ASSESSING YOUR NEW JOB

MEET EVERYONE
It will take a year or more to get settled in …
  to your home
  to your office
  to a routine
  to knowing where the best coffee shops are located

Make as many friends as possible.

Learn and use names! Keep re-introducing: it takes months to learn names, but the process is speedier with repetition.

Support the legacy of your predecessor. Don’t bad-mouth him or her: it will “get back.”

START TO PLAN A WEEKLY SCHEDULE
When does your staff meet? Start there.

When do your choirs meet? Work backwards from that point … and plan for balance.

From the outset, build in practice time and time for score preparation. Be ready musically for whatever may happen pastorally: get your musical act together a day ahead or first thing in the morning … because you never know what crisis will crop up next.

PASTORING YOUR CHOIRS
You will be your choir’s pastor – scary, huh? Be interested in the lives, work and play of your choir members.

Don’t talk about yourself all the time: no one will care about your adventures at university or in your last church position, for instance. Don’t take offense: this is how people are.

Listen to others: let them do the talking. It may be years before anyone takes an interest in you … don’t lose heart: when the day arrives that someone does, it will be well worth the wait!

Choirs are full of oddballs. Love them, but don’t nurture their oddball-ness. Stay focused on your plan, your strategy, your music list, your agenda, your hopes and dreams. Oddballs can be de-activated by your disarming positivity.

Post-rehearsal gatherings allow people to see your full humanity. You don’t have to base your ministry on fear and aloofness: most people will respond even more fully if they see that behind your leadership is a fully formed human being.

Attend choir member extra-curricular events: concerts, piano recitals, parties, bar and bat mitzvahs.

Remember birthdays and anniversaries. Use pen and paper – yes, there are still significant chunks of the world that appreciate a hand-written note!

When someone leaves the fold: Let your people go! Be positive: throw a party!

PASTORING YOUR CONGREGATION
To join or not to join … that is the question. Consult with your pastor/priest. If you don’t pledge where you work, pledge at a neighboring congregation.
Resist the temptation to ghetto-ize. Don’t just hang out with “your people.” If you’re __________, find out what life is like on “the other side.” Cliques are so high school.

Teach. Seize any and all opportunities to put yourself in front of your congregation:
- pre-service “musical moments”
- adult ed opportunities (see attached)
- retreats
- Bible studies

Know your religious tradition:
- Read books about the Bible, theology, your tradition.
- Subscribe to denominational periodicals.
- Become a member of your denominational musicians’ organization – and then attend its conferences.
- Even consider attending your denomination’s conferences. Horror of horrors … there may be discussions centered on matters that have nothing to do with church music!

Know other religious traditions: you never know when this will be useful or even necessary
- Attend services in other traditions
- Obtain hymnals outside your tradition

Model observant behavior
- Attend spoken services

Bow your head at “Let us pray” and make your choirs do the same.

Don’t fidget during services, and make your choirs equally fidget-free. They’re going to resist you at first but will eventually come around. Better to stand by convictions that are shared by the entire congregation than by those that are, at best, minor concerns (“What do you mean, you don’t want me to use the cornet on stanza 3??!!”).

Don’t talk/text/e-mail/FB/etc. during services.

Don’t let anyone think you’re there just for the music.

Know your staff, starting with the sextons/janitors, working your way down from there.
- Use names.

Introduce them to your friends and colleagues.

Know your congregation outside your choir(s).
- Use names.

“The customer is always right.”
- Random congregant at coffee hour:
  “The communion hymn was too loud.”

Bad answer:
  “Go jump in that vat of bad church coffee.”

Good answer:
  “Thank-you for saying something. When are your free for lunch so we can discuss this important matter further?”
Attend non-musical events
  small-group gatherings
  council meetings
  retreats
  non-musical lectures

Befriend the altar guild ladies who’ve been there for centuries.

Befriend the ushers who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

Befriend the acolytes who dropped out of choir because it wasn’t cool enough.

Befriend the members of your governing council and not just because they control the budget.

Offer to help:
  move chairs
  stuff envelopes
  fold leaflets
  make coffee (yours will be better)

You will receive lots of invitations from un-cool people not of your kind. Be a full human being: respond. White lie, if you have to, but at least respond.

Find one or two kvetching partners that you know you can trust outside your outside your congregation. Is finding kvetching partners too difficult? Get a therapist. Whatever you do, don’t kvetch inside your congregation: it will get back.

Develop decent communication habits with people outside your very closest circles:

  Bad way to answer the phone:
    “Hiyyyyi.”
    “Hello … ?”

  Good way to answer the phone:
    “Hi! This is Jason!”

  Bad way to answer a text/e-mail/FB message:
    no salutation/no names/no final bidding

  Good way to answer a text/e-mail/FB message:
    “Many thanks, Josephine.
     I really appreciate …
     Take care – Jim
     555-555-5555 / cell”

When in doubt (and please be in doubt 97.3% of the time!), be overly courtly. You never know who is going to think you’re rude.

Never assume anyone remembers your name. Introduce yourself, re-introduce yourself, re-introduce yourself again and then keep on re-introducing yourself. Particularly in large churches, people with heavy work responsibilities will not be able to remember your name, if they only see you every so often. Shocking, I know … but true!

Romantic liaisons? Go outside your congregation.
SOCIAL MEDIA
Be careful.

RSVPs
Respond.

CALENDARS
Be as complete as possible: the agony caused by putting this together will paradoxically prevent considerable anguish down the road!

With a year-long calendar, you may need to be lenient with attendance at last-minute events. Most choir members will want to help with funerals but may not feel so kindly disposed to weddings and other “late arrivals” to the calendar.

BUDGETS
First question: how much extra-budgetary funding will your church leadership permit?

Possible expenses
- Music / a store, such as Lois Fyfe Music in Nashville, will be happy to “price out” a set of purchases for you.
- Paid singers / add an extra call or two: you never when an extra event may require vocal leadership.
- Vestments / maybe an ongoing replacement plan (five new ones per year, for example, would help to spread the expense? This is also a popular one-time donor item!)
- Publicity / posters, postcards, etc.
- Instrumentalists / Aim to be as generous as possible: your instrumentalists will keep wanting to return, and you’ll be able to secure the finest in town. Conversely, many churches have Christmas and Easter memorials for flowers and instrumentalists.

Possible income
- Calendars / photos of your choir and church
- Concert revenue / particularly effective with no-overhead concerts
- Bake sales and other yummies / let your parents and adults do the work!

DRESS CODES / UNIFORMS
Know first the culture of your church, but don’t be afraid to ask for sartorial appropriateness. Children especially value more the events for which they are asked to dress up.

If you’re in a church that uses vestments, don’t you think black socks and shoes look better underneath?

Start a clothes closet. As choir members outgrow uniform items, most will be willing to donate for second-hand use.

Also having an informal dress item, like a choir polo shirt, makes it easier to spot choristers in large crowds.

STAFF SINGERS
Your volunteers will be watching! Have the highest expectations for your paid singers: they will benefit from this, and your volunteers will be grateful.

STAFF ASSISTANCE
Ask first: what are my priorities? What do you love doing the most? What do you hate doing the most?!

Organ Scholar / Assistant Organist. Bartering sometimes works with high school students. A small stipend, unequal to the opportunity (of course!) will often be welcome to a college student.

Maybe you really like and are good at conducting from the console … ? Make getting administrative help a higher priority then.

CHILD PROTECTION
Put your parents to work on this!