

NOT MY CHURCH!

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“You’re not acting as my church acts!” church social worker Sandy Potts exclaimed. “In fact, you’re not acting as His church would act!”

Peter Wilson, Senior Executive Director of Creekside Christian Church, and Rita Kimball, an assistant from human resources had just informed Sandy that she was being terminated. They had given the same news to others on the church staff as they met at fifteen minute intervals; another pair of administrators was doing the same in an adjoining room.

Creekside Christian Church

In October 2003, Creekside Christian Church was the 15th largest church in the United States. Attendance ranged from 8,000 to 12,000 weekly. A staff of approximately 115 people was housed in two locations. The main campus of the church sat just outside the city of Knoxville, Tennessee, with a second location of offices on Corporate Drive, a suburban office park where many businesses were also located. The church had grown fairly quickly over the previous 8 years.

However, Creekside had a longer history in this area. The church began in 1956 as a church plant, or a “daughter church” as it was referred to then. The first senior pastor, Charles R. Bates, served the church for 40 years, retiring on January 1, 1996. During Rev. Bates’ tenure, the church moved to a 20-acre site outside the

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city of Knoxville. Since 1992, the church had made several additional property purchases and now had a total of 115 acres. The second senior pastor, David Evans, began his tenure on January 2, 1996 and served the church until resigning effective September 1, 2003 to take another position at an even larger church. During this time church attendance grew from around 3,000 to 8,000 people participating in weekend services. The third senior pastor, Gary Lawson, began working at Creekside in July 2000 as the Adult Discipleship associate minister. He moved into the senior pastor's position starting September 3, 2003, after a unanimous vote from the Elder Board and an affirmative vote by the congregation.

As the church grew it started new churches in the Knoxville area. Three new church plants had a combined average attendance of 2,300. The purpose of Creekside says, "We exist to love God and to love people" and the church appeared to take this purpose seriously. The size of the church was some indication of its commitment to reaching out to people. Ministry programs covered the entire lifespan from nursery to seniors. Categories for ministry included traditional programs for children, youth, college students, and adults, as well as programs for families with special needs, Hispanic ministry, sports outreach, and music. The Care Ministry Department provided for a variety of needs both within the church and to the larger community. For example, the Department provided financial assistance and material resources such as clothing, food, furniture, appliances, and cars. The church social worker disbursed between \$100,000-120,000 annually to people in need. The church gave another \$1,000,000 to missions each year.

The cost of growth and providing such a broad array of ministries to the congregation and the community came with a price tag. The church has recently incurred a \$16,000,000 debt for a new building project. Decisions had to be made on how to address this debt and the ongoing issues of growth the church was continuing to experience. The new senior pastor inherited these challenges and had a mandate from the Elder Board to come up with "X-amount of dollars" to alleviate the financial debt the church had incurred.

Things were changing at the church. Leaders informed staff and church members they were making progress on reducing the church's indebtedness. The budget would be changed to reflect the tight times. The percentage of the budget allowed for missions and benevolence would be decreased. There were plans to renovate parts of the church that had been rented out to a school. Staff from the Corporate Drive office had met with facilities staff to pick out offices on the main campus. Because the budget constraints also had implications for staff levels, the elders and

new senior pastor began reviewing the structure of the current staff to determine whether there should be any restructuring. Nevertheless, as they began to make decisions concerning staff, church leaders told people, "This is not a financial decision; this is just restructuring and simplifying because of duplication of jobs."

Sandy Potts, BSW

Sandy Potts was the Associate Director of Care Ministry, essentially the church's social worker, and had been working at Creekside for more than three years. Now in her 50s, she had previously worked in a variety of professional capacities. After Sandy received a bachelor's of social work (BSW) from Asbury College in 1971, she and her husband, Bill, served about 20 years with OMS International, known formerly as the Oriental Missionary Society. They spent most of their time in Quito, Ecuador. As a result of their long experience overseas, Sandy and Bill were bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English fluently. After returning from the mission field, they became heavily involved in the Spanish ministry at Creekside. In addition, Sandy volunteered at a crisis pregnancy center for three years and directed a crisis pregnancy center for one year, taught a sexual abstinence curriculum in public schools for four years, and worked at a community action council for eight months just before beginning at the church.

As Associate Director of Care Ministries at Creekside, Sandy had an important and multifaceted role in the congregation. She administered the benevolence program, which provided financial assistance for rent, utilities, food and other dry goods. She worked directly with clients to develop six-month care plans around a variety of presenting issues. These clients included both church members and others from the community. Sandy provided periodic training for church staff members who did not know how to work with people who came to the church for assistance. Sandy had trained twenty-five volunteers in various Care Ministry programs as volunteer caseworkers. Subsequently, she coordinated, scheduled, and supervised these volunteers. Sandy also supervised social work and counseling students from local universities in field practica at Creekside. Finally, Sandy managed several annual church programs like the food drive and Thanksgiving baskets for needy families in the community.

Sandy's lifelong relationship to the church and her passion for service, as both a minister and a social worker, framed her response to the recent actions and decisions happening at Creekside. Sandy was raised in a non-Christian home. Through the in-

fluence of an older sister, Sandy and her siblings began attending church. Home life was not always stable and for Sandy it was the model of Christ that she saw in her siblings that led her to depend on God. As a teenager she began to date the pastor's brother. This relationship affected Sandy's relationship to the church in another way. While dating, Sandy got pregnant. Her boyfriend wanted her to get an abortion and the family doctor advised her to get an abortion. With no one to turn to, Sandy came to understand the reality of Jesus in her life. Through the services of an unwed mother's home run by the Salvation Army, Sandy was able to surrender her son for adoption. The common practice at this time was for the child to be born and placed almost immediately with its adoptive family. When Sandy insisted on seeing her child, however, the social workers reluctantly allowed her to spend 30 minutes with him. Initially, they told Sandy that she could not do this because she would never go through with the adoption plan if she spent time with the child. But she was determined to do this and felt like it was very cathartic for her. Sandy wanted to let her son know what she was doing. She told him, "I want to make something out of my life so that if we ever meet you will see God's hand at work." This experience as an unwed pregnant teenager motivated Sandy to become a social worker. It allowed her to relate to other young girls as she served with her husband leading Bible studies at an unwed mother's home. She was able to share the grace of God with girls who were in the same position she had been in many years earlier. These opportunities gave Sandy a chance to share the hope of Christ and the healing that she knew the Church was supposed to give to those in need.

Decision time

The day began as many others had except that when Sandy walked through the doors of the Corporate Drive office building she noticed how quiet it was on her floor. There were about 35 staff members housed in this building on three different floors. No one else was on her floor except the receptionist. "They're having a meeting, they're upstairs and they're all crying, and it has something to do with a phone message. You should go to that meeting," the receptionist directed. Sandy decided to listen to the phone message before she did anything else. There had already been talk about people losing their jobs. The new senior pastor, 29-year-old Gary Lawson, and the church's senior executive director, Peter Wilson, had reassured staff members at the general staff meeting the month before: "You are the very best staff and no one will be let go until we take other steps."

Immediately after arriving at her office, Sandy checked for messages. "Sandy, we need you to come to the 'Decision Room' for a meeting at 4:45," the administrative assistant from Human Resources said on a telephone message. Trying to keep a positive outlook on what was happening, Sandy decided to go upstairs to where other staff members who had gotten a similar message were meeting. They were crying and praying. Sandy's boss, Bob Smart, was there.

Someone asked, "Did you get a message?"

"Yes," Sandy responded, "does that mean that I'm going to lose my job?"

"I don't think everyone will lose their jobs," someone else said, "but I'm sure that most of us will."

For her part, Sandy tried to be reassuring, reminding others in the room that God would take care of them all. After talking, crying and praying together the group finally disbursed and people tried to go on with the tasks of the day.

It was very difficult to concentrate on work that day. As the day progressed, people returning from the individual appointments in the Decision Room made comments like, "I'm out of here."

When Sandy asked several colleagues when they would be leaving, each of them said, "Today." Sandy could not believe what she was hearing. People were quietly packing up their offices. It all seemed incongruent to her. This was so totally foreign to the way she operated and thought about how people should be treated. Sandy did not pack any of her belongings. She thought, *that's so silly*.

Nevertheless, as 4:45 pm approached, Sandy felt rising anxiety. She left for the meeting with some trepidation.

Termination

"So, I guess I'm your next victim," Sandy said nervously as she sat down to meet with Peter Wilson and Rita Kimball.

"We're sorry that we're going to have to terminate your job," Peter Wilson said without further explanation.

"I don't understand," Sandy said, shocked at what she was hearing.

"Well, we're just having to cut back on some jobs, and where there is duplication . . ."

"There's no duplication of my job," Sandy interrupted emphatically, "no one else is doing it."

"Well," Peter responded firmly, "this is what we're going to have to do."

Questions came rushing into Sandy's mind and then came pouring out of her mouth just as quickly. "What about my clients who are coming in for pre-scheduled appointments on Monday? We have appointments already set for next week."

"Rita will take care of it," Peter replied, motioning toward her.

"What about the Thanksgiving program and the food drive next weekend?" Sandy asked.

"Rita will take care of them," Peter repeated.

We have to make decisions about what help clients need on Monday. Clients would be coming in for help. "What about the cases? What about the volunteers?" Sandy asked. "I work with fragile people who have suffered a lot of losses. You cannot just drop them like this."

"We'll take care of it," Peter promised. Then he changed the subject. "We really want you and your husband to keep coming to the church. You're invaluable to us."

"You're not acting as my church acts," Sandy exclaimed. "In fact, you're not acting as His church would act! This isn't the way the church is supposed to work. What about some other options you said you were going to do first?" Sandy questioned.

"We've looked at everything and this is what we're going to do," Peter answered. After a bit more conversation, he gave Sandy a packet of severance information.

"Thanks," Sandy said, as she stood to leave the room.

It was 4:55 pm when she checked her watch, shocked by what had just happened. Without prior notice, it was now Sandy's turn to clear out her office.

The Aftermath

As Sandy returned to her office, questions flooded her mind. *Have I done something wrong? My evaluations were always good. Don't they understand how important this work is to the mission of the church? Haven't I communicated effectively what the Care Ministry Department does?*

Then Sandy's thoughts turned toward how the church had behaved toward her in this situation. It brought back memories of some of her earlier encounters with the church as a teenager. *This is such an uncaring, disrespectful way to treat people!*

As Sandy rehearsed what had happened and imagined what the consequences might be, she faced several dilemmas and questions. Although Sandy's termination was effective immediately, she struggled with what to do with clients sched-

uled for appointments on Monday and throughout the coming weeks. *As a professional social worker, Sandy thought, I have a primary responsibility to my clients. Even if the church leaders do not understand the consequences of their actions on vulnerable people, I have to do something. Maybe I should go directly to the senior pastor or the elders to discuss these concerns. They just don't know what and how much we do in the Care Ministry Department.*

Other, more personal thoughts quickly raced through her mind, too. *What do I say to people I worship with, who want to know what's going on? How much do I tell them? How much do I not tell them? Who will supervise the practicum students? This is such a poor witness to the professional community and the universities where my practicum students come from. Can we continue going to church here? But as she cleared out her office, the one thing that continued to push its way back into her thoughts was the clients. What should I do about all those people already scheduled for next week? What will happen to them?*

While continuing to pack, Sandy rehearsed what she had said in the termination interview: *You're not acting as my church acts; in fact, you're not acting as His church would act. This isn't the way the church is supposed to be. As Sandy mulled over the situation, another thought emerged: The Church is supposed to be a place of healing and hope; not a place where hurt is given out. Out loud, she asked herself, "What are you going to do about it?"*