Chapter 9

Ministers and Their Peers: Maintaining Professional Relationships

Occasionally a minister who seems to maintain a high standard of ethics may relate inappropriately to fellow ministers. Perhaps professional jealousy or an inflated ego lies at the root of this shortcoming, but whatever the cause, persons who slight their peers should pray for a greater love for the ministry as well as for God. Discerning young ministers soon learn they need the affirmation and respect of fellow ministers. And to earn such responses they must first show them.

RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PREDECESSOR IN THE PASTORATE

The success or failure of the minister who preceded you will be a significant factor in the success of your relationships and ministry in your new church. If that person did quite well in filling the pulpit prior to your coming, do not ignore that contribution as you take his or her place. This is particularly true as you begin your ministry in the new pastorate. The most loyal supporters (as well as detractors) of the former pastor are watching you closely to see how you will assume leadership.

Whether you are in a service, in a board meeting, or in mere conversation with associates, and regardless of their agreeing with you, your giving proper credit to this minister of God, one whose work you will have to build on, is important. Everyone will be
interested in how you evaluate your predecessor. Fight and pray to resist an unhealthy attitude toward this minister. If you sense jealousy, for example, express it only as a confession to God. And then when He has removed it—confess it only if it is appropriate to a given audience.

Make every reasonable effort to keep in touch with your predecessor as a person with whom you have much in common. Your conversation should never center on the negative aspects of your ministries; rejoice together in the victories you have mutually won. Invite this preacher back to the pulpit from time to time. Those of your congregation who have not been able to accept the transition may well appreciate you more after such a return visit. Those who were not particularly enchanted by the former pastor’s person or ministry will admire you for being generous.

What if your predecessor had only a mediocre ministry or one that failed? Never speak of it critically—publicly or privately. If you take an unethical, negative attitude, your ministry will get the same treatment when you have gone.

If your predecessor was eminently successful, you may need to be more direct in your references to him or her in private conversation and in public services. Above all, honor the former pastor as a friend. If you are more successful, you won’t need to point out the contrast. Your people are keen analysts. Here again, it will serve you and your ministry well to invite this minister back as an honored guest, probably after some time has elapsed. You will want to continue to be in touch and will probably need to initiate each contact to keep the relationship alive. Your friendship and respect will be a major source of encouragement.

**Relationship with Your Successor in the Pastorate**

You will have no problem in maintaining a proper attitude toward the one who follows you in the pas-
torate if your heart is right. Ask yourself if you really want the new pastor to succeed. More importantly, do you want the church you left behind to prosper?

During one of my pastorate, I invited a flamboyant minister friend to hold services. Some time before, he had concluded his ministry in a fairly sizable church. The minister who followed him had met serious difficulty in trying to keep the church growing. I was somewhat taken aback when my friend, who had enjoyed success in the pastorate, commented that his successor just didn’t have a strong enough ministry to take the church forward. Rather than regretting it, he seemed to be gloating over it.

Outgoing pastors always carry some responsibility for what happens in a church after they leave. If they have not left their predecessor a foundation to build on, they may be more at fault than the one who follows and appears a failure.

Departing pastors face another important question: To what degree should they stay in touch with members of the church they are leaving? The question becomes even more critical when applied to pillars of the church or members of its board. I believe that contact should be minimal. A close relationship with former parishioners benefits neither them nor the minister who maintains the contact—besides being a detriment to the incumbent pastor.

I have known of cases where a minister with a strong personality actually attempted to continue pastoring the church he had left. His refusal to withdraw his influence eventually led to a split in the church, dealing a serious blow to the incumbent pastor, who suffered unbelievable pressures. What could be more unethical and unkind than to make the ministry a misery for your successor.

A problem in ethical relationships can sometimes arise when pastors purchase a home in the town where they minister: When they move to the next town, they may have a problem selling the property, or they may wish to hold it as an investment. Under
such circumstances, proceed with caution and exercise Christlike courtesy to your original community and the current pastor of the church. If in maintaining such a property you will have to attend to it personally, the local pastor should be made fully aware of your activities in the community on an ongoing basis. In such circumstances, good manners, not to mention good ethical practice, demand consideration of the local pastor.

As a minister, at the top of your prayer list ought to be the name of the one who follows you in a given ministry. Should that person succeed, you share in the victories. Should your successor fail, you fail as well. Keep in mind, after all, it is the kingdom of God that is being built up or dragged down. We have simply been given the honor of being collaborators with Him who in the final reckoning cannot fail. Nevertheless, we will give an accounting of how we ourselves worked with our fellow ministers.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TROUBLED NEIGHBORING CHURCH

Nolan B. Harmon makes this point in *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette*: “Fortunately, interchurch rivalry has died down with the passing years, and the stern denominationalism of an earlier age has all but disappeared. . . . Nevertheless between local churches, especially in small towns, there is considerable head counting, comparing of local efforts, and striving for local prestige.”

Consequently, in the smaller community a church in trouble often becomes a microcosm of a community in trouble. Church problems can be horrendous. The facts sometimes lend credence to the observation credited to Reinhold Niebuhr that the Church reminded him of Noah’s ark—You couldn’t stand the stench within if it weren’t for the storm without!

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Problems in the neighboring church become particularly acute when that church happens to be of your own denomination. Your attitude as pastor, as well as that of your congregation, must be one of true compassion. Never despise a troubled neighboring church. Never take advantage of the situation. Treat that church as you would treat a troubled marriage. Do everything in your power to bring about reconciliation.

When disgruntled or hurt members of the troubled church show up at your church, be prepared with an ethical approach. The first time they attend, it is proper to welcome them but without commentary about why they are present. However, by the second visit you should have a talk with them and then contact their pastor. Your goal is to return these sheep to the proper fold, back to the care of their undershepherd.

During my twelve years at a fine church, I could expect a visit every year or so from a strapping policeman and his wife who lived in the community. They attended a fundamentalist church but would become discouraged from time to time. They would visit our church for a few Sundays and appear to receive a spiritual boost. Then they would quietly slip back to their home church with no negative feelings on anyone’s part. We felt that we were performing a service for the Kingdom in providing a temporary haven for them.

Should a family begin attending your church because of difficulty in a neighboring church, they may not prove to be an asset. If they have created some of the difficulty in the church they left, the possibility is great they will create difficulty for you. On the other hand, if they are running from an existing difficulty in the previous church, who is to say they will stand by your church should a problem arise?

To receive a family from a troubled church without attempting to help them to return home or without contacting their pastor is a serious breach of ministe-
rial ethics. Count the cost of receiving disgruntled members. You will not enhance the reputation of your church in the community nor will you endear yourself to the pastor and congregation of their former church by your actions. Of course, there are times when the circumstances seem to be completely beyond human control. The only hope is to place the situation squarely in the hands of God and leave it to His mercy and grace. Above all, in such awkward situations as this, do your best to stay on good terms with the pastor of the troubled church and encourage him in the Lord.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH GUEST MINISTERS**

Evangelists are a vanishing breed. Hopefully, genuine hunger for spiritual revival will lead to reactivating the role of these essential men and women of the Word. Since evangelists are difficult to come by, it becomes even more imperative to treat them with respect and appreciation.

First, confirm carefully the dates for an evangelistic crusade with your evangelist. When he or she arrives, be prepared. Treat the evangelist as an honored guest and strive to transfer a degree of the loyalty and love your people have for you as pastor to this coworker in ministry. If you do not show confidence and ethical regard for this person and his or her ministry, your people will tend to feel distrust; the evangelist will not be a source of blessing to the church or lead its members into spiritual renewal. Better not to have an evangelist come to the church than to have one with whom you cannot share the affection and admiration of your church members.

Honor evangelists. Welcome them warmly to your pulpit from service to service. Free them to pursue their ministry. Don’t fear the contrasts between your ministry and theirs. If they preach better than you, your people need to hear better preaching. If they are not as gifted in the pulpit as you, your congrega-
tion will be happy to hear you again when the evan-
gelist leaves. For better or worse, an evangelist’s
ministry will provide a needed change for your pa-
rishioners, and they will be ready to hear you when
the series of services is concluded.

While the evangelist is with your church, be sure
to provide good food and accommodations. Take
time to have fellowship. Pray with and for your evan-
gelists that God will richly anoint their ministries.

In most cases, lodging the evangelist in the parson-
age during the revival series rarely works, either for
the evangelist or your family. Although many years
have passed since the experience, my wife and I have
vivid recollections of serving as the evangelists at a
small city church with a very limited budget. The pas-
tor was able to provide a room for us in the parson-
age, which, unfortunately, was separated from the
adjoining living room by only an arched doorway.
The pastor’s wife had hung a curtain across the door-
way, but we had not reckoned on the all-too-frequent
visitor to our quarters: The pastor’s hyperactive little
son would come flying through the curtain in his ped-
al car, giving only a three-second warning of
“Beep, Beep!”

Once, in a rural setting as evangelists, we were noti-
ﬁed by the pastor and his wife that the congregation
had not been bringing enough food to stock their
spare freezer. The result—we would have only two
meals a day. Although a great way to diet, it hardly re-
ﬂected the appropriate care and courtesy due a guest.
This was, of course, an exceptional case, for during
those years, when it was often necessary for the host
pastor to open his home to the evangelist, we experi-
enced warm, generous treatment time after time.

Pay your evangelists well. They will have lapses in
their schedules from time to time. Their budgets
must include the expenses of travel as well as of
maintaining a home. Because of such accompanying
expenses, their weekly salary should in most cases be
larger than that of the host pastor. Should your
church be unable to generously remunerate guest ministers, you should consider setting up a fund to cover special meetings. The day may well come when your roles will be reversed. As the evangelist, you will want to remember being more than fair to the guest ministers you invited to your church. The Lord himself stated the principle in cogent terms: "‘Treat other people exactly as you would like to be treated by them’" (Matt. 7:12, Phillips).

When hosting missionaries or other guests for only one service, plan it carefully. You will want to highlight the unique ministry of your guests. Give them ample time to present their message. Should the speaker be a missionary seeking financial support or a representative of a ministry that deserves funding, as host pastor create an atmosphere of responsiveness and generosity.

The best preparation for a missions appeal is an established missions fund. Even if the church operates on a low budget or a missions service is poorly attended, such a fund keeps the pastor from being embarrassed and the missionary from becoming discouraged. In any event, the honorarium must be generous. The single-service speaker, like the evangelist, has been faced with travel expenses and has had to neglect other responsibilities to be present at your church. When you have a policy of treating your guests well, the word gets around and you and your church come to be appreciated as benefactors of the ministry.

During the actual service with a guest speaker, your remarks need to be carefully chosen. Nolan Harmon suggests that the introduction of the speaker should be simple and clear, avoiding extravagance. At the conclusion of the speaker’s sermon, it is best not to comment on it. If it was good, the people will know it. If it was poor, you can’t make them believe otherwise.²

²Ibid., 128.
Moving into a new community as a pastor can be interesting and sometimes challenging. In some areas of the country you can expect a warm welcome. Neighboring pastors will take the initiative to get acquainted with you. On the other hand, what if you arrive in town and nobody seems to notice? Don’t sulk or pity yourself. Seek out your neighboring pastors. Be warm and courteous to everyone, even when you’ve been coolly received. Participate in the local ministerial alliance. Let the community know you are a coworker in the Kingdom. If you persist in reaching out to your fellow ministers in the community, the dividends will appear in due time.

I was pastoring in a small city where I met some snobbishness and aloofness in a few of the more liberal members of the local ministerial alliance. I determined by the grace of God to respond with Christ-honoring actions and commit the situation to His guidance. Soon a good relationship developed with one of my neighboring pastors, and we were able to arrange an exchange of services, which continued for a number of years.

My second year in the community, a national trans-denominational effort to promote group Bible study, world evangelism, and prayer (Key ’73) came along. As a member of the planning committee, I was assigned the task of inviting a well-known liberal pastor from a neighboring community to speak at a special rally. Since part of my assignment was to provide the subject and text for the speaker, I prayerfully chose the passage in Luke 4 that records Jesus’ declaration of His mission on earth as He stood in the synagogue at Nazareth. Providentially, this was the exact passage the national committee had selected just prior to the rally. Our guest speaker was so impressed by this “coincidence” that in the course of his message he highlighted the unusual details of the invitation he had
received. The Lord graciously used this almost trivial experience to break down some of the relational barriers among the city's religious leaders.

As a result, the ministers of our immediate area, a wide cross section of denominations, formed a bond among themselves. Interdenominational prayer fellowships also formed, and soon weekly Bible studies sprang up in several homes in the community. A highlight of this interfaith activity in our church was a beautiful baptismal service with four other churches. Moving on the hearts of spiritual leaders who previously had been reluctant to join in the Lord's work, the Holy Spirit succeeded in bringing a genuine spiritual awakening.

Pentecostals often find it difficult to enjoy a warm relationship with those of a different theological position or standard of conduct. Yet even the Lord himself did not reject those who did not adhere to His teaching as the disciples understood it. He simply said that "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:38). We must view ourselves as workers together with those who are bringing others to the foot of the Cross. As we practice Christlike ethics, we will conduct ourselves so that our fellow ministers can trust us and we can trust them. We will mutually work for God's kingdom, confident that none among us are "sheep stealers" or "goldfish-bowl raiders."

It is alarming that at times ministers of the same denomination cannot work in harmony—despite facing common problems. We are all assigned to meet the deep spiritual needs of people. We can and must reinforce each other's ministry. There is no room for rivalry in the family of God, no time for feuding. The hour is short; the harvest is ripe. We must prepare for the return of the great Lord of the Harvest by working together.

**RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR DENOMINATION**

The ethics of a wholesome relationship with your denomination calls for loyalty, support, and even a
sense of pride. That doesn’t mean your loyalty must be blind, but you should see your denomination as a fellowship and agree with your brothers and sisters in ministry about doctrine—this is critical to your ethics as a minister.

Upon joining a fellowship, new members affirm the doctrine of the group. As long as their membership continues, they have an obligation to agree with the doctrinal positions of their fellow ministers. Amos 3:3 states it succinctly: “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” To cloak one’s theological identity so one might enjoy the advantages of a denominational affiliation shows a lack of integrity. It should be beneath the honor of God’s ministers.

Questions or doubts about doctrinal matters are not necessarily wrong. But a person in that state of mind should be pursuing answers. “A double-minded man [is] unstable in all he does” (James 1:8). If a minister cannot resolve the doubts, he ought to do the ethical thing, for himself and his fellowship, by voluntarily withdrawing. Nagging questions and doubts lead only to frustration, bitterness, and spiritual defeat.

How blessed are the ministers who develop a sturdy loyalty to their denomination. Although they may feel there are weaknesses and faults among their fellow ministers, loving them helps overlook those flaws.

Your denomination is your fellowship. The terms “brother” and “sister,” unfortunately, are becoming passé, perhaps because Christian love is declining. An examination of our “first love” (Rev. 2:4) may be in order. Sanctified pride in one’s fellowship—not in its attainments, its strength, size, or quality—shows appreciation for the bond tying believers together.

A good question to ask yourself: “Is my fellowship stronger because I am a member?” It is an enjoyable experience to be with others of “like precious faith” (2 Peter 1:1, KJV). There is real fun and fulfillment in exchanging stories, enjoying humor, bearing another’s burdens, and just being able to vent feelings that
develop in the work of the ministry. An extreme, perhaps, but one of my golfing friends admitted that when he teed up a ball, sometimes he was guilty of imagining a troublesome board member on the tee.

Loyal ministers will not begrudge the financial support that is required to maintain good standing with their fellowship. It is better to go beyond the actual requirement, the second mile. Don’t begrudge the fiscal demands of a great relationship.

Never forget that you are a part of your denomination by your choice. You were not forced to join. On the other hand, you were chosen by your denomination. Your fellowship was not coerced to select you. We are not members of a body of believers on the basis of our merits, just as we are not a part of the kingdom of God because we deserve our place. He first chose us, then we chose Him. Never allow yourself to become disillusioned and to think of your fellowship as “them” or “they” rather than “us” or “we.”

We are all a part of Christ’s body and are joined in bonds of love and faith. While it is true that there are no denominational lines drawn in heaven, the same love and respect that bind men and women into earthly fellowships are the same love and respect that bind them into the kingdom of heaven.

**Study Questions**

1. Why is it important to keep in touch with your predecessor in the pastorate?

2. What should be your relationship with your successor in a pastorate?

3. When church problems arise in a neighboring church, what can you do to help the church?

4. How should you deal with people who come to you from a troubled church?
5. What preparations should you make for guest ministers, evangelists, and missionaries?

6. To what extent and under what circumstances should you participate in a local ministers’ alliance?

7. What is involved in loyalty to your denomination?