

Thoughts for the senior pastor about the departure of a staff member

GENERALLY

...It is never easy, but the best is when the staff pastor makes a move strong for his or her ministry and family. Not because of desire to get away or failure on assignments.

...The senior pastor should be able to hire and fire, as it is coldly put, with safeguards and strong advisors.

...The question must always be, what is best for the church? Not, who are my friends or what is easiest?

BEFORE A DECISION IS MADE

...There must be regular meetings with reports and reviews and evaluations so that the “annual review” brings no surprises.

...The ideal is that an associate is open with the senior about a desire to widen responsibilities or become a senior elsewhere, and the senior helps with advice or networking to find the best ministry. Instead, more frequent is the surprise move. And one of the reasons for that is that some seniors have released a staffer who was looking around -- which seems carnal at best.

...Sometimes a different “seat on the bus” on the same staff can be good.

THE DECISION TO RELEASE

...If it is a release, it should not be a surprise. Some may act surprised when released as a defense mechanism, but they should have had adequate warnings and even (as demanded in some states) a period of official probation, with clear goals and dates assigned.

...The best of the few senior staff and/or board members or even personal confidential advisors for the pastor should be involved -- so it is not a lone ranger decision.

...Many pastors in hindsight feel like they waited too long after deciding someone should leave. Same thing about a staff member deciding he or she should leave. Issues do not change often.

...It is better to release someone with a fair severance than to have them hang around the office with no future to work for. Normally 4-5 weeks is adequate for goodbyes and thanks unless it is a matter for immediate discharge.

In the case of a good run, severance is usually one week for every year they served at the church.

...The larger the church, the less is made of the departure in terms of public appreciation. There is natural turnover and progress in people's careers, and in a large church some people would be saying that there are too many leaving! Some of it is very natural.

Obviously when someone has been prominent in the church and there for a long time, there should be public recognition.

...Talking points among the staff and the board should be very clear. Two or three statements that everyone uses so there is not discrepancy. Some people will try to invent stories of disagreement or make it worse than it is. Such is life.

It is even good if a certain person on staff -- an associate in that area in a large church, or the senior -- is designated as the one to respond to the issue.

Watch how some corporations or the military or some very large churches handle this, and you will see that both the departing person and the senior who stays speak very highly of each other. And often this is part of the severance.

...When a staff person wishes to resign, never try to talk them out of it.

THE DECISION TO LEAVE

...Staff members who could not stay and be loyal to the senior pastor should leave. It is wrong to stay to try to change the senior pastor.

... Staff members should be loyal to the senior pastor even if they do not like him. This used to be a standard procedure, but in today's world of public criticism it is often broken. Church members and even board members have tried to get information that would divide a staff member from the senior pastor. And people still love to spread rumors.

Loyalty of course does not mean that you do not criticize, but that is to be done one on one and not in front of others. Certainly the senior pastor should encourage this.

...It is quite natural for a staff member to want to stay in his post or her post for decades. But it is also quite normal to wish to advance and to be a senior someday or to lead and preach. This should be encouraged when possible. Some people call this worldliness. Others call it healthy ambition. Most blame it on God's will. Perhaps it is healthiest to refer to one's desires and expansion of duties.

...It is quite normal for a person to desire some other kind of vocation -- and let us use that word for all callings, honoring the priesthood of all believers. This can be referred to as "a transition to another way to serve our Lord," and not a demotion or excuse for people to ask questions or make up suggestions and theories. (Though gossipers and conspiracy people are ever-present.)

MORE ON TIMING

...If someone is going to transition, about two months is adequate for the announcement. Six months makes the person a lame duck for a long long time. And five or six weeks is adequate for saying goodbye and being thanked. Only the extraordinary staff person would be making plans and putting people in place for the future, and even then there must be caution because a new person, the eventual replacement, may have different ideas. "Let it leak" -- in this case means that those who work closely with a staff member who is leaving are not surprised with an announcement in a meeting or a public statement. People hate changes and surprises!

...Any departure presents a good time to analyze the position. Sometimes three part-time people can take the place of a full-time who leaves. And the church would then be saving on the budget and getting the same amount done. This calls for a leadership decision of course.