

Are ministers and musicians allies or rivals?

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue



Eileen Guenther, the national president of the American Guild of Organists, authored a new book about cooperation between ministers and church musicians. —RNS photo by Kim Jackson

Eileen Guenther, the national president of the American Guild of Organists, reveals behind-the-scenes church struggles in her new book, *Rivals or a Team? Clergy-Musician Relationships in the Twenty-First Century*.

Guenther, an associate professor of church music at Washington's Wesley Theological Seminary and the former organist at Foundry United Methodist Church, talked with Religion News Service about her findings and advice. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: You titled your book *Rivals or a Team?* From your research, which is a better description of most clergy-musician relationships?

A: I would say that rivals may well be the most prevalent description, but team is our aspiration.

Q: Why is it sometimes so difficult for musicians and ministers to get along and not have an intense rivalry?

A: Part of it is lack of understanding of roles. Part of it is control. Each of us is used to kind of being in control in our area, but sometimes if the roles haven't been clarified, the control issues become simply that, rather than sorting out, for example, the issue of "OK, who's going to choose the hymn?" That's one of the really big issues.

Q: Who should choose the hymns?

A: It should be done collaboratively. I'm just so into collaborating among staff members and with clergy. We have two services at Wesley and both of them are team planned, with teams from five to ten each. If liturgy is the work of people, then the planning of the liturgy needs not to be done in somebody's office alone with a cup of coffee.

Q: You say that the future of the church may well be at stake if clergy and musicians don't learn to understand each other better. Is it really that dire?

A: I think it is. In general, mainline churches are having a very difficult time these days. And the role of music in worship is so critical—40 to 60 percent of a service is musical—but people can tell when things aren't going well among members of the staff.

I think everything has to be done intentionally, with collegiality and spirituality and a view of what we are all about for people to continue to attend church. People may well attend to hear a fine sermon and not very good music or vice versa. But what really builds in success is when people are working together and the sung word and the spoken word are in partnership.

Q: Your book is sprinkled with testimonies from musicians labeled "name withheld" who tell of unexpected firings or verbal abuse. What story did you find the most gripping?

A: Two of the musicians actually put their names on their stories: Ted Gustin [now in Alexandria, Virginia] found out that his job was open from the church's website. And

Robert Young [now in Salisbury, Maryland] talked about a clergyman who, when there was a point of disagreement, stuck his finger in Robert's face and said, "If you do not obey, I will do with you as I do with my wife."

Q: You also had many who said they had great relationships—sometimes decades long—at one or several churches. What's the secret?

A: I think it probably is mutual respect along with allied things—like when you respect each other you work together, you talk together, you care about each other, you appreciate each other's discipline. If there's some kind of problem, you address it. You don't let it just escalate. You spend time together. Respect is kind of a snapshot that has lots of other little pixels in it.

Q: Should ministers of music be members of the churches that pay them?

A: I think it's better not to be. I don't think it's impossible, but it does blur a little bit of a boundary in terms of employment. I haven't ever joined the church. I've been an associate member but not a full member of the church where I work. I just didn't feel that totally joining was something that felt quite right.

Q: What happens when a clergyperson moves on and the musician stays?

A: In some denominations, the clergy change fairly often. A musician may have been in place during the tenure of several different clergy. But that can be a threat to an insecure clergyperson because you, the musician, were there first and know the members. And gosh, thinks the new pastor, how will they ever love me as much as they love you? —RNS

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