

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.theparishpaper.com

April 2008 - Volume 16, Number 4

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Making a Good Start with Your New Pastor?

"I wish the church would act like the Church!" the frustrated young pastor said to his friend John at a clergy meeting. "Why do so many Christians do such unchristian things to one another?"

"Yes, if it weren't for people, a pastor's job would be easy," John quipped with a chuckle.

"I'm serious, John," the young pastor said. "Some days I wonder if I'm cut out for this profession. I'm moving to a different congregation next month. How can I avoid a re-run of my painful experiences at Easton Hills?"

"I'm probably not the best person to advise you," John replied with genuine humility. "All I can tell you is what worked for me. Thanks to a wise mentor, the assumptions I brought through the church door my first day helped a great deal."

"What assumptions?" the young pastor asked.

"*First and foremost, I vowed to think like a missionary,*" John said. "A missionary does *not* assume that the majority of people *act* like Christians. In fact, a missionary assumes that many people may never act like Christians. So I'm greatly encouraged when even a few people act in distinctly Christian ways—with authentic humility, gentleness, and a distinctive care and concern for people around them."

"I'd like to hear more about that missionary mindset," the young pastor said. "Can we get together for lunch next week?"

A few days later John continued over lunch: "Three core values are foundational to a missionary-mindset. I repeatedly shared those core values with church leaders during the opening months of our ministry together."

The pious notes the young pastor took—and later applied in his new pastorate—are summarized below.

1. Learn How to Love One Another.

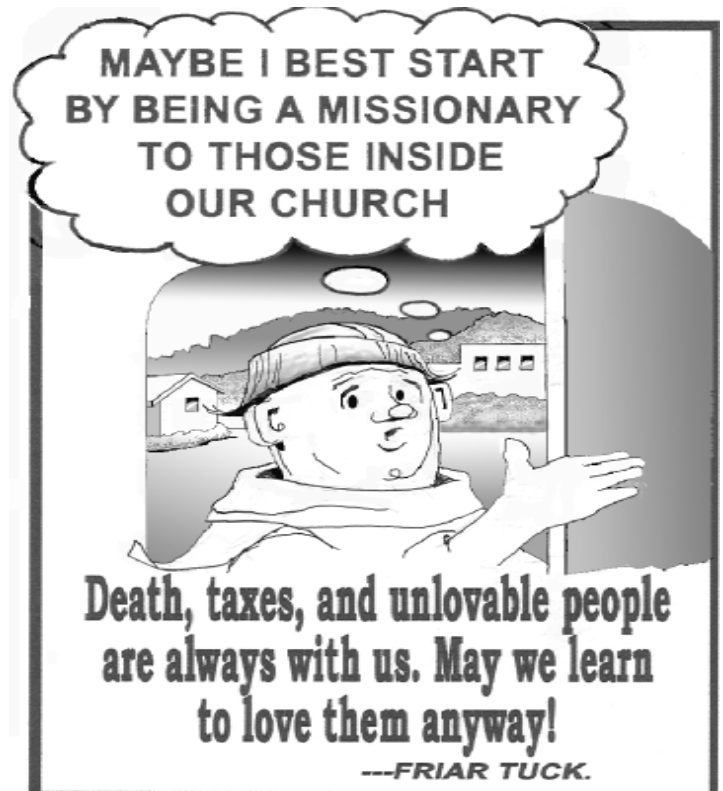
Repeatedly say to lay leaders, "Learning to love one another as pastor and people is our primary task!" Yes, quality sermons and visits to the hospital and homes of members and potential members are important. Fulfill those roles in a consistently trustworthy manner. But John 13:35 is the central task: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."

Every person wants to feel valued and honored as a part of the congregation. In every conversation, demonstrate personal humility. Listen carefully and avoid coming across as a person with all the answers. In every conversation, express appreciation and affirmation for that individual. Why?

The ability to genuinely love is more often caught than taught! Love is what you do, one person at a time, not what you teach from the pulpit! Love is a verb, not a noun. If you don't feel like loving some people, love them until you feel like it.

Prayer and the modeling of prayer are essential to pastor and people learning to love one another. In the first few weeks launch a "Prayer Leader Ministry." Each week, invite a highly respected layperson, someone who holds an elected office in the congregation, to act as the worship prayer leader next Sunday.

Carefully prepare a stack of prayer slips and clip them to a "Prayer Leader Script." Meet with the prayer leader during the week to review the individual joys and concerns and



the script. On Sunday the pastor, prayer leader, organist, and music leader enter the sanctuary together. The team kneels at the altar rail for silent individual prayers of preparation. After the prelude and lighting of altar candles, the prayer leader moves to the pulpit for an opening greeting and the announcements provided in the script. Lastly, before the “stand and greet one another” time, the prayer leader asks, “Have you said a good word about the Lord Jesus Christ or this church this week; or have you invited anyone to come with you to church? This is a reminder of our Lord’s Great Commission to ‘Go Make Disciples.’”

At the time for pastoral prayer, the prayer leader again moves to the pulpit with the prayer slips. The top slip is an invitation to prayer, usually a Scripture verse such as Philippians 4:6-7. Then the prayer leader invites the congregation to prayer and lifts the names of each person with a joy; then prays for each person who is sick, hospitalized, or facing challenges. The next-to-last prayer slip is the Lord’s Prayer. After the congregation prays together, the prayer leader reads the final slip: “We lay these prayer slips on the altar table as a symbol of laying them at the Lord’s feet.”

After a couple of weeks, place prayer slips in the pew pockets. Invite parishioners to write their joys and concerns and pass them to the aisle as the pastor collects the slips. Done early in the service, the prayer leader and the pastor have time to review the slips and place them with the typed-in-advance joys or concerns that the prayer leader later lifts in prayer from the pulpit.

After a couple of more weeks, ask for volunteers from the people who’ve had experience as prayer leaders to take the registration slips from worship to a designated Prayer Room, where they pray for each worshiper by name.

Eventually, as the prayer leader invites attendees to sign the worship registration form, he or she adds, “If you sign the registration slip, we will pray for you by name in the prayer room during this service.” The number of people signing the registration form significantly increases.

Making God’s House a house of prayer moves God’s people toward loving one another far faster than merely telling them to love one another.

2. Learn How to Equip God’s People.

After a year with the prayer leader ministry, (a) affirm to each of the congregation’s various leadership groups that we have made strides toward learning to love one another and (b) highlight the benefits already resulting from the second core value: we are God’s people being equipped “for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:11).

The more we learn to love one another as pastor and people, the more individual members enthusiastically volunteer to select, create, and lead ministries they have never experienced before. Examples:

—The first weekly prayer leader began a prayer group for public school teachers. The group lifted their students in prayer before the official beginning of the school day.

—One prayer leader began a men’s prayer group. Adult males offered their personal concerns and learned to pray aloud confidently. Beginning with twelve men who wrote their prayers on a slip of paper to bolster their confidence, the group grew to over thirty. Individuals volunteered to present an opening devotional and a chorus or familiar hymn to focus the prayer time. Attendance grew to forty-five.

—Some of the more confident prayer leaders began leading new ministries, such as (a) fresh new Bible studies; (b) *Homes of Honor* with Gary Smalley’s materials (www.roadtoglory.net); (c) *Weigh-Down Workshop*—an effective weight loss program through biblical principles (www.weighdown.com); and (d) *Crown Ministries*—a scriptural approach to effective financial management (www.Crownministries.org).

These new ministries consistently drew new people into the church, which began growing in attendance and membership. Newcomers often said, “I can see that this is a church where I can really be involved.”

3. Learn How to Evaluate Progress.

Carry out the third core value in a quiet, behind the scenes, manner. Make no effort to analyze who is following the words of Hebrews 13:7: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

Ask people to apply this core value by asking, “Do I ‘imitate the faith’ rather than imitating the programs and actions of others?”

Acting on that third core value, one of the prayer leaders began asking church leaders if they would consider establishing a Stephen Ministry. She explained this to all the decision-making groups and received a resounding approval. After the ten-day training, she and two other leaders recruited and taught the fifty-hour training (an essential part of Stephen Ministry) to twelve people. After commissioning the twelve in worship, the pastor departed for a three-week mission trip. The fourteen Stephen Ministers assumed all the pastoral care and hospital visitation responsibilities.

Avoid oral judgments *to anyone about anyone* that you feel inadequately “imitates faith.” Leadership and affirmation is your role, not judgment. Death, taxes, and un-lovable people are always with us. Love them anyway!

The Bottom Line

Not everyone in the congregation acts like a Christian all the time. A missionary minded pastor (a) avoids that expectation and (b) gives thanks that some people become exceptional Christians.