

# Say goodbye to employees with a graceful send-off

By Ken Warren

It never gets any easier. After 25 years of ministry, it is still difficult to break the news that a staff member's tenure must come to an end.

However, I have learned that the inevitable difficulties of the process are made somewhat less traumatic when the terms of severance have been established beforehand and everyone understands in advance what is expected.

We discovered that the severance packages provided by two different ministry areas of our church over the past few years were inconsistent. Those inconsistencies, the result of having fortunately very few terminations over that time combined with the absence of clearly defined severance guidelines created confusion, inequity and in at least one instance, unnecessarily hurt feelings. As a result we determined to establish guidelines to avoid confusion in the future.

## Flexibility reflects what may be the most significant element in the entire process — it's not just about policies, it's about people.

We began by surveying local businesses represented by the membership of our church. We discovered that the practices and precedents in local businesses spanned a wide, confusing, and not always applicable range of options. This led us to see what we might learn from other churches. Using a variety of forums including survey questions and responses posted to the online bulletin board of the National Association of Church Business Administration, and contacts with a sampling of churches of various sizes and denominations, we compiled an informal collection of policies and practices.

### Policies vary

Our first discovery was that the policies of churches are as varied as those of the businesses in our area, ranging from

absolutely no severance provision at all to very generous packages. Neither extreme offered the combination of fairness and consistency we were looking for. As we reviewed our findings we noticed general trends in the church-provided data that seemed to offer the principles for a sound set of guidelines.

First, although a few churches offered no severance compensation at all we noticed that a large number of our surveyed churches made length of employment a primary determining factor in the amount of severance. Of the time-of-service based guidelines sampled the extremes ranged from one week's salary for each three years worked to one month of severance for each year served, with a maximum of 12 months and a multitude of variations in between.

Second, we observed a tendency to differentiate the amount of severance between ministerial and non-ministerial staff positions. While a non-ministerial position might be accorded one to two weeks of severance for each year of service, it was not uncommon for a pastoral position to be provided one month of severance for each year of service, with both provisions typically subject to a limitation on the maximum number of years to which that formula may be applied.

We determined that some of this ministerial difference is clearly attributable to prescribed denominational policy, the rest apparently to church choice, particularly the definition of what constitutes a "ministerial" position.

Third, if medical insurance is provided as a benefit for staff members there is a tendency to continue that insurance or at least provide the equivalent of the medical insurance premium for the same period of time that severance compensation is provided.

### Establish guidelines

Using these findings as a starting point, we are developing a severance guideline that incorporates three basic trends, one week of severance for each year of service for non-ministerial staff; one month of severance for each year of service for ministerial/pastoral staff; and, the continuation of medical insurance premiums for the term of the severance.

We have not yet decided whether to apply an arbitrary maximum to the length of the provisions. Using the ministerial/non-ministerial ratios as a foundation we are reserving the option to adapt and adjust a severance package, if necessary, to account for certain factors.

These factors are the nature of the circumstances leading up to the termination, current church budget status, length of employment, possible contingency requirements on the part of the former staff member in order to continue severance (i.e., participation in prescribed support provisions), or discontinue severance (i.e., the acceptance of another job). Flexibility reflects what may be the most significant element in the entire process — it's not just about policies, it's about people.

The fact is "breaking up" will always be hard to do but a foundation of reliability and predictability tempered by grace can equip and prepare the church and the staff member to take the next step toward what God is directing.

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Range of Sampled Church Severance Provisions		
Pay	Terms	Maximum
No Severance Provided		
2 Weeks	Flat rate	
4 Weeks	Flat rate	
2 Weeks	If employed less than 1 year	
30 Days	If employed over 1 year	
6 Weeks	Flat rate	
1 Week	For each 3 years served	No Maximum
50% of 1 Week	For each year served	No Maximum
1 Week	For each year served	13 Weeks
One Month	For each year served (ministerial only)	6 Months
One Month	For each year served (ministerial only)	12 Months

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