

Sing a rights-cleared song to the Lord

“Each report we receive at ONE LICENSE turns into a royalty payment,” says Brenna Cronin, “and those payments are someone’s livelihood.”

Interview by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue



Brenna C. Cronin, executive general manager of ONE LICENSE, a congregational music copyright clearinghouse (Source images: Getty & courtesy of Brenna C. Cronin)

In 2004, I was the music director at a congregation with eclectic taste in music. This was exciting—but when it came to navigating copyright compliance, also a bit overwhelming. So I was relieved that year when GIA Publications introduced ONE LICENSE, a one-stop service for churches and others to secure reprint permissions from several key publishers of congregational music. Since then ONE LICENSE has grown, adding many more songs, publishers, license types, and customers. In 2017,

ONE LICENSE was relaunched as a venture owned jointly by GIA and Oregon Catholic Press. It has since grown to serve more than 25,000 license holders, offering them access to more than 210,000 titles from more than 300 publishers large and small.

Brenna C. Cronin currently serves as executive general manager of ONE LICENSE and has been with the company since 2016. I spoke with her about what the service offers, the usage reports that license holders are required to submit, and why it matters.

Who should consider buying a license from ONE LICENSE?

ONE LICENSE offers copyright reprints of congregational music, primarily to Catholic and mainline Protestant communities. We price our service based on average weekly attendance, so licenses can fit churches, schools, and other organizations of any size. Our offerings lean more liturgical in nature, so our service is a good fit for churches that worship in that style.

By “liturgical” do you mean as opposed to praise-and-worship style?

Generally speaking, yes. Though several of our more recently added member publishers lean more praise-and-worship in their style, so our license holders have access to quite a variety.

What does a license provide?

With an annual reprint license, you have access to reprint permissions from the overwhelming majority of our catalog. Many of our member publishers also provide downloadable notation images to print in service bulletins or project on a screen. In addition to reprint licenses, we offer other licensing options—our podcast/streaming license and our practice-track license are very popular and help a sacred organization round out their coverage.

You also sell licenses for special events.

We do! While the vast majority of our license holders are churches with regular weekly services, our licenses apply to anywhere the church gathers. The type of license you purchase is based on the time period that you need it for—whether that’s an annual license, an event license for up to seven days, or a single-use license for 24 hours.

I imagine your shorter-term licenses get used for weddings, funerals, conferences, and the like. Any more surprising examples?

Right after we introduced the option of podcast/streaming rights in the context of a short-term license, a church in Texas experienced severe flooding following a hurricane and reached out to us to see how they could stay connected to their congregation. They physically couldn’t enter their building—it was in the flood zone—so they purchased a license to hold an online service for their community. Afterward the feed stayed live as parishioners called in to share what their immediate needs were. I watched the service and was incredibly moved.

Another example: the beatification service for Father Solanus Casey at Ford Field in Detroit. A group of music ministers was tasked with planning the service, so they created a new license profile with us and secured the permissions they needed for that specific event. It was for 40,000 attendees, so it definitely exceeded their regular church attendance numbers!

Wow! Yeah, I’ve never planned or led music for 40,000 people.

Where two or three or 40,000 are gathered, Steve!

Many churches draw all or most of their congregational music from one main book. If a church already owns a set of pew hymnals, does it need a license to reproduce that hymnal’s pages for ease of use?

That’s a great question and one we hear often. Reproducing music and text legally is the entire reason our service exists. When a church purchases hymnals, they of course have permission to sing directly from them—but not to photocopy or

reproduce them in any way.

So churches that want to reprint music and comply with copyright law should buy a license—but that’s not all. They also need to report to you what songs they use.

Yes, they do. It’s the only way we know what royalties to pay our composers, authors, and publishers!

Are all users expected to report? Not just a sample of users during certain time periods?

That is correct. All users are expected to report every title that they use, by way of our online system. If someone uses a work, a royalty is owed to the author of the work. Every single report we receive turns into a royalty payment, and those payments are the livelihood of the authors, composers, and publishers that we work with.

We know reporting can sound a bit overwhelming. That’s why we make the process easy.

So, a disclosure and a quick story: I myself am a small-time, self-published liturgical songwriter. I hear from people who say they’re using my songs, many of whom take care to note their copyright compliance via ONE LICENSE. So I was a little taken aback when my first royalty check was for \$3.75: a single reported song use in a six-month period. This made me wonder if some license holders don’t even *understand* their reporting responsibilities, much less comply with them.

I believe profoundly in the power of educating our customers, and your story is a great example of that. Copyright holders and artists are real, flesh-and-blood people who dedicate themselves to creating music for the church. To use a piece of music without reporting that use is no different than photocopying a play, videotaping a musical without copyright permissions, or photographing a painting: it’s not a legal

use. Our role is to make it easy to secure those permissions.

It does seem strange for someone to go out of their way to pay for a license, only to neglect the reporting that is so integral to that license's function. But I guess the only thing in shorter supply for a lot of church leaders than money is time.

And we know that. We ourselves are pastoral musicians, leaders in our churches, and we're pulled in lots of different directions.

Partly for this reason, we encourage our users to catch up on their reporting when they've fallen behind. Submitting Christmas songs on Valentine's Day? No problem. Does your profile page say you used music for Lent in the middle of June? It's all right. We understand that reporting can fall behind. What matters is that you catch up.

I will say that reporting titles in the specific week they were used can really help with future planning. You can quickly find a liturgical week from a prior year and duplicate it—less work!

Once a church reports using a song, what happens? Does the copyright holder get paid a flat rate? A percentage of something?

A percentage of the whole pie. The more a title is reported, the more of the pie it earns. Even if a title is only reported once among several million other reports, it will still earn something.

So if someone pays for a license but doesn't report their usage, the net effect is to send a tiny bit more money to the copyright holders of all the songs they *didn't* choose to use instead.

In theory, yes.

That could really motivate some people I know to keep up on their reporting. The only thing they feel more strongly about than the church music they love is the church music they don't care for.

Ha! Fair enough. This may be a good time to mention that we have checks and balances in place to know if someone is reporting something too many times.

Is that a problem that comes up? People claim to sing their friend's song ten times a week or something?

We trust our users, and if they're playing catch-up and reporting six weeks worth of music in one week, that's one thing. But if the data shows a song being reported 50 times during each week of the year, that would be a problem.

You mentioned educating your customers. I've noticed that you offer a lot of tutorials and other help.

We have everything from simple, short videos on specific topics to full-blown webinars that dive into deeper subjects. Our team also hosts a new user webinar in the first quarter of each year and a live question and answer session each month called Call & Response. Your readers are welcome to get in touch with us if they are interested in learning more about our webinars.

I believe that people want to do the right thing, and we supply the tools to make it easy to do that. We extend our help in any way that we can—virtual meetings, screen sharing, emails, our ticketing support system, and phone calls. We are here to help make the concept of copyright and licensing not so daunting.

In the early days of the COVID pandemic, you were quite nimble in adapting to churches' needs. As we first tried to avoid touching shared items such as pew hymnals and then abruptly switched to off-site, virtual worship, you offered free licenses to give folks one less thing to worry about. That's also when you launched your stand-alone podcast/streaming license. Tell me about those projects and those decisions.

The week the lockdown began in Chicago, we had just announced that we were going to offer six weeks of free licensing to new users. Everything was changing and uncertain; churches didn't know whether they'd be able to gather for Easter. The free weeks allowed them to get through Easter and then reevaluate their licensing needs. We had no idea how long we'd be worshiping virtually!

The limited podcast/streaming license—separate from any reprint license for notation—was something we had talked about for a long time, but the pandemic made it pressing. Churches were downsizing staff members, or at least limiting who was in the sanctuary for a virtual service, so this new license allowed them to stream the service online without paying for reprints they weren't making. This worked well for churches that sent hymnals home with their people or that lacked the capacity to create a bulletin.

So did you end up accelerating the license rollout to meet people's pandemic needs?

Without a doubt. I remember a staff conversation about this license years ago. We thought we'd get to it eventually. But when we realized how fast the pandemic was moving, we knew we needed to adapt to our customers' needs. The pace was unprecedented—launching a new license type involves things like new contracts and conversations with our member publishers, hours and hours of website development, new webinars and tutorials, training our staff, and more—but we came together as a team and launched it on April 13, 2020, exactly one month after lockdown.

That sounds like a ton of work for a pretty small team.

It's that "one day" mindset that a lot of churches came to us with in those early days. "One day we'll get Wi-Fi." "One day we'll post our services online." "One day we'll create a social media presence for our church." "One day" very quickly became today.

For sure. "One day we'll learn how to use Zoom effectively for meetings."

I'm not sure any of us slept that first month! The pandemic really amplified the existing need for accessibility in worship. I'm really proud of our churches for seeing what their communities needed and meeting them there, and I'm proud of our member publishers for trusting us with their works.

What's your favorite part of your job?

My calling lies squarely at the intersection of the arts, hospitality, and social justice—and I get to wear each of those hats every day. I'm incredibly passionate about what I do.