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Ministry With A **LONG** *Established Church*

By Eddie Sharp

Early in my ministry, one of my mentors suggested that I wait for some young church in a new suburb in an urban area. The idea of being a part of some up-and-coming church with a new building and lots of new money sounded pretty good. Yet for some reason, I never made it to the 'burbs. The churches in Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and Carlsbad had been around for a while. When I came to the University church in Abilene in 1980, it had almost one hundred years of history. I have learned a few of the sobering realities and glorious opportunities that present themselves to a minister in what is delicately described here as the "long-established church." In writing about ministry in a long-established church, three pivotal issues must be covered: the meaning of a long-established church's history, the nature of institutional personality, and a theology of ministry to a long-established church.

History in a Long-Established Church

When a minister moves to a long-established church, he or she runs into signs of age in many places. Some of the signs are healthy and sweet; some are bitter and diseased. Yellowed bulletins are bundled and stored away. Old church directories hold the flash-frozen faces of believers of decades gone by. In the pews are the widows of the men who built buildings, sent missionaries, and nurtured orphans. Retired preachers, who have real hopes and fears about the future, listen to your sermons. The past is present in long-established churches. Selected incidents in a church's past are remembered by the members and told to new members

to give them the story of the church. This story links the present to the founding days of the church.

The good old days and the bad old days each have their legacy. There have been good times. A beloved preacher, that year in the 1950s when they baptized forty-three, a successful building project—these create memories that give a church stories of heroes and heroic acts. Such a congregational memory can make it hard to do ministry. The memory of such golden years is sweet to those living in days of iron and clay. When ministering to a church with a long history and seven fat years in its past, the ministry staff will face a paradox: the same people who exert pressure on the ministers to recreate the good days will be cynical at the present church's ability to walk in those ways again. Even the good old days can be bad news for ministry.

Bad old days leave their scars, too. Memories of moral failure in a church leader, a disastrous financial decision, or a soured mission effort feed negative attitudes in a church for decades. New ministers hear the stories of failures deeply felt by the church. In living rooms, over coffee, new ministers hear the blaming of elders and warnings about powerful individuals and families. In planning sessions, members take the responsibility to note every plan and every person who has ever failed. The church wanders through its wilderness, not under the cloud of God's presence, but under the pall of its own disasters. The old days are gone but not forgotten. The memory of hard times feeds pessimism even when conditions might be right for a new day.

Every church has history. Long-established churches have a great deal of it.

The Institutional Personality of the Church

Ministry is not just ministry to the people of the congregation but also to the church as a corporate whole. The people have their many individual personalities; the church has one complex personality. How a minister to a long-established church understands and responds to this single entity will mean the difference between productive and unproductive work.

Ministry in a long-established church asks a minister to have a proper, balanced view of the church—the good and the bad. The local church is the Body of Christ, the Bride, the Temple, the Priesthood, the Flock. The church is also composed of men and women who are not totally conformed to the nature of Christ. In this matrix of imputed righteousness and insidious flesh, of now and not yet, the minister does his or her work. These factors are especially obvious in long-established churches.

In many of our older churches, great traditions of service exist. Sister churches know they can depend on these churches. The poor know what acts of mercy these churches commit. The lost continue to hear a message of salvation in Jesus that has rung out from these fellowships through the years. These churches practice righteousness. Ministers to these churches must respect the goodness of their brothers and sisters. They must respect the senior members who have fought through the years of maturing in Christ to become deeply spiritual people.

On the other hand, ministers need to be aware of the lostness that remains in churches. Even the finest Christian has not been able to put the flesh to death completely. Even the finest church does not walk on the high ground always. People and churches have weaknesses and blind spots. Actions and attitudes, plans and programs may show the evidence of thinking proper to this world rather than the world to come.

Our modern model of church with its property, buildings, and budgets makes the church even more susceptible to temptations issuing from money and power. Deadly sins available to any corporate personality will be found in one way or another in every older church. Pride can fill the corporate heart of an old church. Sloth can replace the fervor that marked its earlier days. The long-established church can envy the facilities and geographical location of the new, suburban congregation.

A church's traditions are established through the years of its history. A long-established church will have some traditions that deaden it as well as traditions that enrich it. Such a church may not be able to distinguish between the traditions that give it life and those that choke it. Like some eccentric, elderly gentleman, an older church may regard all its foibles as necessary and indispensable parts of its person. A part of a minister's understanding the corporate personality of the church is knowing that some traditions are calluses on the hands of the church and others are calluses on its heart.

A Theology of Ministry

A minister in a long-established church must check his or her own motivations and basic methodology. All ministry asks the same questions about motivations: Does the minister want to be like Jesus? Does he or she come to serve, or to be served? Is the minister willing for the sufferings of Christ to continue in him or her? Is the minister willing to offer his or her own life as an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity? If the hope is to have a ministry that can be an extension of his or her own ego, the minister is going to have a rough time in any church. That minister might get his or her bluff in on some group of fresh faces in a suburban church plant. In an older church, the folks have seen it all. If a minister goes in as anything more or less than a servant of God in the service of the church, failure is inevitable.

A proper theology of ministry offers the proper motivation for ministry. A proper methodology for ministry may also grow out of such theological reflection. This methodology would be highlighted in two basic ministry considerations: The minister's attitude about longevity in ministry with the long-established church and the minister's attitude toward and management of change in the church.

When I came to University church in Abilene, a second-generation member two years older than my twenty-eight years told me straight out, "Don't try to push a bunch of programs off on us. You preachers just put out your little plans and then you move off and leave us holding the bag. We are the members of this church. You are just the preacher." Fifteen years later, his opinion has not changed. However, after fifteen years, his opinion is in the minority. A preacher needs to consider committing to stay a long time with a long-established church. Folks who have seen a number of ministers come and go will not drop their emotional defenses quickly. **If a minister will become flesh and live**

with the people of the church for a number of years and become one of the people, then his or her ministry will gain strength. A congregation does not learn to hear or trust a minister, especially a preacher, for five years. Stay awhile in the presence of an old church and serve your way into its heart.

The way a minister handles change issues in a long-established church indicates the presence or absence of a servant heart. This is difficult because the minister search process plants a fatal misconception in the mind of the prospective minister. Every search committee tells the prospective minister about the church's needs for change. They want the minister to think he or she is the one who can raise the dead. The church is presented as being ripe for dramatic change. A revolution is about to take place.

Search committees do not mean to lie, but they do. Search committee members have a job to do: attract the ego of a would-be savior. If a minister is hired by a long-established church, his or her servant heart had better be the control center of ministry. The source of the certain disappointment is this simple fact: churches are the way they are because someone likes them that way. A new minister will not be wise to suggest any kind of significant changes in the life of the church until he or she understands the reasons the church has the shape it does and the forces that hold it there. In a long-established church, a new minister is an outsider for at least five years. A church takes that long to understand that a minister is not one of those "bag of tricks for two years and down the road" fellows. It takes

that long for the church to believe that a minister knows and respects its story. If a minister tries to force his or her way on the church prematurely, the inertial forces guarding the equilibrium of the church will act against the one disturbing the systemic balance.

The servant minister respects the story of the church, listens carefully to many points of view, and plans low-pressure, long-range change in the church. The servant minister does not measure his or her effectiveness by counting the numbers of things changed in the church. The servant minister values the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace as he or she methodically brings new life into the ministry of the church. A long-established church will appreciate being treated with love and respect.

I was advised to wait for a church in the suburbs. I respect those who took that advice. Even now, twenty-five years later, the same basic thought is heard. People are saying that real church life can only be created by starting from scratch and letting the old churches putter around until they die. I would like to suggest that good Christian ministry can be done in long-established churches if the minister has a servant heart and respects the church's history and its humanity. Not only will the church be blessed by such a ministry, but the minister will be refined by the fires burning in the heart of a long-established church.

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