



Exit interviews for everyone

TN95 Training Notes series: Management

These notes were first published on the website in October 2016 and last updated in September 2022. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Many people in employment will be used to the idea of an exit interview. This is a meeting, usually with a member of the HR staff, for feedback as someone leaves their job.

The idea is to help the employer learn from any mistakes made and, often, to understand why the employee is leaving as part of an effort to reduce staff turnover. There is also the opportunity to thank the employee for their contribution and wish them well for the future. It is supposed to show that the employer cares.

These notes suggest how this idea can be applied to a church staff team (where the practice is not so common). But they then extend the idea to exit interviews for Ministers (which would be a novel idea) and members of the congregation who are leaving (again, not so common). The recommendation is that exit interviews become a normal feature for churches in all three cases.

General principles

Exit interviews need to be planned and carried out with sensitivity and care. This section applies to all three of the categories: staff, Ministers and members of the congregation who leave.

- You want people to be honest with you so that will affect the choice of the interviewer who then needs to be able to relax the person being interviewed by showing they are there to listen, not to defend the church from criticism.

- Decide for Ministers and congregational members whether you interview them on their own, or as a married couple if applicable (or even with their children if they are old enough to understand the process).
- In any of our three cases, the person may be leaving in a situation of heightened emotion. Will their views be taken at face value or set aside if that lets the church off a difficult application? The interviewer needs to be confident enough to handle anything from an angry outburst to distraught tears.
- Give the interviewee good notice not only of time and date but reasons for the interview and how the results will be used, so they have time to prepare. You might give them an outline of the questions you intend to ask.
- You need to be up-front about how the results of the interview will be used. What level of confidentiality is there? If the person is critical of the Minister or a line manager, who will be told? It is worth checking this back at the end of the interview.
- Try not to make it too intense and do not let it go on for too long: 45 minutes as a maximum. Meet on neutral ground rather than at the church. Never conduct the interview by phone or email.
- Ask permission to take outline notes – but let the person go off record from time to time if they want this.
- Although only a few outline questions are given below, it may be the extra comments and supplementaries that give the best information. The interview needs to be able to judge when to probe a little deeper after an answer, and when it is best to leave it there. The interview must not come across as a tick-box exercise.
- Use the questions here as a guideline not as a strait-jacket. Keep all your questions open (ie. so they do not permit the simple answers 'yes' or 'no'). Do not ask "Did you enjoy your time here?" (a closed question) but "What aspects of church life have you most enjoyed here?" (an open question).
- Encourage the person to give specific examples rather than just make general points. If they say, "This church is uncaring," ask "Can you give me some specific examples where you felt we were uncaring?"
- Any exit interview needs to be conducted with prayer – and it would be good if the interview finished in this mode. But be careful about silencing a view or promising too much in the way you pray. Any prayers said need to be as sensitive as every other aspect of the process.
- At the end of the interview thank the person concerned and offer an apology if you feel this is necessary, without grovelling.
- If people realise that nothing ever happens as a result of these interviews, they will rightly be unwilling to take part. If they see action, they will normally be happy to help. So the interviewer needs to hold some responsibility for the process from here.

1: Exit interview for paid staff

This is the setting that will be familiar to many people – although they may well not have come across it in a church before. In these cases the interview would normally be with the one member of staff concerned.

It should be carried out if at all possible by someone with the necessary skills who is not the Minister or their line manager (as the member of staff may well have issues they would not raise directly to their manager's face). But in a small church or where relationships are strong and the member of staff agrees, this does not have to hold. In any case it should be someone who then has the confidence to put across any bad news to church leaders and to ensure that any necessary action is taken.

Questions you might ask (you may need to reference these questions both to the person's specific ministry and to the church as a whole):

- 1 What have you appreciated most about being a staff member here?
- 2 What do you feel have been your greatest achievements in that time? In what ways have you developed as a disciple of Jesus?
- 3 What have you had to struggle with most of all? (Or: What has been your greatest particular disappointment?) What can we learn from that?
- 4 What have you learned that has prepared you for future ministry? How can you pass that on to us before you leave so we benefit from what you have discovered?
- 5 What one thing might we change to help your successor find this a better place to work for than now?
- 6 What one lesson would you like your line manager to understand to help them improve in managing staff?

That will be quite enough to form the basis for one 30-45 minute interview. It may lead to all kinds of other issues arising or it may all be quite curt. But a good interview, however the member of staff is feeling, should be relaxed enough for this to be an honest discussion rather than a tense, tick-box exercise.

2: Exit interview for a Minister

Now to slightly more controversial ground. If you exit interview staff, why not the Minister when he or she moves on?

In many churches of course the church does not employ the Minister so this has to be a permissive exercise. I am not aware of this exercise being carried out by many churches (please tell me if your church does so) so be aware that this is not normal procedure.

A Minister in his or her time in a church, will often hear much criticism of their work from a range of sources. An exit interview gives a chance for the church itself to hear how they have come across to the Minister. It is therefore vital that the church leadership take this exercise seriously.

You might extend the interview to include the Minister's spouse if applicable – and if they are happy for this.

In these cases it might make sense for the interview to be carried out by one of the senior lay leaders (Church Wardens, Elders, Trustees or whoever) rather than by a disinterested third party.

Questions you might ask (as variations on the set for staff above):

- 1 What have you (and your family) appreciated most about being Minister here?
- 2 What do you feel you can celebrate as your greatest achievements in that time in the life of the church and in your own personal discipleship?
- 3 What have you (both) had to struggle with most of all? (Or: What has been your greatest particular disappointment?) What can we learn from that?
- 4 What one message would you like to leave with us all to help us move forwards when you leave?
- 5 What might we as a leadership change, whether in attitude or practical action, to help your successor flourish here?
- 6 What might we as a whole church change, whether in attitude or practical action, to help your successor flourish here?

3: Exit interview for a member of the congregation

The tone of the interview may differ depending on whether this is someone moving away from the area and so having to move on from the church, or someone who is leaving because they have decided to join another church locally or they are dropping out of church membership altogether. In all these cases it is important that the church addresses how to say good-bye well – see Training Notes TN27, *Saying good-bye to church members*, for further thinking on this wider issue.

In the last two cases an exit interview, provided it is handled well, could form part of any necessary healing process if people have been hurt. But there is also the danger that it achieves little because the people are too timid to be honest. It is therefore vital that the interviewer (not the Minister) can relax the person and help them share honestly.

If people have left and you have not had the opportunity for an interview like this, it is not too late. Say you would like to meet them to talk about why they left a year ago because the church wants to learn lessons.

It would be wise to avoid the language of 'exit interviews' in this case. Talk, perhaps, about a 'conversation to help the church learn lessons', or something like that.

Questions/requests you might ask/make:

- 1 What areas of our church's life do you reckon are strengths that we should develop?
- 2 Tell me about a time when you benefited from or contributed most satisfactorily as a member of this church.
- 3 Which areas of our church's life or programme do you feel we need to reconsider, change in some way or bring to a close?
- 4 Tell me about any time when you were personally hurt or upset and help us learn from this experience.

- 5 What do you wish you had done or thought differently over any aspect of church life during your time here? How could the church have helped you grow more as a disciple while you were a member?
- 6 What are the main reasons for your leaving this church and, if applicable, what do we need to learn from those?

What happens next?

If these exit interviews become routine and nothing happens as a result they will be a sham. So you need to have a clear process that the findings go to an appropriate person or body and that there is a willingness to make changes if necessary.

The findings may prove distinctly uncomfortable. The risk then for the Minister or other leaders is to become over-defensive. "Well, they were never in the centre of church life so we are not surprised they are so critical." The first need is to listen carefully to what has been expressed (which may well not have been easy to say). Don't react immediately – let it sink in for a week. Then think of what lessons might be learned.

Better still, collect six months or one year of such input (in the congregational case) and analyse it together: what lessons are coming out that cannot be put down to one awkward person's grouses? What is God saying in all this? What should you do now?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN95. See also Article A32, *Be creative as a line manager*, and Training Notes TN27, *Saying good-bye to church members*, TN30, *How to give and receive criticism*, and TN114, *How to prepare a church profile*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of any kind of advice on staff or volunteer management.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN95 under Management.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>