

# How to Kill a New Congregation

---

## THE HUGE LETTERS

Dear Rev Sparks,

OK. So someone has got away from you and started a new congregation. Doing things differently are they? Never mind, you can still put a stop to it and bring things back into line. Here are some tips from experienced players. If you do any one or two of them it should be enough.

### **Keep asking questions**

Keep asking questions about what they are doing. They will find it hard to answer because they are doing something new and they keep experimenting. They feel inferior about it at the best of times, so keep being warm and supportive but do not take “we are feeling our way” as an answer. Bring their mistakes to their attention, especially from the past, so that they do not get lost along the way. Eventually you can wear the leaders down with tiredness and self doubt.

### **Send in a replacement**

When the founder of the new congregation feels it is time to move on, take charge of the process of selecting a replacement. There are so many mission needs in the area, so do not let this little cause hog the money. Make the new appointment cover a few other things as well, and since you are the one best placed to understand these other needs, make sure you have your say about who it shall be. If the congregation says it is defining its own vision for mission which should be taken into account, this is just the terrible spirit of independence that the first leader infected them with; humour them but make no statements for which you will be held accountable. Put nothing in writing about the selection process, they will only spend time thinking about it.

### **Make money the big blue**

If you are paying someone to do this work make the new church realise that they are soaking up the funds. It need not be an attack on their direct funding necessarily, but any ways in which they are being supported by the rest of the churches should be pointed out. Other churches have debts and burdens to carry and this new cause do not. You know that ought to make them feel grateful.

It is quite likely their treasurer is totally inexperienced so let them all know how important it is to be extremely careful to do things absolutely properly according to the book or the auditor will have something to say. Remind them of the last disaster you had to deal with.

If the community there is poor, there is little hope they will ever get to the great and godly goal of being “self supporting”. You have two ways to kill the whole thing. Either subsidise them to a degree that they will see it is impossible for them to pay, ever, and that will make them lose initiative. The cause will die of discouragement. Otherwise insist on them becoming totally independent as soon as possible but do not let them raise money in unorthodox ways, like running a shop or something. Nor should you let them think they could have a minister at anything less than full time. It’s taken us a century or more to train the new ministers not to think that way!

### **Demand representatives at church council**

How will they ever learn to do things right if they do not come to the meetings of the denomination? How can they be accountable if they do not attend? Surely they should take their share of the weight of committee work that comes from the denomination. Within twelve months, then, they should give time to come along to the meetings. They will pick it up before too long. Most of them down there don’t come from our tradition so they need to learn the ropes. For heaven’s sake, they can’t spend all their time evangelising.

Half these places don't have proper members anyway. Some of their leaders have no church background whatever and no interest in the denomination at all. The new minister must make sure the rules of membership of the denomination are taken up. People who are new to the faith should learn that they are not just going to a local church but to one of *our* churches.

### **Insist on proper hymns and orders of service**

It might be all right for a while if they do a few things in the name of creativity, indigenisation and local pastoral needs or the like. But eventually we have to see them use the normal hymns. The rich traditions of our church must not be sneezed at. They must not be allowed to tamper with the sacraments. One Lord, one faith, one minister presiding over baptisms and Eucharist. Where is the continuity between the churches? What did we spend all that time for at theological college studying and refining our knowledge? Give them something to really think about, not emotional froth. This local relevance bit about choosing and writing (horrors) their own music will just leave them wrapped up in themselves. It excludes long standing christians who may come in off the street.

Children participating in worship are cute, up to a point. Their participation has been attempted in many places, but they all see the light eventually that it is better to get only suitably trained and authorised people to lead in the worship.

### **Loan them your most valuable leaders**

If they are short of experienced leaders lend them a few of your own. Not your busiest of course but some who are resting in the wings; those who are most available. They will keep an eye on everything that's going on. Nothing can be done without their approval and they will certainly not be rushing any decisions, not if they have learned anything from us over all these years! If you want to send some of your parishioners to support the meetings, boost the numbers as it were, then that will be at least some who know the hymns. As numbers build up they can drop out again.

### **Tell them what's good for them**

Remind people of your experience and the many many dangers there are in ministry, the hidden traps in selecting a new minister and so on. They can't possibly be asked to handle their own future single handed. Your wise counsel about what is good for them is going to be needed. There is no need for them to be involved in interviews - the inexperienced make such subjective judgments. Just go ahead and let them know what has been decided - they will appreciate your strong leadership eventually.

### **Tell them to grow up to be like you**

A young congregation can be quite fresh faced at first but with the right leadership can grow into being a proper church. Reassure them that you are looking forward to the day when they can take their place alongside the other churches in the denomination as a bona fide church in their own building with their own minister celebrating the sacraments in good heart and with proper reverence.

Lastly these causes have a way of multiplying if you let them. If you can hold on to them past about four or five years without them starting another new cause themselves there is a good chance that you have contained the problem from spreading further. I like to think of us as the bush fire brigade sometimes.

As I say, any one or two of these will help you. I know you can't do them all-the minister's life is so busy is it not? Every blessing on your work.

Your friend and colleague,

Rev Dr Richard Huge