

DOES OUR PASTOR NEED A JOB DESCRIPTION?

“I love our pastor and his family, but I don’t know if I can sit through another one of his sermons!” Other members made similar remarks that eventually reached the ears of Paul, chair of the personnel committee, who was asked to call a meeting to deal with members’ growing frustration. Paul felt nervous about setting up an unexpected meeting with the pastor because the personnel committee typically meets only once a year. However, the committee had never discussed with the pastor their expectations about sermon preparation vs. other priorities and time commitments.

What Are Our Expectations?

Serving a church without a written job description is like embarking on a long trip without a road map. Too many churches have no evaluation process in place for the pastor. Additionally, there is often not a personnel committee (or staff-parish relations or pastoral relations committee) or, if there is one, it meets only “as needed.”

Why does the congregation need a committee that deals with clergy/staff and member relationships? Simply put: the church cannot succeed unless the pastor also succeeds. The committee’s central role is to clarify expectations on both sides. If communication lines are down, the result is confusion, disappointment, and possibly conflict. The committee helps the pastor, lay leaders, and members do a better job in their ministries. Regular communication adds years of effective tenure to the pastor’s ministry with the church. Additionally, the regular interaction contributes to the pastor’s overall ministry satisfaction and the pastor learns things about the church that he or she would never learn otherwise.

How to Create a Job Description

Perhaps lay leaders resist developing a pastoral job description because they falsely believe that all pastors are alike: interchangeable parts in the larger church system. Or maybe they feel that as members they do not know as much about the specifics as clergy would

know. However, the goal is for lay leaders and the pastor to work together to design a position portrait that fits the unique values and priorities of their church. In the church context, a pastoral job description serves as a shared vision for the congregation’s ministries. It gives details to the covenant that both members and the pastor hope to fulfill. In crafting this covenant, ask the pastor to provide answers to the following eight questions.

1. Describe in two or three sentences the purpose of your position: what goals that relate to the church’s overall mission can be accomplished through your responsibilities?
2. List and describe three activities that require the largest percentage of your time. What percentage of your time do you estimate each of those activities consumes?
3. List and describe other activities that take up less of your time (occasionally, monthly, or annually).
4. What are your top priorities; what activities do you feel are most important?



“WHEN ASKED TO LIST PROBLEM AREAS THAT TAKE UP MOST OF HIS TIME, THE PASTOR LISTED 3... AND MISSPELLED HAROLD’S NAME TWICE.”

5. Among your responsibilities, which roles and goals give you the most satisfaction?
6. Over what decisions do you have direct authority?
7. If applicable, list and describe any responsibilities for supervising the work of or guiding other employees, church volunteers, or committees.
8. What special knowledge or skills are needed in your position?¹

Once the pastor gives his or her responses to the committee, hold a meeting where the pastor and lay committee members discuss and clarify the answers. The committee leadership then drafts a description to be reviewed with the pastor for clarification or correction. Next, the governing board receives the position description and examines whether the wording captures the congregation's understanding of the pastor's role.² Eventually, the entire congregation should be given the opportunity to look at the description and make comments and suggestions.

Responsibilities of the Personnel Committee

The work of facilitating optimal pastor/member relationships should be a top priority for any church. If these relationships aren't right, everything else in the church's ministry will suffer. A thoughtfully constructed framework for each meeting is essential; otherwise, discussion can emphasize the negative and offer no constructive action steps.

In terms of best practices, the committee meets six times a year and at regularly scheduled times. Comprise this committee of duly elected lay members plus the senior pastor. Apply three-year term limits to elected lay members to protect people from burnout and to avoid the appearance that only a few people in the congregation make all the decisions.

Although committee members get the opportunity to identify areas of conflict or disappointment, a regular meeting also allows the pastor, who attends all meetings, to express opinions about how well the governing board is fulfilling its responsibilities to him or her. A key function of the committee is to offer oversight and promptly respond to any matter related to misconduct (such as sexual harassment, mental health issues, alcohol/drug use, or financial misuse). Their charge is to act in accordance with denominational rules and state/national laws.

Every committee member must attend and participate at every meeting. The chair's role involves facilitating conversation around several questions:

- What one or two good things do you see happening in our church?
- What one congregational challenge do you feel our committee may want to consider discussing?

After each committee member has voiced his or her views, the committee chair identifies one or two items for further discussion. As the chair proceeds down the list, he or she guides the discussion for each issue toward a constructive, consensus-based solution. Next, the chair asks members to review any issues from their last meeting. Then, the chair closes the meeting with prayer. Do not allow any committee member to bring up a new concern toward the end of the meeting when there is not sufficient time for a full discussion of the matter, but remind the member to bring up the concern at the beginning of the next meeting.

Describing the Role for a Future Pastor

When the congregation is moving toward filling a vacancy, an up-to-date clergy job description is even more critical. The position portrait keeps the hiring/search committee focused on the pastoral skills and abilities that are most central to the congregation's ministry. Because this description uses behavior and performance as criteria, it helps a search committee explore what candidates have actually done. Past performance is the best predictor of future behavior.³

Giving Support and Solutions

When Paul convened the personnel committee, he asked each member to list three positive words or phrases to describe the pastor's sermons and then to list phrases suggesting positive changes. After gathering the sheets, Paul read the lists aloud. After discussion, the members supported the pastor's decision to join a local weekly lectionary study group. They also offered support for the several activities the pastor wished to set aside to give him more time for study, prayer, and sermon preparation. Committee members pledged to pray for the pastor and agreed to meet again in two months to assess progress.

1. Additional details in *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 21*, <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%2021.pdf>.

2. As with all congregational committees, the personnel committee is accountable to the governing board.

3. Rich Birch, "8 Axioms of Church Staff Hiring," <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/310141-8-axioms-church-staff-hiring-rich-birch.html>.