

FAQs For Finding and Hiring a Music Director

Includes suggestions for supplementing a Music Director's (MD's) salary and music copyright licensing

By Richard Mekdeci

Here are 12 questions most frequently asked by ministers and boards who are seeking to upgrade their current program, or start a new music department in their church. Since each church and its needs are different, this is not intended to be a "checklist" but simply suggestions and guidelines for the process.

1. What should the job description for a director include?

Here are some elements you may want to consider when posting a job description for music director.

- Supply and schedule high-quality music appropriate for inter-denominational worship.
- Select music for and lead congregational singing.
- Schedule guest musicians.
- Provide input into all events and services which require music.
- Provide special programs for holiday services, such as a choir concert once a year, a Christmas cantata, an Easter play, or perhaps a yearly fund-raiser.
- Include special services in addition to regular Sunday services (Christmas Eve, candle lighting, burning bowl, church anniversary celebrations, etc.)
- Include Wednesday evening services, if applicable.
- Build and maintain a library of choral and solo music. (no photocopies)
- Manage volunteers.
- Operate department within budget. This includes an acceptable number of Sundays to be off in a year and being responsible for scheduling a substitute for those days. Also include in music budget funds to attend at least one music conference a year.

2. What qualifications should we be looking for?

A full-time music director's job consists of these main functions.

- Lead musician
- Song leader/soloist



- Choir or ensemble director
- Administrator

Options include creative arts such as dance and theater as part of the music director's responsibilities.

An ideal music director would fill all these functions. Some music departments have a person for each function, including dance and theater. (Extra pluses: arranger, business management, promotion experience, computer skills and charisma.) He/she should be able to read music and play from chord charts.

Experience in church work is not necessary. Offer to work with committed person in a position that offers salary growth as the church grows. Someone who really feels called to this work, as opposed to just a musician looking for some supplemental income, would be worth considering over a more-qualified, less-committed person.

As for education, the more the better, but don't let that be a deal buster in the case of a talented and qualified person. Depending on the kind of music you want, a highly educated music director can be over-qualified and may snub simple songs or certain styles of music.

3. How much should we expect to pay?

Minister, youth education and music are the foundational elements of any successful church and should be given high priority.

Whatever you choose for your yearly music budget, reserve about 20 percent of that for paying special guests and buying music, then divide the rest among the number of people needed to provide all the functions of a music director. (see #2)

Begin with your ideal—a do-everything, charismatic and versatile person—and pay that person whatever it takes to keep them. This is the music director who plays piano, keyboard and other instruments, is a good vocal soloist, song leader, choir director and accompanist, has theater experience, plays and is familiar with all styles of music, is well-networked in the music community, lots of performance experience,



etc. This person's salary should be at least half of the minister's salary and/or on par with the youth education director's salary.

4. How many hours a week of work should I expect? (this will vary by city and state)

A good part-time salary would be \$250 a week for 10 to 15 hours. This would include Sunday mornings, choir rehearsals, Wednesday evenings if needed, and special services around the holidays. A part-time person should not be expected to play weddings, receptions, memorial services, etc., without extra compensation. You should expect high-quality music and choir, variety and contemporary music for this amount.

What you should not expect is a huge commitment, extra performing arts programs (dance, theater, etc.), or budgeting and submitting payroll for guests. These are things a full-time director would handle.

Work backward or forward from there. If you can only pay \$100 a week, that should only be for showing up on Sunday mornings and playing one service. (You could ask them to schedule guests, pick hymns based on the topic, but not much more than that.)

5. Should we have a music director and a choir director or have the same person do both? Could the music director also be the accompanist?

There are many acceptable and workable configurations for a music department. Ideally, a person who can do all of the above would be your first choice. A good pianist can be the song leader and choir director, directing from the piano.

Next choice would be the above person except he/she prefers not to lead choir and be accompanist too. This may require hiring a pianist just for choir rehearsals and performances.

The music director could be the song leader/choir director and oversee the running of the department, and then have a pianist in addition. (What happens here is you get the same soloist each Sunday (your music director), or you also pay for soloists on occasion.)



You can budget say, two Sundays where the music director sings, one Sunday where the choir sings, and one Sunday have a guest soloist. If your music director is an instrumentalist but not a vocalist, you will have to hire a regular soloist or have different guest singers. This lends well to having a variety of music as your music director accompanies all different styles of guest musicians and singers.

You will also have to hire a choir director which the music director will accompany. The choir director can be a soloist one Sunday, have the choir one Sunday and then guests two Sundays. Song leaders can be chosen from the choir to lead the hymns on Sunday morning.

6. Where and how should we look for someone?

Check your local musicians' union. You can get a directory of all local union musicians. (This does not mean that you will be paying union wages, this is simply a resource of all kinds of musicians in your community.)

Colleges with music programs are a good place. Even without music departments, a college may have closet musicians who want to get involved in a church community while they are there. (It is ok to look for someone who may only stay 2-4 years.)

Local nightclubs and piano bars are great places to find great musicians. Nightclub performers are usually familiar with all styles of music, know how to connect with an audience, are comfortable in front of people, and are usually personable.

Seventh Day Adventist churches have their services on Saturday so their musicians are available for Sunday work.

A classified ad in the religious section of the newspaper usually will yield a few calls too.

7. What's the best way to deal with our current music director if he/she will not be the new music director?



Tell him/her what you are looking for in a music director and offer for him/her to apply for the position along with the other applicants. He/she may end up being the best person for the job, so don't burn that bridge.

8. How do we know what kind of music will work best for us?

A visioning of what you want your church congregation to look like will give you a pretty good idea of what kind of music you should have.

Remember, don't look at the congregation now, but at the congregation you want to see. Even more than the message, the music sets the tone and energy of the entire service and that's what guests will remember. If you desire a congregation diverse in age and ethnicity, you have to have a variety of music which includes Broadway, old standard hymns (with updated lyrics), classical and classics, adult contemporary, folk and country, drumming, hip-hop, jazz; all of these should surface every six months or so.

If you want to keep your demographics the way they are now, then poll the congregation for the kind of music they would like.

9. Where can our music director find good music for our services?

There are many music sources for Unity and New Thought music available through Unity Worldwide Ministries (UWM) and online sites. UWM now offers a series of songbooks of great congregational and thematic music specifically written and chosen to fit our theology.

Most books include full piano scores, lead sheets, lyric sheets and a clips CD containing 2-minute recordings of each of the songs.

The Agape Chant choir in Los Angeles, led by Rickie Byars Beckwith, has several albums of New Thought church worship music on CD and in book form. Other artists with songbooks and worship packages and performance tracks are Karen Drucker, Daniel Nahmod, Jana Stanfield, David Roth, Robert Anderson (Devotion), and many others.



Your Music Ministry Team produces at least one or two new songbooks each year. If you have any immediate questions or concerns, UWM now has a part-time Sacred Music Resource director on staff. (Email Music@unity.org or call 816.524.7414.)

10. What kind of personal characteristics should we be looking for?

Look for these attributes when interviewing or auditioning possible candidates: plays well with others; personable; makes eye contact with audience; displays confidence, leadership, and commitment to a spiritual path; genuine love of the art; and accepting of all kinds of lifestyles and beliefs. The music director should be around the average age of the (envisioned) congregation.

11. What makes a great music program?

Variety and inspiration are the two main ingredients for a great music program. A congregation must be inspired whatever the configuration on stage. You can inspire them with a full orchestra and choir or with a guitar and vocalist, but it must be inspiring.

Inspiring church music is heartfelt and genuine. The performers must feel what they are singing and believe what they are singing. When a musical message is delivered with honesty and sincerity, the congregation will be inspired. An inspired congregation will grow and grow.

12. How should the music director and minister work together?

Like a producer (minister) and director (music director) of a film or play—hand-in-hand, yet with well-defined roles and with creativity and expression intact. Each should be well-informed of the service's dynamics. The music director should know the message—what the minister wants to convey. The minister should supply the music director with lesson titles (with one- or two-sentence summary of the lesson and Bible passages and quotes) so the music director can look for appropriate music.

Any announcements that may require special staging or background music, special event promotions, etc., should be conveyed for creative ideas. Understand that it is very difficult for the music to match perfectly every week to the message. For these

occasions, there are the generic message songs the music director should have ready that fit almost any title.

The music director must understand that this is the minister's show (the producer); he/she calls the shots as to final say about the flow of the service and what feels comfortable musically.

Suggestions for Supplementing a Music Director's Salary

If only a nominal sum can be afforded, offer this person other opportunities to increase their income:

- Be sure your music director is the first suggested by the wedding coordinator for weddings and memorial services.
- If the church has the venue, offer your music director an event such as a monthly or weekly coffeehouse or a Wednesday evening or weekend music service where he/she could receive a portion of the love offerings so that they're vested in the success of the event.
- Support and promote your music director to the congregation if he/she has CDs to sell or is performing in a venue locally.

Church Copyright—the EmPower Music Rights License

Because of separation of church and state, a church has the right to perform any song and even change lyrics for the purpose of the worship service. However, copyright permission is required when any part of the song is copied or duplicated. This happens when:

- Lyrics to songs are written in bulletins or projected on a screen or by overhead projector.
- Your service is recorded and then sold or distributed to congregants.
- Music is archived on the church website and accessible to download.

For these purposes, and especially if you alter lyrics, permission must be secured. EmPower Music Rights is a blanket licensing company that represents most of the New Thought artists whose music is used in our churches. At a nominal fee of as little as \$100 per year you have permission to use music by Karen Drucker, Daniel Nahmod,



Richard Mekdeci, Karen Taylor Good, Jana Stanfield, and most of the songwriters in the songbooks. Go to www.empowerma.com/musicrights to find out more.

Bio

Richard Mekdeci has spent over 30 years in church worship music positions, including 12 years at First Church Unity in Nashville, Tennessee, and 5 years as Music and Creative Arts Coordinator for retreats at Unity World Headquarters at Unity Village. He has worked as an advisor to church boards and new churches forming and revamping their music departments. Richard is a Licensed Unity Teacher and President and Cofounder of Itoi Ministries and emPower Music and Arts which supports and promotes music with a universal spiritual message. He now works at Unity Worldwide Ministries as Sacred Music Resource Coordinator. He can be reached at Richard@unity.org.



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