

How to Hire an Awesome Youth Director

By John E. Harnish



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So I asked my clergy friends from around the country, “Where would you go to find a really good youth pastor?” After the groans, the responses generally fell into one of two categories: “They are as hard to find as hen’s teeth” and “You can’t have ours!”

Now that we’ve found one, you can’t have ours either, but hopefully you can learn from how our congregation found and hired a terrific new youth pastor.

1. We didn’t look to the appointive system.

I believe in the United Methodist itin-

erant system for deploying pastors. In its origin, it enabled the Methodists to move with the frontier, to be nimble and responsive to the needs of congregations for pastoral leadership. Though it may function well for this purpose, it is not necessarily effective in providing larger churches with the necessary staff of specialists, since its primary task is to appoint members of an annual conference as pastors within that annual conference. This congregation had been blessed with appointed associate pastors who did well in youth ministry, but it was not their first calling and they soon moved to appointments as pastors of local churches. In seeking a new student pastor,

we wanted someone whose primary calling and experience was in youth ministry. So we prayed.

2. We decided to hire our own.

We were intent on finding a person with a passion to serve middle school and high school youth. Our preference was an ordained United Methodist, but we were open to lay professionals and non-United Methodists as long as they expressed a Wesleyan theology. We posted the position on national youth ministry sites, in seminaries and colleges, and in conference and national publications. We received the largest number of applications from Youth Specialties. Frankly, many of them were too Calvinist in theology and too rigid in style, but that is where our final applicant found us. We had some strong applicants from UM seminaries and very few from the other avenues. Then we prayed again.

3. We were looking for the right person first.

Rather than seeking a person to fit the youth program we had in place, we wanted to find a person who could build a program around his or her gifts and passions. We were determined to hire the right person, then give him or her the space to create an effective youth ministry in line with our congregation’s mission “to gather, nurture and equip disciples for mission and ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.” However, we were not specific about the shape of that ministry. Within the search committee, we said we were seeking a “pied piper” who could draw youth into his or her orbit and introduce them to Jesus Christ, but we were flexible as to how he or she would do that. We used two questions in the preliminary phone interviews to help us know if the candidate might be the right fit: First, “describe yourself theologically.” And second, “what would you do if a member of your youth group said he thought he might be gay?”

In hiring staff, I believe in the “3 Cs”: Competency, Character, and Chemistry. Competency can be measured by a candidate’s track record. Character can be confirmed by references and background check. Chemistry is the way the person fits with me as the Senior Pastor, with other staff members, and with the ethos of the congregation. The only thing I can say is “you know it when you see it.” Then we prayed some more.

4. Watch for the “Big Yes.”

I have learned from sad experience that “it is better to have no body than the wrong body.” One of the ways I know when it is right is by listening for what I call the “Big Yes.” We received over thirty resumes, did about twenty phone interviews, and invited four candidates for a round of interviews with the search committee, the SPRC, youth, and parents. Then I listened for the “Big Yes.” The youth liked one candidate, the parents preferred another, and I thought two of them would be acceptable, but there was no “wow,” no consensus, no “Big Yes.” Now we really prayed. We had posted the position everywhere we knew, we had chosen the best candidates we could find, and we were still waiting.

The next day a resume appeared in my fax machine. Rev. Chad Oyer, ordained in the Church of the Nazarene and serving in a United Methodist church, had seen the posting, but he was fully committed to his current position and set it aside. A while later, the Spirit led him to apply for the position. He applied. We met. The chemistry felt right. He came for the interviews and I heard the “Big Yes” bouncing between committees. We knew. We just knew that he was the person who could move our student ministry to a new level, and that is exactly what has happened. Now we pray a prayer of thanks for Chad and for God’s leading in the life of our congregation.

My conclusions: (1) Usually the appointive system does not serve us well in the area of student ministry. (2) Work as if everything depends on you and pray as if everything depends on God, then wait for the Big Yes. (3) Find the right person and give him or her space to follow the Spirit’s leading in creating a ministry around his or her own passions. (4) Thank God when, and if, it happens.

Now—any ideas on how to find a really good business manager? □



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“Regular teaching about and participation in the sacraments invited children into the mystery of God’s love and the love of the church community. Do we not think God’s prevenient grace is working in children, too? Our congregation has come a long way, from tolerating children in worship for short periods of time, to viewing them as little performers, to now increasingly seeing them as fellow disciples, albeit shorter and younger ones.”

— Patricia Farris, Senior Pastor,
First UMC Santa Monica, Calif.

“Until somebody assumes and exercises responsibility, our Christian education programs will continue to flounder. Accountability must reside with all clergy—including elders, deacons, and local pastors. One conference director of children’s ministries told me, ‘Many pastors have no idea what is going on or being taught to children in our churches.’”

— John Ed Mathison, retired elder,
www.johnedmathison.org.

“We complacently believed that the 1950s would last forever. As the world was changing, we disengaged from children’s and youth ministry. Pastors did not believe it was their job to help recruit Sunday school teachers and leaders. We quit providing training and support for adults who were teaching and leading. . . . Education leaders should refocus on changing and shaping the lives of young people. Those of us not gifted in that ministry should recruit and support those who are.”

— Bishop Scott J. Jones, Kansas Area

“Let’s rethink priorities. What if we had volunteers doing the adult worship and programming, and the paid staff (pastor) doing Sunday school, nursery, and Wednesday night teachings? What would it be like if ONE person (pastor) had 50 hours a week to pray, research, plan, and serve in children’s ministry? Instead the pastors are pulled in fifty different directions for adults . . . adult bible study, meetings with adults, worship in the Sanctuary on Sunday morning with adults, home-bound visits, etc. The question is: what are the church’s priorities?”

— Jessica Cobb, commenting at
Kids and Christ Facebook page

*What is your experience with children’s and youth ministries?
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