

WHEN YOUR PREACHER LEAVES: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

October, 2009, #39



Jerrie Barber and John Parker



To subscribe to this newsletter: > [Subscribe page](#) .

In this newsletter:

New Elders – New Preacher?

John Newton: *Amazing Grace*

Shakespeare Quotations for Ministers

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books

Smile of the Month

Jerrie and John this Month

New Elders – New Preacher?

by Jerrie Barber

In the August newsletter ([August 2009](#)), I wrote about my practice of resigning after new elders were appointed. This came from observations during my move in 1988. I talked with sixteen congregations. Eight of the sixteen had fired their preachers. In each case of a congregation releasing their preacher, that congregation had appointed new elders in the past two years.



I have observed situations that may bring that about. There are times when the previous elders have been thinking of making a change in preachers. When the new elders are ordained, the experienced elders introduce the subject: “We have been thinking for some time that our preacher is no longer effective. What do you all think?”

Often the response is, “You have been serving longer than we have. If you think that is best, we will go along with that.”

“Fine. Let’s meet with him and let him know. Incidentally, you new elders read better than we do. We will draft a letter, all sign it, and one of you can read it.”

I have talked with some shocked and hurt junior elders who thought that the congregation would remember who signed the letter. I experienced *shocked reader syndrome* more than forty years ago when I read a letter of withdrawal that the elders signed but asked me to read on Sunday morning because, “You read much better than we do.” At the mature age of twenty-two, I was impressed with my elder’s wisdom and discernment of my outstanding talent – until immediately after the closing prayer. I learned that morning that people remember who read much more than who signed the letter.

Sometimes the new elders come with the agenda of changing preachers. They may begin to ask for time charts, more meaningful sermons, and more visitation. After months of “new rules,” the preacher resists, resents, refuses, and quits in frustration or is released because “we want to go in a different direction.”

Another set of circumstances may involve a preacher who has been in the congregation for several years. New elders are appointed. He may have had them in his young married class or even in the teen class. He is older, feels he is more mature, understands the Bible better, and is more aware of how the church can grow. When these men are appointed elders, they become his shepherds and supervisors. If he fails to recognize that and still treats them as “young marrieds” or “one of the boys,” there is a possibility of hurt and resentment on their part.

For these reasons, I like to have an eldership funeral ([March 2008](#)), resign ([August 2009](#)), talk about the new relationship and how we can work together. During times of transition, relationships and expectations change. I find it good to renegotiate.

My friend, James Jones, often said, “What we won’t talk about we will divorce about and divide about.”

John Newton (1725-1807): *Amazing Grace*
William Cowper (-1880): *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*
by John Parker

Olney, on the Ouse River in Northampton, not far from Cambridge, was a small farming and crafts village in the late eighteenth century. As we drive into the market square this Sunday afternoon, we find bustling and cheerful town with two claims. One is the annual pancake race on Shrove Tuesday, when housewives run 415 yards from the market place to the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, each carrying a pan holding a pancake which she flips on crossing the finish line. The other is the vicarage of John Newton, where he wrote perhaps the most popular hymn of all, *Amazing Grace*.



John Newton was born to a master mariner, who was often away, and to his mother, who taught him Bible lessons and Isaac Watts' hymns. But she died when he was six, and after a few years of living with relatives or attending boarding school he began sailing at age eleven with his father.

In time Isaac fell in love with Mary Catlett, daughter of friends of his mother, but in 1744 he was forced to serve on a naval ship. He records that while watching England's coast fade as the ship sailed away he would have killed either himself or the captain except for love of Mary.

Later Isaac managed to join the crew of a slave trade ship, the brutal traffic he so much regretted in later years. This life blotted out his early religious training and led him into bad behavior. Finally, though, when a fierce March storm one night in 1748 threatened to sink his ship, he prayed for the first time in years. For the rest of his life he regarded every March 21 as the anniversary of his conversion. Relapses occurred, but after a serious illness he committed himself to God, returned to England, and married Mary in 1750.

John worked for a while in civil service in the region of Yorkshire. But soon he became popular as a lay preacher, developing friendships with George Whitefield and John Wesley, and began considering the ministry. Although he studied Biblical languages and theology privately, he received ordination in the Church of England only after completing his autobiography *Authentic Narrative* in 1764, an account that caused influential religious leaders to recognize his spiritual commitment. The book was soon translated into several languages.

John's principal sponsor for priesthood, Lord Dartmouth, helped arrange a station in Olney, where he served as curate for sixteen years and lived in the vicarage. His preaching and services to the poor made him popular, so much so that a gallery was added to the church to accommodate the crowds. He preached widely in surrounding parishes as well.

His religious devotion, remarkable personal history, and natural poetic skills gave John the gifts and preparation for writing hymns — especially one great hymn — but he needed a circumstance to prompt him. That came in 1767 when William Cowper moved to Olney. (Continued next month)

Shakespeare Quotations for Ministers, by John Parker

Let still the woman take
An elder than herself; so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband's heart.
TWELFTH NIGHT 2.4
Shakespeare's advice on marriage ages



Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere.
TWELFTH NIGHT 3.1

Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.
TWELFTH NIGHT 3.1

Haply your eye shall light upon some toy
You have desire to purchase, and your store,
I think, is not for idle markets, sir.
TWELFTH NIGHT 3.3

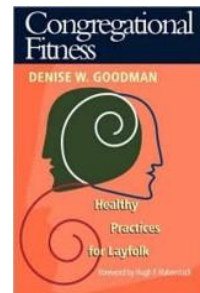
Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

Congregational Fitness, by Denise W. Goodman, Copyright © 2000 by the Alban Institute

Congregations risk destructive conflict when parishioners interpret turning the other cheek to mean keeping silent about hurtful power struggles and manipulative behavior. We risk serious trouble when we focus only on speaking with love and ignore speaking the truth. Mature personal theology requires the tough discipline of keeping constantly in tension justice and humility, love and truth.

Finally, if the church is the place to which we expect to bring our troubles, we should not be shocked when those troubles sometimes surface in congregational conflicts. Sometimes, underlying a congregational dispute are frustrations transported from our jobs, families, or other outside settings. If we feel powerless or victimized at work, we may try to play out that frustration by inappropriately wielding power on a church board or committee. If we are experiencing painful marital problems, we may try to project our anger on the pastor or a visible lay leader. If we are being abused at work or at home, we may be supersensitive and interpret straight talk as a personal attack. We hope that membership and participation in a faith community will ultimately be a transforming experience. But church doors are not like Etch-a-Sketch slates, automatically erasing all our human flaws when we walk through them (pages 8, 9).

Similarly, parishioners should be held accountable. The best way we can hold each other accountable is to avoid participating in “triangulation” – the increasingly popular buzz word for simply talking about a person rather than to him or her. It is Ken talking to Brenda about a problem Ken has with Bruce. At best, even if the information is communicated correctly, the person being talked about feels frustrated, if not betrayed. That person cannot respond if he or she is not directly confronted. At worst, triangulating can turn into backstabbing. When people can avoid being held accountable for what they say, some may be tempted to stretch the truth, exaggerate it, or simply lie. Bystander Brenda can encourage healthy behavior by saying to Ken, “I really think you should talk this over directly with Bruce. That’s the only way you two are going to straighten this



out.” In a healthy congregation, bystanders refuse to be drawn into such triangles. When Dick says to Martin, “You can tell the pastor that some people are really upset with her sermon on Sunday,” Martin should reply, “Dick, you need to tell the pastor yourself. And be careful about using that term ‘some people.’ Speak for yourself and encourage others who are upset to do the same.”

Healthy congregations refuse to deal with anonymous complaints or allegations, whether they are directed at clergy or parishioners. Of course, the most insidious form of this practice is the unsigned letter. But it is also important to resist listening to, without clarification, statements such as “A lot of people were upset with that sermon,” or “Some people think the Sunday school curriculum is inadequate.” Those who make such statements should be asked to name or at least number the complainants. Is “a lot” five or 50? Is “some” a dozen or only my best friend and I (pages 37, 38)?

The no-talk rule is based on several assumptions.

1. If we do not talk about it, it will go away.
2. If we do not talk about it, we can keep the peace.
3. If we do not talk about it, we will not upset anyone.

All of those assumptions are wrong. *It* will not go away. Whatever it is may seem to fade for a while, but in its dormant stage it will probably fester. The issue may seem to disappear, but the anger and frustration nourished by refusing to talk about it will almost certainly surface again somewhere – maybe a year or two later around another issue. When those emotions do surface, chances are that they will be even more intense than the feelings evoked by the original issue or problem (page 50).

The “no-talk” rule is really misnamed. More accurately, it is a no-talk-in-official-circles rule. It means that talking about uncomfortable issues or problems at church council, vestry, session, deacons, trustees, or congregational meetings is taboo. Instead, the “talk” is on the unofficial fringes – on the phone, in the parking lot, in the supermarket aisle, or in private coffee klatches. In fact, the so-called no-talk rule usually increases this kind of informal, unofficial talk. Whenever parishioners are feeling unease, anxiety, and frustration, they are going to talk – but only to those within their small circles with whom they feel safe. And it is likely that the talk will become increasingly exaggerated and inaccurate. But because talk at official meetings is discouraged, there is no arena where exaggerations, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or flat-out lies can be corrected, and there is no means to communicate the corrections to the congregation. Too often, the no-talk rule not only fails to ensure peace but also makes the initial problem worse. By the time the fringe talk has circulated in those telephone, parking-lot, or store-aisle conversations, the initial problem likely has become much more complicated and serious.

Sooner or later the resulting unease interferes with our ability to be spiritually nourished in worship. Several parishioners in one congregation said they were so anxious about the church’s survival that they were distracted and seldom were able to focus on prayer or hear much of the sermon. In another, several members spent most of the worship time checking out or thinking about who was speaking to whom (pages 51, 52).

It is not easy to discern the important difference between the nitpickers, over-reactors, and inflexible cranks, on the one hand, and those voicing legitimate, responsible concerns. In a no-talk congregation, it is even more difficult. Accurate discernment will be much more likely in congregations that encourage questions and responses rather than stifling them (page 53).

The premature suggestion that it is time to forgive and forget ignores the need for repentance. While individuals can forgive, regardless of the behavior of the ones who harmed them, and heal personally, repentance is often a critical factor in congregational healing. As Halstead points out, forgiveness cannot be forced or demanded. Without repentance, the advice to forgive is “glib,” he says, and grows out of a control-based paradigm. “Failure to accept responsibility and to confess group sin can lead to blaming the ‘unforgiving’ victim....Trying to forgive and forget often prevents our healing enough to truly forgive and forget,” he warns. Too often, those who urge forgiveness and forgetting are not ready to acknowledge their roles in the conflict and hope that what they did will be forgotten without their having to make amends or offer apologies.

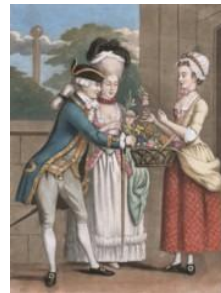
Halstead likens this situation to wounds that “must be cleaned, painful though that may be, or they will heal incompletely, become infected, and lead to more acute pain and peril later. If an emotional wound is covered over too quickly without being cleaned out thoroughly by grief work, infection will set in and lead to bitterness, depression, physical disease, violence, or other relational problems” (pages 60, 62).

Smile of the Month

One day I approached a building entrance behind a gray-haired, distinguished-looking man. A young woman arrived at the same time and he held the door open for her.

She said, “Don’t hold the door for me just because I’m a lady.”

The man was silent for a moment, then said, “I didn’t open the door because you are a lady. I opened it because I’m a gentleman” (*Reader’s Digest*, March, 1982, page 79).



Barber Clippings

The search continues at Hendersonville. For a good preacher who wants a challenging and rewarding work, I would highly recommend the Hendersonville congregation. Interested candidates please send resumes and credentials confidentially to hcocresumes@yahoo.com.

I held a meeting last month at Walnut Street in Dickson, Tennessee, and this month I am at the Beech Hill congregation in Ripley Mississippi. I would be available for a workshop or meeting the week of November 15.

Jerrie Barber
jerrie@barberclippings.com
www.barberclippings.com
<http://barberclippings.blogspot.com/>
(615) 356-8371
756 Woodland Way
Nashville, Tennessee 37209-5207
Church phone: (615) 824-6622
Cell phone: (615) 584-0512

John Parker

Jill and I have completed our fifth month of interim ministry at the Fairview Church of Christ. The congregation is now accepting applications for their position of full-time minister. This is a fine church just west of Nashville with a long history of sound service.

I have had three book presentations for ABIDE WITH ME: A PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY THROUGH GREAT BRITISH HYMNS by Irish photographer Paul Seawright and myself: at the Gospel Advocate, at the Granny White church, and at Lipscomb University. Others are scheduled as follows:

October 12 and 15 at the Hillsboro congregation in Nashville

November 14 11:00-1:00 at homecoming at Freed-Hardeman University near Athletic Center

November 20 9:00-2:00 at the Lipscomb Arts and Crafts fair at Avalon at Lipscomb University (I will be there personally until 11:00)

November 20 at noon at Cokesbury bookstore in Nashville

November 30 at 7:00 p.m. at Davis-Kidd bookstore in Green Hills Mall in Nashville with Ray Walker

Mike Fernandez, director of theater at Lipscomb University, and I continue to work on a video on Shakespeare for Christian high school students.

John H. Parker
Johnparker22@comcast.net
www.interimcofc.com
(615) 373-4462

To subscribe to this newsletter: > [Subscribe page](#) .