

Guidelines for using Personnel Manual or Employee Handbook

The links below are real personnel manuals and or employee handbooks used by one or more of the 65 churches in the Austin district. The UMC *Book of Discipline* states (Sec 258.12) the PPR (or SPR) “committee and the pastor shall recommend to the church council a **written statement of policy and procedures** regarding the process of hiring, contracting, evaluating, promoting, retiring, and dismissing staff personnel who are not subject to episcopal appointment as ordained clergy.” And in sec 258.15 the same committee “shall keep themselves informed on personnel matters in relationship to the Church’s policy, professional standards, liability issues and civil law.” The PPR/SPR Committee is responsible for communicating and interpreting such matters and is encouraged to avail themselves of educational and training opportunities to enable them to be effective in their work. **So, a Personnel Manual or Employee Handbook is not just a “nice-to-have” but a requirement.** (*Click here to continue reading these Guidelines*)

General Principles

A church, because of the nature of her mission, should provide support and care for her employees beyond what can be seen or experienced in secular employ, and yet, since a church is also a human institution, the organization should put in place polices that both reflect the best of our state and national laws and also protect the assets of that institution. So your handbook/manual should reflect both of these concerns. Toward that end, your statement, whether a Personnel Manual or an Employee Handbook, should have a section on **“at will” employment** (state of Texas) and what that means: essentially that there is no guarantee or contract and an employee can be terminated, laid-off, terminated (fired) for any reason, not just for cause. The employee has the same right about his or her leaving employ. Your ordained personnel, subject to the appointment process within the district/conference, are exempt from this dynamic, as the appointment is a “contract” between conference, church and clergy, all guided by the dictates of The Book of Discipline.

Your manual/handbook should probably spell out the various kinds of **employment categories**; exempt, non-exempt (40 hour/week), part-time, full time and applicable and accruable conditions: vacations, holidays, benefits.

Workers’ compensation is not mandatory in Texas, but is a good idea, especially for churches involved in justice issues. The same with **unemployment insurance**. Check with your insurance provider as to coverage recommendations or requirements. Spelling out what the actual situation for employ in your church as to these two elements of the employer/employee relationship will hopefully clarify expectations and lessen friction in case of an incident where such coverage would be applied.

Generally-speaking, a church will want to spell out conditions and a process for **termination** fairly specifically so as to not be unduly harsh or overly generous with the finite resources of the given church. A church, like any organization employing people, will want to spell out policies specific to **EEOC** (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), **harassment** of any kind, and **disability** accommodation. **FMLA** (Family and Medical Leave Act) requirements are not mandated to organizations of less than 50 employees, but wouldn’t it be a good idea to model FMLA and have your handbook/manual reflect that progressive stance?

Any policies **specific to the United Methodist Church** (Sexual Harassment or Safe Sanctuary, for example) should probably be included in your manual/handbook, so as to not indicate separateness about those polices. One would think that with church employees, a committee would not need to spell out policies regarding **alcohol, drugs, weapons**, etc., but isn’t it better to be wise than foolish? The same with **confidentiality, expense reimbursement, use of personal items, dress, personal time off, vacations**, etc. Some churches have even found it helpful to spell out a specific **code of conduct** so as to be absolutely certain that exceptions have been communicated.

Some indication of **acknowledgment** or receipt of the handbook or manual is a good idea, with a copy going to the employee and another copy in his/her file.

Again, as we said in the job descriptions section, the district hopes to provide training in the future as to “best” employment processes for one of our most valuable resources, our people employed in the service of Christ in the church.

Samples

In the pages that follow are several examples of “written statements” constituted as a Personnel Manual or an Employee Handbook. Where known, we tell you if that resource has been reviewed by an employment lawyer or a Human Resources (HR) expert. These docs are in PDF format, so that you can copy the whole and then make your edits on your copy for your church. There is a “warning” in that last statement, implying a degree of difficulty in accessing these: if you edit beyond the reviewed handbook/manual statements included here, in other words, if you excise or remove too much from an already reviewed handbook/manual, you may be omitting something pretty important. When you have your final product, even if you are heavily dependent upon the material provided here on the website, it is always a good idea to contract with an employment lawyer or HR specialist, if such an individual is not readily available as a volunteer in your church community, to make sure you are helping both your cause and your employees. Also If you have questions about any of these manuals or handbooks, rather than contact a single church that might be identified, it is probably best to contact the district office 512- 444-1983 or Mike Renquist, 512-663-9868, or mrenquist@umcad.org.