

Church Politics 101

If I were drafted to teach a course in church politics, here's what I'd include.

1. Every church, including yours, will have some disgruntled, even morally evil souls who will try to sabotage your ministry. Sometimes they will come on first as your friends—all the while planning your downfall. This is a terrible judgment, but often true.

The best way to deal with such people is to smile, accept their appearance of friendship without any great expectations, and pray for their transformation. You may win over a few, but don't count on it.

2. Cultivate friendships with a few church members in strong leadership positions, as well as some who are marginal to the life of the congregation. Consult them on a regular, informal basis. Ask what's going right and wrong. Encourage them to speak freely. Listen!

3. Be meticulously honest. Lies inevitably return to haunt you. If you fail at anything, be quick to admit it. Don't try to cover up. Small deceptions mushroom into bigger problems.

4. Be as open and charming as you can, but don't feel you have to share everything you know. Being too frank about your views, or trying to be "edgy," will get you in trouble with people who can't understand or be discreet. Remember: "Least said, soonest mended."

5. Always keep confidences inviolable. Nothing undermines your relationship with a congregation faster than for a member to tell you something in private and then hear it from someone else a few days later.

6. Live your personal life above reproach. It may not be fair for congregations to expect more of a minister than they do of themselves, but it is a fact of life that they do. Pay your bills promptly. Fulfill your

obligations. Avoid the appearance of evil, especially in relationships with the opposite gender.

7. If a rumor about you gets started, find out where it began, talk to the people who facilitated its transmission, and, if necessary, deal with it in some public fashion. I like the story of the minister who had two gossipy sisters in his church. One day they saw his car parked in front of the liquor store and began spreading word of their minister's "drinking problem." When he learned who was spreading the rumor, he parked his car in front of the sisters' house and left it there overnight. The town heard about it, of course, credited the minister with wit and humor, and recognized the rumor for what it was.

8. It's one thing to be Christian, but you don't have to tolerate liars, gossips, and turncoats in church leadership positions. The faster such persons are cashiered from their positions, the better. You'd like to think that a staff member who undercuts your work would change after being confronted, but this seldom happens. It's best to face the problem, ask the person to resign, or dismiss him.

When I had an untrustworthy associate I was unable to fire because of church polity, I did the next best thing and walled the person off from vital information and sensitive situations whenever I could.

9. Don't be afraid to go to a board or the entire congregation with a problem that is troubling you or the church. Chances are the problem is already disturbing others and they are wishing something

could be done about it. Bringing such a problem officially before the proper venue allows others to deal with it corporately and join creatively in its solution.

10. Be generous in giving credit to others, especially in public. Taking credit for others' work and ideas will not help your reputation. You earn a far better reputation by sharing the spotlight. Many loyal workers labor in obscurity and will work twice as hard if given public praise for their accomplishments.

11. Concentrate on "the big picture" of ministry—so you don't lose yourself in daily routines of newsletters, committees, counseling sessions, and sermons. Don't lose sight of your central task, which is, always and without fail, to bring people closer to the kingdom of God.

12. Embody love and forgiveness to your committees, boards, and congregation. You will receive lots of slights and insults over the years. Some will be intentional and others won't. But if you can absorb these barbs without dwelling on them, and can love the people responsible for them without getting bent out of shape, your congregation will not miss the important lesson. Your behavior may, in fact, speak louder than any sermon you ever preach.

13. Always exalt Christ. The church may be political. But the exaltation of Christ as its head has, through the centuries, lifted it above ordinary politics.

There was a brass plaque in a pulpit I once entered that said it best: "Remember, these folks didn't come to see you, they came to see Jesus."

—John Killinger

