

Handling church staff transitions – with grace, wisdom, and excellence.

Church employees are one of the most valuable resources a growing church has. They carry the mission forward, support volunteers, care for congregants, and often work well beyond their job descriptions. When churches hire staff, there is usually a shared hope—sometimes even an unspoken expectation—that the relationship will last for decades.

The reality, however, is that most people do not stay in one job for their entire career. Today's workforce is marked by movement, seasons, and transitions. Some people experience long seasons in one role or organization, while others move more frequently as opportunities, callings, or life circumstances change. This is not necessarily a sign of failure or instability—it is simply the reality of modern professional life, including ministry. When people are faithful in the season they are in, God uses that faithfulness to prepare them for the next season He has in store. That is true for church employees—and for churches themselves.

As employers and leaders, it is never easy when a strong employee resigns. Our first reaction may be disappointment, surprise, or even self-doubt. We may second-guess decisions, wonder what we could have done differently, or wish we could change the outcome. But it is important to recognize a deeper truth: sometimes God repositions people. He moves them to their next assignment, opportunity, or area of growth.

When this happens, the role of the church is not to resist the transition but to lead well through it. Supporting an employee during an employment transition demonstrates gratitude, professionalism, and genuine care for the time they spent serving your church. It also sends a powerful message to remaining staff: people matter here, even when they leave. Below are six practical ways church leaders can support employees through an employment transition with clarity, grace, and excellence.

1. Conduct an exit interview

Exit interviews are an important way to close the employment loop in a healthy and intentional way. They provide an opportunity to have a thoughtful, structured conversation about the employee's experience working at the church.

This conversation should focus on both strengths and opportunities.

- What did the church do well in supporting employees, volunteers, and members?
- Where did systems break down?
- What challenges did the employee experience that leadership may not have been aware of?

There is a definite skill to creating a safe environment where employees feel comfortable sharing honest feedback. When done well, exit interviews can provide valuable insights that help the ministry grow stronger and more effective. While not every piece of feedback will be actionable, patterns over time can reveal important organizational issues that need attention.

2. Clearly explain benefit transitions

One of the most stressful parts of leaving a job is uncertainty—especially around pay, benefits, and administrative details. This is where churches can demonstrate professionalism and care. The exit interview is a good time to explain how benefits will transition and to proactively answer questions such as:

- Can I continue health insurance under COBRA?
- When will I receive my final paycheck?
- How will unused vacation or PTO be paid out?
- When and how should keys, badges, or equipment be returned?
- How do I reconcile any church credit card charges?
- How do I transfer my 403(b) retirement account to a new vendor?

The goal is to answer questions employees may not even know to ask yet. Clear communication reduces anxiety and prevents misunderstandings after the employee has already departed.

3. Schedule a “Brain Dump.”

Even if a replacement has not yet been identified, it is critical to allow the departing employee to do a “brain dump” with a supervisor or designated staff member. This process allows for the transfer of tacit knowledge—the information that lives in someone’s head but may not be written down anywhere. It also creates documentation of:

- Key responsibilities and workflows
- Ongoing projects and deadlines
- Important contacts and relationships
- Policies, procedures, or workarounds that exist in practice

This is also an ideal time to review and update the job description based on how the role has evolved, rather than how it was originally designed.

4. Provide a letter of recommendation

If the employee was a strong performer, take the time to write a thoughtful letter of recommendation. Even if they do not need it immediately, it is a meaningful gesture that communicates appreciation and support. Providing a recommendation while the employee’s work is fresh in your mind allows you to speak specifically and sincerely about their contributions, strengths, and character. It also reinforces the idea that the church values people beyond their tenure.

5. Issue a formal termination letter

Every departing employee should receive a written termination letter. This document should summarize and confirm all formal details that were communicated verbally, including:

- Final pay information
- Benefit continuation options

- Return of church property
- Retirement account instructions
- Any outstanding administrative requirements

Providing this information in writing gives the employee a clear reference point after their employment ends and protects both the employee and the church from confusion later.

Having standardized termination letters and checklists is a best practice for churches of any size.

6. Celebrate with a farewell gathering

No matter the role or length of service, it is always appropriate to acknowledge a departing employee with a farewell gathering. This can be a simple staff meeting acknowledgment, a small lunch, or a larger celebration—what matters most is the intention. A farewell gathering allows the church to publicly express gratitude, honor the employee’s contributions, and give coworkers the opportunity to say goodbye. It reinforces a culture of appreciation and dignity.

Leading transitions well

Losing a good employee is never easy. But employees will come and go, even in healthy, growing churches. The way leaders handle these transitions speaks volumes about the church’s values and leadership maturity. When churches lead employment transitions with clarity, compassion, and structure, departing employees leave feeling appreciated—and remaining employees gain confidence in the organization’s leadership. Faithful transitions honor the past, steward the present, and prepare the church for what God has next.