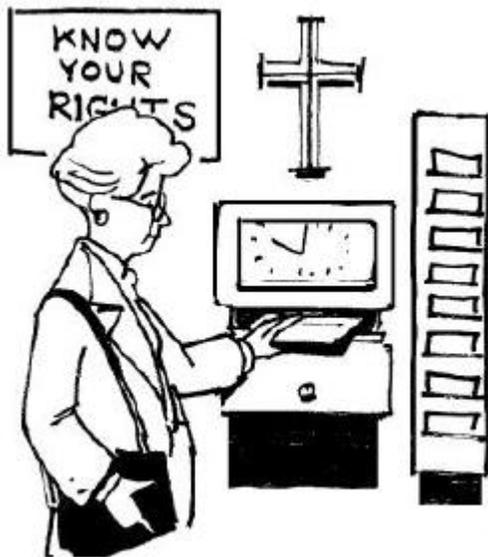


## Mission Management: Archdiocese policy models justice in the workplace

Tom Gallagher | Mar. 13, 2009



*Editor's Note:*

*Good intentions are not good enough. For the church to carry out its mission, it needs management systems, trained personnel, and the oversight and accountability that people in the pews increasingly demand. It must, in short, be a well-run operation. That's what our newest feature, Mission Management, is all about. Here we will explore both success stories -- best practices in church management that can be emulated by others in similar circumstances -- and areas where those on the frontlines can learn from the mistakes of others.*

Any U.S. employer with 4,000 staff members at 240 work sites should expect, in the normal course of business, to be the subject of employment-related litigation.

Not so the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese, which has not experienced a wrongful termination case in more than a decade. "This is a substantial accomplishment for any organization," Fr. Kevin McDonough, former vicar general for the archdiocese, told *NCR*.

It'

s not just happenstance or God's grace that led to such results.

In the mid-1990s, the archdiocese lost an age-discrimination suit, which got the new archbishop, Harry Flynn, and his management team thinking. Flynn, senior diocesan staff, pastors, principals and lay employees undertook a period of soul-searching, reflecting on the nature of work and how the archdiocese engaged employees. The context was good management practices, but also -- through scripture, tradition, doctrine and experience -- the mandate to act justly as an employer.

Most employed Americans (those who don't have a contract of some kind) earn a paycheck as an "at-will employee," a legal term that empowers employers to terminate workers for virtually any reason, absent violations of state or federal discrimination statutes or other relatively narrow restrictions.

Does the "at-will" standard accord with church teaching? Flynn, now retired, does not think so. "The employee at-will legal standard is fundamentally unjust," he told *NCR*. "The Catholic church, as an employer, must be a beacon of light, a beacon of justice in the way it engages employees."

A key document that helped shape the thinking of the archdiocese's employment group was produced by the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators. "The Individual and the Institution: Strengthening Working Relationships in the Church" demonstrated, said Sr. Fran Donnelly, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the former archdiocesan director of parish ministries and personnel, that "justice works for both the individual and the organization."

The result of the group's effort is the archdiocese's Justice in Employment policy. No longer is an archdiocesan employee considered an at-will employee. No longer can a principal fire a teacher simply because of a personality conflict. No longer can a pastor let go a full-time employee in order to get "his people" hired.

The policy provides that full-time employees of the archdiocese (in the chancery, parishes, parish schools and other entities under the control of the archbishop) can only be terminated "for cause." This term is defined to include poor performance, improper conduct and violation of work rules and also financial distress or reorganizations that warrant layoffs or staff reduction. If the latter two circumstances arise, according to the policy, "an appropriate level of severance will be provided to those affected."

The Justice in Employment policy references four key principles drawn directly from church teachings, including the value and dignity of the human person (*Laborem Exercens*), serving the common good (*Mater et Magistra*), justice in the workplace ("Economic Justice For All"), and meaningful participation (*Gaudium et Spes*). "This policy works best when taken as a whole package, as it's based squarely on Catholic social teaching," said Dominican Sr. Dominica Brennan, a former chancellor and director of the Office of Conciliation at the archdiocese. "If any one aspect is stressed to the exclusion or neglect of the others, the policy gets distorted," she said.

"In an archdiocese of our size, there are differing degrees of understanding best practices in management," said Deacon Bill Umphress, who was instrumental in creating the policy as the Director of Human Resources for 14 years. "We spent a lot of time educating our pastors, priests, sisters and lay employees about the policy and about the rights of employees." Now retired, Umphress points out that "we are practicing what we are preaching."

The policy requires sound hiring practices. Once an employee begins her job, performance reviews are required, as well as opportunities for the employee to improve her performance. When conflicts occur, the policy requires local procedures to be implemented with a set time frame for responses. The employee starts with her immediate supervisor but can escalate the matter to the next supervisory level. If agreed upon, an ad hoc committee can be formed to achieve a solution. If all else fails, the policy provides for binding arbitration through the archdiocesan Office of Conciliation.

"The Justice in Employment policy is not just about how one gets terminated, but about how a person participates in the workplace as a valued coworker serving the common good," said Brennan. She recounted a story about a teacher who was struggling and through the conciliation process obtained a new understanding of the issues. The teacher was then able to improve her performance and succeed at her job. Later the teacher wrote to Brennan about how the process was healing in many ways.

While not perfect, the Justice in Employment policy is "one of the finest achievements of the archdiocese," said Brennan.

*Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to NCR. Ideas for a "Mission Management" story? Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.*

### **Online resources**

Copies of the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese's Justice in Employment policy can be found on their Web site at [www.archspm.org/html/justice.html](http://www.archspm.org/html/justice.html).

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