



FROM SEMINARY INTO MINISTRY

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IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU: THE BENEFITS OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

[Note: All personal names, geographic locations, and names of churches or other organizations in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of study participants.]

"I think I have a capacity to sort of suss out the atmosphere and determine pretty quickly what's healthy and what's not, and be attentive to what's not and ... address things when they need to be addressed," explains the Rev. Tim Pearson.

What was unhealthy became obvious soon after Pearson became the rector at Christ Episcopal Church in the Rocky Mountain region. A couple of individuals were souring the weekly coffee hour for the whole congregation and effectively driving away newcomers. Dealing with them would be a challenge, but it would teach the recently ordained priest a lot about shared leadership.

Each Sunday the two men complained loudly about how terribly the church was going downhill. They seemed to want the congregation's social hour to become something like *The McLaughlin Group*, Pearson surmises—they wanted people to argue with them, they wanted people to agree with them, but mostly they wanted attention.

"These folks were cornering [new people] as they were arriving and ... putting them on the spot to say essentially, what side are you on? ... Are you a good traditionalist who's going to help keep the church where it's supposed to be, or are you like the rector, one of these progressives who's ... dragging the whole church down and, you know, making the church [go to] hell in a handbasket? So [it was] very clear to me that this was killing our growth potential."

The new rector approached the two men individually, explaining that certain standards of behavior were expected of members of the church. After that, both men refused to speak to him.

"I called them both one day on my cell phone, and one hung up on me, and the other said 'There's nothing to talk about.' So, I knew that I didn't know enough."

Instead of giving up, he reached out to people he trusted in the congregation, asking for their advice. They pointed out a problem with Pearson trying to handle the situation alone: as long as the exchanges between him and the two disgruntled men took place in private, the malcontents—and others in the congregation—could dismiss the conflict as just a personality clash. He needed to involve more of the church community.

"They said, 'It can't just be you and them one-on-one,'" Pearson recalled. "They said, 'You need to have the community—the leadership of the community—own this. And they need to understand what the issues are and then they need to do it.... The leadership of the community needs to help you move this forward, because otherwise it can split your community.'"



Pearson followed his confidants' advice and brought the matter to the church's vestry (governing body of elected lay members). He explained the problem and what was at stake. The members of the vestry were immediately responsive; many of them shared stories of their own frustration with the two men. The group seemed empowered to take action by the fact that he had turned to them.

The vestry decided to send the disgruntled members a firm letter, confirming the church's behavioral expectations and telling them they would need to meet with Pearson before they would be allowed to return to the church. All the members of the vestry signed the letters.

In the end, both men moved to a different church, an outcome that disappointed Pearson. Still, the problem of their acting as a church's unofficial gatekeepers was resolved, and he was pleased that the situation had brought out something new in the vestry.

"I thought that I had the relationship skills initially to work with these two individuals and then they cut off communication, so that was a surprise. I thought that I had the ability to communicate

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clearly the issues to the vestry. ... what really captured my excitement was to see them become excited and to see them see that they had a voice and that they had a role and that they could resolve this on their own."

Before this experience, Pearson's usual approach to a problem was to assess the situation on his own and then recruit a few key people to help him quickly identify the best solution. Now he sees the value in taking the time to sit down and discuss the issue with a lot of different people, really listening to their perspectives.

He says the resolution of the situation at Christ Church changed the way he thinks about conflict: "I learned that there is opportunity in conflict that I hadn't understood before.... perhaps one of the places of greatest potential is where there is conflict. And so I learned not to be afraid of conflict, but I also learned that the church is a place where folks will go an extra mile to walk away from a conflict rather than just be honest and engage it directly."

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