

Questions to Ask Before You Say Yes

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Accepting a position as pastor of a local church is like getting married. It's a huge commitment. People on both sides are often a little unsure and maybe even nervous. It is a profound relational covenant. It's about trust and respect and hope for the future. It's a calling not a job. This call may not be for life, but it could nearly cost you your life if you make a bad choice.

In too many cases this decision is made in a way that bears resemblance to a couple getting married that is not prepared for the marriage. The couple may share a friendly compatibility and even some natural chemistry. However, if there is no real connect at a deeper level of values, convictions, expectations and dreams for the future, what starts off well often ends in disaster. In a marriage, and saying yes to a church -- where the courtship was too short and too shallow, both these relationships can be made whole through maturity and hard work, but the road ahead may be rough.

In the case of saying yes to a local church the following questions will be extremely helpful to you in discerning if the relationship is right. Note: These questions are designed primarily for a senior pastor, but can be used by a staff member with a little adaptation. I'm giving you ten good questions. You should add many of your own to round out a great list.

Questions for the church board:

1. How are decisions made?

Few questions are as important as how are decisions made and who makes them. The answer in large part reveals how the church really works. The vision statement is important, the organizational chart is helpful, and the church bylaws may be relevant, but these things don't often tell how decisions are really made in the trenches of daily ministry. For example, if all the decisions are made at the top, you really need to know that. Especially if you are not at the top! Or, if decisions tend to get stuck in process somewhere – you want to know. Here's the key, ask the board to describe several of the most recent big decisions and specifically the process by which they were made.

2. What, specifically, do you expect of me?

Asking what they expect of you may sound a little aggressive or edgy, but if said with the right tone and in the right context, it is a very appropriate question. If you speak only in general terms about vision and a job description, the conversation is positive

but doesn't get to the real issues. You've got to get down to brass tacks. For example, an answer might be, "We expect you to preach." And you ask, "How many Sundays a year?" Now you are getting to the real stuff. If you think this is awkward, I say better now than later!

3. What are you currently unsatisfied with that you would want my leadership to effect improvement or change?

This rolls off the previous question of expectations, but gets at the current issues in the church rather than long-term expectations of the job. There is no perfect church. If the board says they are completely happy about everything in the church they are not leaders, or not in touch, or not telling the truth. In any case, not good! Press in for how they really think. Ask for specifics. Write down what they say in the room so they see you write it down. The goal is not to dig up a list of petty junk, but two or three things the board agrees on together that needs to change.

4. What, if I changed without talking to you, would you be unhappy about?

The previous question needs the board thinking and answering together. In this question you want individual answers. This helps you get to know the bents and biases of each leader, their priorities, and a little of how they think. Take notes and see if there are similarities or a pattern to what is said. Pay attention, read between the lines. Great insights can be gained here. You are not held hostage to the answers, but these are things you want to know in order to lead well.

5. Overall, what is the condition of the congregation?

Begin by asking what they love and appreciate about the church. Then ask about the current condition of the church. This seems simple but is often difficult because the board may measure the health, strength and spiritual vibrancy of the congregation differently than you do. It's important to not only discuss the subjective issues in the spiritual realm, but also to talk about specific metrics such as giving, serving, and how many are in small groups.

Questions for the staff:

1. Do you want to stay on the team?

It's not a good idea to keep people on staff that have a "wait and see" attitude toward your new leadership and the transition. Ask each one directly about their desires. This does not commit you to retain them, nor are they obligated to stay, but it gives you insight that helps you know who each person is and their intentions about staff. In essence, you are asking if they are happy working there, and this question, by itself, often leads to a great conversation.

2. What is your great contribution to the team?

Give each person permission and encourage them to brag about what they are good at. Don't ask for a list of strengths. That is too generic. Ask for specific examples of how their presence on the team has made a positive and measurable difference. Measurable isn't always about numbers, it can be about culture, morale, and spiritual vitality, but they can still give stories and examples.

3. What is the last mistake you made?

If a leader isn't making mistakes, he or she is not leading. It is in the nature of leadership to take risks, press ahead and try new things. They don't all work. For a good leader, most endeavors produce successful results, but nonetheless, mistakes and failures happen. Listen to what is said and how it is said, and most importantly, ask what was learned by the person who made the mistake. Be sure to understand if they felt discouraged, defensive, made excuses, or owned it and kept right on leading.

4. If you had the choice, would you keep your current position or take a different spot on the team?

This is not a "just for fun ice-breaker" throwaway question. It's a great question to help you assess the level of self-awareness and positive ambition of each staff person. If they would not choose to keep their current position, ask what they would want as an ideal spot on the team. Listen carefully to why they want a different position on the team and connect that to whether or not they have success in what they are currently doing.

5. Overall, what is the condition of the staff and top leaders?

This can be a dangerous question because it can lead to a negative conversation and gossip. Don't let it go there. If they speak about individuals, keep that positive in nature. Otherwise keep the conversation focused on the overall culture, competence, and character of the team. Is the team happy, productive etc. and why? I love asking "The Beatles" question, "In your opinion, are they better together than apart?"

So there you have it, ten great questions to get you started. Write ten more of your own and you will have a great interview!