

Pastor Jacqueline queried some of her colleagues about their experiences with policies regarding members of a congregation also serving on staff. Their responses have been altered only to make them anonymous.

Trusted Colleagues, happy New Year

First Unitarian Church of Oakland continues to examine how particular informal/formal policies serve the overall mission, vision and ends of the church. One of these policies is members as staff.

Those of you who have policies that address this sticky issue of members as staff, please share it with me. All commentary is welcomed.

Your wise counsel and inspiration is appreciated,
Jacqueline

1. UUXX has a policy of not employing voting members. One current staff member was a voting member and had to resign in order to be employed. Another would join but for the policy. The exception is yours truly, who acts as pastor to staff and members alike.

2. I like this article. I tend to come down on the side of policies that prevent it.

<http://danhotchkiss.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/110707-Becoming-Staff.pdf>

3. It is tempting to hire members, but I don't think it is a good idea. In my years of working in interim positions, I found that some of the most difficult problems were connected to members on staff. I'll be glad to have a conversation about this if you like, though you will probably hear from several colleagues regarding this sensitive topic.

4. I don't have policies to send, but I have commentary. I highly recommend taking Susan Beaumont's seminar on church staff supervision, which I have not been able to do yet, but which I have heard helps people get a lot more clear on how to manage the problem of boundaries in these kinds of situations.

I have served in three settings where members were staff. In one setting, our largest church in [city], it was fine because the corporate structure insulated members from day-to-day decisions about the running of the church. Members did not expect to be involved in personnel management.

In both other settings, much smaller churches, it was very, very bad. These were dysfunctional systems, and perhaps in healthy small settings, it works better, but what I saw was that staff who were members were accustomed to having no boundaries and no accountability. When proper supervisory procedures were put in place, such as regular meetings with and evaluations by the supervisor (the minister), this was greatly resented. It was made more difficult by the fact that personnel management is confidential. When a staff member gets evaluated, the results are confidential. Yet the whole congregation seems to want to be involved. They want to know why the staff member is upset by the evaluation, or why the staff member has resigned (after being called on such problems as total insubordination, coming to work (with children) intoxicated, kissing children on the lips, to name only a few things I have seen), and YOU CAN'T TELL THEM. All you can say is, the staff member's file is confidential. But the staff member can say anything they want, and frequently will. This is very divisive in a congregation, as the staff member's constituency is furious with the minister for hurting the staff member.

Your church is in between in size, so perhaps good policies around boundaries and accountability could work for you. [UU minister] has found that administrators who are members can be highly effective, and he might have a good idea about policies to keep it that way.

I hope this is helpful. I think the main thing is to have clarity on boundaries and accountability.

Blessings,

5. We chose to not create a policy but rather a set of practices-

If a member applies for a hired position, we have a conversation with them about all the possible terrible scenarios (as in, if we have to fire you, you might lose your church AND your job) and ask them if they still want to be considered. If they are hired, we revisit the conversation again and every time we do an evaluation, we revisit the conversation and we work it into occasional conversations sprinkled throughout the year. We have one person who is a member that applied for a position and she was by far the best candidate who applied and she has been very clear with us that if her performance is in any way lacking to take it up with her immediately, which we do. Another member applied and was not hired. She was disappointed. She disappeared for awhile (but that has been her pattern, one of the reasons she was not hired) and she came back and things seem fine.

A lot of our colleagues have very strong opinions about this topic. Mine is to take it on a case by case basis and help members think through what it will be like to be evaluated by their ministers, can they handle constructive feedback or will they conflate their position with their needs as a member? that sort of thing.

Hope that is helpful in your process.
with peace,

6. We have a policy against it and I'm glad. Our one recent case of having gone ahead and given the job to a member did not work out well--the job performance issues were greatly intensified by the fact that people on our personnel committee were dealing with a member, not just a staff person. I am sure the staff member/church member did not grasp the extent to which she would lose her church, and she was bitter.

People do try to bend the rule with the best intentions: "This person would be good at it" / "This person needs the work" etc. In my experience, few understand the difficulty of the dual role, and I try to articulate that for them. The only thing I would change about our rule is I'd get specific about time that must elapse between the two statuses, the way we do with interns and interims, so that someone doesn't apply for the job and quit their membership.

If others have allowed members as staff and made it work, I'd love to hear about it.

7. Back East, we instituted strong policies against members becoming staff. Here in [city], given the conservative nature of the community and limited talent pool, we have had to hire members. I didn't like doing it, but that had been the practice prior to my arrival and given the positions I've filled since arriving, 2 of 3 had to be members as we had no qualified outside candidates as hard as I tried to find them.

8. UUYU wrestled with this issue for years. Current policy says basically "it depends," meaning that the Board concluded that each situation would be decided on a case-by-case basis. A Board recorded vote is required each time a member applies for a position and is considered--even as an independent contractor or one-time task.....safe journey through the pathless path of this issue.....

9. Geography can make a difference. The best policy is clearly hiring non-members, in my opinion, so much less complicated, But if a congregation is more than commute distance away from it's closest UU neighbor (for example, [small-ish, somewhat isolated congregations]), then finding a non-member staff hire is much more than challenging, if not downright impossible for positions like DRE, so some flexibility is necessary in for our more isolated churches.

I don't see Oakland having that issue given its proximity to other UU congregations as well as to SKSM.

10. I've seen this issue arise on this list and the national list every so often over the years with the same basic reasons given on all sides (and rightly so) each time. I am mindful of the unique position I hold in this regard, but that said, since I've had experience in this realm and seen it from both sides and from times when it worked out well and times when there were issues, I'll speak up. I'd say that while it is not a terribly definitive stance, [other minister's] statement of basically, "it depends" is a fairly good description even if that doesn't provide a very clear cut reply and doesn't create a neat phrase for a guideline.

My experience: I have worked for 3 of our congregations as well as UULM (now UU Justice Ministries) as an office manager/administrator (among other roles) and two of those congregations I was a member at simultaneously. These were instances of my being a staff member both before seminary and while in seminary and later, for about 9 months on a fill-in basis, after seminary. Since the one after seminary was a fill-in re-hire by a congregation I'd staffed 15-18 yrs. prior, in my case, there was clearly a sense that there was more value added by my being able to step in to the role than to not hire me because I was also a member. In each instance, ministers and board members from one congregation recommended me to the next congregation/minister. (I should also point out that I'm aware that like any transition, some fellow congregants took my leave-taking harder in both places I worked feeling like as a member I somehow should have stayed longer/stayed in the position because I was also invested as a member and that both ministers worked in my leaving to deal with people who were angry or upset when I left to move on in my life).

Here is what I think makes a difference: what is the level of congregational involvement prior to the employment and what sorts of expectations, implicit or explicit, are there once someone is a staff member? Are there roles and/or activity areas that should be explicitly avoided so as not to create a conflict of interest (e.g.-you cannot serve on the Board and be a staff member). Healthy boundaries, on both sides, and a high degree of confidentiality is needed in order to respect both parts of the employee/congregational system. This is not just a matter of protecting the organization but of the individual being able to set boundaries for themselves so that they are not "at work" so to speak whenever they walk in the door if they are just showing up for a worship service. Everyone has to find that balance and ways of communicating/systems that work for them.

I would point out that hiring non-members does not address the issue of what occurs if someone starts out as a non-member and then becomes so enamored of our faith and the great and vibrant congregation that they wish to become a member. Of course geography plays a role here as well, but it would need to be addressed that if one is going to ban non-members, must they resign their employment to join the congregation? That certainly has ethical implications, but I've seen it play out where a non-member was hired, in later years joined the church, then problems arose in their life and on the job, they were fired and there was much acrimony and hurt and upheaval/unfortunate consequences even as the congregation moved forward stronger in the long run.

It would seem to me that the hiring process for all positions is itself a screening process even in the absence of an explicit policy against members being staff: one can invite all candidates both internal and external to a fair process of application. A statement can even be made that being a member does not in any way guarantee one a position nor preclude one from a position. If you have a clear process for selecting who you feel is best qualified for the position, being aware that we all have biases both conscious and unconscious, then you leave room. Likewise, I would lean toward clear communication and supervision with employees on expectations, boundaries, supervision and evaluation, etc. There are definitely implications for the employee to consider:

that minister you liked as your minister may or may not be a great boss/supervisor. In my own life, I've been lucky to work with particularly outstanding ministers, but I've certainly met some I would not wish as a supervisor, no matter how amazing their preaching or gifts as minister. It feels to me ultimately like what is a good match/calling for both sides: Just as not every minister is right for every congregation or at a particular time, so too what works for one environment/congregation may not work for another or may not be the right approach at a particular time; for some a policy is best and for others it is not. For some, a ban on members as employees is appropriate and for others that is too limiting.

11. I concur in general on the principle, but a policy in itself is not sufficient if there is a practice or a culture of boundary violations or special relationships among staff and congregants. Some members might be excellent professional staff members with regard to boundaries, and others might respond to coaching and supervision with boundaries being clear, and others might be a disaster. I think your church and mine have had examples of both. I just read through archives from the 1980s and 1990s here. And of course I've lived through some challenges here, as well, and give all honor and praise to my colleague in ministry, Rev. ____.

On the other hand, someone who comes to the church from outside and does not join it can still not be good about keeping some professional boundaries about making friends or disclosing information or (the worst) causing people to take sides. Some staff or their supporters could say, "Easy, I'll just resign/she will just resign their membership," but that does nothing to clarify standards of behavior.

Perhaps the safest thing would be a rule that a staff member can only participate in things at the church for which they have a job-related reason to be there; same for socializing, the way ministers should do (i.e., attending a party as their minister/RE Director/membership coordinator vs. as their pal who also works at the church). However, trying to enforce this on a system that has engrained habits otherwise would not be a pleasant experience for us as clergy.

It seems that an initial conversation and then perhaps periodic ones are in order for a staff member who has friends or is making friends in the church, or is starting to attend activities outside their job responsibilities.

If all you can get is a policy, that's better than nothing. And then if you have the policy you can refer to it to explain to any non-member staff that it was put in place to keep clear the boundaries, and that is what you expect of all staff.

