

Working Together: Protecting The Precious Elder/Minister Relationship

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This is a guest post by Bryan Dill, the pulpit minister at the [Holly Hill church of Christ](#) in Frankfurt, KY. Bryan recently presented this material at Holly Hill's annual Elder Enrichment seminar, and I'm honored that he agreed to share this with you. Make sure to follow Bryan on Twitter [here](#).

According to Flavil Yeakley, **the average preacher tenure in the United States is 2.2 years**. He also reports that **over 600 ministers leave the ministry every year**. Not 600 leave their congregation - they leave the ministry altogether. I don't know about you, but I think these are staggering numbers.

Now, I certainly understand that there are a number of factors involved in both of these statistics. Preachers retire, they perform poorly and are let go, they realize they aren't cut out for the job, etc. But, in the 15 years that I've been in the ministry (which, granted, isn't exactly a long time), I have repeatedly heard of good, quality men leaving the congregation

where they were working and/or leaving the ministry because of poor relationships with elders. **If we expect the church to thrive in coming years, this is a trend that must be stopped.**

Allow me to emphasize once more that I am no expert in this area. I've been working with elderships for over 10 years, and have been fortunate enough to have quality relationships with all of them. However, I do have a number of friends and acquaintances who are ministers (some with many more years of experience), and in preparing for this study, I invited their input.

To get us started, I think there are two questions that will tell you a lot about your elder/minister relationship. If these two questions aren't answered appropriately, then you are likely to run into many of the problems outlined in the rest of this article. These questions are:

1. **What is an elder to a preacher?**
2. **What is a preacher to an elder?**

The first notion we have to remove from our minds is that this is a boss/employee relationship. If that concept is present at all in your elder/minister relationships, then they are destined to struggle. Elders and ministers are brothers in Christ, first and foremost. They are a team working toward the same goal. But the elders must also understand that they are shepherds to the minister in the same way they are shepherds to the rest of the congregation. They're to guide, nurture, encourage, etc.

Secondly, it's absolutely vital that elders recognize that **the role of the preacher is not limited to *the rest* of the congregation. The man in the pulpit is responsible for preaching and teaching the Word of God to the eldership *just as much* as he is responsible for doing so to the rest of the church.** No true shepherd is above being taught, even by the youngest of ministers.

With these thoughts as our foundation, I want to suggest to you 5 things every elder/minister relationship needs, followed by 5 things that every elder/minister relationship must avoid:

Five Things Every Elder/Minister Relationship Needs:

1. Mutual Respect

We start here because I believe that everything **else is going to hinge on this**. If there is mutual respect, then the rest of these five things are likely to flow more naturally. If there isn't mutual respect, many problems will be created (like the ones outlined following this list). This mutual respect can break down in a number of areas. **If the boss/employee relationship is present, there's a lack of respect. If the elders refuse to consider the minister's input valid & valuable, there's a lack of respect. If the minister shares his ideas, is defeated, yet he refuses to defer to the elders' decision, there's a lack of respect. If the minister refuses the wisdom or council of the elders, there's a lack of respect.** Nothing is more important.

2. Regular, Open Communication

I think a lot of elders and ministers feel as though they communicate well. But, the reality is that they often are ignoring one of the two emphases here. Regular communication doesn't mean a once-a-month meeting for 30 minutes. There needs to be a continuing dialogue between the elders and ministers - whether it's via e-mail, phone calls, texts, or whatever method you prefer - in addition to regularly scheduled meetings. This prevents misunderstandings, and allows everyone to be on the same page. **Open communication means that everyone's comfortable enough to say what he really thinks, without fear of retribution. Again, if there is a lack of respect present, then open communication can't occur because someone's opinion won't be considered valid.**

3. Encouragement

I know I'm not telling you anything you don't already know when I say that elders and ministers deal with a lot of negativity. They field complaints, minister to people in dark times, and are rarely told how great of a job they're doing (outside the obligatory handshake out the door). **So, it's imperative that there be a concerted effort between the minister and elders to encourage each other.** Take the time to send a quick e-mail, text message, or other communication that simply expresses your gratitude for the work they are doing.

4. Prayer

NO relationship is going to be built to last without being built on prayer. We emphasize this regularly to young couples as they prepare for marriage. And it's something that must be a part of the relationship between elders and ministers. **Pray together. Pray for each other. Pray for each other's relationships within the congregation.** Just pray!

5. Annual Evaluations

I know some preachers who have balked at this idea. But this is an opportunity for the kind of communication that needs to exist. **How will the minister ever know if he is doing something well, or needs improvement, if the elders don't take the time to share it with him?** Don't turn this into a shooting gallery, but allow for some discussion of areas that are going well, as well as some focus on areas in need of development. **This also should be a time when the minister can share his thoughts on areas that the elders may need to refine.** No one is above error, so we must understand that this needs to be a **two-way street of honest communication and respect.**

Five Things Every Elder/Minister Relationship *Must Avoid*:

1. Micromanagement

If you don't trust your preacher, then there are bigger issues at hand, and you need to figure out why you don't trust him, and work on ways to resolve this. Ministers don't work 9-5, 40 hours-a-week jobs. In fact, I know very few ministers who work less than 50 hours-a-week. With that in mind, **a minister can't afford to have his time micromanaged.** When specific office hours are required, or weekly reports on the work done are insisted upon, that's micromanagement. If you don't trust your preacher, then there are bigger issues at hand, and you need to figure out why you don't trust him, and work on ways to resolve this. But, micromanaging is never the answer. **Gauging a minister's work is easier than you might think.** How prepared is he for his sermons? How much does it appear he has studied for the Bible class he is teaching? Is he one of the first ones to the hospital, or do you frequently hear people say they never saw him after being in the hospital for 3 days? The bottom line here is that you can trust that a minister is doing what needs to be done "behind the scenes" based on what is seen "on stage."

2. The "Top-Down" Approach

This is a term that I first heard from one of the elders where I currently work. Thankfully, it was not in an effort to describe his approach to being an elder! **Essentially, what this term refers to is when elders make a decision, insist on it being followed to the letter, and won't hear any discussion or conversation that runs counter to their decision.** This approach runs entirely counter to the idea that ministers and elders are a team, working toward a common goal. Rather, it emphasizes the boss/employee relationship that has ruined many ministries.

3. The Deacon Hand-Off

What's the best solution to (1) *a deacon stepping down*, (2) *a deacon not taking care of his responsibilities*, or (3) *a deacon wanting someone to cover his job for a particular day/week/etc.*? Your answer may vary from congregation to congregation. But let me assure you that **the best answer is rarely, if ever, to hand it off to the minister**. As has been discussed, the minister almost always has plenty to fill the time. A constant adding of responsibilities is a good way to burn him out.

4. Humility

... you read that right. Humility. Now, personal, introspective humility is something that could very well be on the other list. **But this is in reference to an eldership that feels the need to "keep the preacher humble."** If your minister has a humility problem, then there are a number of ways to discuss and deal with it. But, paying him less than he deserves, or being close-fisted with his time off are not the answer. **These types of choices don't build humility - they build resentment.**

Consider these questions:

- How long would you stay at a job where you're being paid 20% less than you deserve?
- Also, what does it say about the congregation if it can't survive if the preacher is gone 6-7 weeks out of the year (less than 15% of the year)?

As with most jobs in this world, pay the minister what he is worth based on his education and experience. And allow more time off as his years with the congregation add up - he's earned it.

5. Serving Tables

In Acts 6, the apostles were approached regarding a task that was important (the care of the Hellenist widows). However, this was not a task that the apostles needed to spend their time on, because they were needed elsewhere. **This may have been the most commonly mentioned item when speaking to other ministers. Ministers all over this country are expected to be taking care of tasks on which they shouldn't be spending their time.** Not because the tasks aren't important, or don't need to be done, but because it's not the best use of his time.

Consider what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:14-20. In order for the body of Christ to function at its highest potential, you want to maximize each person's skills. If you hired your

minister, for example, because he's a talented eye, then it makes no sense for you to be asking him to do the job of a foot. The issue here is not that he's better than the foot, or is above the task of a foot, but that it isn't the best way to utilize the eye's talents.

Here are some quick examples from among the many I was given:

- Mowing the grass at the church building
- Handling all of the mail that comes through
- Cleaning the baptistery (even though someone is paid to clean the rest of the building)
- Printing/folding/labeling/mailling bulletins

Again, understand that the issue isn't that a minister is in some way better than these duties, but that they aren't the best use of his skills. There's almost always someone else in the congregation that is capable of serving by taking on these kinds of responsibilities - thus, **freeing up the minister to do what you hopefully hired him for in the first place: ministering to the church and community**. Even if all of these tasks were only taking the minister an hour each week to accomplish, that adds up to essentially a full week of ministry work each year that is missed because he was serving tables. And we know that many ministers are using much more than an hour each week on tasks such as these.

Conclusion

I hope that these thoughts will be taken for what they are: not an indictment of all elders everywhere (I happen to have a great relationship with my elders), but rather what I hope to be some helpful pointers that may make a difference in your congregation, and in the elder/minister relationships you experience moving forward. May God bless us all as we labor in His Kingdom.