



### EMPLOYING MUSICIANS IN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS: A HANDBOOK FOR COMMITTEES AND CANDIDATES

As many Guild members wistfully recall, for about 20 years, beginning in the mid-90s, the AGO published a chart, updated annually, providing members with salary guidelines for use by organists negotiating their salaries and by religious institutions seeking to establish an appropriate basis for compensating their musicians. The chart provided salary ranges and associated costs of benefits based on the number of hours the organist was expected to work, the experience and education levels of the organist, and whether the organist had passed specific AGO certification examinations. Over the years, the chart was annotated to encourage users to check certain government-maintained websites that compared the cost of living in cities across the U.S., since compensation was typically based on an institution's geographic location, the nature of the community (urban, suburban, or rural), and the size of the congregation, among many other considerations.

The AGO additionally published model contract provisions and maintained certain rules in its Code of Ethics regarding acceptable employment practices. For example, one rule said that a Guild member could not apply for a job if another member already held that position. Another rule stated that Guild members who were incumbent musicians at a religious institution should be paid their regular fee for a special service even if an outside musician was asked to perform that service. Moreover, it was the responsibility of the Guild member to inform the party engaging the outside organist that the incumbent had to receive his or her regular fee even though the incumbent was not playing.

This last ethical requirement is rumored to have been brought to the attention of the Federal Trade Commission by a member of a bridal party who deemed it unfair. That prompted the FTC to conduct a thorough investigation not only of the AGO's Code of Ethics, but of many other Guild practices, policies, and programs, including the publication of the salary guidelines.

The FTC subsequently alleged that a variety of the AGO's practices were anticompetitive and in violation of federal antitrust laws. Upon the advice of all independent legal counsel consulted by the AGO, the Guild entered into

a settlement agreement with the FTC in May 2017 without undergoing costly litigation or admitting any wrongdoing. As part of the settlement, the AGO agreed to modify its Code of Ethics to allow organists to compete freely for jobs and discontinued publication of the salary guidelines and model contract provisions. This settlement was not popular with the membership, but the National Council concluded that it was the only viable way forward to address and resolve all of the FTC's concerns.

The AGO has spent the ensuing years developing a variety of documents and articles acceptable to the FTC that would assist organists and religious institutions in their efforts to understand more clearly the work of an organist and choir director, the time required to do their work, and the myriad considerations that must be factored into a fair compensation package. This information has been consolidated into a stunning new AGO publication titled, *Employing Musicians in Religious Institutions: A Handbook for Committees and Candidates*. Adapted by various Guild committees from *Procedures for Employing Church Musicians*, by the Association of Church Musicians and the Madison (Wis.) AGO Chapter, this new 36-page handbook provides guidelines that “will help religious leaders and congregations conduct an effective search and make appropriate choices of personnel.” It notes that it is important for employers to “clearly define their needs and expectations regarding the available position(s),” and that a “religious institution's development of a compensation ‘package’ must reflect the time requirements of the position and skill level of the candidate.”

The handbook includes sections on the role of the search committee and components of the job descriptions for a choir director and organist; application and evaluation procedures; compensation considerations; special events (weddings, funerals, and memorial services); substitutes; and the Guild's certification program. Two valuable appendices address “Considerations for Calculating the Weekly Hours of an Organist and/or Director of Music at a Religious Institution” and “Annual Employment Review Guidelines for Church/Synagogue Musicians.”

If you are employed by a religious institution or hope to be at some time in the future, you need to study this handbook and make it available to your current or future employer. It's essential reading for anyone responsible for the music program in a religious institution.

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