Ntaka 2003:2). In South Africa, unlike most other areas of sub-Saharan Africa, dance is usually

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<sup>10</sup> Inspector of Music in the previous Transvaal Department of Education in the Apartheid years.

accompanied by choral singing (MHSchool 2006). African music involves “the complete human being interacting with others of his group” (Sadie 2001:76). Levine (2005:21) notes that, in societies where a group dynamic permeates the culture, choral singing is a characterising element of the music. Considering the weight of group solidarity in Ubuntu, as underpinning philosophy of African identity, it is understandable that choral singing “is the most important musical feature of the black South African way of life” (Smith 1996).

South African ethnic groups are classified into four collective language groups namely the Nguni, Sotho, Venda and Shangaan Tsonga (Plaschke and Zirngibl 1992:20). The Nguni - encompassing IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, Seswati and IsiZulu speakers - have been actively involved in musicking since before the first foreign invasion of South Africa. The Sesotho group includes Southern Sesotho, Northern Sotho (Sepedi) and Setswana speakers: they have an equally lengthy history regarding music-making as an integral part of everyday life.

Choral singing is a customary practice in the Venda and Tsonga cultures. Blacking (2000:55) noted that music is a characteristic of almost every feature in Venda culture. It plays out in songs about animals, foods, emotions, greetings and departures, and songs that are associated with places, people and different jobs. In all of the four linguistic groups, it is customary that the community participates together in expression through singing at events like weddings, births, funerals and political marches. Some of the most moving of recent South African choral music grew out of political resistance and freedom songs (Smith 1996).

Choral singing is also prevalent amongst both English and Afrikaans Whites, as is evident in the many school, youth, university, church and amateur choirs in these communities. The vast majority of the previously white choirs have welcomed members from other cultural backgrounds into their choirs.

An additional, vibrant choral tradition and regular feature in the AICF is found in the cultural choirs of the Cape Malay. This choral practice originated when the Malaysian

slaves were brought to the Cape by the Dutch colonisers. Physically and culturally isolated, the slaves sang songs “conceived in bondage” and passed them on from generation to generation (Kamaldien 2002:3). Written in a mixture of Indonesian and Dutch, the songs were created for ‘get-together time’ like camping at the *kramat* (burial ground for a Muslim religious leader in Faure), weddings and funerals. Popular song types include the comic “*moppie* – a combined chorus”, and the *Nederlandse lied*<sup>11</sup>. The *Nederlandse liede* were the songs of the slaves, sung to keep them happy while they had to do hard labour (Kamaldien 2007:13). During Apartheid times, when political meetings were disbanded in the Cape Malay communities, choirs sang songs that made fun of the government - “That was our way to be outspoken” (Kamaldien 2002:3).

With exception of the Indian communities, choral singing is a customary practice in all the language and cultural groupings in South Africa and “the most important musical aspect in the country” (Barrett 2007:27). Smith (1996) agrees: “On the whole the general choral scene in South Africa is a lively and ever-improving one”.

The wide-ranging appeal of this musicking practice across cultural boundaries validates the use of choral singing for broader societal wellbeing in South Africa.

### **3.2 Singing: reasons and outcomes**

Human beings are designed and equipped for singing. Chapman notes that there exists no record of a human society without song (Davis and Chapman 1998:9). Davis (Davis and Chapman 1998:9) observes that even the most primitive cultures found in the most remote parts of the world “make particular kinds of sung sound when emotional”. She expounds: “for other primates (such as the chimpanzee) vocal sounds are always emotional and can rarely be inhibited”. Humans, on the other hand, can voluntarily control their breathing (within the limits set by the brain), inhibit emotional expression and recreate emotional experiences from memory. Such voluntary control skills are significant for singing and are “not seen in any other species”. Welch (2005:239)

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<sup>11</sup> Nederlandse lied/liede: Dutch song/songs.

identifies vocal sound as a defining feature of humanity, with its “commonality, plurality and development ” distinguishing elements of the human species.

Janice Chapman, Australian born singer, teacher and vocal consultant and recipient of the Medal of the Order of Australia, who helped establish the multidisciplinary approach to the understanding, use and care of the voice in the United Kingdom, believes that human beings sing to communicate (Chapman 2006:17). Davis and Chapman (1998:9) perceive that singing usually appears when people come together for rituals – religious hymns, chants, emotional battle songs or sorrowful wailing, and also in group activities such as marching songs. Other reasons for singing are illustrated in the use of hymns for promoting a spiritual atmosphere, political songs for conveying subjective messages, chanting or lullabies for inducing certain states, or functional songs for achieving utilitarian outcomes as used in teaching. Singing is an act of musicking practiced by people everywhere, at all times, and in a wide range of contexts. People sing about the birth of a child and the loss of a loved one. Children and adults, young and old, male and female, sing when they are happy and when they are sad. In fact, singing might be more widespread than love (Weinberger 1996:1). People sing because they can. The singing of those who claim an inability to sing often stems from inhibitions taught through education, peer pressure and the perceptions of others. Chapman (2006:264) summarises: “Singing is not a cultural additive. It is a birthright which we are in danger of losing or devaluing”.

Singing holds numerous and wide-ranging benefits for the singer. Many claims of the improvements of physical, emotional and social wellbeing exist in anecdotal records and research literature. These include: singing stimulates the production of antibodies, thus lowering the likelihood of upper respiratory track infection, increasing lung function and breathing (Fanthome 2006). Singing makes you feel energised and uplifted as it releases endorphins into the singer’s system. It brings about positive mood changes and boosts the immune system (Kreutz et al 2004). Singing produces relaxation and stress relief, increases stamina and wields a remedial influence on factors that are potentially harmful to wellbeing and health (Clift et al 2007). In her autobiography *Singing Away the Hunger*, Mpho ‘M’atsepho Nthunya (1997:18) reflects:

I know many times there were no candles in the house, no paraffin. But ... there was a moon of light inside the house, there was much light. I wonder if it was my mother's prayers that made such beautiful light. Or maybe it was her singing.

Choral singing presents a forum for skilled and inexperienced singers alike to encounter such benefits. It also proffers a framework for meaningful social interaction. Social and emotional considerations are high-ranking reasons for joining a choir (Durrant and Himonides 1998:67). Putnam acknowledges the capacity of choral singing to promote social trust and reciprocity.

In "Singing as Communication" Graham Welch (2005:254) lists additional benefits of singing:

- Singing can be a form of group identification and social bonding. In choirs where significant diversity occurs, singing can also facilitate social bridging. Welch alludes to the use of "specially composed company songs" for reinforcing a senior management's definition of company culture. This is especially relevant to the Absa song, composed annually for the AICF;
- Singing can be a transformational activity culturally, through the fusion of elements presented in the music traditions of the diverse cultures within the choir;
- Singing can be used as an agent in the communication of social change.

Within the South African context where communication between groups is hampered by the inability to speak the others' languages, group singing offers an avenue for meaningful communication. Bannan and Montgomery-Smith (2008:73) note that, in comparison with language, singing can exhibit features of instinctive behaviour more holistically than speech as it is social in its capacity for 'recruitment survival': "Thus group singing might offer opportunities for the non-verbal exchange and communication of emotion...that compliments the use of language in adult social participation". In South Africa opportunities to allow ordinary citizens to sing songs which promote healing, hope and unity in choirs could facilitate singers to embrace a more wholesome South African

identity. Krajnc and Greenspoon (1997:6) reiterate this capacity that singing has to promote social change:

Protest music has often played a significant role in social change movements ... It has helped to form a new identity ... and has educated the public about social justice issues.

Investigating the scope and presence of choruses in American society, the 2002 Chorus America Impact Study shows that 23.5 million adult Americans were participants in choral activities at that time. The findings further reveal that more people in America participate in choral singing - within an estimated 250,000 choruses nationwide - than in any other performing art. The study resolves that choral singers help build strong communities and bridge social gaps. Choral singing also affords participants opportunities for personal growth and the vast majority of the choristers expressed the belief that choral participation inspires them to improve a range of skills useful in their social and professional interactions.

Pertinent to the AICF, development was reported in a number of areas significant to corporate working practices. These include: *teambuilding* (learning to cooperate and “to row in the same direction” ), *attention to detail*, improved capacity for *listening and following*, greater confidence for *social interaction*, *discipline* (for sustaining disciplined habits and commitments, as well as time management) and enhanced *creativity*. Unleashing creativity through choral singing is no minor feat, as highlighted in the following statement by Ged Davis, Managing Director of the World Economic Forum at the 2006 Annual Meeting:

It is imperative that we learn how to unleash our creative potential to tackle the world’s problems. The assumptions, tools and frameworks that business, government and civil society leaders have employed to make decisions over the past decade appear in need of renewal. To successfully meet the challenges we face will require an extraordinary collective response. At the centre of the response will be a greater emphasis on human imagination, innovation and creativity.

### 3.3 Choir participation and transformation

In his address to the nation on Heritage Day 2006, then President Mbeki stated:

We need to engage our musicians to ask them what their individual or collective role should be in making music one of the critical factors in dealing with our current socio-economic challenges (Mbeki 2006).

This thought resonates with Selimovič's (2002:73) conviction of the pungent position culture holds in a society: "It may be no exaggeration that without culture there could be neither democracy, peace, nor development".

Culture includes values and beliefs, such as "judgments of what is good or bad", and perceptions of fundamental truths about people and the world (Schein 1992). Perceptions are powerful and influential agents in determining how people live, experience their lives, define themselves and others, and make meaning of life. The significance of perceptions is substantiated by the theory of *salutogenesis*<sup>12</sup>, an alternative medicine approach that focuses on factors that support human health and wellbeing. Antonovsky, acclaimed American-Israeli medical sociologist and father of this theory, claims that the way people view their lives has a positive or negative influence on their physical and emotional life.

[Salutogenesis] is the process of enabling individuals, groups or societies to increase control over, and to improve their physical, mental, social and spiritual health. This could be reached by creating environments and societies characterized of clear structures and empowering environments where people see themselves as active participating subjects who are able to identify their internal and external resources, use and reuse them to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, to perceive meaningfulness and to change or cope with the environment in a health promoting manner (Eriksson and Lindström 2007:942).

The key concept of salutogenesis is the *sense of coherence* (SOC) which is applicable on individual, group and societal level. Antonovsky explains SOC as a global orientation to perceive the world and identifies three "salutory factors" in the SOC process namely:

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Taken from the Latin *salus* (health), and the Greek *genesis* (origin), *salutogenesis* refers to origins of health.

- Comprehensibility: the need to perceive and experience one's world and the stimuli (stressors/obstacles) it presents as understandable;
- Manageability: the sense that one has the ability to cope, based on the belief that needed resources (which can be one's own or those of "trustworthy others") are available; and
- Meaningfulness: experiences of the world as meaningful enable the individual to perceive stimuli as meaningful (Antonovsky 1990:3).

In South Africa, perceptions of others and the world are affected by the complexity of a diverse society in a young democracy. Putnam (2007) notes that the greater the racial diversity in a community, the weaker the trust on both inter- and intra-racial levels. In South Africa, the complications of inter-personal trust and connectedness are strengthened by people's frequent inability to speak and/or understand each others' languages. The failure to speak the languages of fellow South Africans is more prevalent amongst both Afrikaans and English speaking Whites than among Blacks. This could explain the observation that:

After twelve years of democracy, special barriers remain entrenched, albeit on a psychological level. White incursions into "black space" have not been matched by black movement into "white space" ... This means that opportunities to learn about black communicative practices (or experiences) in black people's own terms and turf are limited, thus hampering meaningful transformation (Mkhize 2007).

In consequence, restricted engagement with the others' (individuals from differing cultural/racial groupings) lifeworlds and cultural and communicative practices is maintained. Lomax (1968:17) observes that "predictable and universal relationships have been established between the expressive and communication processes, on the one hand, and social structure and culture pattern, on the other". In an environment<sup>13</sup> where restricted engagement with other lifeworlds occurs, perceptions of people from differing

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Environment: circumstances, influences, stresses, and competitive, cultural, demographic, economic, natural, political, regulatory, and technological factors (called environmental factors) that effect the survival, operations, and growth of an organisation (Businessdictionary.com).

cultural backgrounds are not rooted in experiential understanding; and thus stereotyping and prejudice are perpetuated. This situation (in which a large majority of South Africans find themselves) calls for an intervention which can facilitate shared cultural and communicative experiences to infiltrate the stereotyped perceptions. Group singing, renowned for its ability to establishing a sense of connection, offers an avenue for shared cultural and communicative experiences.

Bannan and Montgomery-Smith (2008:73) note that, in comparison with language, singing can exhibit features of instinctive behaviour more holistically than speech as it is social in its capacity for ‘recruitment survival’: “Thus group singing might offer opportunities for the non-verbal exchange and communication of emotion ... that complements the use of language in adult social participation”. Music is commonly referred to as a “universal language”, and as such is jointly accessible to all. As a fundamental channel of communication it provides a means by which people can share emotions, interpretations and meanings - even when their spoken languages may be mutually incomprehensible (Miell et al 2005:1). In South Africa choral (group) singing opportunities could allow ordinary citizens to sing songs which promote healing, hope and unity - thus facilitating singers to embrace a more wholesome South African identity. Neuroscientist Professor Aniruddah (Ani) Patel observes:

I think [music is] something that humans invented that actually changed our experience of the world and that is deeply important to people (Mitchell 2007).

Singing in a multi-cultural choir offers unique opportunities for choir members to experience each other’s expressive communication processes through the traditional songs of the cultures presented in the choir. These experiences can foster deeper understanding and so begin a process whereby perceptions of others and the world are modified.

Drawing from Antonovsky’s salutogenic model of health, a recent cross-national choral singing survey (Clift et al 2007) found that an overwhelming majority of the 1,124 participating respondents experienced choir participation as contributing to positive

experiences and perceptions which are contributors to a stronger “sense of coherence”(SOC). Eriksson and Lindström (2008:241) regard cultivating a stronger SOC as a process of enabling individuals, groups or societies to “improve their physical, mental, social and spiritual health ... by creating environments and societies ... where people see themselves as active participating subjects”.

The inherent potential in choir participation to facilitate such a process for choir members across language and cultural barriers is a prospect worth exploring.

### **3.4 Findings of the 2008 WSI choir survey**

The Winter-Summer Institute in Theatre for Development (WSI) is a collaborative endeavour of the following universities:

- Empire State College, State University of New York, U.S.A.
- National University of Lesotho, Roma, Lesotho
- University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

This multi-cultural initiative aims “to create collaborative, issue-based, aesthetically provocative theatre ... and to empower both students and community participants with the tools and resources necessary to create in their own communities and lives” (Winner and Lissard 2007). In 2006 and 2008 the project focused on the role of customary practices in the spread of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho. As part of the lecturing staff, the writer’s role in the project is to incorporate all the student actors in a WSI choir, and direct the choral singing to enhance the message conveyed through theatre.

The WSI choir is equivalent to the AICF in that it is comprised of members of dissimilar backgrounds re culture, ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, educational qualification, age, music proficiency and levels of experience in singing. Within a set of circumstances, specific to the project, the WSI choir evolves. For the first leg of the project students and lecturers from the above mentioned institutions convene in Roma, Lesotho. Informed by literature research, presentations and interviews with community



members living with AIDS, a realistic theatrical production is developed to reflect issues impacting the spread of, and obstacles of living with, HIV/AIDS in the Lesotho context. At this point the choir, consisting of all the participating students, is launched. Typically, a notable number of these students have no prior experience of choral singing with some expressing the belief that they cannot sing at all. A repertoire of songs that can be related to the context of the developing play, as well as the circumstances and beliefs of the community, is developed. Mostly Sesotho songs are learnt, as well some English.

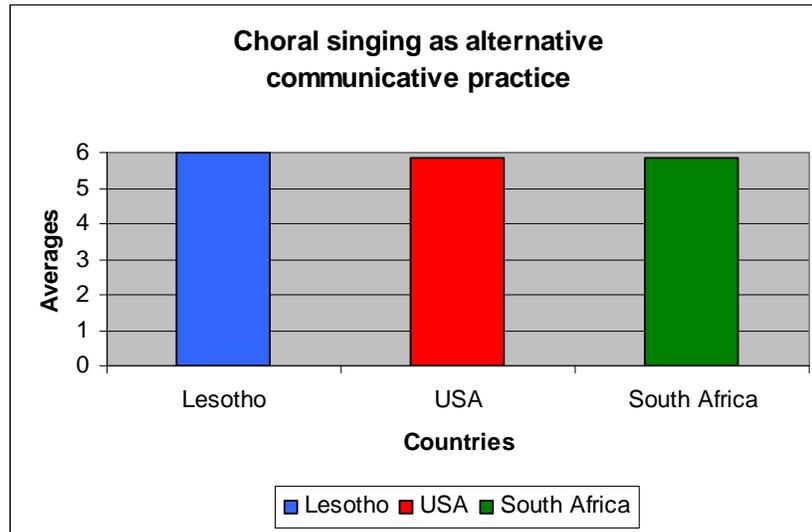
After a series of performances in the communities of Roma and Maseru, this multi-cultural company travels to Malealea, a remote valley in the mountains of Lesotho to form a junction with forty members of the various villages in the valley. Communicative practices are complicated by the villagers' inability to speak or understand English, at a point when students have to apply acquired skills for developing community theatre in a fresh collaborative endeavour. The new work is to portray and interpret the life-experiences of the new members and in doing so authentically reflects HIV/AIDS-related issues specific to the rural Malealea setting.

After the closing ceremony for the 2008 project, students were invited to participate in a brief questionnaire on their choral experience. The questionnaire was limited to four questions pertaining to the focus of this thesis. To correlate with the AICF survey questionnaires, participants had to select one of the following six Likert scale options:

- 1: *Most definitely not;*
- 2: *Definitely not;*
- 3: *No;*
- 4: *Yes;*
- 5: *Yes, definitely;* and
- 6: *Yes, most definitely.*

The following graphs represent the average score per participating school.

Question 1: Did you experience singing in a choir with fellow WSI members of different mother tongues as a communicative practice shared by all?

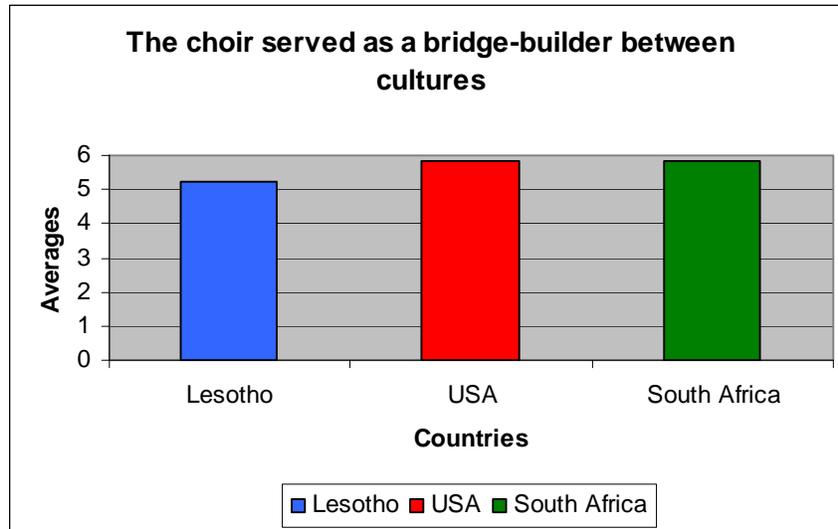


In this graph it is significant that:

- Lesotho students allocated that “Yes, most definitely” (six out of six) the choir was a communicative experience with students who did not speak Sesotho;
- The second highest average score (5.86 out of six) was allocated by the South Africans – amongst whom 75% of the students could at least understand Sesotho and were familiar with the context, meaning and movements of the songs;
- The American delegation – who had to learn all the Sesotho songs, pronunciation of the words and accompanying movements - assigned the lowest score: 5.84 out of six.

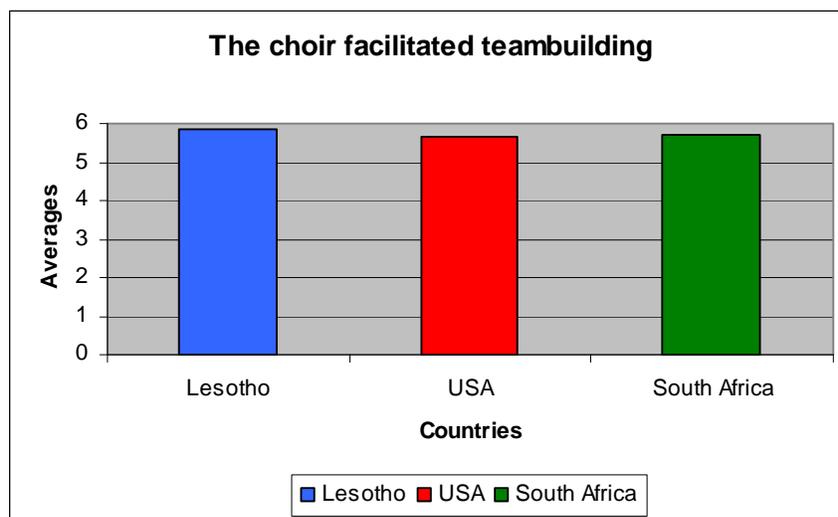
It is thus clear that all students from the three different countries (representing two different continents) experienced a shared communicative practice through choral singing.

Question 2: Did choir participation serve as a meaningful bridge-builder between the different cultures contained by the WSI project?



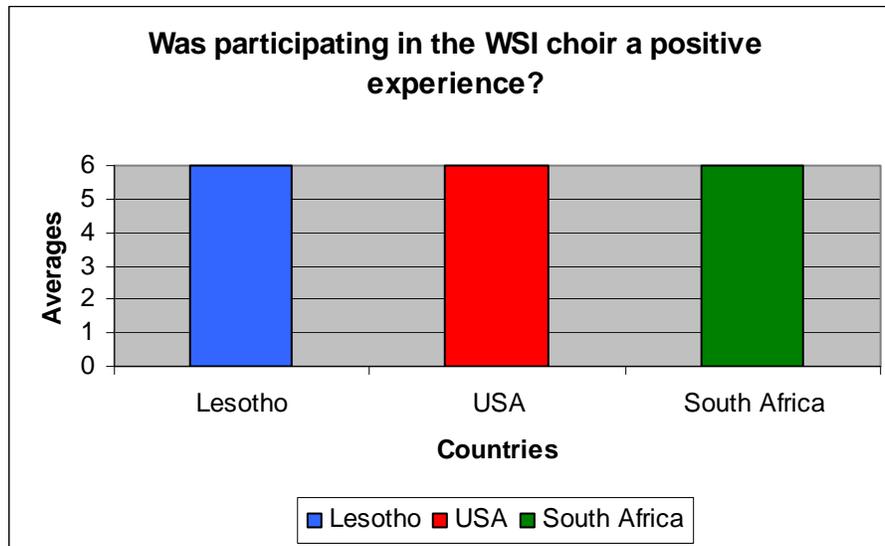
The above reflects that the foreign students (USA and South Africa) benefited more by the bridge building capabilities of choral singing – accessing a different culture through choral singing.

Question 3: Did the choral process facilitate teambuilding between the three schools participating in this collaboration?



In taking responsibility for sharing and teaching cultural songs (both language and musical elements) it is clear that, through choral singing, the opportunity to share own cultural artifacts, as well as the consequent responsibilities associated with this role transpired as a great teambuilding experience for the Lesotho contingent.

Question 4: On a personal level, was the choir participation a positive experience?



It is significant that all respondents (including those who initially were negative about singing in the choir and believed that they could not sing) judged their WSI choral participation as positive experience on a personal level. All participants indicated “Yes, most definitely so” - a 100% score of six out of six.

After each question, space was provided for participants to write comments should they wish to do so. The following tables reflect some of the significant comments given:



Question 1: Communicative practice

I believe the choir was actually the place where we gained the most trust in regards to the differing languages present within the WSI – Ed, USA.

Oh absolutely. It is communication in itself – Katt, USA.

I feel it allowed us to move beyond the language status – the ego. The loss we feel when confronted with the new languages in the group – having to understand another’s mother tongue – well, the music accommodated moving us to comfort. For me it moved us to generosity: each person had a responsibility to teach aspects of their cultural music in the choir, and as one we embraced all of this – Selloane, Lesotho.

The atmosphere that it created: it became a love thing. People give and receive in a loving atmosphere – Li, Lesotho.

Question 2: Bridge builder

Absolutely, again for the reasons listed above in regard to language and also because we got to explore each other’s cultural similarities and differences within the lyrics of the songs we played with – Ed, USA.

Learning and performing music from other cultures allows the student to have an internal visceral experience with the languages and values of those cultures. This experience is unique because it internalizes this new cultural information before it can be analyzed or critiqued. Attempts at cultural understanding become more meaningful when this personal experience is considered, as the gap between self and other is bridged through the power of the song – Deanna, USA.

Absolutely. If I didn’t know the meaning of a song, or how to pronounce words that were non-English, the students from other cultures and countries made themselves available to



help. A lot of time was spent bonding with others when they explained lyrics of messages of songs, the history of the song and/or its place in their culture and society. These moments became opportunities to learn about each other – Denise, USA.

Absolutely, but beyond bridge-builder: it went deeper – Katt, USA,

I now want to take those who say that Whites feel superior to task. This was a reminder that we are all God’s children – everything fell off and we became one through the joy and the love generated through the singing together. And for the people in South Africa who speak 11 different languages – we can use this kind of choir singing as a catalyst: the word of the sons to heal – Selloane, Lesotho.

It very much opened my heart to the people from other cultural backgrounds. I got the feeling of appreciation for and from them – very much so. Some of these English speakers were trying so very hard to sing our songs and do our movements as we do – it was beautiful – Li, Lesotho.

It makes me feel so happy, you know, very happy. Ed (New York) was trying so hard. It opens my heart. It shows appreciation and willingness – he acknowledged that we exist. And he worked so hard, he could tell me what all the songs mean. It is definitely a bridge-builder. I was like “Aaaaaah” – Popa, Lesotho.

Yes, absolutely. And yes because we open up to people of other cultural backgrounds when we try, through the choir songs in each other’s languages, to get the same expression in one voice – you all really got into the [Sesotho] language FEEL through the singing. Singing together bridges cultures because you get the meaning, the feel, the rhythm of the language – Ntsele, Lesotho.

Loving it! Most exhilarating seeing a lot of people willing to learn songs from our cultures in our languages. Once people try and persist – the mere fact that they are willing to try - to me that was like “wow!” – Linda, IsiZulu speaking South African.



### Question 3: Teambuilding

One of the strongest tool for re-focusing, re-balancing as a rest point. It was a great strength in our endeavour and, I feel, our best art – Katt, USA.

For me it gave me a goal that got me outside myself and gave me a feeling of being a part of the whole. Also the individual elements within each song – such as bass, tenor, instruments, etc. gave one a sense of being connected to a team within the whole of the choir – Ed, USA.

I loved trying to muddle through songs when I couldn't quite pick up all of the words. I would look to my friends and try to follow along with their words, much to our general amusement, they would over-enunciate so I could try to get it and then giggle when they heard my own pronunciation, all in all it was great fun whilst teaching us to rely on each other – Deanna, USA.

### Question 4: Positive personal experience

[Participating in the choir] made me feel capable, and even confident in an area where I have almost no prior experience. Also, the choir practices, especially those at the end of the day were often what saved me from utter depression after dealing with intense and painful subjects all day long. I can't thank you enough for providing me with this wonderful experience – Deanna, USA.

I can only say that for me it was transformative. At 52 I have had a phobia of singing for my entire life. On Tuesday last I attended my first voice lesson at a conservatory near my home in Brooklyn New York. After hearing tales of the Simmer WSI Choir and then warming me up, my new instructor had me sing a song and I didn't do half bad. In fact I



was sufficient enough that she asked me to repeat it and at the end said she was quite impressed. With that this old guy began to cry. The choir this past summer was beyond a doubt a gift given to me that I will never forget – Ed, USA.

As someone who never thought of myself as a “singer,” I felt differently after [participating in the WSI Choir] ... With just a few technique suggestions, my identity as a “singer” transformed. I have to say that the choir rehearsals and performances were some of the most positive, memorable and moving experiences I had during my time in Lesotho. (And in my life!) – Denise, USA.

And how everybody’s confidence was enhanced through the singing. I think of how one of our Basotho students cried so much at our final farewell and I know: she got an important role as soloist in the choir and it brought so much to her life and her confidence – Selloane, Lesotho.

Based on his career of thirty years as psychiatrist, Gary G. May (2007:5) observes that grace is the greatest transformational force available. The above comments clearly reflect that participating in the choir afforded WSI students opportunities for experiencing and sharing grace.

The opportunity for sharing grace as a transformational force is firmly presented in the AICF. The next chapter will depict choral singing and the AICF in the Absa context.

## Chapter 4

### **Absa and the Absa Internal Choir Festival**

Chapter 3 explored the benefits of choral singing pertaining to individual and societal wellbeing; and its relevance and significance for transformation and teambuilding. In this chapter a portrayal of Absa Bank, and the birth and development of the choir project depicts the AICF within its corporate context. The 2005-2008 Absa songs are described in terms of intention and purpose. To illuminate a number of cases discussed, the reader is referred to a number of revealing glimpses of the 2005-2008 AICF, as captured on the supplementary DVD.

Related information was gathered through continuous interviews, Absa documents and records, the Absa website and other financial sources available on the internet.

#### **4.1 Absa Bank: a synopsis**

As a major role player in the South African economy, Absa is an impressive, multi-dimensional corporate organism which merits proper introduction.

Absa is the biggest retail bank in South Africa and one of the country's largest financial services groups with a vision to become the pre-eminent bank in South Africa and on the African continent. Renowned for its catchphrase *Today, Tomorrow, Together*, the organisation has distinguished itself as a leading role player and common entity in South African civic life as, amongst other:

- Top banking brand in South Africa (Fin.24.com 2006);
- Major investor in social responsibility programmes;
- Major sponsor for sports in South Africa (Absa Currie Cup (rugby), Absa Premier Cup (soccer), the South African Olympic team and the 2010 Soccer World Cup);
- Official sponsor of Bafana Bafana (South African national soccer team);

- The only financial institution in the world that has actively embraced art as part of its corporate image; presenting the richest art competition in Africa which owns the second biggest financial corporate art collection in the world next to Deutsche Bank;
- Owner of the only banking and money museum in South Africa and in that capacity the guardian of South Africa's banking history (which includes the economic, political and social changes reflected in the countries currencies);
- Official sponsor of national arts festivals such as the *KKNK*; and
- Sponsor of the evergreen music game show (32 seasons - the longest running programme in the history of South African television) *Noot vir Noot*.

Listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange as *Absa Group Limited*, it offers a unique range of banking, bancassurance<sup>14</sup> as well as wealth management products and services. Absa primarily conducts its business in South Africa and on the African continent where it has equity holdings in Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania and Namibia (Mageza 2006:2). The Namibia Economist reports that Absa will become Namibia's fifth commercial bank in 2009 (Kaira 2008). At 30 June 2008, the Absa Group had an asset base of R737 ,6 billion; 680,1 million shares in issue; a market capitalisation of R55,8 billion; 9.4 million customers in South Africa alone and a sum total of 1 176 points of presence with 40 011 permanent employees (Abs(a) s.a.).

## 4.2 Origins: a journey of change

The history of Absa Bank typifies a corporate journey of transition and transformation spurring from a series of merges and subsequent organisational changes. In 1991 the Amalgamated Banks of South Africa Limited (Absa) was formed through the merger a number of banks: *UBS (United Building Society) Holdings, Allied and Volkskas Groups* and certain interests of the *Sage Group*. In 1992 Absa extended their asset base further when they acquired the collective shareholding of the *Bankorp Group* - consisting of

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<sup>14</sup> Bancassurance is the selling of insurance and banking products through the same channel, most commonly through bank branches selling insurance (Pietersz 2006).

*Trust Bank, Senbank and Bankfin.* In 1998 all former brands were consolidated into a single Absa brand, the company adopted a new corporate identity and, at the same time, the name of the holding company, *Amalgamated Banks of South Africa Limited*, was changed to *Absa Group Limited*.

On 27 July 2005 Absa became a subsidiary of Barclays Bank PLC with Barclays acquiring a controlling stake (57%) in the Absa Group. Barclays stated that “the transaction was the largest ever foreign direct investment in South Africa” and that Absa “is a valuable addition to the Barclays Group” (BBC 2005).

### **4.3 Absa in the South African context**

In terms of its role in South African society, Absa is committed to promoting the upliftment and empowering of the communities in which it operates. To help communities reach their full potential, a focus is placed on developmental initiatives around early childhood development, education, job creation and HIV/AIDS (Absa (b) s.a.). The following encapsulates Absa’s philosophy on social investment:

Absa is one of South Africa's largest financial institutions. Such a market position brings a certain amount of responsibility. This means that the Group has a duty to create value not only for its current stakeholders, but also for future generations. Absa aims to achieve this by being a good corporate citizen <sup>15</sup> (Absa (a) s.a.).

In December 2007, through an annual survey among 100 leading companies as well as 100 Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) <sup>16</sup>, the Absa Group was voted the best financial institution for its corporate social investment (CSI) practices. Other accolades included special recognition for most strongly involving employees in CSI activities; and a special

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<sup>15</sup> “Corporate citizenship, as defined by the World Economic Forum, is the contribution a company makes to society through its business activities, its social investment and philanthropy programmes and its engagement in public policy” (Absa.(c) s.a.).

<sup>16</sup> Survey conducted by Trialogue, a black-empowered consulting, publishing and research organisation specializing in areas of sustainable business and corporate social investment (CSI) *Leading the way in CSI 2007*.

award for consistently remaining amongst the top three CSI organisations over the past eight years. Absa Group Executive for Group Public Affairs, Riah Phiyega notes:

At the core of our approach is a sincere effort to contribute to the improvement of the human condition ... Beyond Absa's core CSI, the company also has a proud tradition of employee community development. Committed Absa staff throughout the country work tirelessly and on their own initiative to support our CSI efforts and to increase our impact (2007).

It may be no coincidence that the AICF successfully plays off within an organisation where values and social responsibilities enjoy such precedence on the corporate agenda. The AICF is an initiative which not only allows Absa employees to invest in community development, but also in their own *Absa community*.

#### **4.4 Absa and the Absa Internal Choir Festival**

The AICF has its origin with Dr. Steve F. Booysen, the Group Chief Executive of Absa Bank since August 2004. Booysen, DCom (Acc), CA (SA) is an Honorary Professor in Accountancy at the University of Pretoria with a longstanding career in the bank. This has afforded him firsthand experience of the realities of working in a bank, as well as the effect of mergers and acquisitions on employees.

Earlier in 2004, Booysen witnessed a group of Absa employees spontaneously form a choir during the farewell function for his predecessor in the Limpopo Province. In South Africa – where choral singing as collective expression is a common practice in many of the cultures - such impromptu choral activities are not out of the ordinary. Booysen had never been especially fond of choral music – “Until I heard our Absa choirs, I had never really liked choral music or attended choir performances” (2007). However, Booysen was impressed by the enjoyment, positive spirit and camaraderie evident in the Limpopo impromptu choir. He has often commented that this experience was the fore-runner to the AICF. Concerned for the morale of Absa employees during the impending merge with

Barclays, Booysen initiated the AICF as a tool for team- and morale building for Absa employees, envisaging the project as a vehicle for:

- bringing about a greater sense of spiritual and emotional balance in the lives of Absa employees;
- developing a greater sense of belonging to the “Absa family”;
- fostering an understanding of, sense of pride in and respect for the richness of our South African cultural diversity;
- encouraging the sense of “Absa pride”;
- creating “human pathways” between employees from different divisions and levels in the bank; and
- affording employees opportunities to have fun (Booyesen 2005-2008: DVD tracks 2-5).

Booyesen believed that by facilitating the above through the AICF, Absa clients could be warranted more positive service experiences when being served by more fulfilled and happy tellers and consultants. He further saw the AICF as a vehicle which proffered him, as newly appointed Group Chief Executive, the opportunity for interacting with employees across all levels of appointment:

As CEO of a big corporate organisation, one soon realises that you do not necessarily know what is going on in the organisation. Why? Because there are hierarchical structures and as soon as one moves outside the box regarding these structures, people start feeling uncomfortable ... that is just human. What one does next, is to design ways of interacting with your people in ways that are safe and uplifting for all (Interview: 2007).

Booyesen discussed his vision with Annemarie Mostert (Head: Protocol and Public Relations) and requested her to develop and manage the project. Mostert, former music teacher and founder of the National Eisteddfod Academy (NEA) was an experienced organiser of arts activities and music festivals. She further held well established networks with music practitioners in diverse cultural communities in Gauteng. An advocate of the value of music in society, she was enthused by the prospect of an internal choral project: “My first reaction? I thought *wow*; finally a corporate organisation is catching up!”

(2006). The value of the social and cultural capital owned by Mostert was an enabling factor in the development of the AICF. She relates the relevancy of a choir project at that moment in Absa as follows:

Just place this choir competition in the bigger picture – the Absa picture. Remember now that within the first 10 years of democracy in South Africa, Absa is undergoing a great deal of transformation. Firstly the four brands are amalgamated. This amalgamation is still at a sensitive stage when a new Group Chief Executive is appointed and the Barclays development is announced! This new leader is young, has a funky way about doing business in a domain of *work hard, play hard*. He is adamant that the Absa team has to be developed and that employees must have fun while the team is being built. So he initiates the choir project to support both the process and the employee in a comfortable, playful, different yet meaningful way (Mostert 2006).

Mostert developed the AICF concept, code of conduct, and rules and regulations. The development of musical aspects (such as training of choirs and acquiring an originally composed *Absa song* as prescribed work for the competition) was outsourced to an external service provider, the NEA. Dr. Francois van den Berg, Director of the NEA, assumed responsibility and successfully assisted in the training of the Absa choirs across all provinces in South Africa for the 2005 and 2006 AICF<sup>17</sup>. The writer was commissioned to compose the first Absa song and so her involvement in the AICF commenced.

#### **4.5 Absa and the Absa song**

Welch (2005:254) notes that the use of *specially composed company songs* to reinforce company culture exemplifies singing as a form of group identification and social bonding. Former President Mbeki reflects on the role of music as a tool to shape the broader society:

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Since 2007 the writer has taken up responsibility for these choirs.

Indeed, music permeates all walks of life and has been a powerful instrument and a tool commonly invoked in various occasions and circumstances, good and bad, joyful and sorrowful ... In different social contexts and situations, music has served and serves today to sooth the troubled soul, lift the dejected spirit, and celebrate the very joy of being human ... We need to engage our musicians to ask them what their individual or collective role should be in making music one of the critical factors in dealing with our current socio-economic challenges (2006).

There are very few activities that engage the whole brain. Music is such an exercise. It is therefore explicable that singing together about important issues is more persuasive than talking together about the same. Music is particularly renowned for its capacity to intensify emotions, focus and unify groups of people toward a common goal. Through this capacity of music has been used in religious and cultural practices. Through the ages this capability to energise and impel has been utilised to prime soldiers for battles in war situations. Stirred by the swaying beat of drums, many a soldier have been enabled to walk for many miles, focused on the battle ahead and enthused to obtain the victory. In recent history the advertising industry has exploited this capability inherent in music to impact a consumerist society to the benefit of countless clients.

Ernst Primosch, Vice President Corporate Communications of Henkel International, supports this view. He explains: “Corporate identity is a very decisive factor for a company. A shared song reminds people of corporate values” (Henkel s.a.). When I was approached to compose the first Absa song for the 2005 AICF, the idea of *corporate song as prescribed work for a choir competition* was not a familiar concept to me. Absa expressed the wish that the Absa song would encompass the following objectives:

- Building the greater Absa team;
- Celebrating the diverse South African cultures;
- Promoting transformation (unity in diversity);
- Utilising different South African languages; and
- Promoting the Absa brand.

A challenging factor in composing music for the AICF is the fact that this choir project is designed for ordinary bank employees – many of whom had never sung in a choir before. As the overwhelming majority of choir members have never received any formal music training and other than tonic sol-fa, music literacy is practically non-existing. Typically, the Absa choirs are formed after the composition for that year has been completed. The song may be arranged for a four part choir while in some choirs there might not be sufficient male voices for both tenor and bass lines. Further, there is no way of telling whether the male employees who join choirs will be tenors or basses. The harmonic arrangement (SATB) has to be written in such a way that the song would still “work” (sound acceptable) if sung by either SAT or SAB. The song also needs to allow for the possible lack of experience in choral singing and voice training (which can be expected in a corporate banking organisation) re range (pitch), rhythmic, melodic as well as harmonic difficulty. Notwithstanding all of the above challenges, it is crucial to create a song that appeals to AICF participants of different cultural, age and language groupings. The Absa song has to speak to and motivate employees to participate and commit to the process of the AICF.

In the compositions of the past four Absa songs, I have endeavoured to incorporate the objectives proposed by Absa. A constant theme in the songs is that of taking ownership for the change needed in South African society. This is a common thread through all the songs, illustrated in some of the words/phrases used in this regard: *work, dream, hope, give, pray, give, take my hand, let's be a nation*. Booyesen (2007) notes: “I would say the message is: be committed, be passionate, practice spirituality - all religions have the same core”. Since the first composition in 2005, it has been my aim to encompass all these aspects and objectives, utilising a broad scope of moods, such as joyful, tender, exuberant and hopeful, within the framework of uplifting, inspiring and enjoyable (*fun*) songs.

I have further tried to reflect the spirit of the *core Absa values*, which encapsulate Absa morals, attitudes and philosophy. These are:

- Value our people and treat them with fairness;

- Demonstrate integrity in all our actions;
- Strive to exceed the needs of our customers;
- Take responsibility for the quality of our work; and
- Display leadership in all we do (Absa (a) s.a.).

To maintain an element of challenge and accommodate musical and intellectual growth - and because I am a music educator at heart - I have increased the level of difficulty of the choir songs from year to year. This is evident in the use of the following elements of music:

- Melody - 2007: disjunct intervals, including the challenging major 7<sup>th</sup> (2007); chromatic movement (2008);
- Harmony - increased use of modulation, dissonance, chromaticism;
- Tonality - sections in minor keys (2008) which would not have been viable in 2005;
- Rhythm – increased use of syncopation;
- Time – increased metre changes; and
- Dynamics – increased challenges posed re dynamic contrasts.

#### **- Absa song 2005**

The message of the Absa song for the 2005 AICF evolved around the Absa slogan *Today, Tomorrow, Together*. The dominant language of the song is English, but phrases in IsiXhosa, Afrikaans and IsiZulu are included. In writing the lyrics of the 2005 AICF Absa song, it was important for me to convey an encouraging message of unity, hope, acceptance of fellow South Africans and respect for women and children. The song consists of three contrasting sections (contrasts in tempo, time, tonality and tone colour) and the structure is ABCB. The first AICF Absa song, *We Shall Stand* – sung by the massed choir and soloist Sibongile Khumalo – is available on the supplementary DVD: Scene 6.

### **- Absa song 2006**

In 2006 I chose an Afrikaans folk song (*Al lê die berge nog so blou*) as point of departure for the composition. The original words were adapted and translated in IsiZulu (*Tomorrow is like a mountain; let's conquer it, even if it is hard*). When repeated in Afrikaans, a tenor pedal point-type, repetitive motive is added against the melody, calling “let's work” in four different African languages and sung by the tenors. After a modulation, motives from the well known *Shosholoz*a are placed as contrast to the Afrikaans folk melody (sung by the basses). Scene 7 on the DVD portrays the massed choir performance of the 2006 AICF song, *Tomorrow Calling Today*, sung by the Absa massed choir with soloists Sibongile Ngoma and Joseph Clarke.

### **- Absa song 2007**

The 2007 song centered around a Sesotho folk song, *Seanna Marena* (Royal Blanket). The song contains English, IsiZulu and Sesotho languages. Intended to challenge participants and listeners to dare to dream about a peaceful and prosperous country for young and old, the song consists of four sections of contrasting sound colour: A: *Imagine if we dare to dream*; B: IsiZulu – *Let's be as one*; C: Sesotho folk song, words adapted - *Dreams shape reality*; and D - *Rise up*. Structure: ABCAD. The massed choir rendition of the 2007 Absa song, *Seanna Marena sa Tshepo* (Royal blanket of hope) can be viewed in Scene 8. A recording of the 2007 Absa song, sung by massed choir with soloists Alma Oosthuizen and Granville Michaels, can be viewed on the DVD: Scene 7.

### **- Absa song 2008**

The 2008 song was intended to be a celebration of life. With seven South African languages, many modulations, key and time changes, many choir organisers were convinced that their choirs would never be able to master this song. The Absa employees have responded whole-heartedly to this festival and have grown tremendously in their musical abilities. Intonation, rhythm, phrasing, interpretation and even voice ranges have

developed notably over the span of four years since the first AICF in 2005. The song consists of an Introductory phrase – repetitive descending motive; Section A, Section B (minor key), Repetitive descending motive, A repeated (new key, new lyrics, new language); Section D and concluding motive (ascending motive repeated: *Today, Tomorrow, Together*). The 2008 Absa song, *Choose Life*, can be viewed on the DVD, Scene 8.

Over the years, the commitment and passion of AICF participants have been astounding. Not only have they mastered the song each year, they also wholeheartedly bought into the message of the songs, appropriating the words to their own lives and circumstances, and also to those of the South African society. This supports Mbeki's observation that the songs sung during the years of struggle against Apartheid stayed with people, more than the lessons taught by mothers or teachers (2006). An example of how the meaning of a choral song can be appropriated to real life situations was presented during the time of the xenophobic violence which occurred in South Africa in 2008. Gumede (2008) notes: "The song is what we need to sing now – the line 'love this moment; love yourself; love those who are different from you' [Sesotho: *Rata hona jwale; ithate; rata bang ba sa tswaneng le wena*] is what we must sing now – it speaks to us now".

#### **4.6 Absa Internal Choir Festival: passion and commitment**

Booyesen (2006, 2008 - DVD: Scenes 3 and 5) states that the AICF has "exceeded all expectations" in terms of teambuilding, transformation and leadership. A number of informative interviews with Absa managers (including Provincial Managers) and other role players (such as music specialists from the community) involved with four choirs from three South African provinces are recorded in Scenes 18-21 on the DVD. Scene 19 exhibits particular creative leadership and problem solving skills developed to overcome obstacles in the Northern Cape choir (Scene 19: Northern Cape).

The passion and commitment exhibited by the Absa choir members have been commendable. Since the advent of the first AICF (2005), I have recorded numerous

interviews and experiences which revealed the passion and commitment of Absa choir members to the AICF. Supported by the interviews on the DVD (Scenes 18-21), the following narratives reflect that choir participation can facilitate:

- Developing commitment, perseverance and leadership skills;
- Developing creative problem-solving skills;
- Improved appreciation for language and cultural diversity;
- A suitable activity for both able and disabled employees; and
- Networking and mutual support between able and disabled as well as choir members from different racial, language and cultural backgrounds.

After the first provincial final in Gauteng, a branch manager came to see me in my office with John, the conductor of a choir which did not make it through to the final round of the 2005 AICF. The failure to go through to the final round of the 2005 AICF had left John feeling devastated and disillusioned. He avidly vowed that he would “never in his life” participate in the AICF again - the sense of loss experienced by himself and his fellow choir members by not being part of the final leg of the competition, was “simply not worth it”. However, the following year the same choir (with John as conductor) participated again. They worked extremely hard, took careful note of all adjudicator comments of the previous year and went on to win the 2006 Gauteng provincials. While preparing for the 2007 AICF finals (they had once again been the winning choir in Gauteng) John remarked: “ I have learnt one of the most valuable lessons in my life: when I don’t win, it does not mean that I am a loser. I am a winner, whether I win or lose in life. And in learning this, I have learnt perseverance. And hope. I have learnt such a lot”.

In Cape Town, a discussion with members of the choir which was to represent the Western Cape at the 2007 AICF final revealed the following: every morning choir members take turns to send a greeting (in English) to all the choir members via e-mail. The different mother tongue speakers then translate this greeting into the different languages and forward it to the other members. Choir members study the “greeting for the day” in all the languages presented in the choir. Through this exercise, choir members

have the opportunity to acquire basic language skills, and also greater understanding of appreciation for other cultures represented in the choir. In the same discussion choir members expressed their excitement about a big function organised by the choir which was to take place that evening. The purpose of the function was to raise money to support a disabled choir member who had been selected for the national *Wheelchair Bowling* team. As no sponsorship was available for the team's forthcoming test match in Europe, the choir had taken it upon themselves to do fundraising in this regard. They were convinced that, after that evening's function, they would have raised all the money needed by their fellow choir member for the planned tour. A few weeks after this discussion, the same Western Cape choir was announced as the overall winners of the 2007 AICF. Audio-visual images on the DVD: Scene 14; as well as Scene 18: track 3, allow the viewer glimpses of the spirit and camaraderie between the members of this choir.

In conclusion: early one Sunday morning in 2006, upon arrival at the venue for the choir workshop/practice in a bitterly cold Kimberley (Northern Cape), I found two young ladies sitting outside the locked door, observably tired. Upon inquiring, they explained: They live 725km from Kimberley, do not own cars and public transport to Kimberley is practically non-existent over weekends. As they did not want to arrive late for the practice, they had hitch-hiked through the night and had been sitting outside the venue since before dawn that morning. They were about to participate in a six hour training session, after which they would have to find another lift home – 725 kilometres away. The exact motivation for this kind of sacrificial behaviour is not clear. However, it is clear that the choir had facilitated deep commitment to the common goal of the group in the true spirit of Ubuntu.

#### **4.7 The DVD**

It is difficult to adequately describe the emotive response of Absa employees to the AICF; audio-visual rendering is possibly a better medium to convey the passion, fun and commitment experienced by AICF participants. With permission from Absa, pertinent



scenes from Absa records of the 2005-2008 AICF (recorded for Absa by *Showgroup*<sup>18</sup>, the events managing company for the AICF) were selected to compile a supplementary DVD. The DVD affords some telling glimpses of different aspects of the AICF process and contains examples of the choral music of different cultural groups. Material on the DVD was selected.

The DVD consists of 22 scenes:

- Scene 1: Introductory video footage to the first AICF final
- Scene 2-5: Opening speeches of Steve Booyesen at the opening of 2005-2008 AICF finals:
- Scene 6-9: 2005-2008 Absa songs
- Scene 10-17: Best Choir and Most Popular Choir: 2005 -2007
- Scene 18-21: Interviews
- Scene 22: National Anthem of South Africa.

The Scene selection option in the main menu allows for easy access to specific scenes. Scenes are also presented as Chapters if viewed on computer.

**DVD Content:**

Scene 1.....	Introduction to the 2005 AICF final
Scene 2.....	Booyesen speech: 2005
Scene 3.....	Booyesen speech: 2006
Scene 4.....	Booyesen speech: 2007
Scene 5.....	Booyesen speech: 2008
Scene 6.....	Absa song: 2005
Scene 7.....	Absa song: 2005
Scene 8.....	Absa song: 2005
Scene 9.....	Absa song: 2005

<sup>18</sup> *Showgroup* (Pty) Ltd available at [www.showgroupworld.com](http://www.showgroupworld.com).



Scene 10.....	Winning choir 2005
Scene 11.....	Most popular choir: 2005
Scene 12.....	Winning choir 2006
Scene 13.....	Most popular choir: 2006
Scene 14.....	Winning choir 2007
Scene 15.....	Most popular choir: 2007
Scene 16.....	Winning choir 2008
Scene 17.....	Most popular choir: 2008
Scene 18.....	Interviews: KwaZulu-Natal <i>(Drakensburg Valley Voices)</i>
Scene 19.....	Interviews: Northern Cape <i>(Northern Cape Diamonds)</i>
Scene 20.....	Interviews: Western Cape <i>(Rainbow Sonatas)</i>
Scene 21.....	Interviews: KwaZulu-Natal <i>(Simunye)</i>
Scene 22.....	National Anthem of South Africa <i>(Absa 2008 Massed Choir).</i>

An organisation willing to dedicate a significant financial investment to the development of human and cultural capital of employees merits recognition. The success of the AICF and its significance to the participating Absa employee endorse the respect which the bank has earned in the market. Absa is renowned for making a positive difference in the communities where it operates. The accompanying DVD illustrates that Absa’s investment in their staff through the AICF, is making a positive difference within the *Absa* community.

The results of the survey on the effect of the AICF on participating Absa employees are introduced and interpreted in the following Chapter (5).