

HOW TO SURVIVE WORKING IN A LOCAL CHURCH

The Church is the only enterprise that is guaranteed devilish opposition. When Jesus said, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18), He wasn't saying that the gates of hell wouldn't try to overcome the Church. He was promising that their efforts would be unsuccessful. Working for a church, therefore, is unique, different than any other occupation or job.

If you are working for a church, whether as a pastor, paid staff or volunteer worker, keep the following in mind as you serve.

I. Introduction -- Jesus is our model.

- A. Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:32-43)
1. Jesus was killed by crucifixion, the most agonizing means of execution ever devised. Stay focused on your individual purpose no matter how difficult thing may become in your local church.
 2. He hung naked before family, friends, followers and enemies. Stay focused on the lost and hurting no matter how badly you are hurting.
 3. He continued to minister to the criminals crucified with him. Find ways to be generous in times when everything in you may want to quit or curtail your efforts for the Lord.

Below is a simple self-assessment exercise you can give yourself. The higher your score, the more the likelihood that you *may* need to focus on making Jesus' leadership model your own.

Jesus as Model self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I regularly identify one aspect of Jesus' character and work, with the Spirit's help, to make that part of my life or behavior _____.
2. I choose to give even if no one gives to me _____.
3. I ask "What would Jesus do?" and then try to do it _____.
4. I accept it when I am misunderstood or misrepresented by brothers and sisters when I try to do good _____.

TOTAL SCORE _____

II. Don't be idealistic.

A. Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the people, and Saul's officers as well. When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David. The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice (1 Samuel 18:5-11).

1. Sometimes not everyone treats your success and best intentions with joy. Even servants of God can fall victim to jealousy and insecurity. David learned more from Saul than from anyone else about leadership—David learned how **not** to do it!
2. Entrust your reputation and future to the Lord. He is both your protector and provider. If you are the chief leader, work to promote your people and not yourself.
3. Realize that God allows things like the above passage to help form you and assist you in developing your own ministry philosophy. You will learn firsthand what **not** to do in the future when you have a position of leadership and authority.

B. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4:7-10).

1. Serving the Lord in a church setting is no guarantee of good things that will happen to you.
2. I have consistently underestimated how earthen my “jar of clay” is. I am far from perfect and so are the people with whom I serve. I must not be idealistic and always expect mercy and grace, even though that is the goal and ideal. But I must always give those things when it is within my power to do so.
3. Paul’s ministry led him to difficult, even life-threatening situations. Yours may as well.

C. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man (John 2:24-25).

1. Jesus was able to make man His focus without entrusting Himself to man for His self esteem or identity.
2. Put your trust in God and not in your leadership or coworkers. Yet don’t be aloof or superior. Just recognize that God is your source and strength.
3. Don’t expect to get from man what you can only get from God.

Below is a simple self-assessment that you can go through. The higher the score, the less there is the chance that you are idealistic where church work and church people are concerned.

Idealism self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I can work well when not thanked or recognized _____.
 2. My focus when I work or volunteer is serving God and not others _____.
 3. I am not surprised when I encounter non-Christian behavior from a Christian worker or leader _____.
 4. I am not (or would not be) offended when I see a spiritual leader's family misbehave _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____

III. Don’t be bitter.

- A. But an evil spirit from the LORD came upon Saul as he was sitting in his house with his spear in his hand. While David was playing the harp, Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear, but David eluded him as Saul drove the spear into the wall. That night David made good his escape (1 Samuel 19:9-10).
1. There are dysfunctional aspects to every organization and church. In ministry, you will see things that may surprise you.
 2. Why would the Bible consistently tell us to forgive and forbear if we weren't going to need constant reminders due to the reality of relationships?
 3. Sometimes great leaders, heroes of the faith and trustee boards are less than perfect. The closer we get to them, the more we can see their "wrinkles" and imperfections.
- B. Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Hebrews 12:14-15).
1. Again I ask why the Bible would give us this exhortation unless we were going to need it?
 2. Do not get bitter, even if you have the facts on your side.
 3. Living in peace takes effort and holiness; bitterness always affects more than the parties involved. Always operate in the best interests of the church even if that is against your own best interests.

Below is a simple self-assessment to help you determine if you are struggling with bitterness. The higher the score, the *less* the chance that you have unresolved bitterness about some aspect of your church past.

Bitterness self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I seldom think about a past experience in a church where I was hurt or disappointed _____.
 2. I talk well of the last church I was in (or this one if this is the only church you've ever been part of) _____.
 3. I choose to confront an offense from someone in leadership rather than overlook or rationalize it _____.
 4. I don't mind doing for less (or free) what I know others get paid more to do in the church _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____

IV. Don't be independent.

- A. 1 Samuel 24 (read this on your own; it is too long to include)
1. David's men in the cave counseled him that, since these circumstances were from the Lord, he should kill Saul once and for all. He refused because Saul was God's anointed. He rejected their perspective of reality and rather chose to walk by higher principles and trust God.
 2. No matter how correct you are, do not usurp or undermine the authority that exists. God will deal with the authority. If you are the authority, realize that you aren't perfect or infallible. Be open to input.
 3. If worse comes to worse, walk away from the situation and do not start a church anywhere near where you have just ministered. That is a breach of biblical ethics.
- B. Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).
1. Obedience and submission are two distinct entities. You may have to disobey an order that conflicts with your conscience. But you must always submit. If you choose to disobey, then submit to the consequences with patience and longsuffering.
 2. Obey your leaders not because you trust them but because you trust God.
 3. Do not take matters into your own hands and work up a following or rebellion, even when the leadership has lost its edge or acts in a less-than-perfect manner.

Below is a simple self-assessment to help you determine your level of independence in spiritual matters and how well you relate to authority. The higher your score, the less the possibility that you may be walking in some measure of independence that could be harmful.

Independence self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I say positive things about Christian leaders with whom I don't agree theologically _____.
2. I pray for my pastor and other leaders regularly _____.
3. I try to make my pastor's job easier by encouraging him (or her) or doing my job and obeying the Lord _____.

4. There is at least one spiritual leader or person who speaks directly into my life _____.
TOTAL SCORE _____

V. Be encouraged.

- A. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).
1. You are dead. If something hurts, then you aren't dead.
 2. If something gets to you, it first passed through Christ, since you are now "in Him." You need to maintain your perspective that God is in control.
 3. God will eventually set all things straight. But don't be too quick to call for judgment if you've been wronged. Cry for mercy, for if God judges, you will be judged as well. And who can stand before that!
- B. David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God (1 Samuel 30:6).
1. When there is no one to encourage you, learn to encourage yourself.
 2. There are times even when you have served or led well in the past, that people will criticize you and your work. They did the same to Jesus.
 3. In ministry, there is only one source of consistent strength and that is God.

Below is a simple self-assessment to help you understand your propensity toward encouragement and discouragement. The higher your score, the greater your ability to stay encouraged in the midst of discouraging circumstances.

Encouragement/discouragement self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I have a regular devotional and quiet time _____.
 2. I keep a journal _____.
 3. I keep a list of past successes and recoveries I've had to help me through tough times. _____.
 4. I thank God daily for His help and grace _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____

VI. Be holy.

- A. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Colossians 3:5-11).
1. Be holy. But notice that you are to be holy not only in sexual matters, but also in matters of the heart. Don't hide heart sin and conform to external holiness only. Anger, malice, slander, and lying are also serious sins that you need to deal with if you are going to survive working in the ministry.
 2. I have known of churches that were pure externally but they were downright mean people. This is unacceptable to God.
 3. Do not make distinctions according to ethnic origin or sex. Recognize everyone's worth and make room for everyone's purpose, regardless of whether they fit your model or paradigm for ministry.

Below is a simple self-assessment to indicate your propensity toward holiness. The higher your score, the less the chance that sin may be ruling in your life.

Holiness self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I think sin is sin; I think I can't commit any small sins _____.
 2. I'm not surprised when I stumble or sin _____.
 3. I am quick to ask forgiveness when I make a mistake or offend _____.
 4. I seek feedback from others concerning my spiritual walk or condition _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____

VII. Be forgiving.

- A. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these

virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:12-16)

1. This was discussed above but it bears repeating. Things will happen to you that you will struggle with, even when you work in a church. You will be disappointed, hurt and sometimes frustrated. Walk in the power of forgiveness.
2. Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling.
3. This does not mean you should just keep quiet about injustice or misunderstandings. But if they are not resolved to your satisfaction, you have no choice but to walk in forgiveness.

Below is a simple self-assessment to determine how easily you tend to be merciful and forgiving. The higher you score, the less the tendency you may have toward unforgiveness.

Mercy/forgiveness self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. In my heart, I say "I forgive you" when a negative situation involving someone from my past comes to mind _____.
 2. I confess my sins to God on a regular basis _____.
 3. I would rather be reconciled with others right or correct _____.
 4. I give mercy because I need mercy myself _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____

VIII. Be diligent.

- A. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism (Col 3:17, 23-25).
 1. Don't ever let the quality of your work suffer, whether you are a volunteer or paid. You are working for God and He deserves the very best.
 2. If you cannot do your best for whatever reason, then release the ministry to someone else.

3. God is watching, whether anyone else is or not. Don't do what you do for money, but don't hesitate to talk about money as well. Don't let your family suffer just because you are in the ministry.

B. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58)

1. Remind yourself that God will reward all your labors, if not in this life then in the next.
2. When Paul writes to let nothing move you, it indicates that things will try to move you. Don't let them.
3. Do not give anything less than 100% of your efforts to God's work. Do your best and pray that God will help you do better!

Below is a simple self-assessment to help you determine if you are diligent. The higher your score, the greater the possibility that you are diligent in completing tasks and seeking new assignments.

Mercy/forgiveness self-assessment (answer 3 for usually, 2 for sometimes, 1 for seldom)

1. I finish projects or jobs I start _____.
 2. I follow through on promises I make _____.
 3. People would say I stand for excellence _____.
 4. I sometimes spend my own money to finish my work, whether volunteer or paid _____.
- TOTAL SCORE _____
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Total Scores

1. Jesus as model _____
2. Idealism _____
3. Bitterness _____
4. Independence _____
5. Stay encouraged _____
6. Holiness _____
7. Merciful and forgiving _____
8. Diligence _____

(Remember: the lower the score, the greater the *possibility* that you *may* have some work to do in that particular area)

TOTAL SCORE FOR ALL EIGHT AREAS _____

Questions to ask yourself

1. Are you pleased with your overall score? (96 is the highest, 32 is the lowest possible)
2. What was your biggest surprise?
3. What action(s) will you take as a result of reading this article and taking these assessments?