

Basic Personnel Policies and Practices for the Church

Church leaders often put off addressing basic administrative issues. One reason is that it costs time we would rather spend on something else. Another reason is a false spirituality that dismisses such matters with a quick, “God will take care of our needs,” as if there is some contradiction between good management and trusting in the Lord.

The lack of attention to administrative matters often shows itself in the church’s personnel policies and practices. Neglecting this is unwise. It takes a lot of time and effort to find good ministerial and support staff. There is a strong correlation between tenure and church health, especially where the senior pastor is concerned. Yet many churches unintentionally contribute to staff turnover through sloppy or nonexistent personnel policies. This increases the costs of staffing and, more importantly, works against church health.

Here are ten basic personnel policies and practices that will contribute to staff retention and healthier churches.

1. *Thorough background and reference checking in the hiring process.* Do not assume that someone is trustworthy because they are in ministry or have worked at a church. Do a full criminal, credit, and reference check on each potential new hire even if you have known the person for a long time. Ask the candidate’s listed references for additional references, and then ask those references for additional references. Going three-deep in your reference check allows you to hear from several people who know the candidate but who were not chosen by the candidate. Also, verify each material statement of fact a person makes on their resume (places and times of previous employment, educational degrees earned beyond high school, etc.). Due diligence up front will save you from some nasty surprises later.

2. *Up-to-date job descriptions.* You need this both in the hiring process and for ongoing human resources management. Staff members deserve to know what is expected of them. Supervisors and personnel committees need to know what a staff member is accountable for and how to evaluate them. This all begins with a clear and timely job description.

3. *Clear lines of supervision.* You need an organizational structure that defines who reports to whom. Vague lines of accountability create organizational chaos and promote mediocre job performance.

4. *Regular evaluation and feedback.* Each staff member deserves periodic feedback and performance evaluation from their supervisor or a designated church body (like a personnel committee). Best practices call for some kind of performance planning conversation with the supervisor at least quarterly and a formal, written evaluation at least annually. Remember, good supervision *is* a ministry. It helps staff members succeed and aligns their work with the church’s goals.

5. *Compensation that rewards performance.* I realize that churches do not always have the ability to give raises. But raises should be a budgeting priority, not an afterthought, and should be tied to performance evaluation. Healthy churches reward employees who strengthen the church.

6. *Accountable reimbursement plan.* Churches should define what business expenses they will reimburse and the procedure for securing reimbursement. The plan should meet IRS requirements so there is no tax liability. (See <https://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc514>.)

7. *Specified weekly days off, holidays, and annual vacation time.* Vacation time should increase with years of tenure at defined points (e.g., after each five years of continuous service). It is also a good idea to define how sick days are accrued and administered.

8. *Professional development leave (i.e., sabbaticals) for pastoral/ministerial staff.* At specified points in the tenure of a pastoral or ministerial staff member, he or she should be eligible for an extended leave that involves rest, spiritual refreshment, and preparation for future ministry. The purpose is to renew the minister personally and professionally for continued service to the church, thus promoting healthy staff tenure.

9. *Service recognition.* Churches should recognize the tenure milestones of their staff members. It is a good practice to do this at five-year increments. Give public recognition to employees when they reach a tenure milestone in a way that honors them and reinforces a culture of staff appreciation in the church. A monetary gift that increases with each tenure milestone is also a good practice.

10. *Personal conduct standards and disciplinary procedures.* Do not try to address every possible moral or ethical issue. Instead, state that personal lifestyles of church employees are subject to greater scrutiny than employees of non-religious organizations. Therefore, if a staff member's behavior causes embarrassment to the church or hinders job effectiveness, then that employee is subject to disciplinary measures up to and including termination. Churches should specify who has the authority to make such disciplinary decisions. Also, the church should define how accusations of harassment are to be reported within the organization and who has the authority to investigate and make decisions about such accusations.

There are certainly other matters of personnel management that churches can address, but these ten will go a long way in promoting healthy staff tenure and healthier churches.

Church, do not neglect this important matter. Show your pastor and staff that you value them and their ongoing service to the church by addressing these basic personnel issues. You will be doing yourself a favor.