

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Nepotism

Your field director's nephew is coming to teach at the international school for a year. Knowing that a long-term family will be returning to their passport country for a year, the field director assigns his nephew's family to their beautiful, large home for that year. If he does this, no one else will have to move unnecessarily. When the field director asks if you think that is a good idea, you agree that it is.

About a month later another family serving with you is really angry that the field director showed so much favoritism to his nephew. This family had already served three years of their four-year term, and they had hoped they could move into that beautiful home which was so much larger—and it had a pool as well. They start complaining about the blatant nepotism shown by the field director.

What is nepotism?

Nepotism is the showing of favoritism toward relatives based on that relationship rather than on objective factors such as ability or merit. For example, nepotism would be hiring a person with a master's degree in fashion design as an elementary principal because she is the niece of the school board chairman rather than hiring an applicant with a doctoral degree in education who has taught elementary school for a decade.

This family-based favoritism over competence often leads to low morale, low productivity, and a seeming lack of integrity to some.

Did it occur in Bible times?

Of course, it did. It was part of the Jewish culture in the Old Testament. In fact, it was the major factor in people becoming priests or kings.

The whole book of Leviticus details the system of laws governing the Levites. Priests had to be descendants of Aaron, brother of Moses, and of the tribe of Levi. Sometimes the children of priests were good, and at other times they were bad, unfit to be priests. The sons of Eli the priest (1 Samuel 1-4) were also serving as priests, but they treated the Lord's offering with contempt and seduced the women serving at the entrance to God's house. Nepotism did not lead to good.

Before Israel was ruled by kings, Gideon realized that political power should not depend on nepotism. When the Israelites asked Gideon, his son, and his grandson to rule over them, Gideon said he would not do so and neither would his son (Judges 8:22-23).

After Israel began being ruled by kings, the king's oldest son became the next king unless there was a coup. After division of the kingdom, the Northern Kingdom (Israel) had all evil kings. Nepotism did not lead to good. Sometimes a good king in the Southern Kingdom (Judah) had a good son, but other times the son was evil. Here are some examples from over 200 years of successive rulers of Judah.

- Uzziah, good (52 years, 2 Chronicles 26)
- Jotham, good (16 years, 2 Chronicles 27)
- Ahaz, evil (16 years, 2 Chronicles 28)
- Hezekiah, good (29 years, 2 Chronicles 29-32)
- Manasseh, evil (55 years, 2 Chronicles 33)
- Amon, evil (2 years, 2 Chronicles 33)

- Josiah, good (31 years, 2 Chronicles 34-35)

Did it occur in the church?

Of course it did. In fact, that is where the term “nepotism” originated. The Latin word *nepos* means “nephew” or “grandchild.” The suffix *-ism* comes from the favoritism popes showed to their relatives in appointing them to positions in the church.

Since the popes had taken vows of chastity and had no children of their own, they most often appointed their nephews (*nepos*) to become cardinals. The cardinals then chose a new pope when one died, and it was often another cardinal in the family—thus papal “dynasties.”

This practice began shortly after 1000 AD and continued until Pope Paul III appointed two nephews (one 14 years old and the other 16 years old) as cardinals. A papal bull in 1692 finally prohibited appointing more than one qualified relative as cardinal. The practice of promoting family members continues to some extent in many churches today.

Did it occur in missions?

It has been happening in missions since the second term of Christian missionary service (Acts 15:36-41). Paul proposed a second term to Barnabas, a teammate on their first term. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin, John Mark. Paul did not think it was wise to take someone who had deserted them during their first term. Paul and Barnabas parted company, and Barnabas took John Mark with him to a different place of service.

Nepotism still occurs in missions today, probably most often when third culture

kids (TCKs) want to return to the culture where they grew up—it is home to them! Of course, their parents (and perhaps other relatives) are often still there and are likely to be in leadership roles since they are more mature and have had more experience there than most others on the field. When the TCKs arrive, they often find that being a missionary on that field is quite different from being a TCK. Many of them are rather disappointed. Their parents may then favor them in attempt to make the experience better for their TCKs.

Is it really nepotism?

For it to actually be nepotism, the larger house or the position must be based on the person being a relative rather than based on other factors. Both Old and New Testaments forbid such favoritism.

- Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly (Leviticus 19:15).
- To show partiality in judging is not good (Proverbs 24:23).
- Keep these instructions without partiality and do nothing out of favoritism (1 Timothy 5:21).
- My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism (James 2:1).

Persons in authority making the decisions must be aware of temptation toward nepotism and make sure that decisions are for the good of all involved and are based on objective factors. They also must be aware of their own tendency to rationalize favoritism as being for the good of all when it is really based on what is good for their own relatives.

Other missionaries with less power must be aware of their own tendencies to take

things personally and believe that nepotism is involved when it really is not.

Is it only perceived as nepotism?

Giving a family a larger house with a pool so that others will not have to move is not nepotism. It is a matter of trying to help by causing as little disruption in people's lives as possible.

Nepotism is not involved in hiring family members who are the persons with the best qualifications, even if they are family members. If family members are excluded from the pool of applicants, one may be excluding the people best qualified for the job, and people often know more about their relatives' talents than others know.

However, everyone must realize that it is best to avoid even the appearance of evil. What people perceive becomes the "reality" to which they react. If the situation leads to low morale, low productivity, or a seeming lack of integrity, it should be evaluated for its effects.

What is the solution?

This is a very difficult problem because we want to avoid favoritism toward family members on the one hand and discrimination against family members on the other. About 40% of the states in the USA have nepotism laws against hiring people for state positions. The other 60% do not have such laws because they want to avoid discrimination.

Some corporations, educational institutions, and agencies have nepotism rules, but others do not. Treating people fairly is difficult when those making the decisions are obviously biased. Walking the fine line

between favoritism and discrimination is never easy, but here are some suggestions.

- The best "solution" is to not be in a position where nepotism can occur. That is, do not serve where you are supervising a family member or one is supervising you. However, since that is not always possible, the following may help.
- Acknowledge to yourself that nepotism does happen and that you could be guilty of it yourself. It is only "natural" for people to want the best for their own family members.
- Bring up to the group the possibility of nepotism happening. This brings it out into the open where it can be discussed by everyone.
- Talk with people on all sides of the question. Tell them that you want to be fair, guilty neither of favoritism toward family members nor of discriminating against them. Ask if they think you are doing either.
- Treat everyone applying exactly the same. Openly announce that positions, housing, and so forth are available and ask people to apply for them.
- Leave a paper trail. When you communicate via email or other written announcements, you have everything in writing. Follow up each oral communication (personal meeting, telephone or skype conversation) with a written summary.
- Get the opinion of a person not involved, someone outside your agency if possible. That way you have the unbiased judgments of an objective individual.

These may not prevent accusations of nepotism, but at least you have a record of your attempts to avoid it.

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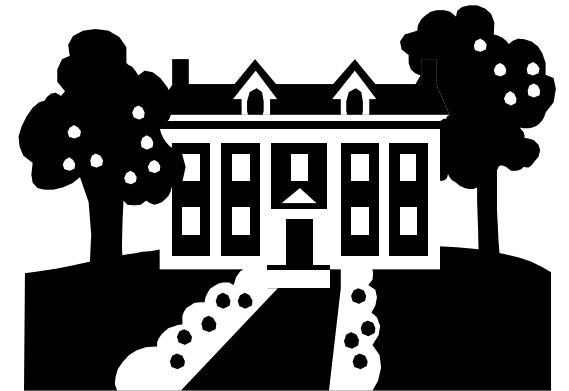
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