



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How does a congregation find and hire/call a musician?

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.

The search process for a musician(s) will vary according to what the congregation is seeking: One full-time musician, a combination of part-time and full-time musicians, one or more part-time musicians. The variety of titles the Lutheran church has assigned to musicians serving the church expresses this diversity: director of music, minister of music, organist, choirmaster, choir director, song leader, and cantor. *Principles for Worship*, a resource published by the ELCA in 2002, notes that, “Whatever the title, leading the people’s song is a distinct and necessary ministry within the worshipping assembly. Whether professional or volunteer, full-time or part-time, paid or unpaid, leadership of the assembly’s music is a vocation” (Background M-10B). This essay will outline the process needed to identify who holds that vocation in your congregation.

Forming a Search Committee

Most congregations use a search committee to find and hire/call a musician(s). The committee may be made up of people from various groups in the congregation (it is hoped that some of them have some musical interest and knowledge): the chair of the worship and music committee, the chair of the mutual ministry (personnel) committee, and the pastor(s). Ordinarily, the committee is charged with clarifying the current employment agreement or, in the absence of such a document, developing a clear description of the position they are charged with filling and the qualifications of the person who might best provide the leadership needed. Again, *Principles for Worship* identifies some of the most essential tasks of such a position:

The responsibilities of church musicians may include gathering and managing the resources for leading the assembly’s song; mentoring the young and those new to the faith; forming and educating the faithful; planning music for liturgies; leading the prayer of the assembly; training choirs, instrumental groups, and individuals of all ages; and developing concerts and outreach programs (Application M-10D).

Identifying Needs

What are the musical needs and aspirations of the congregation? This is one of the first questions a search committee will need to address. Are you seeking a primary musician to oversee and perform most, if not all musical responsibilities? Are you hoping to divide the position among multiple musicians? These and yet more scenarios offer positives and negatives. It can be extremely helpful to have one person taking the pulse of music in the congregation and tending to the overall musical health. Yet this may not be feasible for some congregations. Having a team of gifted musicians can work well provided the staff has a healthy working relationship.

Developing a Ministry Description(s)

If no detailed description of the position exists or if changes have been to the current description, the committee may discuss ways the music program can further enrich not only the worship life, but also other aspects of the congregation's life (see list from *Principles for Worship*, above). From this discussion, the committee should develop a description of the responsibilities of the musician. On the basis of that description, the committee may begin to advertise for candidates. In addition to the more formal processes— placing announcements in a synod newsletter, the local [American Guild of Organists \(AGO\)](#) newsletter, and the [Association of Lutheran Church Musicians \(ALCM\)](#) Placement Newsletter— be sure not to overlook more informal processes such as word of mouth and inquiring at a local college. After receiving résumés, the search committee will determine which candidates will be invited to interview and audition for the position (see below).

If the congregation wants to seek an associate in ministry or diaconal minister (officially rostered in the ELCA and called to the position), the committee should contact its synod office at the very beginning of the process.

The committee will need to make a fair assessment of the time commitment required to fulfill adequately the expected duties. Much preparation is needed in order for services and rehearsals to be conducted in a competent and professional manner. Practice time (usually two hours per day), preparation time for rehearsals, planning for liturgies, staff meetings, worship planning meetings, and committee meetings need to be considered when trying to determine the amount of time it will take to fulfill the requirements of the position. The ALCM has published an excellent document to help congregations sort through these issues. *Guidelines for the Employment of Musicians in the Lutheran Church* includes sample contractual agreements representing duties, expected skills and working relationships, as well as ways to determine fair compensation appropriate for different regions of the country. The document provides not only working models, but also education about the scope of the work for which the musician is responsible. The sample worksheet will help committees determine the amount of time a musician would reasonably need to fulfill the duties assigned to them, as well as give guidelines for arriving at a fair salary.

What if, after an extensive search, the committee receives no qualified applicants? See [“What can we do if we don't have an organist?”](#)

Auditions/Interviews

Auditions and interviews are a vital part of the selection process. An audition portion allows the search committee to assess the candidates' skills in hymn and service playing, general keyboard skills, and conducting ability; it may also help determine the candidates' interpersonal skills in leading the choir or other musical ensembles. It is best to ask the candidate(s) to prepare two or three hymns of varying musical style for the audition, as well as anthems, hymns or service music to rehearse with the choir. For an audition with a choir, one model is to have the committee specify one specific anthem and to ask the candidate to rehearse another of their choice. The candidates might be asked to bring service folders from liturgies they have helped to plan, and to submit examples of musical choices they would make based on the lectionary for a particular Sunday. An interview with the committee will assess the candidate's interest in the position, their vision for church music and their approach to ministry and interpersonal skills among other dimensions.

Compensation

Compensation packages for full-time (and some part-time) positions usually contain not only a base salary, but also paid vacation time, provision for professional development, and medical insurance. Guidelines for determining salaries can be found both through [ALCM](#) and the [AGO](#). Many positions for church musicians are contracted at less than full-time but still require a substantial time commitment. This often means that the workload precludes other full-time employment. In that case, the musician must supplement his or her income with other part-time work, such as private teaching or part-time teaching in a local college or school. Very few part-time positions provide benefits. Congregations should realize that being unable to offer full-time employment does not automatically absolve them from what are considered normal and reasonable workplace benefits. Said simply in *Principles for Worship*,

Congregations also provide fair compensation and just treatment for church musicians, regularly evaluating and examining expectations for music positions” (Application M-10F).

The way musicians are compensated for weddings and funerals needs to be addressed clearly. Some congregations consider that providing for musical leadership at funeral and wedding liturgies is a responsibility of the parish. If this is the case, this responsibility needs to be taken into consideration when fair compensation is determined. In other congregations, these services are often considered to be a way for the musician to supplement his or her salary. If this is the case, the parish musician should be contacted to provide music for all such liturgies. In the event that a family wishes to engage a different musician, proper compensation should still be afforded the parish musician. It should be delineated clearly in the contractual agreement who will be responsible—musician or congregation—for setting fees for such services.

Collegial Expectations

Working relationships among staff members as well as between staff members and congregation should be discussed openly. Pastor and musician work together best when there is a shared vision and an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Again, from *Principles for Worship*:

Although various patterns exist for the relationship of various ministries in the church, musicians work best in partnership and mutual ministry with pastors and other leaders. Such collegiality, developed through models such as mentoring, benefits those who serve in these various roles and, through their cooperative ministry, the church (Application M-10G).

For helpful resource on these matters, see *Music and Vital Congregations* and *Rivals or a Team?* in Resources below.

Worship planning is done best by a team including pastor, musician, the congregational worship committee, or at the very least, by pastor and musician working together. When too much control is given to either party, the working relationship can be damaged and conflict can result. Musicians who work closely with members of the congregation outside of the choir generally have a more positive relationship with the congregation. In every congregation, it is helpful to have an impartial mutual ministry committee in place to help work through difficulties should they arise.

Managing a thorough process can seem like a daunting task for a congregation. Some synods have a staff person responsible for music and liturgy. That person may be available to act as a consultant to guide parishes in developing a job description and help assess musical skills, liturgical knowledge, and the candidate's ability to work successfully in a parish situation. If this resource is not available in your synod, the [ELCA worship staff](#) or the [Association of Lutheran Church Musicians \(ALCM\)](#) may be able to put you in touch with someone in your geographic area who would be able to assist you.

Above all, be prayerful and patient in your search. The musician you hire or call will have a major role in shaping the spiritual life of your congregation. A careful search reflects the value the congregation places on the musician(s) who will lead its song.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- 🔗 [What can we do if we don't have an organist?](#)

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Buckley Farlee, Robert. *Musicians in the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *The Church Musician*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.

Other Resources

- 📖 [*Guidelines for the Employment of Musicians in the Lutheran Church*](#). Association of Lutheran Church Musicians.
- 📖 Guenther, Eileen. [*Rivals or a Team? Clergy-Musician Relationships in the Twenty-First Century*](#). Fenton, MO: Morningstar Music, 2012.
- 📖 Roberts, William Bradley. [*Music and Vital Congregations: A Practical Guide for Clergy*](#). New York: Church Publishing, 2009.
- 📖 Jais-Mick, Maureen. [*Resources in Professional Concerns: An Annotated Bibliography*](#). American Guild of Organists, 475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.
- 📖 Sirota, Victoria. [*Preaching to the Choir: Claiming the Role of Sacred Musician*](#). New York: Church Publishing, 2006.
- ☐ American Guild of Organists (AGO) www.agohq.org
- ☐ Association of Lutheran Church Musicians (ALCM) www.alcm.org

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