

How to Deal with Benevolence Requests

It's Friday afternoon, and a person walks in claiming to be from out-of-town and needing gas, food and lodging because "someone stole my wallet." Or, in the middle of the week you get a call from someone whose electricity is turned off. Maybe a member of your church is experiencing a financial crisis due to illness, injury, marital problems, or loss of employment. These and many other scenarios are common to the church today. The church secretary or ministry assistant is usually the first to deal with these people and their problems. Whether it's a faceless telephone conversation, or a disheveled, wild-eyed transient standing in the office, you are on point! How do you handle requests for assistance with tact and sensitivity, wisdom and discernment, and an eye for security and safety? The following may help.

Church Benevolence Policy and Procedures

The importance of having written policies and procedures for benevolence requests cannot be overemphasized. Having written procedures will solve some important problems.

First, it clearly delineates what kind of assistance may be provided, in what situations it may be provided and how it is to be provided. Every church is different due to its people, pastoral leadership, the community it serves, its location in that community, and its material assets. Some have formal budgets for benevolence, while others rely on the spare cash in the pastor's wallet. Some churches collect "loose change offerings" for ongoing benevolence needs; others may wait until a need arises and take up "special offerings." Whatever the traditional practices or method used, every church needs to ask itself the fundamental questions, "What does the Lord want us to do to help the needy? What situations qualify for our assistance, and how are we to respond?"

Second, a written policy eliminates many inappropriate requests and a ton of personal pressure. Your church will quickly develop a reputation as an "easy mark," or it will be known as a place one can go for certain types of help. We established a written policy for transients, which reads in part:

We require positive Ids of everyone traveling together, including children.

We require proof of marriage for those claiming to be husband and wife with Ids in different names.

We require proof of ownership and registration of any vehicle being driven.

We require a name and telephone number of someone we can (and do) contact to confirm the traveler's situation.

We do not provide cash.

We do not provide lodging to single individuals or unmarried couples.

We reserve the right to check police records.

We will cooperate with the authorities in any ongoing criminal investigation.

We require all "travelers" to read and sign a statement indicating they understand and will cooperate with the above before we meet with them.

Third, a written benevolence policy avoids problems with the IRS who can always challenge a church's tax-exempt status due to questionable or undocumented receipt and dispensation of funds.

Last, it establishes confidence within the church that benevolence funds are being distributed fairly and in good order.

Tact and Sensitivity

It's important to remember that every person's problem is a crisis to him or her. Whether the situation is worthy or not, people asking for help deserve to be treated with kindness and respect that is befitting the Lord. This can be difficult if they are demanding, engaged in obvious sin, or don't want to cooperate. However, when backed by written procedures you are free to say, "I am sorry, we can't put you in a hotel; but I can direct you to the local mission which can provide lodging." Though people need to be treated with tact and sensitivity, you also must remember their problems are not your fault or your responsibility to solve. The church is a church, not a social or government agency. Oswald Chambers wrote in *My Utmost for His Highest* (March 24 entry):

"Over and over again, we try to be amateur providences in someone's life. We are indeed amateurs, coming in and actually preventing God's will and saying, "This person should not have to experience this difficulty." Instead of being friends of the Bridegroom, our sympathy gets in the way. ... You may often have to watch Jesus Christ wreck a life before He saves it.

Wisdom and Discernment

Not every secretary, ministry assistant, or pastor is gifted to deal with benevolence. One who oozes mercy may give the church away. Conversely, one with the gift of prophecy may employ a colder "live-or-let-die" approach. Strive for balance. A measure of godly discernment and efficient administration is also invaluable. In the likely event you don't feel equipped, then consider establishing checks and balances within the office. Ask someone to back you up. Let them give you the benefit of their opinion in situations. Often a second, detached perspective can bring things into focus when they become clouded by the heart.

Security and Safety

In closing, I need to address your safety and security, and that of your fellow church workers. Do we need to work in fear? No, we just need to exercise caution and plan for the unexpected. Here are some practical things you can do:

Never allow yourself to be alone with a "walk-in" or transient.

Always have someone nearby when conducting benevolent interviews, and work out a code or signal if a situation becomes tense.

Do not let "walk-ins" or transients have freedom to move around the office or church building.

Never leave the minister or pastor you support to conduct interviews alone with a member of the opposite sex.

Ask the local police, or hire a consultant to evaluate your security. Time or money spent up-front to keep purses from being grabbed, church property stolen, or to avoid an assault is well worth it.

William W. Hendry, Minister of Benevolence at Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis Tennessee. Excerpted from Secretary FYI, Winter 2001-2002