

The Art of Playing Well Together—For Pastors and Church Leaders

We all want our churches to be healthy and effective in mission—but we know that isn't always the case. Over the past decades I've seen that conflicts between pastors and lay leaders—especially church council members—are one of the most common causes of problems in congregations. The sad results of such a disconnect can include church splits, declining attendance, and pastors leaving churches. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so may I suggest that you read on through, and see if some of these thoughts are helpful for you and your congregation?

FOR ALL (CLERGY AND LAITY):

1. Don't say "my" church.

I know, "my" church can be a sign of pride—like "my" family or "my country." But even when used innocently, it can pave the way to a less noble use of the expression. Recall a time when church disagreements have grown serious, notice how talk of *our* church shifted to *my* church. The pastor starts talking about what won't be allowed in *my* church, the deacon will be darned if such-and-such happens in *my* church, and by the time it reaches this level of misguided ownership, it goes to heck in a hand basket.

How to prevent such self-centered thinking? It's better if everyone speaks of *our* church, so long as *we* includes everyone in the church and not just a faction. But really it is *Christ's* church! Or *God's* church, if we prefer. Church decisions shouldn't be about what suits this person or that person, but about how any decision lead to the creation of the Beloved Community. Sometimes a little word can make a difference, so listen to yourself—do you speak of *my* church, *our* church, or *God's* church?

2. No surprises!

There is only one exception to this rule, which is a surprise party in someone's honor. Otherwise, there is never any reason to surprise someone--either with an unexpected meeting, sudden resolution, unscheduled vote, or unscheduled visit by a delegation to an office. The need by any party to bring something up in an unexpected and unannounced manner always indicates some level of distrust or malfeasance—it is prelude to a power play as surely as Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March. If you hear that a group of people plan a surprise meeting with the pastor, or the pastor decides he has to drop in on someone with a bombshell, beg them to reconsider. If you're at a council meeting and something gets brought up suddenly, or it's obvious that a motion is being railroaded, say "this is rather sudden—let's give it more time for thought."

Of course, the positive antidote to surprise actions is *communication in advance*. As a minister, I consult with the church moderator (or whichever persons will be effected) before introducing any change. In return, I appreciate that lay leaders know to bring up any matters of substance in advance of formal discussion or action. This sort of “testing the waters” with people builds relational confidence between parties and it enables deeper thinking about decisions.

3. Fight against Common Foes—not Against Each Other

I often use this metaphor for marriage counseling, but it can apply as well to church councils and ministers. Suppose you’re walking together down a dark alley, and a bunch of thugs jump you. Instead of struggling against your attackers, you turn on one another and start beating each other up.

The picture is ludicrous, but that’s what couples sometimes do in a marriage---and pastors and church leaders do it as well. Your church is assailed with all manner of challenges---financial needs, ways to connect with the larger community, straining resources of time and energy, etc. When these foes assail a group, they sometimes turn against one another, beating up and blaming, rather than standing together as a united front and directing their combined energies against the problems. As Ben Franklin put it at the beginning of the colonial revolution, “If we don’t hang together, then we shall surely hang separately.” When troubles confront your church, seek ways to frame it as “all of us united” against the common threat.

FOR MINISTERS:

1. Non-Anxious Presence

This comes from Rabbi Edwin Friedman’s classic book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. Over the past twenty years I’ve spoken to a number of pastors who agree that this is as close as it comes to a “silver bullet” for surviving church conflicts. There are two parts: (1) “*Non-anxious*” is self-explanatory; when you sense disagreement do all you can to reduce your own stress; try to look at it playfully and lightly. Even if there is something vital at stake, thinking of it as being of great consequence will not help the situation. Of course, keeping one’s Zen-state when others disagree with us requires considerable spiritual and mental practice. And don’t forget (2) “*Presence*.” This is also counter-intuitive, but when you know someone disagrees with you stay close to them relationally. When there is heat, we naturally desire to back-away; that is instinctive, but it exacerbates problems.

Again, prevention is better than cure. The best way to ensure “non-anxious presence” is for pastor and congregants to establish good rapport. It’s easy to think “ministers are so busy, it’s a waste of time to just hang out with parishoners.” But in fact, just talking when there *aren’t* any heavy issues is a vital use of time. Pastors and lay leaders with well-established relationships are more likely to be able to stay in-sync and weather storms together when they arise.

2. “Watch your life and doctrine closely.”—1 Timothy 4:16

Rabbi Friedman says the primary task of a clergy person is: “take primary responsibility for his or her own position...and work to define his or her own goals and self.” Putting that in mystical terms, I recall the words of a mentor on a personal retreat: “You are the sacrament of the Holy Spirit for your congregation.” The pastor’s own *being*—what they do and believe—is, as the Apostle Paul wrote, a critical element for the health of God’s church.

In the United Church of Christ, ministers are fortunate to have two outstanding documents that can aid in this. The minimal statement of a clergy person’s expectations—a list of lines to never cross—is the **Ordained Minister’s Code**, and particularly the section titled **Ethics of Ministry**. A teacher in seminary often said, “Every minister has his or her price,” a caution that no-one is above failing ethically, given the worst case scenario. Unfortunately, it is possible to gradually descend into such a worst case scenario like the proverbial frog boiling unknowingly in the pot. A regular reading of the Ordained Minister’s Code is a good way to ensure that the pastor stays far from the boiling point.

On a more positive note, the document titled **The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ** is a great summary of what the Apostle Paul enjoins when he says “watch your life and doctrine.” Its comprehensive nature can be a bit daunting at first glance, so remember that this is a listing of the *ideals* for ministry. The Marks of Faithful and Effective Ministers is a great summation of the high call of God so an occasional review of the marks can provide a valuable refresher for active clergy.

3. Bless the “Loyal Opposition.”

This is another excellent suggestion from Friedman. Do you know a member of your parish who always has something critical, snide or oppositional to say? The one whom you think of as the burr stuck permanently under your saddle? Yeah, you have someone in mind when you read this.

When viewed negatively, such individuals can grow to become a minister’s pitfall—like the burr that chafes until it opens a wound and then becomes infected. But

there's a way to re-interpret such a person: they are in fact doing the minister a favor. Social psychologists verify that every group needs a consistent critic; any organization comprised entirely of "yay-sayers" will stagnate. There has to be a voice of correction. Leaders don't have to agree with that voice, but they do need to hear it.

In one of my churches there was a woman who did not profess Christianity, and who was outspoken in her disagreements. Sometimes she'd come out and say "That's silly—do you people realize how ridiculous that sounds to people outside of this church?" I came to realize that in some cases her stinging insights were spot on. I would thank her for such remarks, and others in the church picked up on that cue. I came to privately regard her as "our congregation's B.S. meter." When she passed away, she donated all her remaining assets to a new church that I was then planting—and then I realized she truly was the *loyal* opposition.

FOR LAY LEADERS:

1. Never Relay Anonymous Negative Comments

Would you like to know how we can destroy our churches? Ruin our pastors' health? I'll tell you how. It's simple. Just make a point of telling the pastor "People are saying..." and end the sentence with a negative comment—about the music, sermon, outreach ministry—you name it. This puts the minister in a position of fear (what people? How many?) Then the minister looks at people wondering "Is it so and so?" It is double jeopardy because not knowing whom to address, the pastor has no idea how to rectify or approach the situation. No wonder Jesus tells us to confront people directly—to their face—if we must speak words of correction (Matthew 18).

The solution? If you hear someone saying negative about a third party, ask them "Have you spoken directly to so-and-so with your concern?" Especially if "so-and-so" is your pastor. Doing this could save your church.

And a tip for ministers: next time someone comes to you saying "People are saying..." Reply with this: "I'll address that when the person concerned tells me to my face—until then, as far as I'm concerned, it isn't real."

2. Offer positive and specific Feedback

Everyone appreciates appreciation, and clergy are no exception to the rule. But even better than gracious sentiments is specific positive feedback. So instead of "Great sermon pastor" you could say "I appreciate the way you applied the Old Testament to this week's political events." Rather than, "Our church is doing great," you could say "I was pleased this week at my Rotary club meeting to hear a city

councilman speak well of our refugee ministry.” Statements of this sort provide the minister with a sense of being appreciated and also provide valuable information.

The pastor(s), council members, and ministry leaders of any church are a team, and congregational health depends on their ability to play well together. Remembering these suggestions may help your team to stay successfully in the game, effectively serving God’s Beloved Community.