

# Congregational Ethics for Associate Ministers

Congregations mean well when they hire associate ministers. But often they don't do well. Here are some tips for how to do it better:

-Establish personnel policies. Often congregations hire their first associate to meet an immediate need. "We've got to have help with the youth!"

Too often, though, they haven't established an adequate structure for supervision or accountability. They may, for example, assume that the senior pastor will be the supervisor.

Such relationships should be spelled out in advance. Who evaluates the associate? How? When? Who assigns duties? Who has the authority to hire and fire? Associates deserve to work in an atmosphere in which the lines of responsibility are clear.

-Write a job description. Before you begin a search, put down on paper what you want the associate to do. Discuss the job description in detail as part of the interview process.

You may in some cases want to adjust the job description to reflect an individual candidate's abilities, but write it down! Among your other personnel policies, include a sexual ethics statement which every new employee must sign as a condition of employment.

-Create a structure for lay support. No ministry worth doing should be the province of the staff member alone. Every associate needs some group of laypeople whose job it is to provide support, assistance and feedback as the ministry develops.

-Hire for your vision. The only reason to have an associate minister is enable you to do something as a church which you would not otherwise be able to do. That means you should staff according to your congregation's vision for its ministry in your community.

There is a danger here. Associates are often gifted and caring individuals who

create for themselves a constituency within the congregation apart from their specific duties. But the church is to be mission driven and not staff driven.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the limit of an associate's effectiveness in one job in one congregation is usually about 12 years. When the church begins to feel an obligation to provide anyone with a job, personalities have begun to overshadow vision.

-Compensate fairly. Some churches put so much money into their senior pastor's salary they end up shortchanging everyone else. Such an approach creates bitterness and division within the staff.

A fair compensation policy establishes a base compensation by considering the importance of the job to the church, the credentials required to do the job, and the individual's experience and performance.

Beyond that, annual cost of living increases based on inflation should be provided. Merit increases can be based on experience and performance.

The way a church treats its staff says a great deal about the congregation's health as a body of Christ. Firm, fair and businesslike policies with clear lines of accountability and strong congregational support create an atmosphere in which associates can do their best work. They also serve as a witness of your congregation's health to the community at large.

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