

How to find the right fit so you and the church are happy

by Rene Trujillo*

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"We're excited about your qualifications and would like to offer you a position in our church."

I had found the ideal church—or so I thought. The next three years were the hardest of my life as I struggled in a church I was ill-fitted to serve. My expectations, needs, worship style, and vision didn't mesh with this particular church.

Because of these differences, I've decided to leave. I've learned some hard lessons. I now know what to look for and how to look. In my search for a new ministry, I'll take off my rose-colored glasses and get beneath the surface.

If you're at the same point in your career, here are lessons from my school of hard knocks.

KNOW THYSELF

Before you even begin to look for a new job, ask yourself a few important questions:

What are my God-given talents and strengths? What are my primary spiritual beliefs? What are my expectations of a church? What style of worship enables me to praise God to the fullest? What long-term goals do I have for my ministry? Be honest with yourself. Then use your answers to screen each new ministry possibility.

KNOW THY CHURCH

Each church has a unique personality. Make sure your fingerprints match the body you join.

- Ask to see the church's mission/vision statement. If a church doesn't have one or you don't agree with it, that's a red flag! How well do the church's programs follow the mission statement? Does the congregation at large know the mission? Do they believe in and buy into it?
- Check out the demographics of the church. If the age and general background of the congregation isn't similar to yours, it may be difficult to build meaningful relationships. George Barna says that "people who are most satisfied with their church also find that most of their friends come from that church."

Church staff aren't exempt from the need for friendships, particularly friendships with others who are serious about God. In my particular situation, this was an important insight. Economically and socially, I was not on a par with the vast majority of the congregation. The children's program never quite fit in with their vision and lifestyle. It may seem selfish, but without interaction with other believers, it's hard to keep your own spiritual fire lit.

- Figure out where you'd fit into the church. Does the church need your talents and personality? Spend time with the rest of the church staff. What are their passions? Will you be competing in the same arena with other staff or key laypeople? Or will your passions and personality strengths complete and complement the leadership already in place? Honesty here will eliminate power struggles later.

- Attend a worship service. If possible, don't let anyone know you're coming. Is the church welcoming and open? Are you comfortable with the worship style? Some churches have highly structured, traditional services. Others are less formal, spontaneous, and flexible. If you can't visit before the interview, get tapes from random services if that church has a tape ministry. The church you serve will also be the church you worship in. If you aren't growing in worship, it'll be hard to grow a ministry. I know; I learned the hard way!
- Gather information. It's time for the interview! You're there to be interviewed, but interview the church also. Be bold. Share with them who you are, what you believe, and what your philosophy of ministry is. Don't pull any punches. If they don't agree with you, now is the time to find out. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions. What's the growth pattern for the church? What has the children's ministry been like in the past? What are your expectations of the children's ministry? What beliefs about children's ministry do you hold dear? Gather all the written material you can find—new member packets, bulletins, old newsletters. Then visit with random congregation members. Ask what they like and don't like about the church. Members' perceptions are often very informative.
- Get it in writing. Get a written job description that clearly outlines the church's expectations. When an offer has been made, be sure salary, benefits, continuing education leaves, vacation time, and program budget moneys are all put in writing. If promises are made about future raises or leave time, get that in writing, too.
- Pray. Trust that God has a plan for your life. He has prepared a church for you, and he cares which church you serve. Ask him to give you wisdom and insight. Don't make a hasty decision. Spend time in the Scriptures.
- Listen. To yourself—trust your first impressions. To others—talk with a spiritual mentor, friends, and family. And to God—listen for the still, calm voice of the Lord. Remember, you aren't looking solely for a means of income. You're seeking to be a faithful servant and to use your talents and abilities for the glory of God—where he wants you!

Find a church with a good fit. If you dream the same dreams, relate well to the congregation, share the same theology, work from a common philosophy of ministry, and worship well together, a long-term ministry is possible. If any of these components are out of place, it won't be long before you're redrafting your resume.

The author is an advocate of long-term ministry, having held a position for 14 years at one place.

HOW TO LEAVE GRACEFULLY

If you're leaving your job, you'll leave the church in better shape if you follow these tips.

1. Allow ample time for the church to find a replacement. However, don't drag out the leaving process. Once you've informed a congregation that you're leaving, you're a lame duck. And the ministry is put on hold as people check out emotionally.
2. Leave behind program information, calendars, and activity schedules so your successor will know what has happened recently. This will prevent repetition of activities or topics.
3. Attempt to fill all lay leadership positions. A new staff person won't know the congregation, and it may be hard for him or her to fill vacant key positions.

4. Be honest with the church board about your reasons for leaving. Growth can often occur from painful situations. However, don't allow any ill feelings you may have toward the church to cause you to gossip or belittle the church or its leadership. Everyone doesn't need to know the whole truth. Guard your tongue and speak as Jesus would speak.

5. Take the time to listen to people who are hurting because of your departure. Encourage children to continue to love God and listen to their new leader. Build a bridge between your ministry and the ministry to follow. Enable the congregation, by your support and actions, to get excited about the new staff person who'll be coming.

HEADHUNTER SECRETS

Troy Stromme, a professional recruiter in Colorado, gives these success tips for finding a job:

- Research the position you're applying for. Find out everything you can about the church-its goals, growth patterns, philosophies, and doctrine. Discover the exact job skills the church is looking for.
- Tailor your resume to match the position. Highlight the strengths the church is looking for. As money is to businesses, growth is to the church. So stress in your cover letter that you're able to grow as the church grows.
- Be persistent. Send in your resume and follow up with a letter or a phone call. Show that you're interested by making repeated contacts.
- First impressions count. Always be professional. Stromme says, "I can learn a lot about someone in the first 10 seconds." Your communication skills, appearance, energy level, and attitude are evident even during introductions.
- Relax. If you're nervous about interviewing (and who isn't?), practice responding to interview questions with a friend or spouse. Then relax during the interview and be confident about what you have to say.
- Be yourself. If you try to fool people, you won't find a good fit and you won't be happy in the long run. "If you're yourself and it's meant to be and it's God's will," advises Stromme, "it'll work out."