



AMERICAN CONFERENCE *of* CANTORS

Sing a New Song unto God...

The Cantor Search Process

- **Long-range planning**
- **The best match for your congregation**
- **The covenant between the search committee and the congregation**

Cantor Kay Greenwald
Director of Placement
650-963-9722
kgreenwald@accantors.org

The Joint Cantorial Placement Commission (JCPC) is made up of representatives from:

American Conference of Cantors (ACC)
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC)
Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)

The JCPC establishes policies and procedures while overseeing the placement process for congregations

The Search Process

- Your congregational president appoints a search chair (or co-chairs) and a committee



- The chair of the search committee schedules a phone conference with Cantor Greenwald
- All search committee members are encouraged to visit the ACC website (accantors.org) in order to familiarize themselves with the ACC Mission Statement, to peruse the ACC Governing and Ethics documents, to learn about the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music of HUC, and to orient themselves about the Reform Cantorate
- The search chair, congregational president, senior rabbi and executive director review the document titled, “Placement Procedures of the Joint Cantorial Placement Commission”
- The search committee, potentially along with other congregational leadership, takes some time for a visioning process:
 - Who are you as a congregation?
 - What are your congregational strengths and weaknesses?
 - What kind of cantor will best complement your clergy team?
 - Where and how do you want to grow as a congregation?
- The search committee, along with other congregational leadership, develops a position description (sample pulpit position descriptions can be found on the ACC website under “Hiring Resources for Congregations”)
- The search chair downloads the placement application and Acknowledgments page from the ACC website
- The JCPC lists your congregation on the ACC website
- Interested and eligible cantors contact the Placement office
- Your search committee receives resumes and personal statements from interested and eligible cantors

The Tier System

- **Tier One – Open to all ACC cantors – Up to 699 Member Units**
- **Tier Two – Open to those who have been full ACC members for 3 or more years – 700 Member Units or more**



Qualities to Consider

- Spiritual and personal character
- General warmth and demeanor
- Vocal and musical excellence
- Knowledge of Judaism
- Teaching abilities
- Compatibility with other clergy and professional team members

The most frequent mistake search committees make is to focus too much on the perceived *weaknesses* of the previous clergy person.

The second most frequent mistake search committees make is to focus too much on the perceived *strengths* of the previous clergy person.

The Committee's First Tasks

Voting: What kind of vote will it take to recommend someone? Unanimous? Three-fourths?

Budget: How much may the committee spend? How many visits can be accommodated?

Contracts: Who talks about contracts? The search committee chair? The congregational president?

A Note on the Timeline: The height of the Cantorial placement season is from January through March of any given year, but significant opportunities for placement may come to you in November or December or could continue through May.



A Note on the JCPC “exclusivity” rule -

The Joint Cantorial Placement Commission (JCPC) has put this clause into the application due to its desire to provide you with:

- ❖ The highest quality cantor, who is familiar with Reform Jewish thought, practice and music (from hundreds of years ago through music coming out of URJ camps today)
- ❖ A cantor who is a member of a professional organization that upholds the highest standards of clergy behavior (to review the ACC Code of Ethics, please visit the ACC website “About” > “Governing Documents”)
- ❖ A cantor who is committed to lifelong learning, as well as keeping up with current worship and musical innovations
- ❖ A well-rounded clergy team player who will rejoice with you in times of joy and bring comfort during times of sorrow

In your search for a cantor, you have entered into a covenantal relationship with URJ as well as the ACC (a URJ affiliate)

The Video Conference (or Telephone) Interview

Goals:

- To obtain enough information to select the strongest possible candidates to bring for in-person interviews
- To communicate who you are as a congregation
- To make candidates feel as comfortable as possible
- To give you a sense of the person behind the resume

Sample Questions (Further questions can be found on the ACC website under “Hiring Resources for Congregations”)

- What is your Jewish background?
- What made you decide to become a cantor?
- Why are you a Reform Jew?
- Why would you like to make a change at this time?
- How do you make lifecycle events like bar/bat mitzvah meaningful?
- Would you describe your current congregation?
- What makes you a team player?
- What is a meaningful worship experience for you?



Video Conference (or Telephone) Interview Tips

- Make an appointment with the candidate – no cold calls
- Begin each interview with an introduction of all of the people on the conference/call
- Explain the length of the interview and who will be asking questions
- Select one or two people to ask the questions (although others may ask follow-up questions)
- Keep the interview to about 45 minutes, or so
- Create a warm, friendly but professional tone
- Ask all of the candidates the same questions
- Evaluate a candidate immediately after the conference/call
- Questions from the congregation about the search should come through your committee chair
- The committee's proceedings (minutes, emails, etc.) **must be kept confidential**
- Names of candidates **must not** be revealed outside of the committee's proceedings
- Members of the committee may not contact candidates on their own, unless requested to do so by the committee chair
- References **may not be contacted** without the written (email) permission of a candidate
- Disagreements stay within the committee
- Write to the candidates who were not selected as soon as possible



After the Video Conference (or Telephone) Interview

- Request MP3 files from those candidates who emerge as promising
- If you have written permission, contact references
- If reference-checking is delayed due to confidentiality, then it should be done after the on-site interview

A Few Notes on Sound Files

- Do not listen to sound files before the first interview – search committees can be swayed by a cantor’s sound or presentation such that the committee then fails to interview critically
- A cantor on the bimah conveys liturgical meaning with more than voice: Presence, *Kavannah* (religious focus or intention), *Ahavat Elohim* (love of God), and chemistry cannot be conveyed electronically
- The ACC office does not store or send recordings; candidates are instructed to send their MP3 files directly to congregations, at the request of the chair of the search committee
- Be sure to ask candidates when their sound files were recorded
- Please note: it is not possible to showcase the total variety of a cantor’s liturgical and musical styles in a few MP3 files

The First On-Site Interview

- Show the candidate around the synagogue
- Inform the incumbent cantor of the visit, and let the candidate meet with the cantor
- Schedule meetings with the search committee
- Arrange for a private meeting with the senior rabbi and other members of the professional team (it is crucial to lay the groundwork for the foundation of healthy partnerships even in this initial stage)
- First on-site interview typically includes an audition, and perhaps a “pretend” service, as well as some teaching and further interviewing



- During a cantor's on-site visit, s/he should **not** be asked to participate in a Shabbat or Festival service
- Plan the visit carefully, adding personal touches like housing the cantor in a hotel instead of someone's home, placing snacks in the hotel room, meeting the cantor at the airport, and building some down-time into the schedule
- When initiating that all-important discussion of worship style, be clear about how you define "congregational participation" (Your committee should have had a chance to work this through, as that phrase can mean many different things to different people)
- Ask each interviewee some version of this question: Is there anything in your record that would give a congregational search committee pause when considering your candidacy?
- As with any interview, the asking and answering of questions – and the manner in which the committee handles a candidate's response – should be done in accordance with national and local law, as well as with Temple policy
- Remember that the candidate is also interviewing you

The Audition and/or "Pretend Service"

- Be sure to arrange for a competent accompanist; an unskilled instrumentalist will put the cantor at a disadvantage and will distort the audition/pretend service
- Provide all candidates with the accompanist's contact information (including phone number), so that conversations may take place and sheet music can be exchanged
- Schedule ample, pre-arranged rehearsal time with the accompanist
- Provide water
- **Please note the JCPC policies** regarding who may attend the audition/"pretend service": only members of the search committee, the synagogue professional team, and perhaps key members of the Board of Trustees
- If this is an audition and not a "pretend service," ask the candidate to prepare something from the High Holy Days, Shabbat, lifecycles, children's services, etc. – but do not ask for too many specific composers
- Remember: Kol Nidrei is not an audition piece – do not ask for it



- Don't script the entire audition; allow the cantor to demonstrate what is meaningful to her/him; what the cantor chooses will teach you about her/him
- If this is a "pretend service," allow time for the cantor to meet with the rabbi(s) beforehand to go over service details
 - Note: the service should have already been planned – more or less – before the cantor arrives in town
- Don't ask the cantor to chant Torah without advance preparation
- If you want the cantor to teach, tell her/him in advance what age group, the topic, and for how many people

After the On-Site Visit

- The Search Committee should meet immediately after the in-person visit to discuss the candidate
- Let the candidate know quickly whether you are interested in her/him
- Before narrowing the field, do your "due diligence" and with the candidate's permission, speak to references

Checking References

- The candidates should provide references, including three to five from her/his current synagogue or other position
- Be sure you have the cantor's written permission before calling anyone
- Ask the reference if s/he has time for you in that moment, or if you should schedule a call together
- Be candid in your conversation; if you sense hesitancy, ask for clarification
- Emphasize to the reference that everything is strictly confidential



- Prepare a short list of questions (for help with this, please see “Hiring Resources for Congregations” on the ACC website)
- If you notice someone you expect to see as a reference missing from the cantor’s list (current senior rabbi, temple president, etc.), ask the cantor why that person is not on her/his list
- Always speak to references, even if you have letters from them

Should You Visit the Cantor’s Current Synagogue?

Some search committees find a visit to a candidate’s current congregation to be helpful in their search process. These visits can be very helpful, with the following caveats:

- The cantor has decided to leave for some reason; if this reason goes to interpersonal issues, that may affect the interplay on the bimah sometimes with no fault of the cantor
- The type of service that the cantor is leading may be very different from your congregation’s preferred worship style – in fact, this may be part of what motivated the cantor to apply to your congregation
- Unless the cantor has let her/his congregation know that you are coming (meaning that the congregation is aware that their cantor is in placement), your visit must be held strictly confidential; let the cantor know that you are coming, but do not interact much with congregants
- These visits can be very costly and only a couple of members of your search committee could go, if the trips can be afforded at all



Final Interviews and Negotiations

Sometimes there is a second on-site interview, and/or your leading candidate is invited to visit with her/his spouse or family. Pay close attention to your search budget: it may be that it is more cost effective to bring a spouse to the first – and only – on-site visit. In any case, whether you are planning on one set of on-site visits or a second set as well, be sure to include and/or consider the following:

- There should be some kind of tour of the community
 - If there is a Jewish Day School in the community and the cantor has children, be sure to include the school in your tour
 - Set up something meaningful for the spouse to do with her/his time: send her/him out with a realtor, show her/him the JCC, feed her/him well
 - If possible, set up some job networking contacts for the cantor's spouse to meet while the cantor is busy interviewing, etc.
- After final interviews, the Search Committee should make its recommendations to the Board of Trustees
 - Appropriate people, e.g., the president or the financial vice-president, should begin negotiations and should send a letter of intent (via email is fine)
 - In preparing a contract, the "Guidelines for Cantorial-Congregational Relationships" document will be helpful to you; you can find the document on the ACC website
 - Keep the Director of Placement informed of your progress and intentions

The Cantorial Transition

- Establish a Transition Committee, separate from the search committee (a couple of members of the search committee should serve on the transition committee – but only a couple)
- Transitions are times of both sadness and celebration; don't be afraid to acknowledge both
- The way a congregation says goodbye to a cantor affects the way it welcomes the new cantor



- As the relationship with the incumbent cantor changes, it is important to maintain good communication and to cooperate on shared tasks for the good of the congregation
- Organize opportunities for farewells, both small and large: a lunch with the office staff, a lunch or dinner with the professional team, a congregational Shabbat service and dinner, etc.
- If this transition is particularly difficult for any reason, do not hesitate to contact the URJ transition and consulting rabbis: Rabbi Jan Offel (joffel@urj.org) and Rabbi David Fine (dfine@urj.org) - they are experts and can be very helpful to you

Welcoming the New Cantor

- Make announcements first to the congregation and then to the community (via press releases)
- Make sure that the cantor's office is clean and properly set up with a computer and other pertinent materials; an electronic keyboard or piano can be very helpful
- Keep the cantor abreast of scheduling, congregational matters, etc., from the time an offer is accepted until the cantor begins her/his new position with you
- Maintain regular phone/email communication between the cantor/rabbi/lay leadership from the time an offer is accepted through the beginning of the cantor's tenure with your congregation – and beyond
- Assist in coordinating the cantor's relocation
- Ask the cantor and her/his spouse for the information and assistance that they need
- Schedule a series of events throughout the summer and the first year during which the new cantor can be introduced and re-introduced to your congregation
- Arrange for an installation service