

Who Advocates For Our Church's Ministry Leaders?

by Robert D. Dale, Ph.D.

I've served on both church and non-profit board personnel committees. As jobs go, personnel committees are generally blessed curses. It's a blessing to advocate for ministry leaders and for our church's future; it can be a curse to represent varied constituent's points of view to be a great steward of tight budgets.

I've wondered privately if church personnel policies would be more equitable and progressive if every Christian served as pastor for a week or so, as church staff minister for a month or so, as deacon or board chair for a year or so, and personnel committee or staff relations committee chair for a couple of years. Walking a mile in the other person's shoes expands our perspective dramatically, doesn't it? Those hidden expectations are ticking time bombs, aren't they?

I am certain of four things related to church personnel work. (1) We all bring our histories, experience, and biases to the personnel committee table. As a result, lots of personnel policies and procedures are made in the aftermath of bad situations. Too often, we create policy that's against something rather than for something. (2) Churches should never abuse their employees. Ministers should never abuse their congregations. When anyone takes advantage of anyone else, our witness is weakened. (3) Most states are "at will" states, meaning employment can be terminated without giving cause. That doesn't mean, though, that churches should set out to be unfair, arbitrary or vindictive. (4) Churches should be the best employers in the world.

Now, let's explore how churches and ministers can develop personnel policies that are food for the kingdom of God. What are some questions we need to ask in order to craft progressive personnel practices?

Theological Framing

The Bible is full of sacred covenants – those promises made between persons. In our churches, employment relationships are sacred covenants or promises between the employers and the employees. As is always the case with covenants, the clearer, more specific, and fairer the terms of agreement, the better. To make church personnel policies and procedures clear, specific, trusting, and fair, requires good-hearted Christians who will advocate for staff as well as the congregation. In congregational ruled churches, ultimate responsibility for supervision, evaluation, and discipline of employees lies with the congregation or its designees.

Inquiring Minds

What are some of the personnel questions churches are focusing on today? Let me spotlight five basic personnel covenants in which churches can work progressively and redemptively to clarify expectations and to minimize misunderstandings; time, money, security, support, and growth. And, let me raise some basic questions related to each issue.

Time: Covenant Questions

- When is the Sabbath for ministers?
- What constitutes work hours and a workweek for ministers?
- Does vacation expand with tenure of service?
- How many days away for ministry in other settings are granted?
- What holidays does the church observe?
- Are jury duty, military service, medical emergencies, and family funerals considered excusable absences?
- Are wellness and health maintenance encouraged?

Money: Covenant Question

- Are credit checks and police record checks a condition for employment?
- Is our compensation fair?
- Can employees advance?
- What pay schedule is used?
- Is income from local services allowed?

Security: Covenant Questions

- Are professional expenses covered?
- Is health insurance provided?
- Is a retirement plan included?
- Is disability coverage considered?
- Is there a grievance process?
- Are termination procedures clearly defined?
- Are liabilities taken into account?
- Is sexual harassment defined?

Support: Covenant Questions

- Is there an evaluation process for employees?
- Is office assistance provided?
- Are office equipment, electronic communication, and software the property of the church?
- Is there an expectation about mode of dress?

Growth: Covenant Questions

- Is continuing education provided for and expected?
- Is protected time guarded?
- Are staff planning resources provided?
- Are sabbatic or study leaves provided?

Making Promises, Keeping Promises

Making promises in good faith requires good faith to keep them too. When we love Christ's kingdom and when we love our church, we can adopt the long view and create sacred ministry covenants that can be kept well. We can transcend our smaller worlds and viewpoints for the sake of the Gospel. Issues of time, money,

security, support, and growth challenge our best beliefs and behaviors. Covenants call for faithfulness from all parties, beginning with you and me. We have promises to make and promises to keep.

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