

CHURCH COPYRIGHT ISSUES

Your church needs to honor copyrights on all intellectual property, including, but not limited to, books, magazines, photographs, music, drama, and audio-visual. A copyright holder has exclusive use of the property except for certain, very limited uses. Each copyright lasts for a specific period of years before it comes into the public domain.

CHURCH LAW

The largest risk for churches is copying music, photographs, and large sections from Bibles other than the KJV (the only version in the public domain). Music copyright libraries like CCLI are great investments for churches, allowing them to use projected words for worship services (approximately 2,000 selections).

Via a legal doctrine called “work for hire,” churches own the copyright to all works created by their employees or anyone for

whom the church commissions a particular work. This becomes a major issue with worship leaders who write choruses and pastors who write books or manuals in the field in which they are employed by the church. These copyrights and any royalties that might flow from them are assets of the church and cannot be given to the creator without jeopardizing the 501(c)(3) status of the corporation.

Churches should have an intellectual property rights policy to deal with these issues before they arise.

This is a very important and often misunderstood and misused area of the law. Copyright infringement and private benefit or personal inurement from copyrighted assets can lead to a church’s demise either by large judgments rendered against the church, or by the loss of the 501(c)(3) status.

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