

## **The Keys to a Long-Term Ministry**

*1 Timothy 1:3*

*As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,*

Twenty-five years of ordained ministry in a single place is something of a milestone in our day. Gone are the days when the relation between a pastor and his church was viewed like a marriage. Pastorates in Puritan New England lasted 30, 40, and 50 years. Even ineffective ministers were retained because severing the pastoral ties was thought to be too disruptive of the peace and stability of the church and community.<sup>1</sup> Today's average ministerial stay has drifted down to 3-5 years on average.<sup>2</sup> Yet many of today's most noteworthy ministries have been characterized by longevity: Frank Barker at Briarwood Presbyterian Church (40 years), John MacArthur at Grace Community Church (43 years), Rick Warren at Saddleback Church (32 years), and D. James Kennedy at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church (47 years). Roland Barnes and William Harrell may not be headliners but each has labored faithfully and fruitfully, the former in Statesboro, Georgia, the latter in Norfolk, Virginia, each for 31 years.

The Apostle Paul tells Timothy to "remain" in Ephesus. He doesn't say how long he is to do so. Yet something is to be gained by staying put. The Apostle doesn't elaborate. Perhaps we can begin to provide some clues. We believe in long-term ministry and would like to identify several keys to achieving one.

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<sup>1</sup> See David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 230.

<sup>2</sup> One study claims the average stay for ministers is 18 months to 3 years.

## **Long-term ideal**

When I graduated from seminary I wrote to my supporters that I wanted to follow the examples of J. M. Boice at Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, and William Still of the Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, Scotland, both in biblical exposition and in ministerial longevity. At the time Boice had been at Tenth for 13 years (of what would be a 30-year ministry) and Still at “Gile” for 36, of what would be a 52-year ministry! I wanted to go to one church and stay put. I believe it is good for a church to have long pastoral continuity. I believe it is good for a pastor to be able to baptize, marry, and bury his members for generation after generation. I believe it is good for a pastor to be able to preach the whole counsel of God to his people, and preach the whole Christ found in all the Scriptures (Acts 20:27; Lk 24:44-45). To do so comprehensively takes years. I believe it is good for a church to have continuity in its theology and philosophy of ministry over many years. I believe it is good for a church to avoid the disruption that comes from months of raising a pulpit committee, searching for a pastor, calling that new pastor, and getting him settled into his new position. I believe it is good for a church to avoid the disruption that comes from adjusting to the new pastor’s personality, gifts, taste, emphases, and convictions.

After *five* years of difficult ministry in Savannah, J. I. Packer looked across my dining room table and said, “Terry, I trust you will continue here for at least ten years. You can’t do anything in less than ten years.” I thought my wife Emily would burst into tears. He was right. Digging deep foundations take time. Erecting a lasting edifice takes time. However, it is doubtful that one will stay long-term in a place if one does not bring to one’s calling the ideal that to stay for a lifetime is a good thing. Providence may lead otherwise; one’s stay in a place may be unmistakably hindered. However, the ideal is crucial to longevity.

## **Clear philosophy**

Second, it is important that one bring to the ministry a biblically-rooted and theologically-driven vision of what one intends to do and why. This should be communicated to the congregation while one is still a candidate. I am astonished at the mismatches between churches and ministers that regularly occur. A traditional Presbyterian church calls a top-notch preacher . . . who is planning on having a rock-n-roll worship service. How does it happen? Why? I was called to the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah at the age of 31. I made many mistakes and was unwise in a number of ways. One mistake I did not make was in failing to tell the pulpit committee, the Session, and the congregation just what I would do and would not do. I was as straightforward as I knew how to be. What shape will a ministry take? What will it emphasize? What kinds of sermons will it feature? What type of music will it favor? What will be the mood or tone of the services? What will the public service look like? I am emphasizing the public ministry because it is on the basis of the minister's effectiveness in his public (as opposed to private) ministry that his ministry will rise or fall.

Then, stick to the vision. Don't be driven about by every wind of pragmatism. Is the vision anchored in biblical universals? Then it should be immune to "success" motivated alterations. We're not saying that one can't learn over the years and adjust the vision accordingly. We are urging that adjustments are more like tweeking than an overhaul, given that one brings to one's calling a fully-developed philosophy of ministry at the outset. The result will be that the church will eventually cease fighting over what the church is to be. Those who have another vision will

look elsewhere. Unity and peace will emerge. Those who remain will be there because they share the vision and are happy. A happy people make for a long pastorate.

### **Indoctrinate**

Put in place a number of programmatic means by which to convince the membership of the biblical/theological/philosophical foundation of the church. My vision was that of a historically Reformed ministry. At first blush the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, with its classically Reformed architecture and large, solid-mahogany central pulpit, balcony with choir and organ in the back, looks like a place where historic Reformed worship would be easy to implement, if indeed it was ever unimplemented. However, the fact is that when I began my ministry there in January 1987, there was not a single member who would have identified himself or herself as Reformed in theology or ecclesiology. There were large numbers of mainline Protestants and a significant number of Columbia Bible College evangelicals. But no one was self-consciously Reformed.

Moreover, none of the classic elements of Reformed ministry were present. The congregation knew nothing of *lectio continua* Scripture reading, of sequential expository preaching, of metrical psalm singing, of a full-diet of Scripture-based and enriched prayer, or frequent communion. Facing all the difficulties of a downtown church in a decaying urban setting, the congregation was slowly dying. Attendance averaged 238 in 1986 in a facility that seats over a thousand, even plunging into the 130-140 range during the summer months. Sunday School attendance was under a hundred. Only a couple dozen of the faithful returned for Sunday night. Hostile factions were bitterly competing for larger pieces of a shrinking church-pie. As one of

Savannah's most popular doctors said of his visit to the church in the mid-1980's, "It was the sorriest excuse for a church I'd ever seen." The facility, though magnificent, was deteriorating. Desperate to grow, the congregation called an inexperienced 31-year-old to lead it out of its troubles, thinking that youth would attract youth, and the church's decline would reverse.<sup>3</sup>

The problems we faced in 1987 were not unlike that of any church attempting to teach the Reformed faith and implement Reformed ministry and worship. I needed to convince a partially indifferent, partially broad evangelical and thoroughly unreformed congregation of the truth of the Reformed faith and the importance of Reformed ministry and worship. We needed as well to attract and retain new members, as would a church-planter. Neither the existing congregation nor those who joined had any appreciation for either the Reformed faith or Reformed worship. Neither was there a model of a church of our size and stature practicing a Reformed ministry anywhere in our region. We were without examples to follow. The need, then, was to build a consensus in both the existing congregation and the new members, a consensus that embraced both the Reformed faith and the ministry and worship that flows from it, without dividing the church or driving off significant numbers of members in the process. How was this done?

### ***Worship services***

Without a doubt the key to the successful implementation of Reformed faith and ministry has been the public services themselves. When led with urgency, fervor, and an economy of language, the services are their own best argument. When given a range of choices (e.g. newsletters, books, pamphlets, special classes), 89% of a sample survey of our congregation

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<sup>3</sup> For those interested in more about this history, see David Calhoun's magnificent study, *Splendor of Grace* (Greenville, SC: A Press Printing, 2005), the history of the Independent Presbyterian Church from 1755-2005.

conducted in 2007 said that attending services was the most important factor in convincing them of the value of historic Reformed worship.

Historic Reformed ministry has what we believe is a “self-authenticating” character. There is a “well, of course” quality to its elements: of course we should read Scripture in our worship; of course a proper sermon should explain a text of Scripture; of course our prayers should echo the praises, confessions, thanksgiving, and petitions of Scripture; of course we should sing psalms; of course the Lord’s Supper should be frequently administered. All this makes perfect sense.

Who would have thought otherwise? When ordinary folks hear strong congregational singing of biblical texts, or hear a nuanced reading of Scripture, or hear a carefully applied biblical exposition, or hear impassioned scriptural prayer, many will find the experience convincing, as I did as a young man, and as many in our congregation have. “This is what we are supposed to do in worship,” they will say, as they witness the word sung, read, preached, prayed, and administered. They will want neither to move the church in a “liturgical” direction nor in a “contemporary” direction. There is no substitute for well-led services morning and evening each Lord’s Day, to convince those unfamiliar or ignorant of the ministry of Reformed Protestantism.

### ***Inquirers’ Class***

All of our new members are expected to take our Inquirers’ Class. It consists of seven sessions in which we move progressively, pyramid-like from the church catholic (a mini-history of the Christian church), to the church Protestant (the five so-called “Solas”), to the church Reformed.



From the broad base of catholicity we progressively get more narrow, viewing our distinctives in the context of our shared heritage and theology with all of Christendom. The last four sessions zero in on Reformed doctrine, ministry and worship, ethics, and piety. We're not afraid to compare and contrast what we believe and practice with others. When new members join, they join with a certain understanding and conviction regarding our church. People who have a different vision either don't join or join understanding what they're getting into. We don't require doctrinal agreement to join the church – just five simple vows, only two of which are doctrinal (I am a sinner and I am trusting Christ alone for salvation). Yet we do want them to understand who we are and what they can expect.

### ***Officers' Training Class***

This class is for officer candidates (though open to all men in the church) and is offered bi-annually. It consists of an inductive study of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and so, like the Inquirers' Class, places worship and ministry (as described in I.6, XXI-XXII and XXVII-XXIX of the Confession) in the broader context of a comprehensive survey of Reformed theology. One hundred fifty-two men have completed this class in twenty-five years. Today these men form the backbone of the church. As far as can humanly be discerned, these men ensure that the

Independent Presbyterian Church will continue faithfully to preach the Reformed faith and practice historic Reformed ministry into the distant future.

### ***Pastor's writings***

I print the weekly Sunday morning sermon manuscript. I write a monthly newsletter article. Occasionally I preach topical sermons. We have collected many of those articles and sermons and made them into pamphlets and books for the use of our congregation and beyond.<sup>4</sup> We recommend that pastors write for their congregation what they preach to their congregation. Pamphlets provide a handy resource to which church members can turn to solidify their convictions regarding the theological and philosophical foundations of our ministry. Some of these pamphlets have grown into books.

### ***Reformation & Heritage Sundays***

Each year we observe three historic services, one recalling our Reformation heritage, the other two our Georgia and Scottish heritages. The first of these we instituted. The latter two we inherited. Frankly, three such services is a bit much. However, we have attempted to redeem them by adapting historic Reformed orders of service for use on those Sundays. We rotate the use of two of the following on an annual basis: The Genevan *Form of Church Prayers* (1542),

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. IPC pamphlets: "Worship & Music Today;" "The Lord's Supper;" "An Evangelical & Reformed Faith;" "The Five Points of Calvinism;" and books: *Trinity Psalter; Reformed Worship; The Pastor's Public Ministry; Leading in Worship; The Family Worship Book; The Case for Traditional Protestantism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), *When Grace Comes Home: How the Doctrines of Change Your Life* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000).



Knox's *Form of Prayers* (1556), the *Book of Common Prayer* (1552), the *Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1644), and Richard Baxter's *The Savoy Liturgy* (1661).<sup>5</sup>

The value in using these historic orders has been to provide perspective. Today's Christians are able to see first-hand what previous generations of Christians have understood about ministry and worship. The depth and substance of these services can be eye-opening. At the conclusion of one such service in a church with a rather informal Sunday night service, an older member came to me and said, "I wish we could do this every week." Since every generation tends to absorb uncritically the bias of its own era, a breath of liturgical sanity from the past can play a valuable role in stimulating a reassessment of the liturgical present. Openness to reassessment is exactly what we need as we attempt to restore historic Reformed priorities today.

I have also used these occasions to preach Reformed distinctives: the so-called "solas," "The Five Points of Calvinism," "The Practical Difference Calvinism Makes," and so on. Officer installation Sundays I preach on Presbyterian church government. Prior to baptisms I explain the covenantal basics of infant baptism. When we administer the Lord's Supper, I explain our theology of the eucharist.

In addition to the above, periodically we have offered Sunday School classes dealing with theological and liturgical issues, and have from time to time promoted publications in our bookshop as well as recordings of classic hymns and metrical psalms.

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<sup>5</sup> For adapted forms of these orders see Johnson, *Leading in Worship*, 121-150. For the originals, see Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 185-405.

Our approach, then, has been multi-pronged. Our survey of our congregation in 2007 confirmed what we have observed. Our members by large majorities and across the various demographic categories have joined *because* of our historic Reformed faith and ministry; they regard our doctrines as biblical and sound; the worship services are their favorite part of the church program; they grow increasingly positive in their outlook over time; they find the preaching and singing (traditional hymnody and metrical psalmody) to be especially appealing; they find very little that they would like to change; they find little attraction in contemporary forms of worship; and they have found actually participating in the Reformed worship services the most convincing apologetic, though other means have contributed. We have been largely successful in achieving a high level of knowledge and conviction regarding the value of Reformed ministry, the truth of the Reformed faith, and in achieving a high level of awareness of and rejection of alternatives to a traditional Reformed church. With respect to various means of reaching these goals, while attending services has been far and away the most effective, the others means employed have also proven effective: pamphlets, books, Inquirers' Classes, Officers' Training, Sunday School, and other literature all received high marks from our surveyed members. The conclusion to draw, it would seem, is that a multi-faceted approach is wise, each means reinforcing the other in the overall effort to persuade contemporary people of the truth of the Reformed faith and value of Reformed ministry and its relative superiority to the alternatives. This will make for the long-term peace and unity of the church.

## **Respect**

Fourth, respect the existing culture of the church. Admittedly reforming the church and respecting its existing culture is a high-wire act. Yet it is a necessary one.

Shortly after arriving in Savannah a member of the secretarial staff urged me, “What are you going to do to make this church grow?” Her church background led her to anticipate an answer filled with novel programs and creative ministry. I gave her an old school answer: “We’ll preach and pray.” I took seriously the counsel of my mentor Dr. James Baird, then pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi, who cautioned me: “Don’t change anything for five years.” For the most part, I didn’t. I tweaked the order of service slightly, moving the announcements to before the call to worship. The other changes were equally subtle. I immediately began an expository series on the Gospel of Mark, following Calvin’s pattern of preaching mainly the Gospels and Acts on Sunday morning. Several weeks later I began a second series of expositions on Sunday evening on Daniel, and a third for the Wednesday noon service on James. I also immediately started the practice of selecting as one of our three “hymns” in each Sunday service a setting of a metrical psalm from the hymnal, and identifying it as such in the bulletin in order to help the congregation grow accustomed to singing psalms. Finally I added an Old Testament reading to compliment the New Testament or *vice versa*, depending on which Testament was being preached. It would be a few years before this reading would be *lectio continua* or before we would change from quarterly to monthly communion. But most of the elements of historic Reformed ministry were in place within the first few weeks or months of my pastorate.

However, only those who were paying close attention would notice any change. The public face of the church remained as it had been for decades. The new minister could not be accused of altering beloved patterns of ministry and cherished programs. Most of what I inherited from the

past, even those programs I disliked, remained in place and were tolerated by me for years, even to this day. Don't go in as the guy with all the answers. Don't project to others that you know it all. Every program and procedure in the church has a name on it. Every change has the potential to offend the author of that program.

Reformed doctrines were preached in the early years as we encountered them in the texts I was preaching. I didn't mention the "C" word for 5 years in a public service (i.e. Calvin). However, I did preach Calvinism naturally as Reformed distinctions emerged in my *lectio continua* series. Consequently no one felt that I was seeking to indoctrinate them. They could see that I preached without an agenda driving the content. This made accepting and believing those Reformed distinctives all the more palatable.

The mistake that too many pastors make in their move to a new church is that of changing too much too quickly. Each church has its own culture. Too many pastors have driven bulldozers over those cultures, destroying what was sacred, familiar and comforting for many of its older members. One example has been dispensing with the clerical robe. It has been called a non-essential, which, of course, it is. However, identifying it as a *non-essential* is not the same as identifying it as *unimportant*. If it was customary, and, if it was meaningful to a significant number of people, it was not unimportant. A strong reaction to the un-robing of the pastor proves the point. If it was really non-essential, then why not leave it alone?

Of course, changes are often made in the name of outreach. The evangelistic *ends* typically are used to justify the programmatic *means*. Innovation is necessary, it is argued, in order to reach

people, especially young people. That the changes may be deeply alienating to what one new pastor called “a small but vocal group of long-term (church) members” (read: older people) is not allowed to alter the church’s new direction. In one case the group that separated numbered over 400. They opposed, the pastor said, “practically any and every change we initiated.” Yet, the opposition met a determined change agent. “We had prayed and thought hard about what God wanted this church to be, and we were very determined to get there.” “This is what we’re going to do and this is why we’re going to do it,” the congregation was told. Apparently considerable changes were implemented immediately upon arrival. The changes were perceived as being so revolutionary that within three months a petition drive was organized to have the new pastor removed. Undoubtedly many in the minority were unreasonable, and some were cruel. Still, one wonders: could the concerns of the opposition not have been validated? Could their interests not have been accommodated? A ministry that has been fruitful but has plateaued calls a young minister whom they hope will inject energy and life into the church. He fails to understand the culture of the church. He imports a foreign, typically “hip & cool” culture which he is convinced is necessary if the church is to grow. In the process long-time members are pushed aside, their concerns invalidated, and they are warned of obstructing the gospel over selfish matters of personal taste. The hipsters win, the old folks head for the exits. Pain, hurt, division result. Why? Why force the changes? Leave things alone. Respect the culture of the church.

### **Session**

Use the session. This is another principal that James Baird taught me. All major decisions are sessional decisions. Learn to say, “Your session has decided to . . .” Spread the responsibility for

big decisions, difficult decisions, controversial decisions onto the shoulders of the elders. There is no reason for the minister to bear the full weight of unpopular decisions. Share the blame with others.

In addition, appreciate the value of a deliberative body. Repeatedly I have arrived at session meetings convinced that we needed to do “A.” We have discussed the matter thoroughly. Various perspectives were offered. By the end of the process I came to see that we needed to do “B” not “A.” A number of things were said that I had not considered. I changed my mind. “B” turned out to be a much wiser course of action than “A.” Don’t let the minister impose his will on the session. Listen to everything that is said. Weigh it. Let the session make its decision.

Over the years I have lost many votes. That’s all right. These are the session’s decision, not mine. I used to be devastated when they didn’t listen to me. However, I came to realize that when I lose a vote, my ministry is minimally affected. I still go about my business, preaching, teaching, praying, and leading services. If they’re wrong, they’ll probably come around eventually. If they are not wrong, the pastor will be glad later when he figures it out. Utilize the session.

## **Conflict**

I was almost totally unprepared for the extent of the conflict I encountered in my early years. I refer to it as a “Seven Years War.” Seminary did not prepare me for this. Five years as an assistant minister did not prepare me for this. Two-and-a-half years of sharing a pulpit in a 1000 member church did not prepare me for this. The level of hostility, the vehemence, the cruelty

shocked me. What were its sources? At its core was the offense of the gospel itself (1 Pet 2:8; 1 Cor 1:23ff). Too many members professed Christian orthodoxy and yet wanted the church to be a country club. They wanted a comfortable form of the gospel: nice talks, pious platitudes, blessed thoughtery. They recoiled at the systematic unfolding of God's revelation through expository preaching. Surprisingly the gospel also offends evangelistic folks who are accustomed to the sermon addressing other people and who, as William Still pointed out in *Work of the Pastor*, go mad with rage when gospel guns are pointed at them.

The other offense was growth. We grew. Rapidly. Not spectacularly by mega-church standards. But all the numbers, people and income, doubled and tripled within a couple of years. We added 75 members a year, attendance increased to an average of 400 on Sunday morning (today it is 550+). We increased eight-fold on Sunday night, and Sunday School more than doubled and eventually tripled. Our growth was noteworthy enough that a denominational church-planting official came to Savannah and took me to lunch to find out the keys to our growth. "What are you doing to grow the church?" he asked. I answered, "I inherited a beautiful facility and a fine order of service. Otherwise, I'm not doing anything unusual. We have no programs *per se*." He looked back at me surprised and somewhat perplexed. I continued, "We have a simple ministry of preaching and prayer that God is blessing. That is all." So it was and so it continues to be.

Nine months into my first year the growing opposition knew what that meant. We started our third Inquirers' Class of the year in September. Forty-four new members had joined out of the first two classes. A trustee, who was also an elder, who was also a session committee chairman, pulled open the door and saw 20-30 more potential new members. I saw his shoulders slump as

he sighed, giving the look of “Oh, no.” He didn’t want the church to grow. I had never met church members who didn’t want the church to grow. What was his issue and those who stood with him? Power. It was all about power. With all these new members they were out-voted in congregational meetings. They had lost control of the church to those who wanted a serious gospel-preaching church. They continued to make my life miserable for seven more years. I wasn’t about to turn the church back over to unqualified leaders. One by one they left church offices until gradually we had more mature leadership in place.

It pays to stay in place for a long period of time. If when conflict arises and ministers jump ship, they miss out on the years of fruitful ministry and peace. We have been, essentially, a happy and unified church, not since the 7 years war, but since about year 14. It took that long to persevere through a second round of conflict of the lesser sort. Too many men had been put into positions of leadership during years 1-7 who weren’t qualified. They were just far more qualified than those they replaced. We had no choice, as we saw it, to make elders and deacons of them.

However, they weren’t really qualified and they became a source of trouble in areas like church discipline. It wasn’t trouble like the Seven-Years War, but more normal church trouble. Once they rotated out of leadership, the church really began to flourish. Yet it took time. It took years to get there. We’ve had to work through conflicts, disappointments, and even heart break.

There are also the inevitable interpersonal conflicts. One of the most aggressively hostile elders is still with us. He is a friend now. We’ll never be best friends. Yet I appreciate him and he, I hope, has some appreciation for me.



Another elder's family and mine had a significant emotional conflict about 15 years ago. We had been close. We butted heads. Things were tense. Emily walked by the nursery and saw the mother and wife of that family rocking my youngest son Ben, then a baby, with tears rolling down her cheeks. I baptized their infant son shortly thereafter and could not finish without succumbing to my emotions. We worked through it. That elder is now my most aggressive supporter, almost to a fault.

Long-term ministry means considerable disappointments along the way. Among the greatest disappointments in my ministry, let me name two.

First, I have been disappointed by those who faithfully attend services each Sunday, and yet who never, ever offer a word of encouragement. Years may go by. Then they'll make a snide remark questioning my handling on an issue or person. That's it. No discussion. No request for an explanation. Just a thinly veiled accusation. Then five more years will go by and *nothing* is said. *Nothing*. Not one positive remark about preaching, teaching, the music, the Sunday School, the Missions' Conference, the holiday sermons, the weather, nothing. Then after five years the silence is broken with another snide remark, accusing or criticizing this or that. They keep coming so I guess they are not completely miserable. Yet, why, I wonder? I know that Ephesians 4:28 is in their Bibles. They know I work hard and given my limitations do about the best that I can do. So why not the occasional affirmation?

Second, I have been disappointed by a recurring phenomenon that defies explanation. It is this: the people to whom we have given the most attention, extended the most hospitality, been the

most generous, and invested the most time, have turned on us. Repeatedly this has happened. Its happened with youth, with singles, with couples, and with older folks. When they get on the inside is what they see so dark that they become disillusioned? Do they grow presumptuous about their privileges and then become embittered when their connection with the minister and his family is scaled back? I can't explain it.

We're not meant to flee problems in the body of Christ. We're not meant to church-hop when things get awkward. We are in covenant with each other, and therefore we support each other, bear each other's burdens, and forgive each other when offenses are committed. Stay put.

One more thing. Don't burn bridges. When people leave the church, leave the door open for them to return. The angriest person to ever leave our congregation yelled at me and my companion elder for two hours. Her husband walked us to our car and said, "I had no idea." Several years later she and her husband were back. When I interviewed them as "new members" she said, "that was all about me." She had issues. She had to work through them. The main issue had to do with her own spiritual immaturity. Today hardly a Sunday goes by now where she doesn't leave the church with tears in her eyes, so grateful is she for the messages that she hears, the hymns and psalms she sings, and the fellowship that she enjoys. Don't take opposition personally. Sometimes opposition take on a life of its own. The case against a ministry builds. The numbers grow. It can be quite irrational. A couple of years later they say to themselves, as did some of Jonathan Edward's opponents, "What have we done?!" Bear the reproach of Christ. Keep the door open for the disgruntled to return.

Besides, as I tell Emily, 10% are always going to be unhappy. Once when she said, “Everyone hates us. We have to leave,” I pulled out a church directory. I said, okay, tell me their names. We worked through every name. She identified 40 people who “hated” us. What was our attendance? A little over 400. Forty sounds enormous. But 360 are happy! Ten percent will always be upset over something. Your church will have a Diotrephes, “who likes to put himself first” (3 Jn 9). You will have a Demas, who for love of “this present world” will desert you (2 Tim 4:9). Indeed, “at my first defense,” said the Apostle Paul, “no one came to stand by me, but *all* deserted me” (2 Tim 4:16). There will be those who will intentionally, out of envy and rivalry, aim to “afflict” us (Phil 1:17,18). There will be those who “cause divisions and create obstacles” even as they serve “their own appetites” by deceiving the naïve with “smooth talk and flattery” (Rom 16:17,18). If Jesus and the apostles faced these challenges, so will we. Switch churches and all the same people and problems will reappear with different faces. Don’t take conflict too seriously. Certainly don’t be driven off by it.

## **Staff**

Church staff can make or break a ministry. Be wise about adding staff and about removing staff. Staff can multiply the church’s ministry, and it can reduce it.

First, *hire staff promptly*. When it is clear that important things are not getting done and there is potential for growth, add the secretary, janitor, youth director, musician. Adding church staff is like hiring help in a business. When it is done at the right time it pays for itself. More ministry will get done, more members will be happy, more visitors will join the church, and more tithes will come in.

Second, *fire staff promptly*. I admit that I'm not much good at firing. Twice I knew almost immediately that we'd made a mistake. On one occasion I knew within five minutes. Yet I held on, and held on, and held on, thinking that we could coach and pray these two staff people through their quirks. We couldn't. Their prickly personalities were ingrained, a core element of who they were. I was expecting a fundamental alteration of character and personality that was unlikely. Christ through His gospel can transform anyone. The old passes away and all things become new (2 Cor 5:17). However, we should seek to understand how far sanctification is likely to progress in any given person's life. Put it another way: has God given us any indication that a given person's anger issues or rudeness issues are going to be conquered? In these cases, there were no indications that this was going to happen anytime soon, or at least, soon enough to spare the church further uproar. They had to go.

We called a campus minister to work at the Savannah College of Art & Design. After a couple of years of him reaching a dozen or so students, and few of them establishing a connection with our church, I asked him, "Do you see our church as an asset or a liability to your ministry?" He answered honestly (which I appreciated), "A liability." He thought he'd have a much more fruitful ministry if there were a hip contemporary church nearby. I said, "You need to find another call. The person who is in your position needs to see us as an asset, not a liability." We let him go. He was in the wrong place, which was not good for him and not good for us. Clear your conscience with that principle. It is not good for him to be in a position for which he is not gifted or otherwise qualified. Let him find a more suitable place to serve.

Third, *retain faithful staff*. I have learned the hard way that character is king. Consider the tortoise and the hare. We've had staff that are sharp, cool, and gregarious, magnetic and big with *personality*, yet who are a constant source of problems. Countless hours are spent sorting out what they said or didn't say, did or didn't do. They are hares full of "sound and fury, signifying nothing." I'll take a faithful tortoise over a shady hare any day.

On the other hand we've had staff who are steady, reliable, faithful, uncool, shy, and big with *integrity* who cause no problems at all. Ever. I might have a file full of incidents and warnings for the hares. However, I'll not even have a file for the tortoises. Hares are so disruptive, so time-consuming that although they get a lot done, the net impact is negative. When hiring, above all, weigh character. Godliness is irreplaceable. Don't let bad staff undermine your ministry and be disruptive, and God-forbid, divide the church. Let them leave. At the same time, cling to the devout staff. Be buoyed by their prayers and faithfulness, even if they are less energetic, less flashy than their competitors.

### **Vigilance**

Finally, take nothing for granted. Practice eternal vigilance. We know that we are all inadequate for this work (2 Cor 2:16–3:5). Peace in the church is a gift. Contentment in the church is a gift. Fruitfulness in ministry is a gift. Don't ever rest on your laurels. Constantly evaluate and review each aspect of the church's work. Ask regularly, "How are we doing?" Don't presume. Be grateful and vigilant.

I should clarify that I claim no particular virtue in having survived 25 years in Savannah. Though I brought the ideal to my position, there were times I would have left if I had had an offer, but none came. There were other times when offers, or at least interest was expressed, but at those moments I wasn't inclined.