



American Guild of
ORGANISTS

The Secrets of Successful Subbing

Carl Kishline & J.W. Arnold

Monday, February 23, 2026

Checklist: Hiring a Substitute

Planning. Have you compiled all the details about the service that a sub will require:

- Date, Time, and Location
- Performance Requirements (Organ Voluntaries and Hymns, Conducting or Accompanying the Choir or Soloists, Special Liturgies or Sacraments)
- Hymnal(s) and Service Music Setting Used
- Organ Information (Pipe or Digital, Number of Manuals, Ranks, and Stops)

Payment. How much can your church afford to pay? Be prepared to negotiate, especially during high-demand seasons (Christmas, Easter, Summer Vacation).

- Amount Per Service
- Time and Method of Payment

Preparation. Does your substitute have everything he or she will need to perform the service:

- Point of Contact (Pastor, Secretary, Choir Director, etc.)
- Bulletin or Order of Service
- Hymnal(s) and Service Music, Anthems or Special Music
- Key and/or Instructions to Operate Organ (Including Documentation of Any Maintenance Issues, Piston Use and Permissions, and Any Quirks)
- Building Access and Practice Availability (Including Security, Lighting, Environmental, and Sound System Instructions, If Applicable)
- Streaming/Audio-visual Contact (for Titles and Licensing)

Checklist: Working as a Substitute

Marketing and Availability. You need to put yourself out there, if you hope to hear the phone ringing (or the ping of a new text or email in your inbox):

- Chapter and National AGO Substitute Listings
- General Availability (Sundays, Weekdays and/or Evenings, Weddings and Funerals, Concerts and Special Services, etc.) and Planned Vacations
- Scope of Services (Organ Voluntaries and Hymn Playing, Accompanying Soloists and/or Choir, Choral Conducting)
- Denomination and Worship Style Considerations (Liturgical, Contemporary, or Blended Worship, Streaming Services, etc.)

Booking a Gig. Get the date on ALL of your calendars “prontissimo” and never take the details for granted:

- Date, Time, and Location of Service
- Agreed Rate of Pay, Time and Method of Payment
- Performance Requirements (Organ Voluntaries and Hymns, Conducting or Accompanying the Choir and/or Soloists, Special Liturgies or Sacraments)
- Hymnal(s) and Service Music Setting Used
- Organ Information (Pipe or Digital, Number of Manuals, Ranks, and Stops)
- Key and/or Instructions to Operate Organ (Including Documentation of Any Maintenance Issues, Piston Use and Permissions, and Any Quirks)
- Building Access and Practice Availability (Including Security, Lighting, Environmental, and Sound System Instructions, If Applicable)
- Streaming/Audio-visual Contact (for Titles and Licensing)

Preparation. In addition to having all the music in hand (being told “the books are on the bench” is not enough), important questions to ask the musician or pastor include:

- What are the scripture readings for the service and are there any special themes?
- Will there be any special liturgies or moments before, during, or after the service? (Announcements, Baptisms, Confirmations, Blessings, or Special Meetings)
- How strong is the congregational singing? The choir? What are the normal tempos for hymns?
- If the congregation shares the peace during the service, what are the cues to continue the service?

Day of Service. As the Boy Scouts say, “Be Prepared” for anything:

- Arrive Early (Know how much preparation YOU need, including any decompression or down time after warm-up and before the service.)
- Coordinate with Other Leaders (including A/V techs about last minute changes)
- Be Available for Choir Warm-up
- Be Prepared for Unexpected Conversations and Distractions (It’s undoubtedly a friendly and welcoming congregation.)

Pro Tips. Here are a couple extra suggestions that will make the experience positive and earn you a reputation as real pro:

- Watch a recently streamed service, if available, to get a sense of general tempo and cues, singing strength, and average length of the peace, offering, and communion.
- Take the time YOU need to get on friendly terms with the instrument, bearing in mind you are not playing a D.M.A. recital. Aim for understanding how it best leads congregational singing. Document the instrument for your future reference.
- Follow up with the organist afterwards and let them know about the experience. You could become the preferred substitute for many years to come (now that you’re “broken in”).