

Relationships: A Key to Pastoral Leadership

Paul left Timothy with a mess in Ephesus. We see it in the apostle's first letter to Timothy in our New Testament. There were problems with doctrine, personal agendas, worldly ambitions, gender roles, and controversies of various sorts. The fledging church was in the middle of a hostile pagan culture trying to figure out how to be followers Christ, and it wasn't all going well.

We might expect Paul to tell Timothy to charge in there and set everyone straight - a "take no prisoners" approach. The apostle certainly instructs his young protégé to give it to them straight in preaching and teaching. There was to be no watering down of doctrine and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. But in the middle of Paul's instructions about what to do in the Ephesian church, he gives Timothy this bit of advice:

"Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity."

1 Timothy 5:1-2 ESV

Notice the emphasis on *family* and the high value given to *relationships*. Timothy had some difficult things to say to the church. He had some sticky situations to work through. He would need courage, wisdom, tenacity, and skill. But for these to be effective he would also need a relationship of love and trust between himself and the church members. *They had to know he loved them if he was ever going to lead them.*

In my Tenure Project interviews pastors told me something very similar. One of the factors that helped these pastors stay in their churches and eventually experience positive ministry results was *a focus on relationships and "being their pastor" in the early years*. Aspects of this include:

- Building relationships with influencers in the church.
- Learning and appreciating the church's history and how it affects the present.
- Serving and being an example of servanthood.
- Ministering to people at times of sickness, death, and crisis. (This is a BIG one!)
- Listening to people and understanding the heart of the church.
- Demonstrating a strong work ethic and reliability.
- Establishing connections and a pastoral role in the community.

Intentionality is the key. People have to be the priority and relationships have to get the necessary time and attention. The result is a reservoir of trust that enables pastoral leadership. The focus on relationships makes it more possible to lead from a position of strong consensus as the years go by. This is another reason there is a connection between church health and pastoral tenure. It takes time – years – to develop the reservoir of trust that enables pastoral leadership.

Don't get me wrong. Not everyone is going to like the pastor no matter how hard he works on relationships. None of the men I interviewed had a conflict-free ministry. But they stayed and they disciplined themselves to make people the priority. They eventually had a strong reservoir of trust between themselves and the church, a few soreheads notwithstanding.

Also understand this: You don't have to be a "touchy feely" type to do this. A lot of the pastors I talked to are actually introverts who are more at home in the study than in a crowd. But they decided to show up, to make people a priority, and to be accessible servants. They were intentional about it because it was the right thing to do and because it was the only way they would ever be able to shepherd the sheep toward a better pasture.

So here it is in a nutshell: When you lead by showing up and serving, and you do it long enough so that people really know you and trust you, then the ability to guide the church toward health is greatly enhanced. Other pastoral competencies are leveraged to greater effect.

The bottom line is: *You got to love'em to lead'em.*