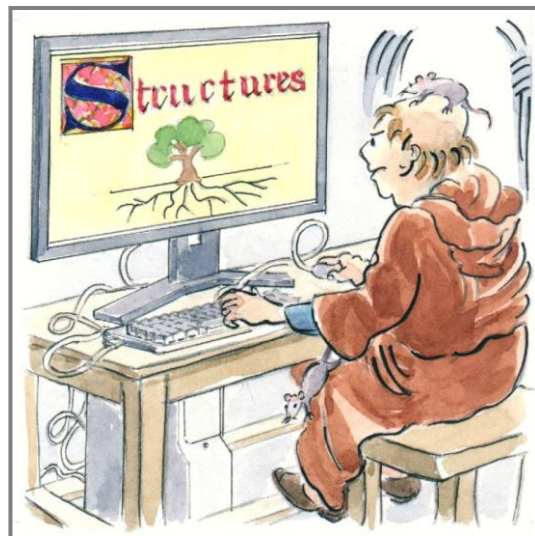


12 issues for church staff members

TN163 Training Notes series: Structures



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It must be wonderful to work in a salaried capacity for a local church.

Whether as Families Minister, Community Worker, Worship Leader, Operations Director, Intern or Church Administrator, it must be ideal employment.

You are doing the work of God, your name and photograph are on the church website, you are working with other Christians. It is so spiritual, so fulfilling, so comfortable.

There cannot be most of the normal problems of secular employment: coping with colleagues you do not get on with, working under the control of those above you in the chain, or operating in an environment where the values are decidedly worldly.

Er, excuse me for interrupting. Being employed by a church has many joys but there is also a darker side. I do not want to put you off applying for that post on the staff of St Bliss but I need to prepare you for some of the issues you might meet. If you have a more realistic view of church employment you are less likely to go under when problems arise.

Here is a list of 12 issues I have observed in church work. Please, I am not saying you hit these in every church who employ lay staff. Nor am I wanting to suggest you will meet more than one of these at any one time. But it pays to be prepared and to go into so-called 'church work' with your eyes wide open and with realistic expectations.

These notes are also written for employers which usually means church Trustees. Also for Ministers who are responsible for managing church staff. The applications of Nos. 1-8 are directed more at these groups for action. The final four, 9-12, are more up to the staff workers to do something about themselves.

So here are my 12 possible downsides of working for a local church. Don't be alarmed but do be aware!

1 **Line manager and pastor roles clash**

There is a conflict of interest if a member of a church staff has a line manager who is also their pastor. The roles of line manager, pastor and (where relevant) counsellor need to be clearly defined and separated.

It may work fine for a bit but when a grievance or disciplinary issue arises, and these do arise, the Minister may find him or herself compromised. If they pastor the employee and line manage them too. So either ensure someone else is the manager and the Minister remains the pastor or, more likely, the Minister line manages and asks the Trustees to appoint someone else to be the pastor, possibly one of their own number. Spell this out so there is no confusion.

2 **Poor line management**

This follows on from the previous point. On a church staff the Minister may line manage several lay staff when he or she has little idea about and training in line management. This may result in over-control of staff members which can lead to worker frustration, or under-control which can lead to lack of necessary reprimand, discipline and challenge in the work. For posts of some responsibility the line manager's role should focus on the staff member's *development* rather than on *supervision*.

Line management is a skill to acquire. It needs thought and training for a church's staff, just as much as it needs these in any secular context. This is taken up in more detail in Article A32, *Be creative as a line manager*.

3 **Lack of clarity between paid and voluntary work**

For church staff there is an additional issue of fuzzy boundaries between paid work and voluntary activity for the church. A part-time member of the church staff may give a significant amount of time to additional voluntary work. They may do so for more hours per week than their employment is for. On any day and at any time is it clear that they are working as employed or volunteers?

To avoid confusion it is better if the voluntary work is quite different from their employment. So if the Church Administrator helps to run a children's club activity the distinction is clearer than if they were the Treasurer of the club.

If the voluntary activity can be viewed as part of their employed hours there is an additional problem in that a tribunal might view both sets of hours together to be part of their employment which could easily contravene minimum wage legislation.

4 **Part-time staff**

Most churches employ very few staff but those they do employ are likely to be part-time. This leads to the need for line management over several people some of whom may only work for 5 or 10 hours a week. It means that inter-staff communication may be poor because staff only see each other rarely, and finding day and time for meetings can be difficult because there are few hours when all staff are on site together.

Try to avoid a church structure with several part-time staff working a few hours each. This can fit people's availability well but lead to inefficient working and a high proportion of time for something fixed like staff meetings. You may also need to justify just why some posts are paid and others, perhaps with greater hours, are voluntary.

5 **Small operations**

Small churches work in a less formal way than a larger organisation would. There will not be an HR department, there may be no one well versed in employment law, you may hit a problem when the topic of paternity leave is raised or a member of staff brings a grievance.

But small churches need to abide by the law. What needs to be decided is what is an *appropriate* level of detail in policies and the following of relevant legislation. If you employ one part-time Office Manager what policies do you need and in what level of detail?

Try to ensure you have a specialist on your trustee body to ensure you do maintain an appropriate level of adherence to the law. See Article A8, *Worker agreements*, and Training Notes TN111, *A church policies checklist*.

6 **Trustees as employers**

The Trustees (PCC in a Church of England church) cannot all be specialists in employment matters and it is wise to set up a group to handle such employment on their behalf. However, the Trustees delegate their employment responsibilities and therefore need to be informed of the group's work so they can ask questions and fulfil their trustee responsibility.

So ensure there is excellent communication between the Trustees and their Employment Group and that the delegation is handled professionally.

Problems can also arise from the Trustee body setting salary levels well below their own for equivalent work in the secular world. Just a thought.

7 **Lack of staff selection process**

What I have seen happen in many churches is someone in the congregation who is gifted and available gets appointed to a role on the staff designed specifically to fit them. They may be appointed as the only candidate to be interviewed or there is no interview at all. Their appointment may be promoted by the Minister without the Trustees being involved but in these cases the normal checks and balances of appointment procedures are by-passed.

This may well be God's gift to the church but take care and do not cut out procedures designed to avoid making an unwise appointment.

Or it may just be that the whole selection process is handled in an unprofessional way. The job you were appointed for is not what it turns out to be, references are ignored, random questions are asked, and so on.

See Article A17, *Staff selection, step by step*, for more on this topic.

8 **Friends or colleagues?**

For Christian paid roles there are also issues of the need to see staff as colleagues rather than friends. Problems arise when friends work together professionally and this can lead to lack of appropriate discipline in the workplace.

It is not that colleagues cannot be friends but if you are working under an employment contract there has to be a discipline to how you work together.

Friends are less likely to criticise poor work than colleagues. Friends may see work time as an opportunity to build relationships at the expense of meeting deadlines. There may be less commitment to the purpose of the church when everyone is a friend of others. Focus on being colleagues. Add some rigour to the relationships.

And, finally, four issues more in the hands of staff members themselves.

9 **Home working**

Many churches do not have the building spaces to enable the staff team to work out of a central office. Home working is often the norm. But it is likely that no one has thought to offer training in the discipline required to work effectively from home.

So staff may find themselves with laptop working out of a spare bedroom at home, or from the kitchen table. The Trustees or Manager should provide training for this and not assume it will come easily to everyone especially those used to a tightly timed work environment such as a school.

See Article A25, *Working from home*, for more on this topic.

10 **Working alongside fellow sinners**

Working with other Christians is not always the bed of roses you expected. Relationships on the staff may not always be straightforward but need to work. Responsibilities may overlap and cause tension. Not everyone is easy to work alongside.

Then some members of the congregation may assume they own the staff since they pay for them and give out orders or criticise publicly in a way that is painful for the staff concerned. Christians are work in progress but some church members may seem to be rather short on the progress.

Be ready for both these areas of relationships with other people.

11 **Lack of promotion path**

When working for a large organisation there may be clear promotion grades to give challenge and motivation. But if you work as the Youth Minister the next step on from that post may be far from clear. That will not bother some people but it may mean that some staff get caught in a role from which there is no clear next step.

So expect to move on at some point, and seek guidance from God to avoid getting stuck in a role you should have left a few years ago. Your line manager should be helping you think creatively in this ... but may fail to do so.

12 **Church becomes your life**

In normal secular employment you finish work for the day at 5.00 pm., say, and then leave the building and travel home to another life. There is a clear gap between employed work and home. At weekends you have two clear days in your home life. Things may not be quite as clear-cut as that if you bring work home or if you work flexible hours but there is still a physical separation between employed work and your non-work life. Your church activity is part of your home life.

But when you work for a church, if it is your own church, this distinction is not so clear. There will be evening meetings and activities that are work, church activity may become work time too as members of the congregation want to discuss work issues with you. The colleague you reprimanded on Friday kneels beside you at the Communion rail on Sunday. Your mobile number applies 24/7.

If you are employed full time, just how many hours does that mean? Your contract may say 40 hours per week but in reality it may be 50 ...or 60, and there is legislation that does not allow this. If you are not careful, church takes over your life and that may put your family life and your health under undue pressure. Being aware of the danger is a good place to start.

OK, so some of those are not your experience at all. But over my career in church operations I have seen all 12 of those many times over so I know they are real. Be prepared. And the joys of working for a church will be real.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN163. See also Articles A8, *Worker agreements*, A17, *Staff selection, step by step*, A25, *Working from home*, and Training Notes TN111, *A church policies checklist*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN163 under Structures (with a link to Management).

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