



The small-church administrator

TN126 Training Notes series: Administration

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From time to time I am asked how you can appoint a Church Administrator in a really small church, or a group of small churches, where such a formal post seems out of scale and where money may be short.

This might be a rural benefice, circuit or equivalent where there is only one stipendiary (or salaried) Minister shared between half a dozen churches. Or perhaps an inner-city or estate church with a small congregation where the idea of a Parish Administrator would sound rather too grand.

I am going to assume there is no church office as such, or only a rudimentary one designed more as a work-station than the hub of church life. I have a solo Minister in mind.

So here are seven ways to think, all expressed in the format 'A rather than B'.

1 **Assistant rather than Administrator**

The model of a 'Church or Parish Administrator' based in the 'Church Office' is not appropriate here. Instead of someone who serves, primarily, the church, think instead of someone who serves, primarily, the Minister. So the idea of an 'Assistant to'.

I realise there is a danger of making the whole structure Minister-centric, but that is where things are at in many small churches, especially in rural and inner-city or estate areas. So the idea here is to have someone working alongside the Minister, freeing them up for their proper role by handling as much as possible of the admin that comes their way. In a small rural or urban church there is still a great deal of admin that lands on the Minister's desk and is in danger of stifling what their real role should be.

Much of this would be handled in a larger church by a paid Administrator and by a range of professional members of the congregation with the required skills and experience. But you need a different model for the small church.

2 **Gofer* rather than Secretary**

This Assistant does not have to be solely concerned with secretarial work. What they need to be doing is work that the Minister does not have to do themselves and which takes time and perhaps bother.

One example might be phoning round a group of people to sort out a meeting date and time. You might want to use a digital tool such as a doodle poll but in the churches I have in mind you may have people without internet access so that may not work. It can be tedious ringing round and finding people are out when sorting out a meeting. An Assistant can take that off the Minister.

But other tasks come to mind. A busy Minister who is single and overrun with work might appreciate someone to mow the lawn or sort out the study. Or why not ask the Assistant to pick up the kids from school on a day when the Minister has to deal with an unexpected pastoral crisis? Much will depend, though, on what the Assistant is happy to do and no one should be put in an awkward or difficult position,

So, get away from the idea of a Secretary, and think instead of a holy Gofer – someone who is utterly reliable and who can undertake specific tasks that free up the Minister.

*Gofer or gopher, either spelling is permissible, means 'a person who runs errands, especially on a film set or in an office, a dogsbody' (COD). But think here of someone with real responsibility, a 'Godsbody', for what I have in mind – see 3 below. The idea I want to promote is the running of errands more than deskwork.

3 **Responsibilities rather than tasks**

But, in spite of the term 'gofer', that does not mean anyone can do this job – quite the opposite! The biggest mistake I see in churches that I have in mind here is when someone with limited ability offers to help and is accepted with gratitude. Be careful! They may have little IT experience, be unable to drive a car, make mistakes, or fail to understand how the Minister ticks.

Because you are a small church you set your sights low on ability – but this is wrong-headed thinking! Such appointments may end up causing more frustration than solution, and minimal benefit because of the constant need to supervise.

It is vital that the person selected for this kind of role can take real responsibility and be admired for their wisdom, efficiency and engagement with the Minister. You want someone to whom you can confidently delegate issues that require tact, clear thinking, excellent communication skills or high levels of software application.

You need someone to whom you can give 'responsibilities' and trust them to deliver, not a person who needs simple 'tasks' spelling out day by day. Competence and reliability are key requirements.

4 **Home rather than office**

I have already made the point that there is unlikely to be a proper Church Office but it may be more sensible to think in terms of the Assistant having a home or virtual office. They will need to come to the Minister's home from time to time but there is no real need for them to have a work base there.

Instead think in terms of how modern tech can be used to allow the Assistant to work from wherever they are. The one time they may need to come to a specific location will be to use equipment such as a photocopier or binder.

This means of course that the Assistant owns a laptop and has a home with enough space for a work base that does not interfere too much with their personal life.

5 **Flexible rather than fixed**

This kind of appointment is unlikely to work well if the Assistant can only offer two hours each Monday and Friday morning, for example. It calls for something more flexible than this. The benefit will only be fully realised if they have enough freedom in their week to work for the Minister when needed. That is almost certain to vary week by week.

This may mean having to fit round the Minister's diary or being available out of office hours to phone people out at work during the day. It will imply having time available for when there is work to be done rather than the Minister having to spend their time packaging work into fixed slots during the week.

Few people can be totally flexible in this way, but the ideal would be someone who has the scope and availability to work in different patterns week by week.

It is also unlikely to work well for very few hours in a week. Someone who can offer five or more hours a week should be fine, but the ideal might be more like eight or ten.

6 **Voluntary rather than paid**

The ideal would be the availability of funds to pay for such an appointment for a few hours each week, but I am going to assume this is unlikely to be the case for many Ministers of small churches. There is also the issue of employment and all the legislation involved as well as PAYE.

It is also possible that the church would not authorise such an appointment if taken to the Church Council or equivalent, and that this needs to be more of a private arrangement between the Minister and the Assistant, although this is not ideal.

So it is likely that this will work best with a volunteer, even though that means lack of legislative control over them. But the kind of flexibility that has been suggested would make this a better way forward anyway. The post envisaged is more likely to be one of personal relationship and trust for both Minister and Assistant.

7 **Limited rather than open-ended**

But there is one issue where some employment restriction might be no bad idea and that concerns the length of appointment. If you have a voluntary post with very little structure around it, it can become very difficult to draw the arrangement to a close when the time comes. The difficulty will be more acute if the Minister and Assistant are, or have become, good friends in working together.

It may prove that the appointment is not working out as well as had been hoped, and either the Minister or the Assistant feel it would be better to close it down or find someone else. But if there are no guidelines designed for such a situation it might be embarrassing to talk in these terms.

Or it may be that the church grows and the model of a Parish Administrator becomes more appropriate. Again, it could be awkward to bring this arrangement to an end and then appoint a salaried Administrator.

So it might well be sensible for both Minister and Administrator to agree on a fixed term appointment which can then be reviewed and renewed or brought to an end.

Something of this kind for a volunteer is wise and adds a degree of discipline to what can otherwise be a very open-ended arrangement.

A final note

Well, that is all very well, you may say, but how do I find this incredible, able angel who is prepared to work all hours for no pay? No, it is not easy, but here are the places to consider. In all this beware jumping at anyone who offers. The above points should have made it clear that there can be people who are not going to offer the benefit you need for this post.

- 1 **The congregation** – this will be the first base for search in the hope that there may be a Christian who would see this as their area of practical service for the church. This might be someone who is retired but still full of energy with some professional organisational background. Or it could be a parent whose children are now at school with time on their hands and not needing a second salary in the family.
- 2 **The local community** – it does not have to be a member of your congregation and might suit someone who is a member of another church or who has no faith as such but who is happy to work in your context and with your values. There are clear disadvantages here in that they will not meet your congregation on a Sunday and so might remain faceless. But it could work.
- 3 **Another local church** – it may be that someone in a much larger church in a nearby town would see this as a form of Christian service. So it would be worth promoting the need to larger churches (of all denominations) within a reasonable distance.

Before announcing this, it would be wise to produce a role description and person profile for such a post, based on what I have written above. Otherwise you lay yourself open to unsuitable offers or misunderstandings. Article A6 in the Resources section of my website will help you here – but, for a volunteer, keep it very simple.

Finally, remember that it may be worth waiting rather than appointing someone who proves unsuitable in some way. Follow my seven suggestions and I hope that you will find the right person.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN126. This item was originally written in a slightly longer form for the magazine, *Maintenance and Equipment News*.

See also Article A42, *What do Church Administrators do?* plus Training Notes TN40, *Appointing an Administrator*, and TN112, *Set my leaders free!*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN126 under Administration.

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