

November 2014

'you're fired'

How to be like Jesus and not Lord Sugar when you need to let staff go ...

Employing staff in the life of a church is a big challenge – but saying goodbye to staff in the life of a church is even worse! Over the last 20 years, I have had the privilege of working with some great colleagues. All were committed, hard-working and sincere Christians, but because they were also fallible human beings, it has also been necessary to face the unthinkable from time to time. Sometimes we have done this well as a church – sometimes we (and they) made huge mistakes which made the process more painful and damaging than it needed to have been.

'How you leave is how you will be remembered' is a sentiment I have repeated often. Sometimes a staff member will need to leave because of poor performance, inappropriate behaviour or just – and this is always the toughest – because the job has outgrown them. The challenge is to help a staff member to leave as well as possible. How?

'I release you in the Lord'

Bishop T.D. Jakes once used these words with a member of staff, and half an hour later, the person was back in his office asking if they had been sacked! So, let's be clear and generous, take our time and not rush. It helps if staff have an annual performance review as well as regular reviews during the year – but the process is as important as the outcome.

As church leaders we have several responsibilities – to God, his mission, the church and the individual staff member. There should be no surprises, so repeated chances to improve, discuss and review need to be given (and taken)

so the individual is as involved as possible. If however, it is clear that improvement is too hard – then the bullet needs to be bitten.

However, UK employment law is complicated and ever changing. Be prepared to go through due process. Keep good written records and be prepared to pay for good legal advice. We pay an annual fee to a firm who specialise in employment law, and it certainly is worth it!

Tell the people who need to know – but your duty is to maintain the integrity of the church.

Confidentiality is required for all concerned: the staff member, the church and the leadership. The basic rule is to tell people who are affected by the staff member's area of responsibility before any public announcement. But there may be limits on what you can say.

Try and agree a form of wording that both parties are happy with – that says as much as you can – and agree that that is the truth. You may need to trade versions over a period of time, but do not be rushed! Be clear, be truthful, and be generous. But when the time comes for a public announcement, ensure that you say it – **not** the staff member who is leaving. And if you hear the staff member telling a different story, don't be afraid to correct their version.

Be as generous as you can

As the employer, you are in a position of power and responsibility. The staff member



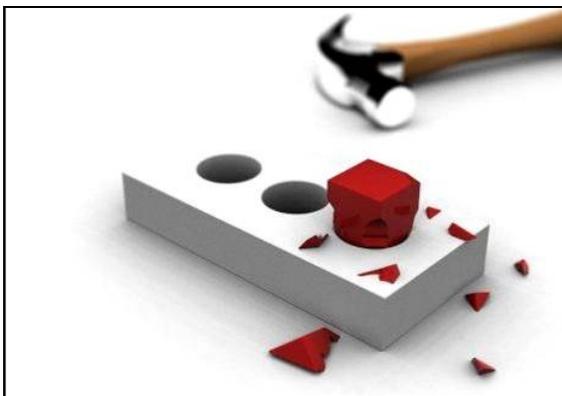
may feel hurt, vulnerable, angry and uncertain. Offer any help the church can – financially, in retraining, or in professional development. If relevant, be generous with outstanding holiday allowances or salary. If possible, celebrate what the staff member has contributed to the life of the church, and offer a farewell lunch or gift if appropriate.

Allow a time gap before you advertise for a replacement

Church jobs are not normal – people may well have grown attached to a particular youthworker or worship leader. Some time to celebrate and grieve can be helpful for the church – and the leader.

The end of a person's employment is also an opportunity to reflect on the requirements of the church and the ministry area. Do you want to replace like for like? Does the job specification need changing? I recently heard a helpful piece of advice 'Appoint for tomorrow, not for today.' Where do you think God is taking the church and what staff do you need to help you get there? The time when a staff member leaves can also be a helpful time to review salary and conditions. For example, is the notice period long enough or has a resignation left you exposed too quickly?

Don't be afraid of the hard conversations



Conflict is part of life – and church life in particular – but something that many church leaders struggle with. Learning how to handle it, and realising why you feel about it as you do, is a very important skill and insight to acquire. If the staff member in question is not leaving well, it may well be that you have to apply something like 'gardening leave' for the sake of the team and the church. Remember, your responsibility is to maintain the integrity of the church and the health of the staff team.

Recognise that what is good for one season may not be for the next.

One of the most painful situations is when a staff member has served faithfully, conscientiously and well, but the needs of the church have changed.

The job has outgrown them and you need a different skill set or level of performance. Given the size of most church teams in the UK, it is very difficult to move a person sideways into a different role. In my experience, these have been some of my most difficult decisions and conversations.

A growing church will require a growing staff

I am a firm believer that every Christian is a minister – every Christian has spiritual gifts – and is required to discern them and use them, in the Church and in the world. However, the reality too is that as a church grows, the number of staff required will need to increase too. It is not a sign of success, simply a reality that needs facing. Our policy is to employ a staff member when a ministry area grows too big for a volunteer to lead, and both begin to suffer. Knowing the right time to appoint or dismiss staff needs wisdom, prayer and clear communication. Likewise, employing staff brings a responsibility to invest in the staff members and help them develop. Do you have a plan for continuing professional development or regular sabbaticals? All our ministry staff are eligible to have a five week sabbatical every four years. We want them refreshed and growing!

'The more staff you employ, the more sin you get'

This was the insightful piece of advice I received from one of our church leaders. It came in the middle of a disciplinary process that was heart-breaking and deeply hurtful for the church and the individual concerned. But staff members are not saints – they are simply fallen human beings like the vicar who leads the staff team. Assume nothing – follow your instincts – and don't be afraid to lovingly confront behaviour or habits that are unhelpful to the individual, team or the church. Thankfully, you are not Lord Sugar or Donald Trump – but then the church staff are not your apprentices, they are disciples of Jesus. And ultimately you, and them, are accountable to him!

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