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Ministering to Ministers Foundation, Inc., Newsletter

December 28, 2011

The Fox Guards the Henhouse

I was not quite two years into a new job as an associate Minister of Education and things were going well enough, I thought, when all of a sudden the church's most important deacon unexpectedly invited me to lunch. There was the usual glad-handing and friendly banter when all of a sudden the smile fell away from his face; he looked at me and almost out of nowhere said, "I'm trying to help you, Jim, but if I ever come to the conclusion you are not good for our church I will hurt you." Almost immediately the jovial mask went back up and the matter was never alluded to again.

I learned later that this was one of two occasions when this man had volunteered to "talk" to me about his perception of my weaknesses. On both occasions he made mysterious allusions to "unhappy people" and non-specific "problems." I asked him who I needed to reconcile with and pressed him for specifics, but he demurred and simply suggested that all I had to do was work on my "people skills." A month after the second meeting, the Pastor, an old friend of mine from college days, told me I needed to meet after Sunday service with this man and another deacon at the gentleman's place of business. I asked

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the pastor what this was about, but he said he didn't know. I went unarmed to this ambush where I was told, "You just aren't the right material for our church, and we think you need to find a new place of service as soon as you can arrange it. Talk to the pastor. He'll help you to understand." It was then I realized that my friend, the pastor, did know the meaning of this mysterious meeting after all, and my fate had already been decided.

The story is a familiar one from there, often rehearsed in the pages of this newsletter, but today I want to draw special attention to these pre-meetings before the ax fell. In the professional business world persons facing possible termination are normally given clear warnings and opportunity to improve their performance before they can be fired. Corporate leaders do this not because they are required to do so, but because it is the ethical way to treat employees. Churches often don't provide such steps, ambushing ministers with a demand for resignation without any warning at all. But this church was led by laymen who worked in the professional world and understood how things were "properly" done, so the Head-Deacon-in-Charge volunteered to "talk" to me about my shortcomings, assuring the pastor that things would be done "right."

I was given mysterious hints and threats, but I still, to this day, do not know exactly who my critics were, or what I did to offend them. Most important of all, it was the man who most wanted me gone who volunteered to "help me" with my "people skills." It is no wonder at all that I received no substantial guidance or genuine help in identifying the real problems to be addressed.

Thinking back to the first luncheon, when he said, "If I decide you aren't good for our church I will hurt you," I strongly suspect he had his mind made up from the beginning, and these talks were not meant to help me, but rather were meant to provide cover fire for the moment when they would ask me to "resign quietly for the sake of the church." If I were faced with such a problem today, I would demand an immediate meeting of the personnel committee. Furthermore, I would remind the pastor, the Head-Deacon-in-Charge, the personnel committee and anyone else who would listen that in the world outside the church people are frequently given the opportunity to know the exact nature of their mistakes and shortcomings so things can be made right. People cannot fix what they do not know to be broken. Long before my first lunch with the Head-Deacon-In Charge I should have had a frank and helpful meeting with the church personnel committee and assistance in healing wounded or broken relationships.

The church's first obligation in event of any offense should always be a serious opportunity for healing and reconciliation. If a church cannot even meet the most rudimentary standards of a worldly business, it is in a sorry state and the dismissed church employee has been morally wronged by an organization that claims to do its work in Jesus' name. My own "wellness retreat" with Ministering to Ministers taught me that it

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is not only "alright," it is a service to the Kingdom of God, in such a situation, for us to speak up for ourselves.

Jim Shoopman

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