

Losing a Staff Member

A Case Study

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We do not frequently publish articles anonymously, but sometimes we feel that, for pastoral reasons, it is wise to do so. This is just such a case. Names and other details have been changed for obvious reasons. Ed.

I have just lost a staff member, who for the sake of anonymity I shall call Peter. Peter has resigned - and resigned in the sense that he has nowhere else to go. It is a desperately sad business - sad for Peter, sad for the church, and sad for me.

True, my sadness is mixed with a great sense of relief. However, I am fully aware that nobody is a winner in such a situation. Not only Peter has been damaged, but so too has the church, and so too have I. Here I have in mind not simply damage in terms of reputation, but also damage in terms of mission: so many hours have been spent and so much energy and effort have been expended on resolving the situation, and in so doing we have lost a good deal of our focus on mission.

Without going into detail, the resignation centres around a difference of understanding of ministry. Almost no sooner had we invited Peter to join our staff team than I received an e-mail stating: "I do not see myself as a member of your staff but, as by the grace of God, a minister of this church. Therefore I am a fellow minister, a colleague.... I find the concept of 'being managed' inappropriate". For the last two to three years, this has been the basic issue. With the greatest of difficulty Peter accepted a job specification, monthly supervision, and annual appraisal - and in the end he rejected them all.

With hindsight Peter should never have come to us. He should have remained a solo priest. But he had made shipwreck of his last parish, and so he was grateful to find a 'haven' with us. And to be fair, we were grateful to receive him. He came to us prepared to work half-time for relatively little money, because his spouse is a high-flyer and earns well, he said he did not want to be paid the going rate for the job. Furthermore, in some respects he has done very well and has been much appreciated by many in the church. It is therefore all the more sad that we have lost him.

It is then against this back-drop that I thought I would dare to write an article reflecting on the lessons I have learnt from this unhappy affair. I say "dare", for I recognise that in some ways it is too early to learn lessons - the dust has yet to settle. On the other hand, by the time the dust has settled my mind will be focussed elsewhere and the past will be forgotten. So to my way of thinking, now is the time to begin to reflect.

1. Leopards do not change their spots

With hindsight I was probably unwise to encourage Peter to come on the staff. I knew that in the past he had found difficulty with authority figures. Before he was ordained, he was always complaining about the 'hierarchy' - his way of referring to his parish's

leadership team. As two of his former parishioners in his first parish told me just this week, he had little time for the lay leaders of the church, for, if he was convinced that God was leading him in a particular direction, then that was it. And yet in spite of all this, and in spite of the reservations of some of my own leaders, I encouraged him to come on our church staff.

So, in one sense, I have only myself to blame. In my pride I thought I could handle Peter. From conversation with him I thought he had learnt from his experience. I thought that a fresh start would be possible. After all, the Gospel is all about second chances. And if we are honest, all of us have made mistakes at some time in our ministry. But on reflection it seems that the old dictum is true: 'leopards do not change their spots'.

2. Most ministers/clergy yearn to be 'top dog'

This was certainly true of Peter. He was at his happiest when I was away. My three month sabbatical was bliss for him, because he could do much of the Sunday morning preaching, he could chair the staff meeting, he could be 'the Vicar'. Indeed, to my amazement, I discovered that he had been looking forward to taking over from me as the Team Rector, and felt unfairly thwarted when I announced that I intended to stay on another five years!

But Peter is not an exception. My experience over the years is that there are few members of staff who do not want to become 'number one'. With the exception of specialists such as youth ministers and children's workers, most clerics want to be 'the boss'. Somehow the training they receive at theological college encourages them to be 'prima donnas'. When staff members are essentially 'curates' this is not a problem, for they know and I know that within three years they will be off to run their own church. The difficulty arises with more experienced members of staff. In the UK at least there are relatively few natural 'number twos'. By contrast in the USA and elsewhere, there seem to be a good number of clergy who are quite happy to develop their 'careers' as 'Team Vicars'. Frankly this 'thirst for power' in ministry is bizarre. It doesn't exist in teaching - most teachers are happy not to be head teachers; indeed, according to a radio programme I listened to recently, there are not as many applications for headships today because people do not want the responsibility and hard work that goes with it.

On the other hand, before I point the finger at others, I have to admit that I have always been in the senior leader of a church. Certainly at this stage of life I could not see myself being anything but the team leader. But then, I would argue that God has gifted me for this kind of leadership. Yet I am still surprised by the fact that so many of my clergy colleagues long to be team leaders themselves. I have come to the conclusion that most want to be 'top dog'.

3. Careful record keeping of staff is helpful

As difficulties with Peter increased over the last year in particular, I found it helpful to be able to draw upon 'hard evidence' when talking with my leaders. As we reflected, for instance, on his early e-mail about not seeing himself as a member of the staff, or on another e-mail where he wrote that none of the church leaders were to be trusted, it became obvious to those who had not been part of the inner group seeking to resolve

the situation, that we were dealing not with a personality clash, but with a major problem which, for instance, transcended my own leadership style.

I confess that in my early years of being a team leader, record-keeping was not my 'forte'. I was much more relaxed in my approach to the team. However, long before Peter came on the staff, I realised that a different approach was necessary. I now keep files on all my members of staff. No, this isn't being 'Big Brother': it is simply adopting a more professional attitude toward managing church life. Thank God, up until the time Peter came on the scene, I have never had to draw upon the letters, e-mails, and notes of meetings. But in Peter's case the record-keeping enabled me to show that we have not been dealing with unfounded subjective perceptions, but rather with genuine differences of opinion and as a result unacceptable behaviour. My experience is that careful record-keeping is helpful.

4. Senior clergy are not chief executive officers

In management terms, I was Peter's 'line-manager'. The Bishop had given me authority to manage Peter. However, as difficulties developed, I began to call upon my church leaders for help. I sought advice and help from my lay Chair of PCC and my Wardens. I also found it helpful to share my concerns at my annual appraisals, where one of my appraisers was my most experienced Warden. As the situation deteriorated, I involved a small four-man 'personnel and management' support group. Finally, however, I had to take the matter to the Executive Team of the Parochial Church Council. At that point, to my great relief, my leaders began to take over responsibility for the situation. Therefore when it came to the PCC meeting, my lay Chair of PCC took over the responsibility for making a statement to the PCC about Peter, in the course of which he expressed the confidence of the leadership team in my leadership. Furthermore, the lay Chair took responsibility for dealing with those individuals in the church who felt an injustice had been done to Peter - he together with other Wardens held private meetings to clear up misunderstandings and explain in greater detail the situation in which we found ourselves.

From this I conclude that, although Vicars are called to lead the church, this does not mean that they are chief executive officers with power to deal with every aspect of church life. Yes, in the first place staff teams are accountable to their team leader, but when difficulties arise, there comes a time when it is wise to allow the church's lay leaders to take responsibility for dealing with the situation.

5. Even larger churches can benefit from outside help

The temptation for many larger churches such as ours is to be self-sufficient, and understandably so, because larger churches tend to be blessed with good leadership within the church. Certainly when it came to dealing with Peter, our first reaction was to sort matters out ourselves, rather than go to some outside figure. Indeed, I did not think it fair to Peter to approach the Archdeacon or Bishop, in case that would scupper Peter's chances of moving on to another parish. However, within a week or so of Peter's resignation, I found myself talking to the Archdeacon, and in doing so gaining real help.

In the first place, Archdeacons, precisely because they are not involved in the situation, are able to be objective in their judgments. They may not be intimately aware of

everything, but nonetheless their distance gives them real advantage. Secondly, helping churches deal with conflict is their 'bread and butter'. In a way which is not true of local clergy, the very nature of their jobs means that they have inevitably developed expertise in dealing with conflict. Certainly I found it helpful gaining advice from outside. It enabled us as a church not to turn a difficulty into a crisis.

In the second place, Archdeacons (and their equivalents in other denominations) are able to offer pastoral care in cases where the church cannot. Let me explain that, in Peter's case, although Peter resigned from the staff, he did not stop attending church. We therefore had a duty of care toward him. Unfortunately, as a result of the difficulties, our care was unacceptable. I found it a great relief to be able to hand that duty of care over to the Archdeacon, and to be assured that he could be there to support Peter in the coming weeks and months.

6. Senior clergy can also benefit from specialist outside support

I have been incredibly blessed by the support which I have received from within the church during this difficult time. My staff members have been supportive. Every single member of the leadership team has been supportive. I could not have asked for more support within the church.

I have also been blessed by support from outside the church. The Archdeacon and other local clergy came to see me, pray for me and offer their support. So too have the Board members of Ministry Today with whom I shared the difficulties I was experiencing.

However, I believe that there is space for specialist outside support. For some ministers this might take the form of a spiritual director or work supervisor. For me it has involved visiting an experienced cleric with a view to engaging in personal and theological reflection. It is too early at this stage to evaluate the benefits of such reflection. Nonetheless, I think it is important for leaders of larger churches - who tend to be self-confident in their ministry - to be willing to allow others to help them see what can be learned, and if necessary what changes might be best made.

7. Resignations need to be dealt with promptly

When Peter resigned, he did not resign with immediate effect, but rather gave two months' notice of resignation. The intention was that he would work out his notice (although strictly speaking, he should have given three months' notice, rather than two months). In his letter of resignation, he assured us that he would seek to ensure that his departure from the church would be "constructive and productive". He wrote, "I believe it is right that, even though we see my ministry developing in different ways, that such a parting on the journey should be a mutual blessing and as peaceful as possible". Alas, he failed to live up to his intentions. We quickly discovered that he was telling people in the parish that he had been forced out, and before we knew where we were all kinds of rumours were spinning round. Furthermore, within a day of his resignation he informed me that he would not take part in any more church services, nor would he attend the weekly staff meeting - in effect he would simply do whatever he wanted to do! In response, the leadership team requested that he go on extended paid leave, until the

two months was up when, within the context of a church service, we could thank him for his service and pray for his future.

With hindsight the two month delay of resignation was unwise. We had thought it might give him an opportunity to say his good-byes, but in fact it simply gave him an opportunity to share his grouses. I have learnt that resignations need to be dealt with promptly!

8. Change is always unsettling

Peter's resignation came as a shock to the parish. Although I and some of my fellow leaders knew that resignation had been in Peter's mind for some six months, members of the congregations had had no inkling of it. Furthermore, it was not as if Peter had already been called by another parish to be its vicar. All I could do when I announced his resignation, was to say that Peter was "in the process" of seeking a parish of his own. Inevitably our parishioners felt unsettled by the manner of his departure.

However, I would argue that a minister's departure is always unsettling, whatever the circumstances, for departure signals change, and change is for the most part unwelcome, especially to older members. The day after the announcement, I spoke to one of our members, who told me how upset his elderly in-laws were. "I reminded them", he said, "that they were just as upset when a previous vicar had left. Their trouble is that they find change difficult". And he was right. In Peter's case, anxiety levels among the older people were heightened, because he had oversight of the seniors in our congregations. If the truth be told, they were more concerned with the question of "Who will care for us?" than "Why did Peter resign?"

Change is always unsettling. Hence, any wise leader will plan for change. Our difficulty was that, although Peter's resignation was not unexpected as far as the leadership was concerned, we could not actually plan for it. However, as soon as the resignation was announced, one of our first actions was to assure the older people that they would still be cared for, and that all the activities planned for them would continue as usual. Personnel might change, but nobody would be neglected.

In this situation what was important was that the leadership did not turn a challenging situation into a crisis. In this respect the leadership needed to realise that many of the shock waves were in fact just a reflection of the fear of change.

9. The church does not need to be told everything

When rumours began to circulate that Peter's resignation had been forced, perhaps not surprisingly the leadership began to receive letters from some of the older members, urging us to reinstate Peter and at the same time apologise to him for the unfair way in which he had been treated. In such a situation, it was tempting to write a letter detailing all the difficulties which had led up to Peter's resignation. However, to have responded in this manner would have involved damaging Peter's reputation, and given Peter's state of emotional turmoil, that seemed to be unfair and un-Christian.

We resolved to treat Peter's resignation in a similar manner to the way we had 'disciplined' two couples some ten years ago - instead of 'blackening' his name, we would treat the matter as a pastoral situation and therefore would give the church only the barest of details:

- This is not a situation which has blown up recently.
- This is not a clash of personality between two individuals.
- Although Peter's resignation took the wider congregation by surprise, it has been no surprise to those who have been closely involved in the affair.
- At no stage has Peter been asked to resign.
- We agree with Peter that he would be happier in a parish where he is in sole pastoral charge.

For most people in the church this would be quite sufficient. Thank God, the relationship between the congregations and the leadership is good, and that most parishioners would be more than happy to trust their leaders.

Clearly for some of the older people, this would not be sufficient. For such people the leadership would offer the possibility of private conversations, where the situation could be more fully explained.

10. Love sometimes needs to be tough for peace to prevail

When accepting Peter's resignation, I said to my leadership team: "Although we cannot turn the clock back, we need to ensure that the decisions we make and the attitude we display are characterised by love and peace". I believe that to be an important principle. For the sake of the future life of the church, it was vital that as leaders we acted in a God-honouring manner.

Thus in my own letter to Peter following his letter of resignation I wrote: "I really do want to help make the next few weeks a positive experience for you.... Together with all the other members of the leadership team, I am determined to ensure that love and peace characterise our dealings with you".

Love and peace, however, are not antithetic to firmness of action. With the benefit of hindsight, I believe that I and my leadership team should probably have taken a more pro-active role in our dealings with Peter. An opportunity provided itself almost a year before his resignation, following Peter's withdrawal of co-operation at a leadership weekend away. The visiting speaker/facilitator in a subsequent report wrote: "The dysfunctional behaviours of the weekend raise major questions that require attention in two directions: there is the obvious pastoral concern for someone who is deeply troubled and manifests that in the ways we have witnessed; there is also the management of the person as an employee in the parish and that requires a separate function to the pastoral and ought not to be confused, lest it gets out of hand". Although we did seek to grasp some of the management issues, we gave greater emphasis to the pastoral issues, and as a result spent the following eleven months reacting to one crisis or another brought on by Peter.

If only we could have been firmer in grasping the nettle, albeit in a loving and peace-making way, we could have spared ourselves a good deal of trouble. Love sometimes needs to be tough for peace to prevail.