

**Hire Education:
Tips From the Trenches on Finding (and Keeping) the Right Youth Staff
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It's that time of year again. Hunting season has opened—the season when thousands of churches compete to bag the best and brightest and bring them back to serve as professional youth workers. And most churches dive into the hunt with all the confidence of a desperate adolescent seeking a first prom date.

The desperation might be well founded. In fact, by one estimate, a church that hires the wrong person can expect to quadruple its expenses simply recovering from a hiring mistake (footnote: Gary Macintosh, [Staffing for Church Growth](#)). So for all those churches anxiously in the hunt, I offer a few “Secrets of Hire Education.”

1) Build the Dance Floor Before Hiring the Dancer

The typical church expects its (typically inexperienced) youth worker to step onto the job and give the church *its* vision for youth ministry. “Dream your dream,” the church says, “Build your vision.” Though it may sound noble and liberating, placing this expectation on new staff is neither reasonable nor responsible.

Show me a youth ministry that hires staff with this expectation, and I'll show you a youth ministry that has little chance of sustaining momentum. The first youth worker might be “purpose-driven,” the next “worship centered,” and a third (my personal favorite) might joyfully scrap all vestiges of previous ministries and call it “family-based.”

To expect a newly-hired 23-year old to define the church's vision for youth ministry is an abdication of leadership. It is the church's consistent vision, not the changing emphases of serial staffers that offers the greatest chance of ongoing sustainability. Sure, hire a great dancer, but build your dance floor first. \

2) Fish Where the Fish Are

The most common complaint we hear from searching churches is “There are so few fish in this pond!” My response: “Then maybe you're fishing in the wrong pond.”

Most churches we've worked with have spent almost all their time trying to find ponds filled with experienced superstars who are willing to stay around for a decade and happen to enjoy working for peanuts. Those ponds simply don't exist.

But once a church has clarified its own vision for youth ministry, there *are* ponds stocked with those who can implement those visions. One of my favorite fishing holes is the one filled with engaging, winsome mothers with school aged children. Most churches are filled with dozens of these experienced multi-taskers who combine

an infectious spiritual enthusiasm and a deep love for youth. Another well-stocked pond is the one filled with idealistic, energetic, recent graduates with a passion for serving Christ. If supported and mentored by a caring clergy supervisor, these young adults can have an immense impact on students (My own children—23, 18 and 15—give me a daily reminder of just how effective this approach can be).

3) Tell the Truth Even If It Hurts

Unfortunately, the old joke, “How can you tell a search committee is lying?” (Answer: Their lips are moving) is not far from the truth. Sometimes, search committees in their eagerness to woo “the right” candidate will shade the truth about their church just a bit. Here are a few of the most common search committee white lies:

- What is said: We don’t care about numbers.
What is meant: ...Unless you don’t produce them.
- What is said: We just want you to bring your own vision for youth ministry and implement it here.
What is meant: ...Unless it doesn’t work.
- What is said: This church is willing to do whatever it takes to build a top-flight youth ministry.
What is meant: ...unless it involves hiring more staff or increasing the size of the youth budget.

Giving prospective candidates information you wish were true will not help them or your future ministry. In fact, when interviewing staff for our own youth ministry in Nashville, I start by telling them all the reasons they wouldn’t want to work here. After 10 years or so of this kind of interviewing, not a single candidate has been scared away by my honesty. And my staff has been able to enter into the challenges of youth ministry with eyes wide open to the immense expectations that will be placed on them.

Happy hunting.

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