

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### Can You Downsize Staff Without Destroying Your Congregation?

Downsizing hurts not only the person who loses a job but their family, other employees, and even bosses who have a deep, compassionate spirit. When you add the element of a congregation, downsizing also hurts the personal and professional support groups of the staff person. It also damages the health and well-being of the congregation because it can wound the church's image and witness in its community context.

#### Why Does Staff Downsizing Happen?

When your congregational budget becomes a straitjacket, one issue that you will likely consider is the possibility of downsizing staff. The two most common reasons for staff downsizing are *economic necessity* and a *decline in church participation* (membership and/or worship attendance). A few other reasons may also prompt a staff reduction: a new pastor drives a major new strategy that requires a different staffing pattern than the current one, a major shift in the congregation's context necessitates a shift in its mission, or a conflict leads to change that affects staffing priorities.

Staff downsizing happens when other attempts to balance the congregation's budget are already in place or have failed. In general, cuts have already been made in missions and programs. Routine and preventative maintenance on buildings have already been delayed. Even with these preventative measures to avoid downsizing, the effects are still far-reaching. Because a congregation is an emotional system, what impacts one part often affects the whole system. When churches downsize staff, the system itself is susceptible to being wounded or even destroyed. For *initiators* of a staff downsizing strategy the emotional loss may be low. For *defenders* of downsized staff persons the emotional loss may be high.

One difficulty is understanding the motives that influential people and groups in a congregation have for downsizing specific staff persons. Typically, the staff person that they want to downsize is one who is

not their favorite and is therefore, to them, expendable. Staff persons who are the favorite of influential people and groups are often untouchable. Their support groups see no rationale for downsizing them.

Whether based on strategic principles or spiritual discernment, it is unfortunate that staff reductions are almost always based on subjective perceptions, the personality of staff persons, and the size and passion of their support groups. Further, the life and ministry approach of affected staff members influences their personal openness to downsizing efforts. This has a direct impact on whether they go quietly or seek to disrupt the fellowship of the congregation.

#### What Questions Arise When Downsizing?

Different people will have different questions about what's important when downsizing staff members. Some will focus on questions that interrogate what is best for the current financial and organizational structure of the church such as How vital is the role of individual staff members to the ministry and fellowship of the congregation? Others will focus on how the downsizing will affect



WE NEED TO COME UP WITH A BETTER  
PROCESS FOR DOWNSIZING CHURCH STAFF.

each staff member and will ask questions such as What is going on in the staff member's personal life that may be negatively affected by downsizing?

When your congregation has assembled the group that will be involved in the decision-making process, it will be important to let everyone know that neither of these approaches is incorrect. A healthy balance of those who are focused on what is best for the congregation as a whole and those who are focused on the impact on each individual staff member is most helpful. When discernment groups are formed (see step 1 below), leadership will want to have members in each group who represent both perspectives.

*Warning!* A lot of questions are not legal criteria for who is downsized. Please consult with legal and human resource professionals.

### **Why Not Use the Business World Approach?**

Downsizing in congregations—because they are an interconnected and complex spiritual organism and not an organization of separate individuals—needs to be done differently than it is in corporations. In organizations, secrecy, surprise, and swiftness are often the tools of the process. Legal and human resource advisors may recommend this methodology.

In the congregational organism, openness, trust, and healthy transition are the tools of the process. When a congregation must downsize staff, a process for reducing staff must be designed; shared with the staff first, then with the congregation; and voted on as needed or required by church policies. Everyone knows what process is being followed and the steps involved in the process. This approach of open process will foster a sense of trust among congregational staff and members. It creates a healthy environment that can build a foundation for a healthy transition even in this time of stress.

### **Is There a Healthy Approach to Downsizing?**

Yes. A healthy strategy involves seven steps and takes up to 120 days. Here are some details.

*Step 1—Build a climate for making tough decisions.* Begin and lead 100 days of discernment that involves dialogue and prayer triplets. Divide the willing congregational participants into groups of three people with various perspectives on church life and ministry. In addition to prayers for the church, conversations should include open discernment dialogues and brainstorming innovative ideas for staffing the congregation. Steps 2–6 are enacted during these 100 days.

*Step 2—Develop multiple scenarios for future staff.* Continue the open discernment dialogue and

prayer around multiple scenarios for the future staffing of the congregation. A consideration of three possible strategies works well and can help focus the dialogue at this stage.

*Step 3—Choose a pathway.* After prayer and dialogue, focus on *one* scenario as the strategic framework for future staffing. Using a consensus method, have open discernment dialogue around the chosen pathway and how it can best benefit everyone affected by the staff downsizing. Only if discernment is still unclear should the congregation vote on which pathway to use.

*Step 4—Formally develop the chosen pathway.* Church leaders need to write a downsizing plan that takes into account the church as an organism and the new and emerging emotional and spiritual climate. Continue having open discernment dialogue around the downsizing plan.

*Step 5—Implement the chosen pathway.* At this point, church leaders take downsizing actions. Although it may be tough, the process followed to this point should have prepared the congregation for what is happening. Open discernment dialogue around downsizing actions will be very important at this step as well.

*Step 6—Transition to the new reality.* The staff reductions and transitions to new positions have happened. Begin to talk and act on the new reality. Having open discernment dialogue around these forward actions continues to be important at this step.

*Step 7—Craft prevention processes.* Plan for future staffing processes that are not likely to produce the kind of downsizing crisis the church has just experienced. Commit to a staffing plan that is flexible and agile. Have a job performance and relationship covenant with each staff person.

### **The Bottom Line**

The staff persons being downsized, the staff persons remaining, and the leadership of the congregation are at all times persons of worth created in the image of God to live and to love. Expressions of unconditional love are always in order. The Golden Rule always applies.

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**About the Writer:** George Bullard serves as a congregational and denominational leadership coach with The Columbia Partnership ([www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org)).