
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Every candidate for eldership in the Young Nak Presbyterian Church of Seoul, Korea, is examined in four areas: theology, Bible, church history, and common sense. I would have fully expected the first three areas of examination, but I was surprised by the fourth. Yet now that I've considered it for a while, I'm convinced it's not a bad idea. In fact, why not add the same fourth criterion for leadership in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., my own church at Berkeley, or the staff of any other church?

I am certain that the most important determining factor in the effectiveness of a church staff is its shared conviction about the Lord Jesus Christ and the nature of the gospel mandate. But other factors are also important. Even with a solidarity of faith at the center of a staff, much can happen that is confusing and downright discouraging.

Despite a sense of loyalty, we may find ourselves floundering in our programs, or even in our relationships with each other, because of a shortage of the fourth Young Nak principle—common sense. Our staff, for example, may be totally united in theology and commitment and fully agree on the need for ministry to fathers and sons. But we'll still probably fail to get much of a turnout at a father-son archery outing on

Super Bowl Sunday. The problem is not always theological; sometimes it's simply a shortage of common sense, and the lack of simple "market" research.

Straight Talk About Staff Relations

Let's talk some common sense, then, about a ministry staff team and what makes it work. I have four common-sense reflections:

First, it is common sense that *each member of a staff should have a task as important as every other member of the staff*—and everyone should know that this is the case. This means that from the newest to the most senior member of a ministry team, each person should be made aware of his or her own vital importance to the total mission of the staff.

This is not an egalitarian ideal. It is simply a biblical truth about ministry. In fact, three realities of ministry are true for each member of a ministry team, regardless of experience or skill: the *gospel*, which is the same gospel for each; the *people*, all of whom are simply human; and the *mystery* of the Holy Spirit as the great confirmation of the gospel—a mystery that is available to all the servants of the Lord.

Actually, this recognition of common elements is necessary to every team, in ministry or otherwise. Each member of a basketball team, new or old, must work with the same sixty minutes, the same rule book, the same ball, the same goal. Every singer in a glee club works with the same musical realities.

And the more elements a team has in common, the more firmly the principle holds. This is why a basketball team has more solidarity than a busload of commuters riding home from work on a Friday afternoon.

This is precisely the point of Paul's advice to Timothy, his youngest staff member: "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Tim. 4:12); "Fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5). Each member of a team needs to work as hard as the others do, and to rest away from work just like the others, to achieve a living balance within the staff. This is just common sense about what makes a staff a team.

Who's In Charge Here?

Secondly, *every staff needs a senior colleague* someone who has as part of his or her special mandate the leadership of the team. There is no such thing as a leaderless church or parachurch staff.

Furthermore, if each member of the ministry staff has an equally vital task, then each should have equal access to this senior colleague. In the same way, the senior colleague must have a direct and natural relationship with each one on the team. Lines of authority may still exist within the staff, but the principle of access is essential.

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tionships between those who carry responsibility. St. Luke records for us the example of the early church in this regard: "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and *fellowship*" (Acts 2:42). Though the model obviously places a personal burden on a leader, it also grants the marvelous bonus of fellowship and feedback from co-workers.

My third observation is this: It makes common sense that *each member of a staff should be a professional*, and should act like one. According to this word's Latin root, being a *professional* actually means to make promises.

What are the promises I have made as a pastor or youth worker? Some concern doctrine; some have to do with Christian discipleship. But we should focus here on the promises involved in the dynamics of a ministry team: A professional keeps confidences with discretion; a professional respects other colleagues and supports their ministries. He or she welcomes critique and evaluation of the quality and content of ministry. A professional works to stay current in knowledge and skills, and is always growing in competence. A professional is punctual and returns phone calls. A professional always comes to an event prepared.

When these qualities are combined, they produce confidence as well as

freedom. In sports or the arts, to be called a "pro" doesn't mean you have less spirit or excitement about what you do; it just means that you know what you're doing. In the same way, we who serve on a staff team as professionals have made promises about the quality of our work, and it is common sense that we should be eager to keep them.

Develop Your Following

Finally, I believe it is only reasonable that every member of a church staff should have a strong constituency within the larger congregation. We could call it a "following" of members in the fellowship who especially appreciate our unique leadership and personality within the larger whole — our special supporters.

When a congregation or ministry becomes large enough to require a staff working in multiple ministries, then that very multiplicity proves in itself that such a church is really several fellowships of smaller groupings within the larger whole. Loyalty to the broader community of faith is strengthened as people cultivate a sense of belonging to a smaller community within the whole, where they feel a special relationship to some member of the ministry team.

It's unfortunate when anxieties about loyalty cast a shadow of suspicion over this natural and healthy development of individual constituencies. Though I realize that decidedly

unhealthy groupings can emerge within congregations as self-righteous and exclusive cliques, sick groups are not an argument against healthy ones. The principle still holds true that each of us needs a smaller circle of friends with whom we can participate deeply, just as we need the larger communion of the whole. In fact, the one encourages the other.

In a practical sense, this means that a staff in a larger congregation is in ministry to several congregations within the church. The wise staff leader will recognize this reality and welcome the opportunity of teammates among the respective teams that they serve. Being a booster for your colleagues in this way is more than a requirement of Christian humility — it's just common sense. ♦



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