

Five Questions Every Resident Should Ask Before Signing An Employment Contract

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5 Questions to help Christian physicians choose a practice they can thrive in.

Don't settle for pat answers... Look for what is NOT said as much as what IS said.

You've waited for this moment a long time. After years of study, your eagerness must be hard to contain. All that delayed gratification is now ready for fulfillment. It's time to leave the world of academics and get your feet wet in practice. It's a time for great opportunities...and for great discernment.

I've had the pleasure of working with thousands of physicians as they face some of the most challenging business decisions private practices have to offer. Choosing the right partner is one of the most challenging. Life-changing decisions about with whom you will share your professional life need to be made on the basis of a few encounters. It is amazing how much weight rides on so little knowledge.

My experience includes observations about great partnerships and about disappointing choices. The potential for each seems to be heightened for Christian physicians, perhaps because they expect more from each other than those in many other business relationships. I've seen the assumptions people make about others to fill the gaps of what they can't know from the interview process, and have designed the following five questions to help Christian physicians choose a practice in which they can thrive.

1. What does it mean to you to be a Christian physician?

The question can take the discussion into a variety of sub-questions, each of which are likely to reveal more truth, more insight, about each other. Don't settle for pat answers about praying with patients or keeping a Bible in the waiting room. Look for what is NOT said as much as for what IS said. Look for corroborating evidence - actions that support the words. Draw out stories that demonstrate honest wrestling with the question and that show how they have discerned what being a Christian physician does NOT mean. Mature Christian physicians will likely understand the ambiguity in the phrase. They'll have a hard time knowing where "Christian" ends and "physician" begins, and vice versa.

2. How are Christian physicians to be stewards of their practice?

The practice is a financial and social resource, deserving of the kind of attention and care that a home and family require. Practice owners are stewards of cash flow and equipment just as much as of relationships with professional colleagues, patients, employees, and vendors. Wise stewards keep a balance in their personal and professional lives, manage their business affairs prudently, and nurture relationships in ways that model Christ.

3. What makes this practice different from others?

Market sustainability is no longer assured simply by being a competent physician. Every organization needs to understand how it fits in its community to be sustainable. Look for evidence beyond the personal opinions of the people in the room. Find out what other physicians and what patients have to say. A hundred-year-old concept in marketing is to look for an organization's "unique selling proposition" -

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Unveil their vision, expectations, and goals to see if yours are compatible to theirs.

the distinguishing factors that enable it to stand out from all the rest. It is the key to sustainability, and when it is understood well, it can enable the organization to thrive in all its purposes.

4. What stands in the way of this practice being all it can be?

Don't be afraid to delve into specifics about the profitability of the practice. Find out the leadership's agenda for improving the practice and how they plan to carry it out. Ask about how decisions are made, and about the weaknesses and strengths of governance structures and dynamics. Listen for the tone. Are physicians optimistic or not? Are the staff members excited to work there or putting in their time? Does limited competition allow the practice to become complacent? How is the practice keeping abreast of changing expectations in the community?

5. What do you hope this practice will become for the next generation of physicians?

The question itself can be jarring if the listeners are only thinking of their own careers. Their answer sets the stage for expectations for your relationship, and for the legacy the practice is to leave. It assumes that the practice exists for reasons beyond the comfort of its present owners. It assumes ministry purposes. If there are none, the blank look on the listeners face will tell it all. If genuine visionary ideas are hidden, they will be expressed with excitement.

6. What other questions should I be asking?

I know I said there were only five questions. Consider this a bonus in the spirit of generosity that I hope you will find in your potential partners. But this is what I sometimes call "the mother of all questions." It opens the door for transparent discussion about the issues that might otherwise be glossed over. It challenges the listeners to look deeper and to articulate more of their expectations than they might have if the question had not been asked.