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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Israel Galindo



Church staff conflict: Knowing when to fold 'em

Congregational staff who occupy the “second chair” often find themselves in a precarious position related to the prospects of their tenure. Sometimes circumstances dictate this, but also the relationship with the senior pastor can be a significant determinative factor.

One insight that can be of help when both circumstance and relationship make for a prickly situation is to remember that in times of acute anxiety the issue is not about some of the things we assume should matter. For example, I’ve heard church staff members, who are trying to sort out conflict that involves their job (meaning, there’s a threat of dismissal), argue on the merit of things such as their tenure, competence, expertise in the field, past glowing annual personnel reviews, sincerity, good service and even the fact that they are “nice persons.”

Staff members often are taken aback to discover that none of these things tend to count for much during times of reactivity if staff become the focus of anxiety (resulting in scapegoating, blame-displacement or personalization of issues). Reactivity is inimical to logic and reasonableness. People who are in the throws of reactivity are not interested in dialogue — they just want their way. Here’s what it sounds like:

“I’ve been here 10 years. They wouldn’t just dismiss me or tolerate the pastor just firing staff.” When anxiety hits, length of tenure does not matter. In fact, it may become one more arrow in the opponent’s quiver (“You’ve been here too long,” “That staff person should have left five years ago.” “We need new blood and fresh ideas.” And if there’s a new pastor on board, “We should allow the new pastor to start with the staff of his or her choice.”). But appealing to tenure

also assumes that length of tenure provides some “rights” and “privileges.” That may be true in more formal organizations that intentionally recognize length of tenure as a value, but it’s not universally true in congregations. (Andrew Bierce said that fidelity is “a virtue peculiar to those who are about to be betrayed.”) As to the issue of the pastor firing staff, that’s one loaded with all sorts of angles. In some congregations it may be that staff is expendable while the pastor is not. Or the congregation may have a “theology of hire” rather than a “theology of call” related to staff — in other words, an untheological and unhealthy position that “the pastor hires staff” as opposed to the congregation, as a community of faith, *calling* its staff.

“I’m competent at what I do, and I carry out my work responsibly.” Aside from the fact that this is a given — you are *expected* to be good at your job — few congregational members will have any idea of what you do at your job and ministry. Program and ministries staff persons tend to be behind-the-scenes persons and their sphere of influence will tend to be small and focused, often by virtue of program areas: youth, children, adults, senior adults, educational programs, ministry groups, music, etc. Usually most people will not notice how good a job you’re doing, but they’ll immediately notice if you drop the ball on something!

“But I’ve gotten glowing personnel reports every year. How can they now say I’m not doing a good job?” Sadly, most congregational personnel committees (or staff relations committees, etc.) tend to be ineffective if not outright dysfunctional. Often these committees consist of people in the congregation who have no idea of what

you do, may have only a passing personal acquaintance with you and, lacking leadership, tend to have no idea about how or why they are meeting for the annual personnel review with church staff. Additionally, there tends to be a high turnover in these types of committees. No one wants to be critical of staff (except for the occasional willful persons who get on the committee to work out their issues with the church), and few church members feel competent enough to evaluate the specialized kinds of ministries that second chairs carry out. Besides, the more responsible members likely take the view that if they don’t supervise you, why should they evaluate you?

When conflict spikes to a certain point, either because of circumstances or relationships, staff need to do the work of discernment about whether to stay or go. This is not easy and can be heartbreaking. But I’ve seen too many staff persons take a naïve posture and just “hope for the best” or trust that persons will be reasonable and redemptive. Sadly, often that’s just setting oneself up for a tragic surprise and is putting one’s fate in the hands of others.

So, how do you know when to fold ‘em? Based on my observation of staff (second chair) terminations over the years, the time may be when ...

- You realize you are working with a pastor who does not want you there.
- Your job and ministry become oppressive rather than life-affirming.
- Your family is suffering from the fallout of the toxicity from your job.
- The pastor gives you an ultimatum about “getting on board” with no room for dialogue or compromise.

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by Israel Galindo, professor of Christian education at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, executive director of Educational Consultants (www.galindoconsultants.com) and faculty member of the Leadership in Ministry Workshops (www.leadershipministry.com).

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- The pastor or a group in the church starts to micromanage your ministry.
- You discern that you have become the scapegoat for misplaced anxiety and blaming.
- You cannot support the pastor's vision for the church.
- The pastor tells you that you're "not spiritual enough" or that "your commitment is lacking."
- Someone starts insisting on or counting office hours or insists that you "work harder."
- Staff members are issued a "gag order."
- You are made responsible, and held accountable, for other people's functioning.
- The pastor, other staff or church members begin to undermine your ministry and your effectiveness.
- You are called into the pastor's office for a "talk" with representatives from the personnel committee.
- Neither the environment nor working relationships contribute to your personal, spiritual or professional growth.
- There is no joy in what you do.

Lest this sound like a tirade against pastors and senior pastors, let me say three

things. First, let's confess that sometimes it *is* the pastor. However, often it's a consequence of the challenge of pastoral leadership functioning in a complex and chronically anxious system.

I don't think pastors intentionally want to function in unhealthy, unredemptive, reactive ways that are detrimental to self, others and their congregations. But we should never underestimate the pressure of an anxious system on leaders who lack the resources to do self-care or self-work or lack the capacity to function in responsible, non-reactive ways. Never underestimate the power of systemic emotional process on the person on the endpoint of anxiety — the appointed leader in the system (especially if it involves dealing with acute anxiety) — and respect the power of homeostasis that facilitates a system to call out the leader who matches all of the system's neuroses. In addition, accept that the relationship between pastor and staff also is complex and fraught with difficulties.

Developing trust, mutual respect, collegiality and a good working relationship takes time, commitment, vulnerability, honesty and mutual accountability and requires personal and spiritual maturity on the part

of all players. How often do persons come together who can facilitate that constellation? How often do people give themselves enough time and opportunity to develop that kind of a relationship? (The more common pattern in congregations seems to be that the pastor is loath to meet and spend time with staff colleagues — despite all their talk of being a "team player" or "team leader.").

Here's the bottom line for me: it comes down to integrity of self. God will hold you more accountable for your response to your calling and ministry than God will others (and, by the way, that means your choice to *leave well* regardless of the fairness of your treatment). Life is too short to allow yourself to be caught in oppressive and unhealthy contexts and relationships. While there is no "perfect" congregation or place of ministry, there are places that are healthy, redemptive, affirming and call out the best in people. None of us who are called of God and accept the call to ministry are called to serve in places that are toxic to spirit, mind or family — especially if the toxic environment is fostered by those responsible for the care and health of the church or organization under their charge. **BT**

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