



Saying good-bye to church members

TN27 Training Notes series: Management

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Closeknit Community Church lost two of their key families last year.

Mike and Monica retired and moved to a new area 200 miles away. The church organised a farewell party one Saturday night. There was a generous presentation at their final Sunday service, an extended interview in the newsletter, and many letters and cards. Closeknit Community are renowned for their love and care so they wanted to make a big fuss.

Mike and Monica were overwhelmed. They felt wonderful, even though it was a sad time.

Six months later Pete and Pamela also left Closeknit Community. After 12 years of loyal support they felt they could no longer cope with one particular direction the church was going in.

They had prayed long about it, they had held on for months, they had talked it through with the Minister, they had wept at the thought of moving away from their friends. In the end they explained the position to a few who knew them well, wrote a thoughtful letter to the Elders to explain, and started attending a Baptist church a few miles away.

They felt desperately guilty.

The Minister acknowledged their letter – by email. When people started noticing their absence, the Elders explained that Pete and Pamela had left for another church. The general view developed that they had let the side down, that they were out of tune with where God was leading.

The matter was soon forgotten. When the Church Secretary saw Pamela in town one day he crossed to the other side of the road.

What would your church have done?

Be prepared

Most churches can handle the Mike and Monica situation, although whether all are consistent in their actions is not so certain. Few know what to do with Pete and Pamela.

These notes are not necessarily arguing for easier transfer between churches. Christians in today's culture are in danger of devaluing church membership and allowing people to move whenever they feel like a change.

But when people do move out of conviction this too often leaves a sour taste in everyone's mouth. Churches just don't know how to say good-bye. Those who are moving feel guilty, their former church friends are embarrassed, and the new church may feel uncomfortable as they pick up the transfer.

No one wants anyone to leave but when they do are we prepared for how to bid farewell with grace so that relationships are not soured. It needs more than goodwill – perhaps some kind of policy and plan in place – so you are not caught out next time it happens.

More examples

It is not just the Pete and Pamela's of this world. Take Phyllis, a widow in her 70s and another long-standing member of Closeknit Community. She has been a member for most of her life, spends an hour every day praying for the church and its leadership, and gave one of the largest donations to the building fund a year ago amounting to a very significant proportion of her savings. But no one knows about the prayer and only the Treasurer knows about the gift.

The trouble is that Phyllis, naturally, is not one of Closeknit's 'key families'. She lives alone, does not run any activity and sits quietly at the back of services. Her only visible piece of service is to help on the coffee rota – but that apparently doesn't count.

Then Phyllis, needing support and care, moves away to live with her daughter and son-in-law down South. No one notices other than a few of her friends – and the Treasurer.

Towards the other end of the age spectrum, consider Pradeesh who comes to the Closeknit youth group on Sunday evenings. The group only has a handful of members and not everyone comes each Sunday evening. So every member really does matter to the church.

Then a bright new church plant opens up in the city centre, with resources Closeknit Church can only dream of, staff financed externally and worship bands to attract a large congregation of under 30s. Pradeesh finds that so much more attractive than what Closeknit can offer and disappears. The youth leader despairs of the situation. But no one has the grace, even if at considerable cost, to say good-bye in an appropriate way.

But would *your* church do any better? Do you have, to give it a grand name, an exit strategy (read Training Notes TN95, *Exit interviews for everyone*, for more on this)? Or, in simpler language, do you know how to say good-bye properly and appropriately to everyone who leaves?

So, what might you do in Phyllis' case, and for Pradeesh? Discuss!

Ideas and questions to help you forward

Here are some ideas for starters.

- 1 Read James 2:1-13. How might your church be showing favouritism in the way it allows different types of members to leave? Should it make any difference whether the leavers are:
 - long-standing members or recent joiners;
 - office-holders or not;
 - parents plus five kids or a single person;
 - easy people to get on with or problem characters;
 - going into so-called 'Christian ministry' or not;
 - looking for recognition or wanting to slip away quietly?

- 2 Have a policy on rites of passage for how you say good-bye to 'members' (however you define that word) who are moving away from the area for some reason. Consider which of these might be appropriate and whether this should be from the whole church or the smaller groups they belong to:
 - card signed by all;
 - present (of what kind of value?);
 - presentation in a main service;
 - party or celebration of some kind;
 - letter from the leadership;
 - practical help in finding a new church;
 - introduction to their new church.

Think too about what to do about those who leave temporarily such as students going to university or those going abroad for a year. How do you stay in touch with them while they are away?

- 3 Consider the rite of passage for those who are leaving to join another local church or just wanting out, full stop. Take Pete and Pamela in the case study above. Here are some questions to ask.
 - a What should be the normal plan for all the bullet points in No. 2 above, especially helping them to find and settle in a new church?
 - b Is there any way that local Ministers can work together to agree to welcome transfers provided there has been a proper farewell from the previous church?
 - c How can you help people to leave with dignity and without guilt, yet not make it seem that moving from one church to another is a commendable idea?
 - d Is it more important that people are welcome in *the* Church or *your* church?

- 4 Consider how to avoid missing some people out (including children). Also, how to notice the person whose attendance is becoming less frequent. What action might be appropriate at this point before it is too late? And how do you cope with kangaroos: those people who are for ever hopping from church to church, never finding the perfect fellowship they long for?

So, can people leave your church with dignity and will you show real love to them as they do so? Don't rely on the idea that yours is such a friendly church. My experience is that the more a church claims to be friendly, the more *unfriendly* it can be to the newcomer, the oddball and the one who does not toe the correct line.

I saw a Pete and Pamela situation a little while ago. After a pause of indecision the church got a card signed by everyone and made a presentation at a packed Sunday tea party (to the couple and to their children). The Minister had written and spoken to the leaders of their new church. The transfer was made in a very positive manner. It wasn't free of pain, but there was a clear rite of passage.

One family, who had earlier made a similar transfer between the same two churches but in the opposite direction, said they wished the same could have been done for them. They still felt awkward about quietly slipping away. So, what about your church?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN27. See also Training Notes TN95, *Exit interviews for everyone*. For guidance on establishing a Newcomers' Team, for churches that want to think 'welcome' and 'farewell' together, see Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*. On related themes see Article A31, *Helping people back to church*, plus Training Notes TN86, *Customer care for churches?*, and TN134, *Integrate your newcomers*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN27 under Management.

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