

Patient Leadership

You spot the problem immediately. You know what needs to be done. You're full of energy for the task. You charge in enthusiastically to slay the dragon. "We'll get this church fixed in no time," you say to yourself.

But then the dragon bites back. There are aspects to the problem you hadn't considered. The people don't see the situation exactly as you do. Some respond emotionally. Why don't they see what needs to be done? Why do they seem to be against you? All you want to do is give them a better church and a better future. "I'm not sure this is worth it," you say to yourself in frustration. "Better get the resume polished up and look for a church that really wants to change." (Side note: There aren't any.)

Such has been the experience of many a pastor. For most pastors it is in their nature to lead, to take action, to make changes and get things done. They have a calling from the Lord and sense of urgency about the task. They have training and ministry skills to apply to the situation. They come into the church with fresh eyes that immediately see barriers to church health. They're ready to get started and make a difference. But often it doesn't go well.

When I asked long-tenured pastors, "What helped you stay?" one of the common responses was, "Patience." They talked about pacing themselves and not trying to change too much too quickly. They realized that some things could be changed fairly easily, but the big things would take time – years! They took the time to build relationships and a reservoir of trust between themselves and the congregation. They learned the history of the church. They listened. This requires a lot of patience when there is so much to be done, but it is essential if those things are actually going to get done in a healthy and sustainable way.

A key aspect of pastoral patience is disciplining yourself to *build healthy processes* instead of trying to force desired outcomes. Now let's be honest: When you know what the answer is, it's a whole lot quicker to just declare it and implement it. This might work with some smaller issues and it might be necessary for a while in a crisis situation. As a general rule, however, and especially for bigger issues, there are two problems with this leadership style.

First, you might be wrong. You have to admit that this is at least a possibility. Your perspective is narrow and fallible and your solution might just turn out to be a disaster. And guess what? If you force it, it's going to be *your* disaster. It'll be on you. So patience in leadership means *humility about your own ability*.

Second, you'll leave a lot of people out. A good process expands participation in the decision. It means the outcome will be much more widely owned in the church. More people will be committed to

its success. So patience in leadership means *inclusion*. It also means *faith* that the Holy Spirit will guide the church to a good outcome. Your job is to shepherd the church through healthy processes, not come up with all the answers yourself.

Of course, even with the best processes in the world there will still be battles. There will be times when you have to face down ungodly opposition. Nearly every one of the tenured pastors I spoke to described a key moment when they did just that. Because they didn't do it too often and had built a reservoir of trust with the congregation, that confrontation often became a breakthrough moment in the life of the church and in the pastor's leadership standing. Patience means *fighting the right battles at the right time in the right way*.

Finally, remember this number: 7. In my interviews and in all the research I have seen on church health and pastoral tenure that number popped up time and again. A sense of "turning the corner" often comes around year seven of a pastor's tenure. Occasionally earlier, but not much. It typically takes that long for the reservoir of trust to be fully developed and for enough healthy processes to be implemented so that a sense of change momentum begins to happen. So patience means *the willingness to stay long enough* so that the groundwork can be laid and positive results can begin to be seen.

To summarize, pastoral patience means

- Building relationships and processes
- Humility about your own ability
- Inclusion
- Fighting the right battles at the right time in the right way
- Staying long enough to see results

Brothers, be patient!