

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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What's the Best Way to Find Church Staff?

When one works as denominational staff, one frequently deals with contacts from churches looking to hire staff, whether lead pastors or other ministry leaders. Sometimes it feels like the person asking thinks that we are sitting on a vast pool of so-called “human resources” of great diversity that are sitting around waiting to be paired with a church where they will fit the category of “just the person we were looking for.” More often, though, the inquirer is merely asking for some leads and some recommendations on where to look to find potential candidates for church staff positions.

These repeated inquiries got me to thinking – What’s the best way for a church to find ministry staff? Where should we look? Who should we call? After some thought and reflection of our experiences at EFCA West, it seemed the topic was something to write about and, hopefully for you, will become something to talk about.

As I reflected on this question, I came to the conclusion that there is no “best way” or “best place” to find church staff; rather, there are options available to us, and like all options, whichever one we select means that we gain some things and we lose other things.

I grappled with the question of what criteria I would use to determine a “good” hire from a “poor” hire. For the purposes of this article, a good hire is one in which the person hired fits well into the leadership team, has or quickly gains credibility as a leader in her or his area of responsibility, is a good fit with the church’s culture (at least the positive aspects of it), can perform their work at least competently and, hopefully, quite well, and that stays long enough to make a difference (as opposed to being another passerby in a revolving door). A poor hire would lack these characteristics.

Most churches I have worked with tend to hire someone to do a specific job for the present time and give little thought to longer-term issues. In student ministries, for example, we need to know whether we are looking for a person to run our student ministries for a season, or looking for a person that will start in student ministries and hopefully have a long and perhaps even lifetime ministry at the church in leading various ministries of increasing responsibility over their work lifetime. Are we looking for someone that will hit the ground running on day one, fully trained and ready for results, or are we looking for someone that is still growing and

learning into whom we might invest over time and see what results God will bring? These decisions are best made at the start of the search for a person to do the work – what type of person and ministries are we looking for?

Here are some observations followed by implications related to hiring staff for you to talk about. They are based upon my experiences rather than scientific research, so feel free to push back in your conversations. This article is longer than most, but you'll know why once you dive in.

Observation #1 – Other things being about equal, the best hire is often an in-house hire. The in-house hire knows your church. You know them better than an outside hire because you have watched their behaviors over time. They know your church culture and already have a relational network in place. Unfortunately, many churches don't have hires-in-waiting from which to pick. Nonetheless, my recommendation is that, if you have solid, in-house, potential hires, strongly consider hiring them.

Implications #1 – To have potential in-house hires, we need to be developing people and giving them opportunities to test themselves and grow in their skills. Don't assume this involves only younger people first entering the workforce. We need to be developing older congregants to lead ministries as well including those for senior citizens and other ministries that involve older people or mentoring younger Christians. This is especially important as the huge baby boomer generation moves into their senior citizen years. We also need to keep in mind that we already know the faults previous errors of a potential in-house hire, so we might be tempted to pass them by in favor of an outside candidate. What we often forget is that we don't really know (at least not yet!) the faults of any outside hire until after we hired them at which time they can be an unwelcome surprise.

Are we looking for potential hires from inside? Are we intentionally developing future leaders? Do we know the dreams and aspirations of mid-level leaders on staff? Do we want them to stay in their current positions until they become tired or incompetent, or do we want to give them opportunities to grow and to demonstrate abilities for working in areas of greater responsibility than they have now as they move through life?

Observation #2 – Good places to find entry-level ministry staff are seminaries and Christian colleges/universities. This is where people go to formally train for ministry. And when they graduate they are usually looking for jobs, often their first job in paid church ministry.

Implications #2 – Seminary and college/university hires, especially younger ones, tend to come out heavy on knowledge and light on experience and wisdom. It's been said that the connections between humans' right and left brains are not strong until we are in our mid-twenties. Seminary hires typically need some development as workers and to be

mentored by more mature church leaders. They bring lots of energy but lesser levels of wisdom and experience.

Hiring college/university students and seminarians oftentimes results in short-tenured assignments as they often move after graduation to some other locale. Sometimes this is a problem, and sometimes it is not – but it is something to consider.

Unfortunately, not all seminary or college graduates deal well with people or are gifted or good at leading other people in a church leadership position. We've all heard stories about people with impressive degrees but not a lick of sense or without the ability to get the work done or to relate well with people. So don't depend too heavily on degrees and don't put them too high on your "position requirements" list – pay strong attention to potential candidates' prior and current work, and let a degree be the icing on the cake or even a tie-breaker.

Observation #3 – Good places to find potential hires are the people you know. I'm referring to ministry connections, not so much from congregants that have friends and relatives looking for jobs. I have found it common that churches have staff members that are ready for additional responsibility, but the church doesn't have a position to accommodate their growth. Referrals from people you already know in ministry are good ways to find ministry staff.

Implications #3 – In order to get referrals from ministry connections, one must have ministry connections. When you have a sudden need for a staff appointment is not the time to begin looking for ministers to connect with. There are regional gatherings throughout the EFCA West district that are designed to create, establish and grow these connections between pastors and staff of EFCA West churches. They usually gather monthly or semi-monthly. We used to call them "clusters," but we really don't like that word anymore (yet, old names die hard...). Do you, your ministry staff or even lay leaders participate in these regional gatherings? Contact us at efcawest@efca.org to learn about regional gatherings near you. These connections among like-minded, same-faith churches are places where you can freely ask, "Hey, do you know of anyone that might be ready to come on board and become our _____ at our church?" and get a good answer.

It can be a good idea to have connections with pastors of larger EFCA churches that have many staff. It's not uncommon for large churches to have staff members ready to move to another position or assume greater responsibilities but there is no position at the church to which they can move, especially if they feel called to a preaching ministry. This can be a good place to find a well-trained and highly experienced person to serve at your church. One potential drawback is that sometimes people whose only church experience is in a very large church context don't really know how to serve in a smaller church with less staff support and more congregational engagement. Do you know any of the senior-level staff at larger churches? Have you attended any conferences or

training there at which you might meet the lead pastor(s) and, perhaps, also meet some of their staff and interns?

Remember, in order to realize the benefit of networking you need to have a network. Who is in your network, and what are you doing to expand it?

Observation #4 – Denominational job postings are typically less effective than other ways on this list yet they can still be valuable and fruitful. EFCA has two main posting methods. One is to post a position on the EFCA Job Board. A church can post a job opening by going to <https://www.efca.org/opportunities/employment>. This page posts only position openings – it does not post information from people looking for positions. The second method is to post the open position on EFCA’s Pastor Search (go to pastorsearch.efca.org). Pastor Search uses an algorithm to pair potential candidates in the system to searching churches in a manner that maintains the confidentiality of the church and the applicant until such time as both agree to connect with one another. Other places to post positions are seminaries and colleges/universities (don’t forget their student employment offices).

Implications #4 – The biggest downside of job board posting is that, depending upon the circulation of the posting media, a church can be flooded with unvetted and unqualified applications to wade through or have the sound of crickets. A good thing about EFCA’s Pastor Search is that there is a buffer between the church and potential applicants so that churches do not have this problem.

Observation #5 – Lastly, but certainly not least, professional search firms can be an excellent source of highly qualified candidates, even more so if the search firm also does the pre-search work with the church to develop a realistic opportunity profile that accurately describes the church, its mission, how it came to be in its current position, its actual and aspirational culture, its community characteristics and its hopes and dreams for the future. When I reference a *realistic* opportunity profile, I mean one that is a truthful and accurate description of the church, warts and all, not a public relations brochure. While denominational staff and independents can assist in pastor churches, there can be real advantages of working with people who do this work for a living and have thereby gained insights that can only be gained through experiences while doing the work. Search firms typically have potential candidates from outside the EFCA family – they cast a wider net, which can be a blessing or a problem.

Implications #4 – The downside of search firms is that they often can cost more than a church can afford, especially a small church, even those firms that have scalable rates. But, fret not! An EFCA church is both autonomous (self-governing) and *inter-dependent*. EFCA churches rely upon one another. If you are a small church that really cannot afford the help you think you need in conducting a search, let us know and we will seek a church that may assist you or even fully underwrite the cost of a reasonably-priced professional search. We believe it is important that a search firm agree up front to work with denominational staff during the search. We oftentimes have information that may

be valuable to those considering a potential candidate, especially for those potential candidates that have been part of the EFCA family of churches.

The wider net aspect can be a blessing or a problem. The blessing is that they may have excellent potential candidates that are not known to the EFCA family. The problem is that candidates unfamiliar with or not interested in maintaining strong relationship with the EFCA family may be an acceptable doctrinal fit with EFCA but a poor fit in polity, culture, mission, etc., of the EFCA movement and family of churches. We encourage churches to contact EFCA West for assistance in vetting a candidate's theological and relational fit – we can't and won't tell you who you should hire, but we will let you know of any concerns we might have about issues that have not yet been explored or that may come up later.

There you go – five good places to look for staff from experienced lead pastors to beginners in paid ministry. As always, let us help you in the process. That's what we do, and it's something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.*

This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.