



THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF ENTERING A NEW MINISTRY

This partial list of the Do's and Don'ts of Entering a New Ministry has been gleaned from my experience in working with conflicted churches since 1993. It should be helpful to both ministers and boards. In any new relationship there will exist factors that detract from team members' abilities to manage tensions in the first two years of the relationship. By minimizing the mistakes that are often innocently made during this critical period, the minister / board relationship will naturally strengthen and become a stabilizing energy within the social system.

1) When judgment or criticism is directed toward you, avoid defensiveness or making people wrong for judging you. Instead, use judgment and criticism as feedback to the "missing pieces" in their experience of an authentic connection to you or the community.

2) Identify the "inner circle" (the 20% of the congregation that contributes 80% of the resources needed). This circle is the field of established triangles. Try not to disturb this circle by changing or dismantling established triangles.

3) Identify the primary caregivers within the system, those who are matriarchs/patriarchs, elders, and persons the community holds in esteem. Affiliate with these individuals. Make these people your allies and advisors. Consult with these people before making any changes. Enroll them in your vision and get them on board before implementing changes that affect people's involvement or stature in the community.

4) Identify the circle of volunteers. These will also be a part of the inner circle. These will usually require an inordinate amount of attention, appreciation, and respect. Avoid making them wrong should they become judgmental or critical.

5) Assume that you will inadvertently inherit the unresolved issues of the church's past and especially any dysfunction there is in the minister/board relationship. In times of disagreement or tension, it will be important to remember to *first be a pastor* to the board and individual board members, and second the spiritual leader and administrator of the organization. It is more important to give the gift of "having been heard" than to emphasize your position.

6) Pay particular attention to these circumstances that will indicate a church with significant healing needs:

a) A beloved minister having left the church after 5 or more years.

b) Troubled circumstances surrounding the previous minister's leaving.

c) A history of difficulty with ministers.

d) Bylaws changes that have removed the minister from the administrative role.

e) The church is a product of a split; or the church has a sister church in town that is a product of a church split.

f) Unresolved issues relating to clergy breach of trust or clergy sexual misconduct.

7) Do not assume that just because the ministry has had the services of an interim minister that this work is complete. The emotional cycle of a church system is at least two years. In some significant way, you will be tested in a manner similar to the circumstances in which your predecessor failed or fell short of a healthy management of interpersonal or administrative tensions.

8) Do not criticize your predecessor or buy into the praises of how much better you are by comparison. This is a set-up.

9) Never swear or become belligerent in the presence of others. Control all emotional outbursts. Don't do therapy or

emotional processing with church members. Never use the pulpit to lobby or advocate your position when it is contrary to the board's position. This is abusive. Never cast yourself in a victim role. Get a coach, mentor, or therapist to support you during challenges.

10) Before making changes that impact established triangles (individuals or groups with a history of stature or prominence in the community, such as a beloved organist that needs to retire), be sure to involve all affected persons in any decision making process. Don't assume that just because you have the board's support that the change will unfold without consequences. Always consult with the primary parents within the system regarding global changes. Conduct town meetings to get broad consensus regarding global changes.

11) Be particularly careful about making staff changes, music changes, and youth ministry changes that alter how affected parties are valued or feel important within the system. You will no doubt inherit a certain level of dysfunction including incompetence in staff, and lay leadership. Make attempts to build capacity before addresses performance deficiencies. If training and reevaluation fail to bring about necessary improvements or changes, then you have the basis to take appropriate action.

12) Relate to issues as feedback to a creative process rather than problems to solve. The distinction between "problems to solve" and "feedback to a creative process" is similar to the difference between Newtonian physics and quantum science. When conditions (such as failure to grow the church) are seen as problems to solve, logic dictates that something needs fixing. In order to fix a problem, you must first determine the breakdown and then define the defective part. The Newtonian paradigm sees the universe as a machine and breakdowns as symptomatic of defective parts. Because church organizations and the individuals that comprise them are not machines, but are complex living systems, it is misguided to assume that conditions such as lack of growth are the effects of something or someone not working right.

13) Build a tolerance for mistakes, and welcome criticism as evidence of what is missing in the intention to create authentic

community. You must succeed in modeling a "non-anxious" presence. Becoming defensive will demonstrate to people that you are making the issue about yourself and not about their concerns or needs.

14) Create a culture for peacemaking. It begins with you being open to feedback, especially criticism. You must model and teach people how to stay connected during disagreement. A good way to create a culture of peacemaking is to regularly teach *The I of the Storm* and *The I of the Storm for Teens*.

15) Power struggles are evidence of a "purpose vacuum". Don't try to manage power struggles with force. Always revisit the transcendent purpose of the organization or project when conflicts arise. If you have difficulty managing these challenges, get assistance before the dynamic becomes a contest.