

BEST PRACTICES FOR CHURCH MEMBERS SERVING AS STAFF

Jean grew up in a large Methodist church in Ohio—confirmed there, active as a young adult, and married there. To accept a part-time job at the church, and later to go full time as the youth director, felt like a natural fit. “But to be on that side of the fence, attending staff meetings, was different,” she said. “I was seeing the magic behind the scenes that I didn’t know about. It was all about numbers. I still needed to be filled spiritually, to learn and to grow, and all of a sudden it was a business.”

During eight years on staff, she watched things get worse under a new senior pastor and neglected her own spiritual life while running a large, busy youth group. “I watched as other staff members walked out the door,” she said. “We were trapped in a toxic environment.” The birth of her third child gave her a convenient reason to leave.

Ultimately, Jean’s story has a happy ending. After a two-year break from her church employment, a change in senior leadership improved morale. When the new pastor offered her a different full-time job, she accepted. “I still struggle with the balance of worship for myself,” she said. “You’ve got to be intentional about your own spiritual growth.” After everything she’s been through, she would still encourage a friend to apply for a church job, “but you have to be strong emotionally to separate the business side from the spiritual, religious side. I don’t care who you are, they don’t blend well.”

Understanding and Avoiding Potential Problems

Having done consulting in both church and corporate settings, Susan Beaumont¹ has found that corporate employees are generally happier than church workers. The difference, she thinks, is that corporations tend to have very clear policies and require accountability from employees. Beaumont lists the following potential problems to watch out for:

- Members want to join the staff to get inside information or have a closer connection to the pastor.
- Pastors often supervise on either extreme of the spectrum: little to no supervision, or micro-managing.
- There’s no training support for pastors regarding effective supervision techniques.
- Job descriptions are unclear, which sets up conflict between the expectations of the pastor as a supervisor and the member-employee who was not well-informed of her or his job duties.
- Regular employee evaluations are either non-existent or not helpful.

Each of these can be remedied by taking the time to be clear about expectations, having review parameters in place, and following through on corrective actions. George Bullard,² a veteran church consultant, takes this one step further, recommending that



WHEN FIRING CHURCH EMPLOYEES, PASTOR TED OFTEN USED THE “PASS THE BUCK” TECHNIQUE.

churches and member-employees work out a covenant agreement (“not a contract”) for one to three years that spells out goals, roles, and responsibilities. That makes it clear to both sides that the job is not a permanent entitlement and leaves room to renew it if the arrangement is working well. And this covenant works both ways. The senior pastor does have a legitimate role, or even a responsibility, for the spiritual development of the staff. Whether they are members of that church, a different church, or no church, Bullard argues that pastors “should focus on the ministry of God and relationships of people to God, to one another, to the community.”

And if an employee obviously isn’t working out? While there will be difficult decisions to make, as Bullard argues, you can provide discipline or even let someone go in a way that is redemptive. For example, if a person has substance abuse or emotional problems, “a secular business would just fire them. A church has a responsibility to help them connect with systems that will redeem them.”

Pastors Not Called to Management

Of the potential problems listed above, poor management skills from the pastor can be the biggest issue for member-employees who see the pastor both as a spiritual guide and as a boss. This issue is highlighted by Beaumont, who points out that “people don’t feel called into ministry to do supervision.” Furthermore, Bullard argues that the “majority of senior pastors don’t have an arena where they learned management skills.” This can cause conflict to develop in the church office, or the pastor may hand off management responsibilities to businesspeople who make up the church’s governing board. The former causes the souring of the spiritual relationship between the pastor and the member-employee, whereas the latter can lead to those businesspeople pressuring the pastor “to allow business principles to overwhelm what should be a caring, Christ-like relationship.”

Ultimately, Beaumont argues that pastors need a covenant relationship with their congregation and an employment relationship with their staff. Part of that employment relationship requires pastors to understand and employ effective supervisory techniques. If staff members are reporting dissatisfaction with how the pastor is providing management (either too much or too little), the personnel committee and

church governing board should work together to locate training options for the pastor so that his supervisory skills may improve.

Making the Decision

Churches, with guidance from the pastor, need to decide whether or not they should hire members to staff positions. Some churches refuse to hire members altogether in order to avoid situations like what Jean experienced. Of course, as Beaumont points out, there are also benefits to hiring members, particularly for program or mission positions, because those members feel strongly connected to the mission.

No matter the position a person holds, if churches decide to allow members to work as staff, potential member-employees need a clear understanding that their relationship to the congregation will change from covenantal to employment. Additionally, for anyone on a church staff, whether member or not, Bullard reminds us that “the principal relationship is one of employment, not pastoral care.”

Balancing Member and Employee Roles

A pastor or a church committee often want to hire someone from the congregation whom they already know, but clear guidelines are necessary to make the situation work well. Of course, many relationships between a church and its member-employees work smoothly.

Patti, who joined her Presbyterian church in Kentucky more than twenty-five years ago, accepted a position as the church’s administrative assistant in 2002 and is still on the job. The pastor “encouraged me to set boundaries for myself,” Patti said. Patti’s biggest temptation is to jump in and do a job herself rather than delegating, but that is a tension of her own making. She said her role as a worshiper on Sunday morning is not affected, and that even if she has to talk shop with congregants, she doesn’t mind. Patti’s pastor recalled, “I remember saying to our personnel chair that Patti was probably the only church member we should consider. So the short answer is: it can work if it’s the right person.”

1. All quotes from Susan Beaumont are from an interview with David Lewellen.

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