



Square pegs in round holes

TN36 Training Notes series: Management

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What do you do when the person and their (unpaid) job in the church just don't fit together? Perhaps it was always like that for those you have in mind. Perhaps they were great in this role ten years ago, but now they have grown tired, or old, or out of touch in some way. But they have not resigned.

There are no easy answers but here are some suggestions to help you plan what to do. As always, further ideas from readers are welcome.

Five things to consider first

It's easy to let this become an emotive issue, so begin by sitting down quietly and analysing the situation.

- 1 Who says the person is wrong for the job or the job for the person? Make sure this is the considered view of wise leaders, not just of yourself alone.
- 2 What is the present effect on:
 - a the person (is he or she suffering or blissfully unaware of any problem)?
 - b the whole church (are others suffering)?Try to get the issue into the right perspective.
- 3 What effect would a change have on:
 - a the person?
 - b the whole church?Who might be hurt or thrilled, destroyed or liberated?
- 4 How has this situation arisen? It might well be the church's fault (eg. you asked for volunteers and got unsuitable people or you failed to provide training). Perhaps you are a small church and felt you had no other option but to choose this person.

- 5 What do you think might matter most to God:
- a business efficiency or pastoral needs?
 - b the needs of this individual or the needs of others in the church?

Six case studies

Spot the problems in each of these scenarios. For each of them ask the five questions above. This is best done as a group exercise.

- 1 Andy and Ali have been home group leaders for 15 years. They used to be brilliant but have lost their enthusiasm. They keep the group ticking over but it has become inward-looking and rather too much of a social club. Neither of them turns up to the bimonthly leaders' meetings and they seem to make no use of the study notes from Sunday sermons which the church provides for groups to use. Their group is going nowhere and you would not want to recommend it for new members.
- 2 Bridget has been teaching the 7 to 11 year olds for just as long. She is ever so keen and her enthusiasm is infectious. She claims to love this work and puts hours into preparation week by week. But she is out of touch with today's kids and runs the group like a 1970's Bible class, which is what she remembers from her childhood. She has no links with modern-day education. The children hate going and try to avoid attending church at all. Their parents are tearing their hair out and no one knows what to do.
- 3 Connie volunteered a year ago for the rota of morning lesson-readers. She lives a rather repressed life under a controlling husband and has longed for the chance to do something up-front, so when the church asked for volunteers to join the reading rota she offered at once. Everyone loves her for who she is but reading in public just isn't her gift. It is really quite painful to hear her stumble over words and she often gets the sense of the passage quite wrong. She does not seem to realise this and has now asked to help at the evening service too.
- 4 Darren would be the ideal leader for the Outreach Team. He is young, single, enthusiastic, holding down a responsible job at work and an extrovert who has a great gift of talking naturally about his faith. But he's on the Church Council and a couple of their working groups. He says he can't cope with any more because he has to bring office work home with him most nights. The Outreach Team quietly folds.
- 5 Ed is a thorough Treasurer but since the church suddenly came alive last year he finds himself spiritually out of step with the other leaders. He is an old-school accountant but the church finances are in excellent order and everyone trusts him because he is so reliable. People always tell him he is a marvellous Treasurer – and in many ways he is. But he no longer comes to the prayer group, often misses Sunday services, and was the only person to vote against a plan to extend the building because he felt they would never raise the money from giving alone.
- 6 Faith is 35, unemployed and a manic-depressive. Her lifeline is the voluntary job of folding the news-sheet in the church office each Friday. She loves to come in for a chat, although the folding then suffers and is never that accurate. The Church Secretary is a perfectionist and could do it much better himself. But Faith insists and keeps promising to do it better – but with no sign of this happening. So the Secretary now has a cunning plan to buy a better copier that will do the folding too.

Three longer-term needs

What follows is the ideal to aim for, although small churches will have problems in staffing even the most basic activities.

1 **Practise a more thorough approach to selection**

Practical service should be as much to do with growing disciples as getting the task done. Simply asking for volunteers shows that the church fails to give the necessary time to helping Christians discover how they fit into God's plan. This certainly takes time because it is essentially a personal and pastoral job to select (and even interview) the people who could be God's person for this job at this moment.

Furthermore, it should be the norm that Christians hold a position for no more than a few years before moving on to new challenges. This concept of 'short-term contracts' avoids putting people under undue pressure. It means that many more will be ready to serve. But, again, its organisation takes much time.

2 **Teach a more selfless approach to service**

In Christian ministry everyone should expect on-going support, training, and appreciation. But there also needs to be gentle, positive, regular assessment by others (who should be clearly defined) and the expectation of redeployment. Everyone needs L plates in Christian ministry and no job should become the property of one individual. Churches need to promote a culture of service, not status. Understudies should be the norm, ready for a smooth handover.

3 **Adopt a more radical approach to activities**

Too many churches today rate themselves by their level of activity rather than by their quality of holiness. God cannot want every local church to do everything the Christian world is currently enthusing about. Yet small churches try to ape their larger sisters even though they do not have the resources to do so.

Churches need to take an honest view of people's gifts and time availability, perhaps appointing someone who can oversee this. Most churches need to prune their list of activities. What matters most must be witness out in the world rather than internal comforts.

Seven pointers to help you now

"That's all very well," you say. "But I want help right now for Andy and Ali, for Bridget, Connie, Darren, Ed and Faith."

1 **Prayer**

Put prayer at the heart of all action. Most of these cases are not straightforward and you need God's wisdom to find the way ahead. But be ready for God to show you a surprising solution if necessary.

2 **Team**

Ensure that a leadership team agrees the action to take, rather than leaving one person, such as the Minister, to carry the responsibility and the risk of emotional comeback alone.

3 **Respect**

Talk to the people concerned openly and honestly. Don't dodge the issue. This needs to be done privately and sensitively. Treat the person with all due care and respect.

4 **Space**

Paint the picture as you see it and then give them space to consider it: days, possibly weeks. Ask for their considered opinion rather than stating your solution too soon. Try to help people find the answers themselves.

5 **Win-Win**

Help them to see that everyone can benefit from whatever is being suggested. Explain graciously why the change might help both them and the whole church.

6 **Future**

Aim for something positive for them: new areas of service to move on to, fresh challenges, something that only they can do. There must be a positive next step.

7 **Everyone**

Take the spotlight off them by putting change into a context of revision of roles throughout the church and so fresh challenges for everyone.

One way to plan for a more radical approach

Article A43 on this website, *Every member on active service*, sets the scene for the more thorough approach to selection recommended above as the first of the three longer-term needs. This offers five action points:

- Make someone responsible
- Think different approaches
- Ensure people fit roles
- Develop training for all
- Design an effective plan.

The section on ensuring people fit roles adopts what should be a better approach than a traditional request for volunteers with ten lenses through which to view people's suitability and a description of the SHAPE and Network schemes.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN36. See also Article A43 as above and Training Notes TN15, *How not to delegate!*, TN24, *Church members can burn out too*, TN100, *Why some offer, why some don't*, and TN139, *Church workers in teams*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on working with volunteers.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow and cover the six categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN36 under Management.

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