

Taking care of business: Administrators show ecumenical spirit

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

It was meant as a compliment when preacher-author Leonard Sweet praised his audience as “a kind of homeland security of the church.” Sweet, evangelism professor at Drew University Theological School, was speaking to an unsung national organization of church business administrators meeting in the Colorado Rockies. Nearly 700 church professionals were getting current on auditing practices, on tax and insurance matters, and on how to protect children from sexual predators—just some of the issues that place churches in what Sweet called “a high-risk environment.”

When churches reach an attendance level of about 500 or a yearly budget of \$1 million, they typically start thinking about hiring an administrator—“someone to mind the store and take care of the details,” as one administrator modestly put it.

A church administrator, who may or may not be ordained, has less visibility than a senior pastor, but he or she may juggle just as many different roles, from directing music and education ministries to handling personnel and property matters.

The job is “basically about teamwork,” said Paul Johnson, a Disciples of Christ clergyman who at different times has been either a pastor or an administrator. “You’re part of a ministry team working together for a common purpose.”

If church administration blends into the background at the local level, what about the low profile of the National Association of Church Business Administrators? The acronym NACBA is hardly familiar in church circles.

The decades-old group may not remain in obscurity much longer because of three factors: the group’s “exponential growth,” its informative surveys on church-staff salaries, and its striking ability to model cordiality and respect among Christians of

different denominations and ideologies.

“We conduct a nationwide church- staff compensation survey, which through the years has been our most popular product,” said Simeon May, chief executive officer of NACBA, in an interview at the group’s annual meeting at a mountain resort close to the Continental Divide. The online survey is “constantly being updated,” he said. “If a church fails to update its salary data after 15 months, they drop out of the calculations.”

Congregations can compare what their counterparts in size, budget, geographical region and denomination pay their music directors, office managers, youth directors and secretaries—and their senior and associate pastors.

“I was told recently by one of our members that he just received a \$10,000-a-year adjustment to his pay based solely on results of our compensation survey,” May said.

The organization also has a certification program for church administrators to assure congregations that job candidates have solid training and wide experience.

When NACBA holds its 50th-anniversary meeting in Chicago next summer, it expects its national membership will be over 3,000—compared to 1,100 in 1985 and 2,000 in the year 2000. That figure would be doubled if church administrators belonging only to local chapters were counted. While NACBA is largely a Protestant organization, the number of Catholic parish administrators may increase as priests are increasingly freed from management duties, officials said.

The organization is strongest in the nation’s Bible Belt although mainline Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians and Lutherans are heavily involved in NACBA at the national level. That hasn’t deterred a lot of evangelicals and Pentecostals from joining the group.

NACBA is “professionally the best, most relevant organization for my job,” said Riley Albertson, administrator for the Mississippi Avenue (Southern) Baptist Church in Aurora, Colorado. “It’s expensive to join,” said Albertson, but he has attended the last four national conferences on behalf of his nearly 600-member church because the workshops and resources help to “make people and God’s money safer.”

The organization is “without doubt, I think, the most ecumenically open organization in Christendom,” said Johnson, the Disciples cleric who is now minister of business administration in Dallas for the 3,400-member Wilshire Baptist Church, which is part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Johnson was NACBA president in 1999 and 2000.

“People here represent the broadest spectrum you can imagine in church theology,” he said. The current president is Merwin Pickney, administrator and member of the Woodlake Assembly of God in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Chairing the 2005 conference was “Spooky” Gilliam, from a Catholic parish outside Denver.

The largest group in the membership comprises Baptists of various stripes, followed by those from independent or nondenominational churches, then by large numbers of Presbyterians, United Methodists and Lutherans—most of the latter simply calling themselves “Lutherans” rather than citing affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or one of the other Lutheran bodies.

Administrators “come together because of the commonness of their work regardless of their theological underpinnings,” Johnson said. “Our problems are the same.” The worship services at national conferences “are amazing,” he said. “To see a Foursquare Gospel guy making the call to communion and a Catholic priest and Lutheran minister in the same service—it is something else!”

The group’s chief executive, May, is a Southern Baptist, while its number-two official, Phill Martin, is a former moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a body that continues to have strained relations with the SBC. “There is so much animosity and back-biting between churches and within them—we’ve certainly seen that with Southern Baptists—but under the NACBA umbrella there is a great spirit of cooperation and fellowship,” May said.

“We are not going to make everyone happy all the time,” he said, noting two complaints at last year’s conference. One conservative was very upset because a woman handling the music for the worship service was introduced as an ordained minister attending seminary. The other complaint was from a liberal group that was perturbed over evangelical pollster George Barna speaking to the conference from a conservative Christian worldview.

Martin, writing in NACBA’s quarterly magazine, which he has edited for five years, observed, “God is at work in every faith group but we don’t always act like we

believe it.”

Martin, who also manages the group’s educational programs and the Web site (www.NACBA.net), said members generally accept an ethos that avoids doctrinal disputes and culture-war debates. Martin said he once overheard a hallway discussion between two administrators on how their churches should treat or react to picketers on gay issues. Do you invite them in for refreshment, let them use restrooms, restrict their activities, call the police? One administrator was from a conservative church confronted by gay rights picketers; the other was from a welcoming and affirming congregation facing a demonstration by anti-homosexual activists, Martin said. The common issues were hospitality and safety, not social values.

The most crucial issue for administrators today is preventing child abuse. “This is an area where churches still struggle,” May said. “They are so vulnerable liability-wise.”

Besides providing resources and training, he said, NACBA encourages churches “to make sure they do background checks, that they follow the two-adult rule when children are around . . . and that anyone working with children has been in the congregation at least six months to get to know them.”

Discrepancy in pay for women is also a lingering issue in NACBA, 33 percent of whose members are female. Several years ago, the compensation survey showed that males got paid more than females in equivalent posts.

“We discovered that many women may have started out as church secretary or treasurer, gradually taking on more and more responsibility until they were truly doing the work of a full church business administrator,” said May. “Yet, because of their background, their compensation was not adjusted to the level of their male counterparts.”

One exception is Betty O’Neil, honored at the conference as the Church Business Administrator of the Year. O’Neil says she is given a fair package by St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where she has been full-time administrator since 1982. “Many women make far less than men,” she said, but added that her background included business college and management in the cement industry before she was hired by the Episcopal parish.

She’s not a member of St. Luke’s, however, and is often asked why. “My response is that I can worship so much better in a church [Methodist, in her case] where I don’t

work.” That doesn’t prevent her from being personally attached to the Episcopal congregation, O’Neil said, “but it does allow me to see the broader picture in my professional capacity.”