

When to Hire Church Staff

The “right timing” is as key to hiring staff as marinating is to a cooking, and the bugle’s “Call to the Post” is to the start of the Kentucky Derby. The excitement of hiring, or “finally” hiring, should not overshadow the thoughtfulness needed to ensure it is done correctly. The success of the new staffer can depend upon it.

The list below is not exhaustive, but reflects points I recount sharing regularly over the past few years. If you are considering a hire allow your imagination to wonder about each, or the consequences of not carefully considering each. Pass up the temptation to skip quickly over the points that may seem a given; think about the implications of each.

The example illustrated is one of hiring a student minister, but in many ways the principles are the same regardless of the potential hire.

1. Hire when the church leadership (senior pastor, pastors, elders, personnel management team, whoever) have a vision for the central ministry goal – i.e. discipling students. Is the desire to hire based on an “it’s just our next step” anticipation of the congregation, a compulsion, or a genuine conviction and calling?

If the leadership is not in agreement with the hire, how is the church expected to be, or expected to support the leadership’s actions? If the person who will give oversight [“supervise” for those preferring management over leadership] to the new staffer is not enthused by the vision for the ministry how are they to adequately oversee it? It may be the new hire’s passion and responsibility that will run the ministry, but they cannot – nor will or should they – do it alone.

If the senior pastor’s attitude is passé perhaps it is not the right time to hire. Sooner or later the staffer will need the backing of the senior pastor and if they did not wholeheartedly support the hire they will not be able to sufficiently give the needed support.

2. Hire when a more than adequate percent of the congregation is in agreement with the time to hire. Is the overall sentiment that the church family has true ownership of the need to hire?

You may feel that the congregation should just trust the leadership with such decisions. Yet it is crucial for the people to feel the need for and have a vision of what the new staff can accomplish. Has an adequate “shared vision” been embraced? This is not a call for a vision with specific promises – such can lead to unfulfilled expectations and thus a disappointment with and perceived failure of the new hire. But has the vision been cast for the why of the hire?

Depending on your context a pulse check with the congregation can seem unnecessary. Depending on your ego suggesting its need can even seem a bit offensive. Allow the cause of hiring staff to be an instance where the church family is engaged in collective discernment and exercises unity. This is not to advocate for voting; it is an advocate for leadership knowing the people within its care. Would the church family say “their church” is looking to hire, or “we” are looking to hire? Would they say “our church leadership” is about to hire, or “we” are about to hire? The difference is huge.

3. Hire when the climate of the church has the potential to reach the community. Is the drive to hire based on a desire “to do ministry better” with “our” people or to have ministry reach more people?

It is easy to hire staff with excitement and ambitions of how much better ministry will be ... to those currently present. And it is easy for the new staffer to be so consumed with this responsibility that they fail to dedicate proper thought, energy and aim at the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. Is the heart behind the desire to hire focused inward, outward or a healthy balance of both?

Those seeking student pastor positions are typically very energetic and passionate about reaching the world – the whole world. Will your church be ready for such? Are the expectations regarding the type of ministry you are seeking clear? Hiring the right person will mean knowing the type of ministry sought.

Are you hiring to maintain status quo, satisfy the cultural expectation to have a student minister, meet the demands of parents – or are you looking to hire in order to get to the next place of faithfulness to Christ? Know why. The new hire will certainly need to know why. And the success of everything could depend on your ability to articulate your “why” to your candidates – and see how they respond to it.

4. Hire when all the clean-up work from previous hires has been done. Ready for a new day? Ready to apply what you learned previously, but to turn loose of the quirks, hang ups, failures, misfortunes and outlandish successes of the previous hire? Ready to embrace a new person in a new day for a new ministry?

The new person will not be the old one. They will be worse at some things and better at others. The point is to stop the comparison game. Conversations that compare staff to their predecessor are often risky ventures that put the new hire in a negative context. They may intend to compliment the new hire but too often they hang the new hire in a culture of negativism, if nothing else by spotlighting the inherited challenges they must overcome. Are you ready to let the strengths of the new hire shine through? Let them be themselves.

If there is reconciliation work needed with the old staffer get it done before the hire of the new. If a work of reconciliation is needed between students or families and the church due to the effects of an old hire, get it done before the hire of a new. Let healing flow if and where it is needed. Perhaps churches sometimes go seasons without staff because they fail to honorably disconnect with previous staff.

Allow the new staffer to have a fresh start in ministry AND allow your ministry a fresh start. Will the new staff person have a thunderously bright beginning going after the objectives of the ministry, or will they spend the first year proving they are not like the old guy and cleaning up the broken attitudes and expectations of a ministry left in shambles? Set them up for success by making sure they start with a clean slate.

5. Hire when the existing team needs a staff leader in order to be increasingly effective. Is the expectation of the new hire that they will come in and assume the roles of a currently-ministering-but-soon-to-exit-team, or is the expectation they will facilitate the efforts of an existing team?

A staffer should not be hired to do ministry alone. They should be hired to facilitate and refine an existing ministry to greater effectiveness. When a student minister is hired they should not replace those currently engaged in the ministry. They should become a ring leader and resource, not a

replacement. Is the hire about relieving those currently using their abilities to serve Christ, or about refining the church's total effort in being obedient to Christ's call?

Ministry, and especially student ministry, is team ministry. The right person to hire as your student pastor will be a team leader and the right time to hire them will be when a team, even if a small team, of dedicated adults can be found to surround and partner with the student pastor. Are you looking for a Lone Ranger-Superman hybrid, or a coach for an existing team? Youth pastors who are Lone Rangers typically have a group of 20 or so students and youth pastors who are team leaders will build teams consisting of multiple adults who each reach and retain 7 to 15 students.

6. Hire when the gender issue has been settled. Are you looking for a male? Female? Either? The point here is to decide and for all to know the decision – and its reasoning.

There are pros and cons of hiring either. [Yes, truth is not always politically correct.] The important thing is to let this decision be a part of the discernment conversations so that no one is surprised during the search process. And so the search team nor a candidate's time and energy are wasted. What is your church's answer to this unique question that can peer so deep into your soul?

Regardless, consider how you can help partner them with someone of the opposite gender. How can you elevate someone of the opposite gender than that of your hire within the ministry in a significant way to run along side the new staffer? It will not be appropriate for the hire to minister to students of the opposite gender in the same ways as those of their own gender. (If you have a candidate that disagrees with this statement, consider their naive.)

The new hire will need a partnership with someone of the opposite gender; if possible help them find this someone. Else they may fall prey to feeling they should minister to those of the opposite gender with equality and in doing so fall prey to things in which you just do not want to consider. How can you help ministry be apt to both genders with equality?

7. Hire when your budget says you can. Balance stepping out in faith with good common sense and with dedication to appropriately fulfill the needs of the new hire and their family. Can you afford a student minister? Can you afford to adequately compensate a student minister?

Most churches have staff compensation as 45-55% of their overall budget, depending on their missions support and mortgage demands. For years the general thought has been that it is reasonable to have a pastor, or full time staffer, for every 100 people. Given the context of your church can you afford this financial commitment while being fair to existing staff and commitments? Some would ask, and perhaps with great legitimacy, can you afford not to?

When setting compensation it can be helpful to recall an ole adage. You get what you pay for. Pay part-time? Anticipate a very limited pool of candidates with little to no experience. And expect partial effectiveness. Resist the common temptation to dishonor God's work and His servant by hoping for a full time effectiveness at a part time pay. Is it better to start part-time or to save up for a season and then hire full time? You decide, but remember – you get what you pay for.

The days of student ministers being a recent graduate looking for a job for 2 years so they can then become a "real" pastor have ended. This era is no more. Student pastors are now commonly in their 30s

and 40s and may even have “students” of their own at home. Is your church ready to acknowledge the legitimacy of the student pastor and compensate him or her accordingly?

8. Hire when God’s specific calling has come through as a result of prayer. This intentionally mentioned last because it is the most important. Until lots of people have prayed – do not hire. Do you have confidence that it “seems good” to the Holy Spirit and to the church leadership that you have the right time and the right person? If so go for it! If not keep praying, anticipating and waiting for God’s unique best.

Truth is for most churches early summertime is the best time to hire a student pastor. They have all summer to build leadership teams and prepare for the new school year kick off, or “first impression night” as I have come to understand it. For many students the onset of the new school year is a recalibration of their routines and the time they are likely to establish a rhythm for the year. Programs that try and start at other times often have difficulty. Yet as much as the Sunday before school starts back is a great time to have a student pastor who is ready to go in place, the right time to hire is when God has answered the earnest prayers of your church and provided you a student pastor.

Wrong hires are about the worse mistake that can be made. They create dissension in the church, bring havoc to the staffer’s family and life, cause the church leadership to lose creditability and are an overall bad witness to the non-churched community. Better no one doing the job than the wrong one doing the job. Until God send you the right person, keep looking. Yet when God says, “Hire” do not miss your opportunity to be faithful!

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Randy Cobb is the founder of New Day Leadership and has consulted for-profit and not-for-profit organizations since 2006. He holds a doctorate of strategic leadership from Regent University and has 19 years experience in church ministry. Randy is currently the Associate Pastor of Student and Family Ministry at Grace Fellowship Church, Kinston, NC and can be contacted through randy@newdayleadership.com.