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## **Should You Hire a Church Member? Some warnings and advice about filling church jobs from within**

by Steve Marr

Whether to hire a member of your congregation or someone from outside to work in the church office is a dilemma for any pastor or board. But it doesn't have to be a snare, says Bill Hossler, former pastor of the 800-member Colonial Woods Missionary Church in Port Huron, Michigan, and now vice president of the Missionary Church denomination. "As long as you hire based on sound principles, the outcome should be favorable," Hossler says.

### ***The Advantage of Hiring Church Members***

Experience has taught Hossler that church members can work out better in the office than non-church members. "What I've found is that members have a vested interest in the church, are more available, and are more known to the church," he says. In other words, selecting a church member increases your chances of hiring a known commodity.

Carl Baker, a pastor at Flagstaff (Arizona) Church of the Nazarene, agrees. "The church members we've hired tend to have a longer tenure. They see the position as a calling rather than just a job," he says. He warns that it would be wise to consider the prospective employee's history with the church before hiring, however. "If someone has had difficulty with other members, you're probably better off not hiring him or her," he says. "Not everyone will agree with an inside hire."

### ***Some Cautions***

The key to success in hiring from within is establishing upfront a clear understanding of staff expectations, Hossler says. For example, if any confidences are broken, that is grounds for dismissal. "Also, I tell prospective staff members that they will see all the warts that Christians have," he says. "If they can't accept that, they should not accept a church position."

Hiring a member of your congregation can alleviate many potential problems in the hiring process, especially if you already know the person and have insight into his or her gifts, demeanor, spiritual maturity, and ability to maintain confidences and avoid gossip. On the other hand, if you hire someone for the wrong reasons and it later becomes apparent that he or she has insufficient job skills, the entire congregation

could become embroiled in the situation. A pastor in the upper Midwest learned a hard lesson about choosing a person based on needs rather than qualifications when he hired a church member to work in the office. The woman was not qualified for the position. She struggled with the computer and was overwhelmed by the workflow. She was often late, and when she missed work she expected to be excused because she had problems at home.

When the pastor confronted the woman about her performance, she complained to others in the church that she was being unfairly treated. When she was fired, she caused a major stir. The pastor felt constrained by propriety from sharing his perspective on the situation.

In another case, a large church hired a music minister from among its members. The man had definite ideas about altering the church's worship style and thought he had been given a free hand to make changes as he saw fit. When other members began to complain about song selection, the choice of soloists, and other elements of the new worship style, the music minister took the criticism personally.

The senior pastor tried to make peace, but before long, the church split into factions for and against the new worship leader. Eventually 25 percent of the congregation left the church in protest. When the music minister was subsequently discharged, more members left. Then, the senior pastor himself resigned. All this turmoil might have been avoided if, during the interview process, the pastor had clearly established his expectations and the parameters of the position. Had the music minister fully understood the pastor's vision, he might not have accepted the job.

### ***A Well-Defined Hiring Process***

Hiring a church member involves some risk, but the difficulties can be minimized if church leaders establish an orderly hiring process. Some tips on doing that:

**1. Start with a clear job description.** "The key is to hire only members who are well qualified," says Rex Frieze of Frieze Church Consulting in Orlando, Florida. "To do this you must have written job descriptions and clear expectations. I have seen many churches end up in a mess when members are hired. They are nice people, but if they're not qualified, they just can't do the job."

Sadly, most churches have either vague job descriptions or none at all. To avoid problems and pitfalls, write a complete description of the duties, responsibilities, and expectations for each position. Begin by reviewing the office workflow for a month, making notes as you go. Write a first draft of job descriptions, then discuss each

with other staff members, church board members, and members of the congregation whose management experience might be helpful. Make necessary alterations.

**2. Tap the entire market.** Hiring only church members may leave you with little room to maneuver if no church member fits the needs of the position. So advertise the opening inside and outside the church, then, consider all interested applicants. When you advertise, make it clear that the position is open to all qualified applicants. Some members might believe that they should be the only ones considered, so nip that conflict in the bud by clearly announcing your intentions up front. Nobody likes surprises.

That's something Bill Wormsley, who retired after serving 25 years as pastor of Christ Community Church in Tucson, Arizona, practiced for years. "When openings occurred, we made it clear that we would be advertising outside the church," he says. "At times, we mounted a national search. If we then chose to hire a member of the congregation, we knew he or she was the best qualified."

In addition, Christ Community would not hire a member who could not be fired, if necessary. "The elder board would always ask me, 'If it doesn't work out, can we fire this person?'" Wormsley says. "If the person was too entrenched, we wouldn't hire him. The advantage of hiring members is that they already know the doctrines, mission, and vision of the church, but you need to be careful not to reduce your standards in order to hire a church member."

**3. Conduct a professional interview.** A well-written job description will clearly list the required skills and aptitudes. Be realistic, considering the salary, hours, and other demands, but establish a minimum standard of qualifications in advance, and stick with it. No matter how rushed you feel to fill the position, do not hire someone who fails to meet your minimum requirements.

When interviewing, be honest and forthright with each candidate. Don't string anyone along. It's better to tell someone where his or her qualifications fall short than to raise expectations—even by silence—only to douse them later. If you know right away that someone doesn't fit, be considerate enough to say so.

Explain the job requirements and any additional strengths that you prefer. Ask questions about the candidate's experience and skills in each key area of responsibility, and discuss any areas where he or she

falls short. Be careful not to make any commitments at this point.

At the end of the interview, offer the candidate the opportunity to contribute additional information. This will eliminate the possibility that applicants will leave the interview feeling like they didn't have a chance to fully express themselves. Thank candidates for showing interest in the job, and tell them you will let them know about your decision. *Keep that commitment with every applicant, especially those you choose not to hire.*

**4. Add another step for church applicants.** Before you hire a member of your congregation, consider these four keys to a wise and fair decision:

- Don't allow personal feelings to influence your decision. Follow the objective standards developed earlier in the hiring process. Dr. James Dobson warns that our feelings will fool us every time—and he's right.

- Don't allow the opinions of other members to dictate your choice. Your responsibility is to lead, not to make everyone agree with you.

- Make your decision based on the applicant's qualifications rather than need. If you don't do that, you could block God's plan for meeting that person's financial need.

- Decide whether the person is capable of handling confidential information and can withstand the pressure of staff responsibilities. Some church members are unable to separate issues and maintain discretion.

Should you hire church members? By all means, if you have developed and followed a solid evaluation and selection process that includes paying attention to a clearly written job description, advertising the opening inside and outside of the church, interviewing qualified applicants in a professional manner, and selecting only those persons who are qualified to do the job the way it should be done.

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