



Becoming Staff

by Dan Hotchkiss, Senior Consultant, Alban Consulting

“Is it wise to hire a member?”

When hiring staff, congregation leaders often ask this question. Hiring members has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that members are apt to be familiar with the congregation, committed to its mission, and used to working hard without pay. The drawbacks are that a former lay leader may have difficulty accepting supervision, and a minister or board that tries to fire a member may wind up in hot soup with the member’s friends and family.

Looking at the disadvantages, some congregations resolve “never again” to hire a member for a staff role. This is a workable policy, especially in large metropolitan areas, but in other settings, it can be difficult to maintain. The best-qualified candidate, especially for a part-time job, sometimes is a member. And for “program” positions—director of religious education, director of music, membership development director—there are advantages to hiring someone in sympathy with the unique style, theology, and emphasis of the hiring congregation. Often the pool of such persons comprises mostly members.

High on any congregation’s list of goals should be a unified, effective staff. All staff members need to honor this leadership of the head of staff. It should go without saying, but unfortunately doesn’t, that the head of staff, like any leader, must also be loyal to those he or she leads. A minister or administrator who plays favorites among staff or speaks of them with scorn is asking for trouble. The first obligation of the head of staff is to make sure staff members have what they need to do their jobs effectively: resources, political support, and a sense of direction.

Belonging to the staff team is very different from being a lay leader. Luckily, by orienting applicants and lay leaders in advance to the potential difficulties members face when they become staff, it is possible to head off some of the worst problems. On the next page is a list of useful cautions to share with member-applicants.

Keep in mind that congregation members who join the paid staff can expect important changes in their relationship to the church, so it may be helpful to share the document on the reverse side of this page with member-applicants.

When a member joins the staff

by Dan Hotchkiss, Senior Consultant, The Alban Institute

As a congregation member thinking about joining the paid staff, please consider the following expectations. If you have doubts or questions, please raise these at your interview.

A staff member is both a leader and an employee. Unlike a committee chair or board member, a paid staff member works for the congregation and must follow established policies and accept supervision. Staff members should not also hold lay leadership positions in the congregation. Your spouse, if he or she belongs to this congregation, needs to avoid voting on matters that affect you personally. You will advocate for your program area as part of the congregation's larger mission, not necessarily for what you personally prefer.

A staff member belongs to the staff team. Especially in small congregations, this may seem a little odd. Doesn't the sexton work for the Building Committee, and the musicians for the choir? Every staff member has a natural constituency, but must support unity within the staff as well. No one should accept a paid job who does not expect to balance loyalty to one's "department" with a positive relationship to the whole staff team.

A staff member may need to find another pastor. Your pastor is still your pastor for weddings, funerals, and other public

functions. For the more private, pastoral aspects of ministry there are some limits. The minister's first role is to lead the team. This means articulating the mission and goals of the congregation to you, seeing that you have the support you need to do your job, and giving you frank feedback about how you are doing. These roles may not be compatible with intense pastoral care or counseling, in which case you may have to look elsewhere for the ministry you need.

A staff member may need to find a new peer group. Your enjoyment of your peer group in the church may be part of what moved you to apply for a staff job. For a time, the satisfactions of group membership continue, but eventually you will be more a leader than a peer. As a staff member, you cannot be casually available to anyone who wants to chat. In time, your relationship with fellow members will shift, and you will find that to feel truly relaxed and "off work" you need to find friends who are not part of your congregation.

As a member of the congregation, you bring unique experience, knowledge, and enthusiasm to the paid staff. If you say "yes" to a staff position, you will join thousands of others who have moved from lay membership to professional service. Best wishes!

You can reach Dan Hotchkiss about consultation or leadership coaching at dan@alban.org. His published writings are listed at www.danhotchkiss.com/publications.