



Planning the next step

TN133 Training Notes series: Planning

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Most churches are only too relieved to fill a volunteer vacancy and so rarely go on to consider now what to do when the next changeover occurs.

When a member of staff announces their resignation it often takes churches by surprise.

Those who organise a major event are so focused on its delivery that they rarely think ahead to a proper follow-up process.

We are not good at what is called 'succession planning'.

So here are some realistic ideas to give this topic the attention it deserves. I have in mind how to prepare for when:

- a church office-holder or team leader resigns;
- a paid staff member announces they are leaving;
- a church project or event comes to an end;

and perhaps the most obvious one of all:

- the Minister moves on.

But, first and over everything, put prayer first. It should not need to be stated, but our planning is an exercise in seeking God's plan not our own ideas. This must permeate everything recommended in these notes.

Ten ideas for action now

1 **Get planning onto the church agenda**

This is an issue of the mind. The church culture needs to include the idea that you are always thinking ahead to the next stage. Even if you do not have an easy answer, and you often will not, it should become second nature to ask, 'What happens next?'

Have a listing of church roles where the question is asked at a fixed point each year, or an official planning group or office-holder whose job it is to ask the question about every aspect of church life.

Don't be put off by those who complain that it is hard enough to find anyone to fill any vacancy let alone have the successor in mind, or that it is wrong to plan. Embed the idea in how you think.

2 **Appoint No. 2's for office-holders and team leaders**

A No. 2 does not have to be assumed to take over when the No. 1 goes as some people who are brilliant No. 2's do not shine as No. 1's. But at least it gives the idea that you have in mind both support and short-term succession. It also means there is a natural point of contact when the No. 1 is away or unavailable.

The No. 2 may well be an apprentice, someone who is inexperienced, who needs mentoring and practical training. So a No. 2 Treasurer may not have the experience and understanding to step into the Treasurer's shoes permanently but could at least keep systems running during a vacancy.

3 **Maintain updated handover papers**

We often prepare a hand-over paper when passing the baton to a successor, but if you have them ready at all times you do not need a sudden burst of writing just when you are about to leave. This applies to office-holders but also to organisers of major events. This is covered in Training Notes TN131, *Helpful handover documents*.

4 **Have a training budget**

This demonstrates that you are prepared to invest in training and that you encourage those who serve on teams to seek out training to develop their skills. This might be training in leadership, or training in the specifics required for the ministry in question. It makes the point that you expect people to grow into roles and be ready for new responsibility.

5 **Insist on limited term appointments**

One of the key ways of thinking is to assume every voluntary appointment is for a limited term: one to five years and renewable. If this is the norm then the idea of succession planning also becomes natural.

This involves a considerable amount of work to oversee such a system (eg. if every home group leader serves for three years) but it may be better for a church to attempt less but do it better and to show there is real support for its voluntary workers.

6 **Overlap appointments if you can**

Whether a voluntary role or a paid staff post, a handover period for, say, a month can be valuable. The new leader should beware simply copying what the outgoing leader has been doing, but the handover period may help them see what does need to change.

For a paid post there is of course a cost implication. For a voluntary post a handover may not be possible if the previous leader has already moved away. But if it can be arranged it gives an opportunity to smooth over the transition.

7 **Build in follow-up to all church events**

Consider a mission week or a church weekend away. What happens once everyone goes home?

Someone should be planning how to make the most of what happened and what you all learned. Otherwise the value of the event itself may be completely dissipated.

Can you plan a series of sermons to carry on the theme in the weeks that follow, or set up a group to ensure that good ideas at the event are not lost? All this needs to be done well before the event, not in its aftermath by which time it is too late.

8 **Focus on the *use* of a new building**

A classic mistake is to plan a building project and its funding with meticulous care, but only to have a hazy idea of how to use the building once complete.

Your vision must be of what the building is for. A building is only a building. Once the project is over, the real activity is only just beginning. So ensure you have a group making all the plans for use which may involve staffing, volunteers, systems, publicity, and much more.

9 **Be ready for the Minister to leave**

Most writing on church succession planning focuses on the Minister leaving, but these notes consider a wider set of examples. However, changes of Minister are still an important issue.

The process for selecting and appointing their successor may well not get under way until the resignation or retirement is announced, but there are actions that can be taken in advance.

One is to have the church profile drafted and then updated each year so that it just needs some tidying up at the time. Another is to know who will be responsible for the vacancy and how this can be handled. Another is to have a list of responsibilities that will be handed over to named people both on the staff and as congregational members.

10 **Be prepared for staff turnover**

This may not necessarily be for replacement appointments as you may want to make changes to the hours or to the role. But it is worth expecting staff to move on after a period and to have the selection process ready to launch at any time.

This might mean the church profile updated each year as above, job description and person profile drafted, and even job advertisements at the ready.

You do not want to give the impression in any of these suggestions that you are hoping the employee or office-holder will leave, so take care if launching a system such as this. But if it is clearly established for all posts, there should not be a problem.

Five potential dangers

Part of the planning should be to consider where difficulties may arise and seek to avoid them. Here are five issues to look out for.

1 **Power seekers**

Without a clear leader for a ministry it could be that different groups emerge and seek to get their way. If a Music Minister moves on, two or more different groups may try to promote their views on the style of sung worship. Who will ensure there is a measure of discipline?

Or after a church weekend away, different groups may want to push their own agenda for how the weekend might be applied, based on their own preferences more than on a thoughtful debate as to what might be best for the whole church.

What is needed are clear lines of authority so that any situation of this kind can be sorted out before it becomes a conflict zone.

2 **Inappropriate timing**

The plan to follow on from a major church event probably needs to go into full gear from the moment the event closes. But a week's pause may mean that people have a different perspective on things as emotions may have been artificially aroused at the time. If a Minister has died or left, it may be sensible to allow a period for people to get over their loss and to be able to grieve properly.

But normally the point of planning ahead is so that you can move with some speed once a resignation has been announced, whether a paid member of staff or a volunteer. It is just worth checking, however, that a pause would not be a wise move, especially if the announcement of resignation had come as a shock.

3 **No change**

There may be an assumption that like is replaced with like, but this may not be wise. Does this ministry need to continue in the same way, or even at all? Should it be staffed in a different way or combined in a different setting? Is it time to replace a volunteer with a paid member of staff, or *vice versa*? Is the Gift Day a model for every year or should there be a change next time?

When anyone moves on this gives an opportunity to rethink the role. When a major event is over, it is worth thinking about whether this met needs or if there is another means that could be used. Do not neglect to think of possible changes.

4 **No leaving**

This happens when the person who is supposed to be moving on never properly leaves. In a voluntary post they may stay on the ministry team and never let go, blocking any change that their successor tries to put in hand.

Or when a popular Minister retires, he or she moves just down the road, close enough for friends in the church to call in and keep them fully in the picture. They then act as a power base to thwart the new leader at every turn.

It is much better if a leaver makes it clear that they have left. They do not hang around. If in a Christian mission where they were CEO they do not join the Board. They distance themselves to give their successor freedom to run things in a different way.

5 **Founder departure**

Handover may be especially difficult if the founder or first post-holder moves on even if they do not stay around. They may not appreciate it but they can hold enormous power and if they are uneasy about what their successor is doing and make that clear, that can destabilise the new leader.

A founder in this context may be simply the first person in the voluntary role, or the one who set the ministry up and ran it successfully. The moment when the founder of any venture moves on is a dangerous moment in its history, even if the word 'founder' is not used as such in this context.

There will be people serving who are there because of their support for the founder and they may well decide to leave at this point. That may be no bad thing but it can weaken the resourcing of the ministry in question quite markedly.

So how might your church apply the ideas suggested while avoiding the dangers listed?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN133. See also Articles A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, A43, *Every member on active service*, and A44, *Making things happen*, plus Training Notes TN114, *How to prepare a church profile*, and TN131, *Helpful handover documents*.

Contact John if you would like advice on any issue of church planning.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN133 under Planning.

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