



horizons

S E E I N G B E Y O N D

GO FIX THE PROBLEM

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For United Methodist clergy and churches, June is a very transitional month. It is the month when clergy move to new churches. Occasionally it is a move where a gifted clergy person is awarded a fine new church to simply carry on the good work both have been doing. But often times the clergyperson is told that the church is having serious problems (finances almost always mentioned) and told to go and fix the problem. In other words...“the bills aren’t being paid and we want you to find a way to pay them.” Some of you non-Methodists have heard the same thing except it has come from the church leaders themselves after you arrived or shortly before you agreed to be their pastor. The message is clear, “Your ministry will be judged on whether you get the bills paid or not!” I will get several phone calls at the end of June or first of July with the question, “Hey Clif, what do I do now?”

First, this disclaimer: I served four congregations and thus moved four times. Each time I was told that the church needed financial help. Each time I succeeded in lifting the church from the financial hole I had inherited. However, each time I created situations where the person succeeding me also heard that the church needed financial help. So I talk with you from a position of hindsight and now after helping hundreds of other pastors and churches, not from a position of having been the financial savior of every one of my churches.

Here’s what I would do if I were asked to do it over again: First, I would not ignore what I had been told about the church finances, but I would not make it my first priority, either. I would invest myself in learning about the ministry of this new church and exactly how they see themselves as the Body of Christ. Do they understand the business they are in? Do they know that they are not the customer? Why do they have worship? How do they feel about their Sunday morning experience? What is their understanding of discipleship training? In what ways are they in mission outside their walls? What role does evangelism play in the life of this church? What shape are the youth and children’s ministry areas in? Is there a sense of love and community here? There is a real probability that in discovering the answer to these questions you will uncover the answer to why financial stewardship is as it is.

Second, I would find out where the greatest pastoral needs are for you to involve yourself in and begin immediately to be a pastor. For the very large church this will mean discovering how your staff and key leaders need you to listen, love, and pray with them. For the smaller church pastor this means discovering who is in the hospital, nursing home or grieving over a loss. Persons need to know you want to love them as Christ loved.

Third, I would start doing my financial homework quietly and behind the scenes. Get lots of historical data on corporate and individual giving. Be sure and get data on annual, capital and planned giving. See how things have evolved over the last several years. Do you see a trigger point when things radically changed for good or bad? Why? Talk with your financial leaders to get clarity (but avoid prescribing any solution) and also talk with those who have been your top donors to discover why they are supporting the church and what their expectations are. Talk to those who used to be key supporters and find out why they have chosen to move their support elsewhere. See if your elected leadership is also an invested leadership? See how your staff is exemplifying generosity.

Fourth, six months into your tenure, call a retreat with no more than 6-8 of your key leaders. Lay out what you have learned and lead a discussion on how you can better make disciples for Jesus Christ going forward. Make it a ministry discussion and not a money discussion. You aren’t in the money business! Money will make its way into the discussion at the appropriate time, but ministry and changing lives needs to be the focus and intent. Very important – Lead! Do not call this retreat and only listen. They have hired you to lead and God has called you to lead – Do it!

Your goal is that at the end of your first year, you have a solid plan in place to go along with hopefully a high trust level from your people and you move forward with bold initiatives to make disciples. Then you call your superior and tell them you have fixed the financial problem and the bills are paid.