

Non-Anxious Leadership

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Late on a Friday night, John H. was arrested for drunk driving. He blew twice the legal limit. By Saturday morning, the arrest was reported on local news outlets and immediately went to Facebook and email and text messages.

And then the Center Hill Church began to implode. For seven years, John H. had preached for CHC. He was charismatic, well-spoken, and highly-respected. Everybody in the congregation—from teens to singles to young parents to golden-agers—loved John. The church had doubled in size under his leadership.

And now this.

By Saturday afternoon, the elders were bombarded by phone calls from anxious church members. Some were angry, demanding John be fired (if not drawn and quartered during Sunday's worship!). Others were worried sick about the dire impact of John's arrest on the church—"We'll lose half our members!" Still others called to report conversations with heart-broken teens or deeply-disappointed friends.

Saturday night, the elders held an emergency meeting. John H. was asked to attend, but, still reeling from events and the reactions of his wife and children, declined. As one of the elders closed the conference-room door, he quipped, "It happened Friday, but Sunday's comin'." None of his peers thought the comment was very funny. Tomorrow morning—by any measure—would be awful.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Crises and the Anxieties They Provoke

Every church teeters on the brink of anxiety-inducing events that can tear it apart.

- A church leader is caught in an affair.
- A deacon embezzles funds.
- Theological tensions within the congregation erupt into open discord.
- A financial crisis finally forces a congregation to face the reality that, without radical transformation, its days are numbered.
- A popular preacher resigns or is fired.

- Two teens in the youth group are killed in a car wreck.

Church leaders delude themselves if they believe their churches are immune to such forces. Stability in the past is no guarantee of stability in the future. The future is ripe with looming crises. A traumatic and church-threatening event may not occur in your congregation tomorrow or next week. But it will occur eventually . . . in every church . . . and it can happen at any time.

However, it is not this *potential* for crisis that most threatens the health of churches. It is, rather, how crisis is *handled*. Certainly, handling the crisis itself—circumstances and consequences and communication—is a primary leadership task when churches are threatened. But it is also critical (and equally important) for leaders to handle *anxious members*.

The future is ripe with looming crises.

Inevitably, some church members will react anxiously to threatening events. They will allow their anxieties to determine the shape and strength of their reactions. And they will attempt—consciously or not—to infect others with their anxiety.

- “We’ve got to make a decision right now!”
- “This is black and white...clear as the nose on your face . . . why can’t you see that?”
- “I’ve talked to several people who are thinking of leaving!”
- “This is awful . . . how could you let it happen?”
- “We don’t have any choice in the matter!”
- “Stop debating and DO something!”

Anxious members say all manner of things to each other and to church leaders in times of crisis. We cannot regulate how they react or what words they use or the tone of their voices. We cannot prevent their anger or confusion or desperation or lack of faith. We cannot script their lines to ensure less reactionary, more reasoned conversations.

As leaders, we must regulate ourselves, control our own reactions, and refuse to allow anxious members to contaminate us with their anxiety.

What we can do, as leaders, is regulate *ourselves*, control our own reactions, and refuse to allow anxious members to contaminate us with their anxiety.

Anxiety is the mother of all manner of sin. It gives people permission to:

- Speak immoderately, make demands, announce ultimatums
- Over-simplify complicated situations to clarify a course of action
- Eliminate legitimate options, narrow the range of choices, cut off discussion
- Sink into paralysis (or, alternatively, feel justified in behaving rashly)

- Place pragmatics above principles, practicalities over ideals
- Feel out of control (or justify ever-greater levels of control)
- Avoid and evade conflict . . . placate rather than resolve.

When church members act in these ways, it is lamentable (for it is not Christ-like). But when anxious members persuade *church leaders* to act in these ways, it is tragic.

Peter Steinke (in his pivotal book *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*) champions the virtues of non-anxious leadership. This little book is a “must read” for anyone called to be a church leader in these present, anxiety-prone days.

Because leaders love their congregations, they are vulnerable to the same anxieties that can overwhelm church members . . . perhaps more so, because they care so much. But because church leaders care about their churches, Steinke says they must choose to be less anxious than the people they serve . . . or, at least, less controlled by their anxiety. It is precisely in anxious times that church leaders must avoid anxious behavior, if they are to lead their churches to healthier and more productive futures.

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How can we do that . . .practically speaking? By making two leadership commitments during troubled times: to be *present* and to be *differentiated*. And by incorporating related disciplines that permit leaders to rise “above themselves” when their church faces hardships.

The Present Leader

When it comes to congregational leadership—especially in anxious times—*showing up* is half the battle.

Leaders should never underestimate the power of *presence*. In difficult times, church members don’t need their leaders to be charismatic, eloquent, brilliant, and wise. They do need them to be *present*, to be accessible and approachable, to be visible whatever the circumstances.

But *presence* can be difficult when the sky starts to fall. Just *showing up* can be a challenge for church leaders.

In anxious times:

- Leaders can be nervous about being around anxious church members, fearful of awkwardness or uncomfortable with expressions of raw emotion.
- Some leaders are so conflict-averse, they won’t risk interactions where confrontation is a possibility.

- Leaders may lack a sense of *permission* to step into tensions because they don't want to intrude or don't have a pre-existing and profound personal relationship or haven't embraced their God-given spiritual authority.
- Leaders assume members want answers and solutions. Lacking those, leaders can avoid members and—thus— deprive them of the one thing they need most: assurance, touch, engagement.
- Leaders often go into *crisis mode*, meeting behind closed doors and engaging in secret discussions with other leaders...effectively absenting themselves at the very time the church most needs to see their faces and feel their touch.

And so, for many leaders, simple *presence* in anxious times must be *intentional*. Here are some “presence rules” for you to consider:

- *It is always better for a leader to show up than to stay away.* If you're going to make a mistake, make it in the direction of presence rather than absence.
- *Come early and stay late.* During difficult days for the church as a whole, determine to be at every assembly of the church, positioned where people can “get at you”—the foyer, the back of the auditorium, and/or the door of the classroom.
- *Don't schedule leader meetings around church gathering times.* Yes, it's more convenient for leaders to meet during class time on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. And, yes, traumatic times call for more frequent meetings—there are only so many nights in a week! But leaders need to be available to members, not hidden away in an office or meeting room.
- *Run towards the tension.* Whenever you find yourself (as a leader) reaching for reasons to stay away or evade or escape, recognize those reasons are probably rooted in your personal anxieties rather than your leadership instincts. Fight the temptation to avoid the difficult.
- *Set and protect boundaries.* Working with anxious members does not mean offering yourself as a sacrificial lamb to a member's irascibility. There are boundaries to behaviors you can and should insist upon. Anxious members might require extra patience. But they do not need *carte blanche* to behave in ungodly and hurtful ways.

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Presence is necessary. Presence is foundational. Presence is powerful. Without presence, there is no leadership—especially when times are tough.

The Differentiated Leader

First, leaders throw themselves into stormy waters (with a commitment to *presence*). But then they must find a way to keep their heads above the waves.

When you are surrounded by anxious members and the temperature of the room keeps rising, when demands and ultimatums come thick and fast, when people all around you are using immoderate words and strident tones, what is a good leader to do?

Many things, no doubt. But they all begin with a commitment to practice *differentiation*.

“Differentiation” is the ability to:

- Balance the tension between being an individual (“I can do what I want without reference to others”) and being a member of a group (“I must do what the group wants without reference to me”).
- Value both the “self” and the “group” by serving others without becoming lost in them.
- Embrace our God-given role as *leaders* and recognize that role must inform the way we see ourselves and the group ...how we respond personally and interact with the group.
- Manage our emotional lives by a core *within* ourselves (character, principles, core values) rather than surrender our emotional lives to outside forces.
- Take responsibility for regulating ourselves for the greater good of the group.

It is one thing to belong to a group (like a church) . . . to be committed to a group . . . to feel responsibility for a group. It is another thing entirely to be *consumed* by the group . . . *meld* with the group . . . act *co-dependently* with the group. Faithful leadership of a church doesn’t mean you drink the Kool-Aid, surrendering your “self” in order to adopt a “herd mentality.” In fact, *faithful* leadership requires you *not* imbibe, actively resist “groupthink,” refuse to surrender your values and principles to the group, and remain true to yourself even as you try to interact with and lead others. Godly leaders don’t allow themselves to identify so closely with the church and its anxieties that, in the end, the church and its anxieties identify them.

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There is a fine balance between maintaining your sense of membership and your sense of self. Too much *separation* from church members and you will cease to be trusted and followed by them. (Remember the power of presence.) But too much *fusion* with the group and you will cease to listen to your own inner voice and better angels. Keeping a balance between presence and co-dependency defines *differentiation*.

Here are some “differentiation guidelines” for you to consider:

- *Remember who you are.* Differentiated leaders know themselves, what they believe and value. These *identity convictions* do not change with time or circumstances or the anxieties of others. Being “true to yourself” is a hallmark of non-anxious leaders.
- *Remember whose you are.* Differentiated church leaders are even more committed to Christ than to the churches they serve. Especially in times of crisis, church members can lose their way and advocate the most graceless solutions. Keeping and modeling “the mind of Christ” is the essence of godly, non-anxious leadership.
- *Monitor your personal anxieties.* Keep a finger on your emotional pulse. Recognize that even the best leaders grow weary and angry and frustrated and impatient. Anxious leadership springs from such emotions. It may not be possible to avoid such feelings. But it is possible not to give in to them.
- *Monitor the anxieties of others.* Keep a finger on the pulse of members—especially as they interact with you. Behind the words members speak and the actions they take is a mix of emotions and motives and back-stories. Listen for the anxiety, not just the words—and then be willing to rise above it.
- *Don’t take things so personally.* Effective leaders do not allow themselves to be defined by the problems they face...or the accusations and blame of the people they lead. When leaders identify too closely with the difficulties they are navigating, anxious leadership is only a heartbeat away.
- *Memorize Rudyard Kipling’s poem IF.* “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you . . .” (I wonder if Kipling ever led a church?)
- *Always keep the end in mind.* As a church leader, you are the guardian of your church’s character and future. Remember where you and the church are going. Remember the kind of church Jesus calls you to build. Never sacrifice the goal for the sake of expediency. Never make decisions for the short-term that jeopardize the long-term health and mission of the church. Keep in mind the question, “What kind of church will we be tomorrow if we act this way today?”

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The Rest of the Story

Sunday morning proved to be as difficult as expected . . . but not as disastrous.

The elders met early that morning to pray and promise solidarity with each other. Clearly they weren’t ready to make a decision to resolve the situation (though the temptation of a quick and clean solution was strong, considering how uncertainty can affect many members). They were determined not to abandon John H. (they hoped there might be a way to redeem the situation), even though they knew this hope would upset some members and appear as “dithering.” Most of all, they longed to transform a situation that threatened the church and shamed the cause of Christ into an opportunity for greater unity in the congregation and stronger witness to the community.

But reaching for such a solution would require time . . . and unity among church leaders. There could be no panic among this group, no haste. There could be no breaking ranks. As the assembly hour approached, these tired, burdened men looked around at each other, asking “Are we together in this?” with their eyes, each elder nodding his commitment to the others.

One of them handed out copies of a written statement to be read during the worship hour. In it were bullet points to guide their individual conversations with members that morning and in the days ahead:

Friday night, John H.—our Pastor—was arrested for drunk driving. Most of us have heard the news. All of us are affected by it. In the days ahead, there will be discussions and decisions that will impact the future of our congregation—for better or worse. May God shape those discussions and guide our decisions.

We love John H., his family, and the Center Hill Church. The events of this weekend are heartbreaking. But it is for times like these that God has called his church to be godly. As your shepherds, we are committed to navigating these stormy waters in a Christ-like manner.

We ask four things of the members of our church family:

- 1. Please be praying. Beg for God’s guidance, forgiveness, and healing. Pray for John H. and his family. Pray for our church. Pray for us.*
- 2. Give us time. We will not make a hasty decision about something so important to this church and to the life and ministry of our brother John. We have listening to do...talking...discernment. All this takes time.*
- 3. Talk to us. We want to know how you are feeling, what you are thinking, and which course of action you believe we should take. We will be calling on you in the days ahead to hear what you have to say.*
- 4. Guard your tongues. Guard your hearts. What happened Friday night was sinful. But what happens now, as we react or respond, can be just as sinful. We encourage you to conduct yourselves by Paul’s command to the Ephesians: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”*

May God bless and guide us in the days ahead.

Again, they looked around at each other, taking a silent poll. Looking at his watch, one of their number announced, “We need to be in the foyer.” Pause for a deep breath . . . pause for silent

prayer. And then the group walked out of the conference room together, ready to meet their people—with all their questions and worries and messy emotions—in a united, non-anxious way.