

The Process of Leaving InterVarsity Staff

By Steve Stuckey and Friends

Former UC Irvine staff member Bill Clark put it this way. “I became a Christian in InterVarsity. It was my spiritual family. Eventually, I felt the need to leave ‘home’ to continue my growth.

Another former staff said, “The leaving process was very painful because I was asked to leave. The decision caught me by surprise.”

Former San Diego staff Joon Han said, “We were not making it financially. I really wanted to stay. I think IVCF is the best job in the world, but I was unable to raise the funds I needed to support my family.”

Greg Walgenbach, who worked at East Los Angeles City College explained that when he and his wife, Claudia, had their first child, it got them to thinking about the future. His desire to complete a seminary education and work in a church setting, thoughts that he had put on the back burner of his mind, began to heat up again. He decided that it was time to make the break and pursue his dreams.

Matt Frazier served for five years as a campus staff member. He left that position to become music director for Urbana with his wife Sundee. Speaking of his time as a campus staff member Matt said,

“Frankly, I was tired. I couldn’t do it any more. I was exhausted from the constant involvement with people. Secondly, I had the forever feeling that nothing was ever finished.”

For various reasons, at least ten InterVarsity staff members leave the ranks of IVCF in Southern California each year. At the national level where the average stay of a campus staff is 6.625 years, 253 team members left in 2003. The number of people who are former Southern California staff has grown to over 150 people since 1950. Between 1950 and 1992 the regional team turned over every nine years. It is safe to say that 85% of the people currently employed by InterVarsity in Southern California will leave by the year 2012 swelling the ranks of former staff to over 250 people. Given the potential

transition of that many people, it seems wise to me to learn as much as possible about the leaving process. How do you know when it is time to stay or leave? What questions should you ask yourself? Who can help you make a decision? What emotions might you experience? How do you write a resume of your InterVarsity work that makes sense to a secular employer? How do you leave well?

I have asked these same questions of eight former InterVarsity staff. Their responses shape this essay.

The Ties That Bind Us Together

The home port for the Goodyear Blimp is a grassy field in Long Beach next to the 405 freeway. When the blimp



docks to take on fuel, supplies, passengers, or make repairs, a set of ropes tether it to the ground. For a season the blimp becomes a part of the earth in its daily rotation around its axis. In a similar way, men and women who join InterVarsity staff tether themselves to an organization for a season. Invisible ropes bind us together in a common orbit. To understand why people leave InterVarsity, it is important to grasp what ties us to the fellowship in the first place.

The rope of meaningful work

Ken Harlander, former staff at Cal State Bakersfield, put it this way, “I attended a Bible college after high school but it was not until I became involved with IVCF as a student that I felt I really met Jesus. I saw the importance of reaching college students with the gospel. I liked the diversity and flexibility of IVCF as compared to traditional church work. I felt we were on the cutting edge and not as encumbered. I joined because I wanted to make a lasting impact for Christ and I felt that IVCF was a great way to do this.” Sundee Frazier said, “I truly wanted to be a part of something meaningful, to participate in matters of eternal significance, and staff work gave me that opportunity.”

The rope of giftedness

A number of people mentioned how much fun it was to use their gifts and abilities in serving students. Bill Clark talked about how he liked to study the Word with students and help them to live out the gospel on campus. Ken

Harlander liked conference planning, large group speaking, and having fun with the students. Randy Fowler, former staff at UC Santa Barbara, liked helping students in the area of missions and evangelism.

The rope of Christian community

Serving with likeminded people is a powerful draw. Sundee Frazier echoed the words of many when she said, “What I liked most about the staff experience, honestly, was probably being part of a tight-knit community of people (the staff team at UCLA) who genuinely cared about me and my spiritual growth and wanted to pursue Jesus with everything they had.”

The rope of education and training

For many, InterVarsity has become a graduate school of Christian leadership training. Bill Clark and others liked the fact that in IVCF a young person was given a lot of responsibility and the chance to develop various ministry skills in a hands-on setting. “The learning-by-doing process can be a bit messy,” said Bill, “but the risk was a tremendous time of growth for me.”

The rope of fiscal support

InterVarsity is the first post-college job for many of us and as a job it must provide enough money to meet our financial needs. We need a sufficient amount to become financially independent of our parents and pursue our dreams for ourselves and our families. I know of no one who joined InterVarsity for the money! But, a steady stream of paychecks does keep

us connected to the organization.

The rope of organizational usefulness

Not all ropes that bind us to the organization are controlled by the individual staff member. This is one of them. The leaders of InterVarsity, the owners of the vision, create goals and objectives that they want the collective team to meet. Those goals are based upon a set of core values. Each year staff directors are asked to write annual performance reviews. They must evaluate whether the contribution that an individual staff member makes is helping the organization move towards its goals. Is their contribution cost effective? Is the effort to support and supervise a person worth the results they produce? Decisions about whether we stay or leave are sometimes dependant upon our leader’s evaluations of us.

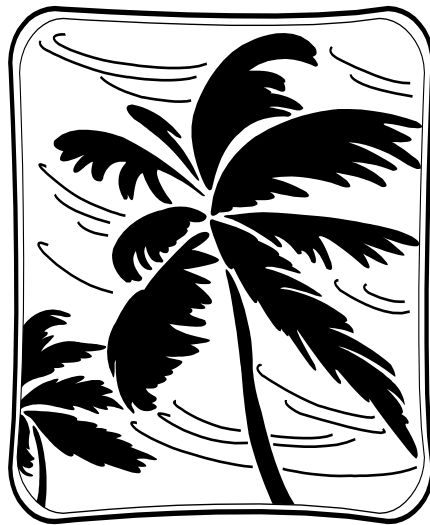
All six of these ropes are required to hold us as staff members to the organization of InterVarsity. Like a lighter than air blimp floating in the wind, neither we nor the organization are ever static. We both grow and change. At twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, each of us has a limited but growing sense of who we are and what we want to do in life. Each joins a national organization that we know mainly from a local campus perspective. As time goes by, we change. Individuals become more aware of their gifts, needs, and longings. Staying up until 2am in a freshman dorm may become less exciting at 30 than it was at 22 years of age. We begin our careers by relating to

students as peers, but then we age and they don't. Soon we find ourselves relating to them as older brothers and sisters. Eventually, students see us as fathers and mothers. Some staff marry, have children, and discover they must work harder to balance their time and energies.

Our perception of the organization also changes. We start off thinking we are part of a highly relational fellowship of like-minded souls. We are that but we are also more. We are also a diverse, national organization with objectives, goals and standards. We have policies and procedures to follow and organizational leadership structures that require our allegiance. At some point the fellowship will begin to feel more like an institution. That feeling requires a response from us. Finally, the organization itself changes. When I joined thirty plus years ago, I knew almost all the staff in the nation by sight if not by name. Now I can hardly keep track of folks in one region. Leaders, strategies, and even our corporate website change constantly.

The Forces That Pull Us Apart

For the Goodyear Blimp parked in Long Beach, the ocean winds exert an invisible force on the ropes that keep the blimp secure. The winds cause the ropes to fray. In InterVarsity we have our own set of winds. Everyone must decide whether they can repair and strengthen their cords or cut their ties and move on to another port. Here



are three examples of the forces you may experience.

The Island of InterVarsity

“The most significant way to spend your life in God’s kingdom is as an InterVarsity staff member.” A number of former staff heard that message and initially believed it. Sundee Frazier said, “I wanted to be radically faithful and the only radically faithful people I knew were InterVarsity staff, thus I wanted to be an IV staff. Perhaps only urban ministry or ministry among the poor would be equal to it.” But Sundee eventually discovered that she had gifts and longings that were not being used as a staff member. She and others experienced a growing fatigue, frustration, and even disillusionment with their work. Sundee touches on one of the problems close-knit mission communities all face—insularity. *Insula* is the Latin word for island. It is easy in our business to develop insider language, limited perspectives, and narrow applications for God’s truth. Bill Clark said that the ‘island experience’ fed his pride and led him to believe he did not have anything to learn from others. A narrow

viewpoint on “ministry” can also cause some to feel pressured to fit a mold in order to gain acceptance by their fellow staff. It can lead to a situation where certain gifts are devalued. Greg Walgenbach detected cynicism for the church. “If only they could do it like we do it.” He noted that cynicism hinders creativity.

The problems of insularity and the long term forces it will put upon staff is largely a leadership problem. Youthful movements like InterVarsity will always be highly susceptible to the condition. The solution—building bridges to a broader point of view—will require vigilance from all of us. Sundee put it this way: “More than skills or training, I think what I lacked most was the awareness that campus ministry is not the highest [or only] calling. Faithfulness can take many forms and what is faithful for one might be absolute death for another. I wish I held more tightly to the truth that ‘the only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through LOVE.’ This can look so many different ways.”

The Tension between Communal Fellowship and Mission Organization

A number of former staff described InterVarsity as their spiritual family. They found faith in Jesus as a student. As they moved from adolescence into young adulthood they gained brothers and sisters in the faith who were more hospitable to them than their own blood relatives. Then somewhere along their journey they were hired as a staff member with InterVarsity.

Expectations changed but most didn't notice. Families don't hire siblings. They don't hand out job descriptions, give performance reviews, or fire people. But mission organizations do and that is the rub. In InterVarsity, relationships take on a level of complexity and intensity that is rarely found in other job settings. We behave and feel more like a family business. There is weightiness to that reality. Bill Clark noticed how much easier it was to be a supervisor outside IVCF. There were less overlapping expectations. He experienced a freedom to enter creative conflict with supervisees because less was at stake. We put a high value on friendship and relational harmony among our staff teams. But we also want to be effective with students. Those two values are both good and must be kept in tension. When the tension is relaxed, problems develop. Two people I interviewed were asked by their supervisors to leave. The hardest part was the surprise. Job expectations had not been made clear to them in the beginning. Supervisors may have been hesitant to address difficult performance issues early on. I found I always wanted to be the friend, rarely the boss. The supervisee may have been slow to pick up on signs of failure. Regardless of the reason, we all need to find ways to live with our relational and organizational complexity if we want to stay with the job long term.

Money Matters

Jim Lundgren recently reported to the board of directors, "Only 22% of field staff receive full

salaries. Nearly four in ten (38%) earn less than .75 of their target salaries. This situation erodes morale, hinders long-term service, strains marriages and undercuts campus ministry. It also runs counter to Biblical teaching. While, for various reason, some staff might choose to earn less than they might, the vast majority of staff would prefer to be fully compensated."¹ Jim and other leaders of the movement are working hard to address these fiscal concerns and they are to be commended. Nevertheless, fundraising is hard work and probably always will be. If a

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staff member is to stay long term, he or she must make their peace with the situation or look for another job.

A number of former staff said that their inability to raise their budget left them feeling like failures. Often we do fail. We fail to put in the time and energy for the task. However, the sense of failure can become spiritually and emotionally debilitating if unaddressed for too long. Joon Han said that though he was not making it financially, he felt very loyal to InterVarsity. He needed his supervisors to graciously set

him free from the burden and give him permission to leave. His staff director said, "It's not your fault" and that made all the difference in the world.

Recommendations for Dealing with the Winds that Pull Us Apart

- Look for opportunities outside of InterVarsity to learn and expand your perspective.
- Meet with a pastor, school administrator, or youth worker from another organization.
- Read biographies of people in "non ministry professions."
- Seek help in identifying your areas of giftedness and look for ways to exercise those interests in a non university setting.
- Who and where do you want to be ten years from now.
- Say to yourself, "InterVarsity is my job. It is not my calling." Calling is always bigger than any specific job assignment.
- Keep your nose attuned to the skunk of cynicism.
- Is there a model staff worker mold in your part of the organization? InterVarsity and the university we serve do not need you to fit the mold. We need you to break the mold and be yourself in all your uniqueness.
- Ask for a yearly performance review from your supervisor.

¹ Inside InterVarsity, April, 2004

On a yearly basis clarify job expectations.

- Celebrate your friendships with other staff. Recognize the necessary tension between friendship and mission and say “thank you.”
- The fundraising guidelines of InterVarsity are a good thing. Practice them.
- Agree with your supervisor on when you will both say, “Enough is enough.”

The Process of Leaving-Advice from the Experts

Who was helpful to you in the decision making process?

Bill Clark said that he had to seek out people who had no interest in his outcome. Fellow staff wanted him to stay. People at his church wanted him to leave and join them. He found a spiritual director outside of IVCF and his church to give him some perspective. Bill noted that it was difficult for his staff director to also serve as a spiritual director in his situation.

Matt Frazier noted that his supervisors paid for a SIMA review and that proved to be a most helpful investment. Matt wanted to make his situation work but he knew it wasn't going to. He appreciated the gentle nudge out of the nest that his supervisor gave him.

How long did the process take?

The length of the leaving process varied from six months to two years. Coming to a decision seemed to take the longest time. Once a person decided to leave, they had to then decide what to do next. Supervisors, fellow staff, students, and donors later needed to be notified. Each set of relationships often requires times for discussion and reflection. Farewell parties varied from team to team. Once the final pay check was issued, the Human Resources department sent an exit interview. One former staff said, “The leaving process takes time. Make space for it. Don't try to jam it into a final busy quarter.”

What emotions did you experience?

Almost everyone I spoke with expressed appreciation for their years with IVCF. But the leaving process triggered a variety of emotions. As Joon Han said earlier, “InterVarsity is not just a job.” Some experienced a sense of loss. Feelings of grief surface for some- anger, fear, sadness, loneliness, or depression. Personal contact with fellow staff often ceased as new students and staff workers filled the space vacated by the person leaving. Randy Fowler felt he had failed and let God down. Some wondered if they had

accomplished anything. Several, on the other hand, felt relief. They were glad to be leaving a job assignment that was a poor fit. A few were excited to be moving to another job and a new season of life.

Sundee Frazier said, “As I gain some distance on the experience, I feel more peaceful about ‘what I accomplished’ in my years on staff. I think I see now that *radical disciples* aren't made in four years, if they're ever even *made* at all. Now I simply want to plant a seed, or encourage someone along the way, or be a light who shines Jesus. I still feel pangs of regret and pain when I attend InterVarsity weddings or events where there are former students. I wonder, ‘Did I make a difference at all?’ I am humbled again when I realize that it's not about me.” Ken Harlander added, “I am learning to relax about my legacy and do what I can with the gifts God has given in the circumstances I live with.”

How did you translate your IVCF experience to a resume? How has it helped with what you are doing now?

Bill Clark and Randy Fowler both worked for high tech companies. In their resumes they focused upon the skills they learned in leadership development, conflict resolution, and team building.

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Ken Harlander

Bill says that in his line of work, the people who succeed exercise the gifts of servant leadership and learn to build trust with others.

Sundee Frazier works as an admissions recruiter for an adult education university. She emphasized *recruiting students* to attend events, *directing programs, providing leadership and mentoring*, and *speaking to and teaching/training groups* on her resume. She credits IV with helping her to overcome her proclivity to shyness.

Ken Harlander eventually got a counseling degree and works as a therapist in Bakersfield. He emphasized counseling students, leading workshops, and organizing events on his resume. He also said that learning to be self motivated and work independently has helped him when he had his own private practice.

Joon Han and Greg Walgenbach have both continued in the pastoral ministry in a church setting. Their InterVarsity job translates well, though both have had to broaden their vision on how they define faithfulness and success.

Matt Frazier works as a free-lance musician in the Los Angeles area. He credits IVCF with helping him develop people skills that are useful in whatever profession a person enters. Fund raising training has also helped him know how to network with people in the industry. Matt, however, echoed a struggle other former staff mentioned. Time with InterVarsity has put him behind

his peers in the music field. Others noted that they had to enter the job market at an entry level. Some advanced quickly once they got a job, but their IVCF assignment was not an initial advantage.

Summary

Gary Gates, former IVCF staff in Berkeley once told me, "Once an InterVarsity staff member, always an InterVarsity staff member." By that he meant the experience of serving college student with InterVarsity brands us for life. We are part of a small and exclusive club of people who approach scripture and life in a similar way. We are members of an invisible fellowship of students, staff, and alumni from around the world.

But it is also true that all of us, whether we serve five or fifty years, leave the organization at some point. Our jobs end. I am grateful to those who have blazed the trail before us and shared their wisdom and insight.

Comments or Questions

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