

HOW TO STAY ALIVE
IN THE PARISH

by

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Preface

What a joy it has been to serve the Lord and His church over the course of my ministry! The last church relationship was a service of seventeen years. While attending an Interim Pastor training conference, after I retired, one pastor there was enamored with the fact that I could "last" 17 years in one place, a feat which had escaped him all his ministry. Having talked with him at great length, it began to occur to me that there are some principles of long ministries which might do well for all pastorates, long or short.

The truth is that pastoral ministry takes its toll on a person, unless you deliberately keep it from happening. It is out of this concern that I have chosen the title, "How To Stay Alive in the Parish" - to stay alive spiritually, socially, organizationally, financially, physically, including how to survive in a parish without being asked to leave. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the latter is more difficult to do because of the nature of the church, but one way or another, a church-pastor relationship can come to an end before we want it to, and that for a variety of reasons. You will go a long way toward a harmonious relationship in a new parish if you and the congregation are very clear on the expectations, both of the pastor and the congregation. A dialogue at this point will be

helpful before a severed relationship is made official. Many disagreements in the church begin within a two year period over conflicting expectations. So, having begun the work of the parish, one has a right to expect great things to happen as pastor and people work together in Kingdom work. Perhaps some of the ideas recorded here may be of help as you serve our Lord and His Church.

I. STAY ALIVE SPIRITUALLY

You are in the ministry, I assume, because you care about the spiritual and physical welfare of people, in service to Jesus Christ. And, it is just that kind of devotion which can drive you in the direction of other people's needs and forget your own. Remember, the command is, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Just as one might be so concerned about others and fail to be a good manager of his own financial resources, it can easily happen that one pays little attention to his own spiritual development. One might well feel self assured, "After all I did graduate from Seminary!" The tendency is to read the Bible, and engage in prayer and devotions with the congregation in mind. This sounds good on first reading, but if one does not fill one's own soul - if the relationship with Jesus Christ is not kept in personal order, then one may go through the motions, but have little to share that relates to first hand experience. It is possible for the pastor to become like "the shoe shiners shoes" that are never shined. The Apostle Paul was concerned about this when he wrote in II Corinthians 2:17: "For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence." (NRSV)

At one time during my early years, I sold shoes to help support those Seminary days. I always wore our best men's shoes,

and sold a lot of them, because I could say, "I wear these shoes myself and can tell you they are a good value for the money." There's strength in that. First hand experience sells, even in the communication of the good news of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. There must be time set aside, even if you have to steal it from sleep, to spend time alone with God in prayer and Bible reading. In the Presbyterian Church, I have found the directed reading in our daily Lectionary, set forth in our new Book of Common Worship, to be helpful. Finding another person, to be a spiritual partner can also be value. You might read biographies about strong Christians, or engage in a spiritual retreat. There are many devotional guides that can help direct one's spiritual progress, but the most important is one of attitude. It is important to reflect on one's own spiritual needs and do something about it. Otherwise your preaching will lack authority and your life will be less than honest as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Each person must find his own way, but one thing for sure, one's own soul needs attention. There is always the threat that while going through the "ministry motions," one may well die spiritually, losing one's own soul.

Stay alive spiritually. Your life in the Lord depends on it; your effectiveness in your congregation is at stake. Many a person has demitted the ministry at this very point. Don't let it happen to you.

II. STAY ALIVE SOCIALLY

The pastorate can be a lonely profession. One must be careful about singling out a small group of people in the church, or even a person, or a couple, to make these one's social outlet. While it sounds perfectly normal and necessary, it can lead to disaster. The congregation will quickly pick up on the fact that you have these special friends, your favorites, and will act accordingly. In the church organization and life, you can never be objective with your "close" friends. And when disagreements with them reaches a certain level, most generally, they will react by leaving the church, and sometimes even be so disillusioned, that they leave the larger church as well.

So where does that leave us? It can cause us to die socially unless we do something to prevent it. It means that we take a closer look at the nature of Christian Fellowship. It is the Greek word, "Koinonia." It can be translated: partnership, fellowship, sharing, and even communion. It is, obviously, the life we share in Jesus Christ. And this is the level our social life in the church must reach. If this is kept in mind, it will keep one from singling out only a few friends, but will broaden your relationship which will help you fall in love with the "Koinonia" all over again. And longer you stay in the parish, the broader your relationship will be able to develop.

Beyond the church fellowship, however, it is always helpful to broaden one's perspective to associate with other persons and groups outside the church. It provides not only social outlets, but it puts you in the midst of a witnessing situation, where people listen to you talk, and watch your way of life, always watching and listening for consistency regarding who you say you are.

All of this does not happen by accident, it is like so many good things; they happen on purpose by people who are aware of what their needs are.

One can be so intent on doing the job, including administration, organization, preaching, teaching and the like, that one's life becomes dull and drab, lacking in personal spiritual development and social outlets, necessary for us all. Being aware of such need helps us to seek the fellowship of others who also need us. Keep in mind your need to stay alive spiritually and socially. Your life and the life of your congregation depends on it.

III. STAY ALIVE ORGANIZATIONALLY

To arrive in a new parish is to be filled with renewed enthusiasm and anticipation of what's going to happen in the new ministry. One can even give the impression to the people that the new minister believes that nothing good has happened here until the new pastor came to town! I can tell you for sure that they will not take this lightly! There is so much to be done, and the way is never easy. It will be greatly hampered if you get off to a bad start, which some might even label "arrogant."

Obviously there is always a need for change in every church. After all, it is our theology that we are not only reformed in our faith, but always reforming in the life we share in Jesus Christ. How change comes about is often the source of much trouble in the church. There is, of course, the natural resistance which aging brings. The older people get the more apt they are to want things to stay the same. It is just the nature of who we are, and so, for many of the older persons in the church, and for some who are younger, change is painful. To be aware of this is to give serious thought as to the way change comes about.

One of the first lessons of change is patience. If one pressures it to

happen in a hurry, you can be guaranteed firm resistance. It is better to go slow and win, than to ramrod something through and watch it explode. People get hurt in such explosions - pastor and people alike. One, of course, knows the old trick of leaving the heavy stuff to the end of an evening meeting when everyone is tired and they will vote for anything! To give in to such temptation is usually wrong, even when the cause is right. Rather, a better approach is to spend lots of time educating and getting people aboard the cause or action you seek to get accomplished. If you are creative enough, they may even think they thought of it on their own! It always provides a good sense of satisfaction to see one of your ideas brought up by someone else and watch it grow and develop. I consider that good leadership.

Now of course, there are times you have to fight for what is right when most around you think it is wrong. But, even here, it is best to work on the educational approach, and relationships with others, that makes change possible. Let me digress a moment and say something about relationships. We are in the people business and good relationships don't just happen; we have to work at it. People feel neglected so easily. One day, when we were in our car, waiting for the stoplight to change, I waved at some people in another automobile. My wife asked, "Did you know those people?" I said, "No, but perhaps they know us!" You might not want to go to that extreme, but much of the Gospel goes over the bridge of good

human relationships. I made it a practice to greet as many people as possible before each service, giving them a chance to talk, ask about the family, and in general, just pursue the building of good relationships. While general pastoral calling is not as easy as it once was (people as so busy and the family so fractured), nevertheless, when it is possible to be in the home, make the most of that opportunity. It is part of our visibility as pastors. Someone once said rather cleverly, "The pastor who is invisible six days a week will likely be incomprehensible on the seventh!" Being both visible and available must be at the heart of the pastor. Serve the Lord by serving the needs of the people and a lot of other things will take care of themselves.

I knew of a young pastor once who had been reared in New York City and was then serving in a small town parish. He just didn't know that he was supposed to speak to people on the street, He would go into the local restaurant, for example, where farmers and others gathered around a big round table, - not understanding all of this, he would sit at a table by himself, with his face buried in the morning paper. The young man was brilliant, well versed in theology and church organization, but he didn't know how to relate to those rural people. Needless to say, this relationship didn't last very long. The older I get, the more I am convinced that good relationships is the key to almost every situation. It extends to how one relates with the Lord, others of God's people, one's mate and

family, to others in the community, indeed to everyone. Spend time welding good relationships. One cannot do better.

One of my mentors, many years ago, used to advise, "Don't shoot till your ducks are up." Things always work out better organizationally, if you sense how others feel about an issue before you bring it up to a vote. You won't know this unless you are closely related to those who make the decisions.

Perhaps this is the place to talk about those people in the church who influence many of the decisions made in the church. These people may or may not be on your Session or Board, but they are the people to whom others go to ask advice. If you look around, you may discover 4 or 5 of these key people in your organization. They may be officers or not. Get to know these people, well! If possible get them on your team. You can't afford to have them against you either. This may be thought of as political, and of course it is. But, it is a fact of life you need to keep in mind. And as we have said before, education and good relationships are the keys to persuasion, and often to clarification of your own opinions. You could be wrong!

We might add that conflict is often healthy. At least it causes one to examine his own position more carefully. Christian organizations, I believe, have always had a difficult time with

conflict and disagreement. I have spent a life-time of ministry trying to teach people that in our organizational structures, it is o.k., even right, to disagree; but it is not o.k. to be disagreeable. It is one thing, for example, that one can say to another in a meeting, "I disagree and for these reasons...." It is quite another for a person to attack the other with "You don't care what happens to this church, do you?!" The key is to keep one's attention on the issue instead of the person. Once we start attacking each other, progress is greatly hampered. The Fellowship (the Koinonia) would teach us that even in disagreement, we are one body in Christ - we belong to each other - we are brothers and sisters; and this must not be forgotten in the midst of disagreement, tension, and conflict. There are many books and pamphlets that can be read and studied on "Conflict Resolution." The leader who knows this field of endeavor will find it most helpful in the organization with which he or she works.

Many conflicts we leaders face has to do with the way we handle our time. Most pastor's I know are rather harried, running here and there, hardly ever able to catch up. It is obvious that the needs of people are great, and the conscientious pastor can spend more time than he or she has to keep up with the needs of the people. Home and hospital calls, various appointments, study time, devotional periods, including sermon preparation, and just keeping up with the leadership responsibilities, leading the church organization, can

lead to a stressful situation both for the pastor and the people as well.

The "Playing Coach" model appeals to me. Get help. Well-trained staff members is a good place to start. With some help from others, perhaps a personnel committee, write good job descriptions and up-date them often. Many conflicts arise in the church because of conflicting expectations. The more you agree on what the job entails, the more likely you will get the job done and harmoniously. This is true, also, in regard to volunteers, such as office workers, Sunday school teachers, committee members, ushers, greeters, hospital visitors, and the list goes on. Before someone is asked to do a job, be sure that you agree on what the job entails and how much time one might expect to spend doing it. Write it down and agree on the copy. It will be a handy reference when there is conflict as to what the person was supposed to do. Writing the job description, however, is to be only halfway there. Part of leadership is not only to assign the careful outlined task, but the second part of it all is to see to it that the work is done. Either you check on it or someone appointed can do the same thing. Leadership is more than assigning responsibilities. It is also to be part of the action, to be part of the team. To be a "hands on" person who encourages and inspires other members of the team with whom the leader works. Assigning the task and just sitting in the office with your feet on the desk will diminish enthusiasm and

bring into question your own integrity and sincerity as a leader. Share the load of leadership, but keep careful track of the process. Don't assume that just because we assign the task that it has been accomplished.

In every respect a leader is expected to lead. While this is true throughout the organization, it is also true as one preaches the Word. In my earlier years of preaching, every week brought about a big decision, "What will I preach on next Sunday?" It was like the person standing before the refrigerator or the cupboard, asking, "What will we have for dinner tonight?" Outside of some series of sermons from time to time, I have found the most productive and less stressful way of scheduling sermons; is three-fold - Plan, Plan, Plan. The Revised Common Lectionary has been of immense value. While I am looking for sermon ideas all the time, the plan begins to evolve during the summer months when schedules normally slow down a bit. I work through the Lectionary for the whole year, making one page in a notebook for each of the Sundays of the year, which in my planning, begins the first Sunday of September. Having decided the sermon subject for every Sunday, with a few notes which occurred to me at the time, I then print up a planning copy of every sermon title for the year and accompanying Scripture passages, submit it to the rest of the staff, and especially for the choir director and organist. This enables the music people to look for appropriate music and anthems for the various Sundays

of the year. One disclaimer needs to be inserted here. There may be circumstances which call for a change in the plan, but you can't change the plan if you don't have one! One of the skills of leadership is in this area of planning. Have a plan which states where you're going, and others will often want follow.

We have stressed throughout these pages, a personal ministry. This needs to happen, too, from the pulpit. Throughout the years, I have written full manuscripts, built as logically as is possible for me to do, with key words or phrases to help me remember. I study carefully what I have prepared, and at the time of delivery, I leave the manuscript tucked in my Bible or somewhere else. If the sermon is logical enough and flows well enough so you can remember it, perhaps your people can too! It's hard for people to believe what you say comes from the heart if you don't have opportunity to look them in the eye. One of my early mentors used to say that paper is a poor conductor of thought. I remember his saying about this, "When you asked your wife for her hand in marriage, you probably didn't pull out a piece of paper and read it. Rather, you looked her in the eye. Things happen when eyes meet eyes." I am aware that not everyone agrees with this point of view, but let me say that if you must have a manuscript before you, have it well enough in hand to spend a lot of the time looking at the people. I have seen other speakers look up from time to time, but it is obvious they don't see anything! Some are comfortable with

taking a good outline into the pulpit, but whatever method you choose to use, prepare well enough so as to be as personal as possible in the presentation. Another part of being personal is to use a sense of humor if at all possible. We need to excel in being good speakers and excellent communicators! Someone said about his minister one day, "He can go down deeper and come up drier than anyone I have ever heard!" But, be careful to use illustrations which let light shine on the subject and not a story as an end in itself. While we are on the subject of preaching, I am of the opinion that it is difficult to preach the Word by limiting one's sermon time on Sunday morning to ten minutes, which seems to be the norm in so many churches these days. Of course, I have also heard comments about the sermon being too long. One humorist said it this way, "If you haven't struck oil in 20 minutes, stop boring!"

Another way to stay alive organizationally is to learn to build good docket, out of the prior work the committees have done before the meeting. This way, the Session, or whatever you call your organization, will be able to better prepare themselves for what is going to be discussed at the meeting. Committees can do the background work, and even make recommendations, which the larger group desperately needs to make informed decisions. In a meeting, when little ground work is done ahead, it takes "forever" to do the business. It is often a time when "the ignorant attempt to

instruct the uninformed!" That takes longer! And speaking of time, it is a matter of integrity to start on time and end on time. If you set a meeting for 7:00 p.m., begin at that time, no matter how few are there. Inform your people you are going to do that and after a meeting or two, they will get the idea. It is a bad habit to delay the start of the meeting. This is also true if you are leading a larger meeting. You were expecting a 100 and only 25 show up. The temptation is to begin to lament by saying, "I don't know where everyone is; we better wait awhile until others come." Better to say the positive thing: "How delighted I am to see you; let's get started." Another trick along these lines is to set up fewer chairs than you think you need. Setting up more chairs is always exciting and builds enthusiasm. Still another thought along these lines: If you have a choice, it is better to have a crowd in a small room, than to have what seems like a few people in a large room.

We have talked about beginning time for the meeting. The ending time is also of considerable importance. Get your Session or Board to agree to an adjournment time. A meeting is like a closet; you can always find more stuff to cram into it than what you have room for. Having stressed this to one of my Sessions, one of our Elders noticed the time was passing all too fast with so much to do, and said, "Rev., your closet is getting full!" And even when leading a larger meeting, hold fast to both the beginning and ending time. If your meeting is from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m., it is a

matter of integrity for the people to know that if they have to be somewhere else later that same evening, they will know they can make it. It may seem like a discipline too difficult to do, but it can be done and people will love you for it.

While it is through such organizational meetings that we set forth plans to be accomplished, one must also understand that it is "Koinonia" at its best. Forget this and you are in danger of forgetting the deeper reasons for meeting. It is in the meetings that we do business with each other as members of the mystical body of Jesus Christ. Awareness of our "brother/sister" relationship with each other, bound together in His love, is paramount as we do the business of the church. Someone asked me one day if I had "small groups" in our church for spiritual nurture and mutual support. It then came to me that we already had 47 groups, including Church School, committees, task forces, women's groups, etc. The important thing is to make these natural organizations the kind of spiritual fellowships worthy of the name Christian. It is business, but more than business.

The administrative area of the church is often distasteful to some leaders. It can be far more exciting when it becomes also a spiritual adventure as well. During the years of my seminary training, I received little training in administration. Hopefully, things are getting better these days. If not, get help.

IV. STAY ALIVE FINANCIALLY

Good stewardship is not only taught; it is caught. People have a tendency to look to the leader for examples of how to handle the resources God's people have been given. It is part of our integrity which is always on display among our people, both in one's personal life and in our resources, take literally, "Seek first the Kingdom...." It is to show people first hand that when a person puts the Lord first in everything, including one's finances, God has a way of taking care of his people. When the congregation knows you are the first to give sacrificially, they will have an incentive to follow your leadership, especially when you speak of stewardship from the pulpit. Nothing sells like first-hand experience. Keeping one's financial house in order is essential in a harmonious church. If circumstances, however, make it necessary to seek a loan, it is best not to receive it from a church member. While this is not a hard and fast rule, there is always a danger that such relationships will not go well, and others will be brought into it, to the pain of the pastor. Of course, I feel the same way about hiring a church member to work in the office. If everything goes well, fine. But it does remove you from a professional relationship. Unhappy employees have been known to call other parishioners to tell them how unfair you have been to them. This never does you any good!

Stewardship, however, is far more than what we do with our money. It is what we do with our life. Surely I don't have to tell anyone who would read these words, that the only reason you can have enough to give away, is yield to the Lord's will, making us wiser in the way we spend what we have. He controls our desires and centers us on our needs. These two are different.

The Board of Pensions in our church has provided immense help for our retirement. Social Security does the same thing. It is wise to have both. In my retirement years, I find both of these together to be adequate for our living. There should be further preparation for one's future, however, than only depending on pensions. Begin as soon as possible to save and invest wisely. It doesn't have to be a lot of money at first, it just means to have the discipline to begin. It is amazing how much we are able to accumulate and at the same time have enough to give away, when we begin as soon as possible to provide for the future. Another benefit enjoyed by this writer is that of having purchased our own home. Throughout the years, we have received a housing allowance, provided by the church, adequate for the monthly payments, and then finally the house was paid off. We now have an equity we would have had trouble building in any other way. It is an equity which still continues to increase in value. In support of such a position, I have discovered that many pastors will live

even on a lesser level, if it is of one's own choosing, but at the same time feel abused if living under the same conditions in a property owned by the church. When it is possible to purchase one's own home (obviously in some churches this cannot be a reality), it is highly recommended. It is also recommended that the pastor's home not be "a cup of sugar" a way. Distance away will be your friend.

The person who is a good steward of his own resources, then, is in a good position to lead the way enabling the church to do the same thing. It will reflect in one's preaching, teaching, and private conversations. It will also be evident in stewardship training for the whole church. One must remember that the budget of the church provides a commentary on what the church believes and does. This means that church budgets must be taken seriously. So often, especially in small churches, a handful of people get together and decide how much money the church can spend in the coming year. While it is true that we have to pay attention to how much money we expect, and to be good stewards when we write down figures in the budget, but there is more to it than that! Needs and mission of the church come first. A good plan we have followed routinely is for committee or department heads to work with their respective groups as to plans for the coming year. This means that the budget process should begin early enough to have plans and budget figures by September of every year. When plans

are complete, budget figures follow logically. Then, heads of committees or departments meet together and negotiate the final budget. Ultimately approved by the Session in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Some Churches even have budget hearings with the congregation. Other churches do a tentative budget and then revise it after the pledges are in. No matter which way it is done, needs come first, then the budget, which becomes more than figures; it represents people and mission.

So, be a good steward of your life and resources. It will not only be profitable for the future, give you a better working relationship with the Lord, but also help to make your preaching and teaching believable.

V. STAY ALIVE PHYSICALLY

There are some trite slogans which well apply here. "Take good care of your body and it will take good care of you." The same can be said about your family, your car, your business, and other areas of your life. Take care of it and it will take care of you. While illness and misfortune can happen to any of us, creating conditions over which we have no control, overall, we have a lot of control over our own health. Theologically, this makes good sense. It was the Apostle Paul who wrote,

"...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body." I Cor. 6: 19b-20

This is reason enough for anyone who claims the name of Christian to take care of his body. It is a sobering thought that God, in His Triune nature, has chosen to take up residence within us. It must be a fit place in which to live. But, beyond that, Paul points out that the body is not just our personal possession. It, also belongs to the Lord. In the few times I have borrowed someone else's automobile, I have driven as if the car were made of eggs! One naturally is afraid of scratching it, or worse, getting into an accident. Because it belongs to someone else, we have a tendency

to take better care of it. This is a good starting place for striving for good health.

We have already indicated that good planning eases stress. It is sure easier to get there if you know where you are going! Organization has occupied a lot of our attention in previous pages. I sincerely believe that getting organized goes a long way to alleviate stress, which is one of the culprits which chips away at our good health.

Such organization should enable us to schedule time for one's self and the family. I wrote "schedule time" deliberately, because if you don't schedule the time, you probably won't get it. Let everyone know what day you are not in the office (Thursdays worked for me) and others will begin to make their plans around that fact. Hold to it as rigidly as possible, although there are some emergencies in the parish one must answer no matter what. If you don't take time for yourself, the needs of the church will take it from you. This fact came to me rather painfully in one of the early years of ministry. At a Session meeting, I noticed something that felt like a small pin-stick near my belt line. It didn't go away that night and in the days following. Thinking this needed some medical attention, I went to our family doctor who, after a thorough physical, said in effect, "There is nothing wrong with you that I can find, but I believe that if you continue to work seven days a

week, eat at fast food restaurants, in your Study while you are working, in your car on your way somewhere else, you are going to die! I said something like, "No one ever explained it to me like that!" These words literally changed my life. It was beneficial for our church, its organization and my general welfare. I discovered that taking time for me was good, not bad. One can feel so righteous and even enjoy the sympathy of the people who are sorry you have to work so hard, and spend so many hours doing it, but in the long run, both pastor and people suffer.

A disclaimer. There are some lazy pastors who don't have this kind of problem. These words have not been written to excuse the person who is not giving his best effort to serve the Lord and His people. There are some safeguards in a large church that helps. Good staff people keep track of where you are, especially the secretary who must know where you can be reached. But, in a small church, the pastor can be either easy to find or not as one chooses. There are some natural temptations at this point, but the conscientious leader won't have the problem.

Another problem with the pastor's health might well be an occupational hazard. Often, I have said in jest that I majored in church potluck in Seminary. It might seem like it for some of us who continue to eat too much and often of the wrong things as we attend potluck after potluck. This doesn't need to be a detailed

account of dietary choices. It is general knowledge that too many fats, sweets, and a lack of fruits and vegetables can cause us to run the risk of deteriorating health. Take this seriously. While my mother used to say, "Everyone loves a fat, jolly preacher," I'm not at all convinced of that validity! Take care of your body, it will take care of you.

Then, there is the problem of exercise. It is good for you. Get on a program of some kind, and stick with it. While this pastor was a jogger for around 17 years, walking now seems to be the best option. Some join health clubs; some ride stationary bikes or use various kinds of exercise equipment in one's own home; others walk every day. But whatever you do, stay with it. It not only helps blood pressure, improves circulation, builds strong bodies in general, but it has a way of clearing your mind, easing tensions, and helps you feel good about yourself. In addition to the exercise, it is also a matter of common sense to get a physical check-up every year from your doctor.

While there are often problems within a parish that are long-standing, and may take many years, and sometimes several pastors to resolve, at least be sure that we are doing all we can.

We have listed five ways to stay alive in the parish. There are many more I have written as personally able to do, to say, "It worked for me"; perhaps it will for you, too.

