



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we choose a new organ?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Choosing a new musical instrument to lead singing in worship can seem daunting. A thoughtful approach, however, will result in a wonderful blessing for your congregation. Remember that this is a big decision, one that is not made often in the life of a congregation. You will want to take care that all options are thoroughly investigated. For example, is the congregation looking to purchase a pipe organ or an electronic organ? The latter will be more costly in the short run, but will last for many, many years if maintained properly. Electronic organs do not require as significant funds up front, but will need replaced more often. If choosing a pipe organ, will the organ be an electronic-pneumatic organ or a mechanical action (tracker) organ? With any of these decisions, the options need to be weighed carefully without rushing the process. You will also want to be open to exploring new possibilities, even if they seem unlikely at first.

The first step is to form a selection committee. The group should include several interested persons from the congregation, as well as the parish musician and pastor. Ideally, some of the committee members, other than the parish musician, will have some musical training. The committee should have clear instruction from the congregation council to proceed with its work and an understanding of the way in which the two groups will communicate. Misunderstandings can be avoided if the committee knows at what points in the process it needs council approval. The selection committee will want to accompany the process with prayer.

It may be best to secure the services of a consultant to help direct this project. This person might be an organ professor from a nearby college or university, the organist at a nearby seminary, or another professional organist who has experience working with liturgical worship needs and organ builders, and with guiding organ selection committees. It is best that the consultant does not work for an organ builder or company. The nearest [American Guild of Organists \(AGO\)](#) chapter may be able to advise you about people in your area who are experienced in organ consultation. The role of the organ consultant is to guide and advise the selection committee through all phases of the organ selection and installation process, to be an advocate for the congregation when dealing with the

company chosen to build the new organ, and to see that the project is completed according to the contractual agreement.

First and foremost, the organ should be able to lead congregational song. The instrument should provide a sturdy, lively accompaniment that fills the worship space but at the same time does not overpower the congregation. Other questions to be asked before contacting organ builders include:

1. Will this instrument be used for solos, recitals, and concerts, as well as for choir and solo accompaniment?
2. Will the nave need to be redesigned to accommodate a new instrument?
3. Is space for the instrument at a minimum, or is there adequate space?
4. Should the new instrument be compatible with midi-interface?
5. If there is an existing instrument, is it worth rebuilding, or can some of its pipework be used in a new instrument?
6. What is the budget for this project?
7. Is a new organ required or is a rebuilt organ a possibility (contact the Organ Clearing House listed in Resources)?

The consultant will probably need to spend some time educating the committee members about the various kinds of organs they might consider and the appropriateness of each for the congregation's particular situation, as well as helping the committee to answer questions like those mentioned above.

Once the committee has a clear idea of the congregation's needs, group members should take several trips to listen to *and* sing with organs built by various builders in installations that may be similar to your own. When considering companies and getting a first hand look and listen to their instruments, be sure not only to listen, but also to sing! Since the primary task of an organ in a worshiping community is to accompany assembly song, singing as part of the consideration/search process is invaluable. The organ consultant should be able to suggest appropriate sites and help make the arrangements. The purpose of these visits is to develop a sense of the tonal quality you would like your instrument to have. Organs built by different builders and companies each have unique tonal characteristics and sound different in varying acoustical environments. Once you have determined the basic tonal quality best suited to your congregation's needs and tastes, your consultant can direct you to builders whose organs generally have those characteristics.

At this point, you are ready to talk with the organ builders and to listen to instruments they have built. You will want to have conversations with three or more builders. If searching for an electronic instrument, you will also want to investigate more than one company. You may ask for a proposal from each or, after some initial conversations, ask only one or two to present a detailed proposal. These proposals should include detailed drawings of console, pipe chambers and cantilevering, blowers, and electrical system (for a pipe organ). If the installation will include remodeling of the worship space to accommodate the instrument, an architect should be consulted. A detailed accounting of cost and timetable for completion should also be included in the proposal. Remember,

each builder will produce an instrument with different specifications; you may not be comparing apples with apples. Nor is it fair to compare bids for tracker action with electric action, or pipe organs with electronic instruments. Each individual builder/dealer will have a unique product, particularly in tonal quality, so keep in mind as you negotiate with various organ companies that cost figures alone do not tell the whole story.


When the negotiation process is complete, a detailed contract that includes drawings, specifications, and financial arrangements should be written. Most organ builders use a standard contract. Your congregation's attorney should review the contract before it is signed. Some congregations wish to have the builder secure financial bonding to ensure completion of the project in the unlikely event that the contracted builder cannot complete the project. If you feel it is in your best interest, the bond should be a part of your negotiations with the builder.

Once the work begins, a member of the selection committee (often the music director or organist) along with the organ consultant should be assigned to oversee the project. Frequent and open communication with everyone involved will ensure that the project proceeds smoothly.





Purchasing a new organ is a major event in the life of a parish. Its completion is certainly an occasion for celebration. Keep the congregation well informed through all phases of the organ project, and use the time while the organ is being built to plan a celebration, including a dedicatory liturgy and recital. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Occasional Services for the Assembly* provides a rite for the dedication of an organ, as well as suggestions for appropriate psalms, readings, and hymns. (See pp.161-164).

RESOURCES

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

-  Blessing of an Organ or Other Primary Musical Instrument, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

Other Resources

-  Many articles on acoustics and purchasing an organ are available either online or in downloadable pdf format from [Scott R. Riedel and Associates](#),
 -  [Purchasing an Organ.](#)
 -  [Worship Space Acoustics.](#)
-  The following resources are available online from the [American Guild of Organists](#): or by calling 212-870-2310.
 - Ingram, Donald, Edward Barnes, Calvin Hampton, David Klepper, and Robert Noehren. *Acoustics in Worship Spaces.*
 - Ogasapian, John, and Carlton Russell. *Buying an Organ*
 - Ogasapian, John. *Church Organs: A Guide to Selection and Purchase*

Planning Space for Pipe Organs

- 🖨 [The Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America](#) (APOBA). P.O. Box 155, Chicago Ridge, Illinois 60415. (800) 473-5270.
 - The *Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America* has prepared this pamphlet to lead potential purchasers through a pipe organ project. Here is advice on deciding on a pipe organ, assessing musical needs, involving the congregation, and fund raising: *Guide to Organ Planning and Fund Raising*
- 🖨 [Organ Clearing House](#). P.O. Box 290786, Charlestown, MA, 02129-0214. (617) 688-9290. info@organclearinghouse.com.

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