

“How to Run a Presbyterian Church: What We Didn’t Learn in Seminary”

Some Tools and Tips by Bob Sheldon

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Why to Use These Resources

“I wouldn’t have your job!” One day Jim invited me to lunch. His primary purpose was to tell me that he was disappointed with how I was “running the church.” Jim owned the local bank, was a long-time member, and had been on the Pastor Nominating Committee that brought me to their church, so I felt his motives were basically more helpful than hurtful. I looked across the table and said simply: “Then help me, Jim. What would you do differently?” Being an accomplished executive, he had a whole list of suggestions! He began with a plan that would work really well—if you own the company, and everyone does what you tell them because you can fire them if they don’t. I affirmed his suggestions, and asked how he would do them with a group of volunteers who generally do what they choose—because, as a pastor, I have no real authority over them. “Oh,” Jim said, “good point.” He went on to begin another suggestion, only to stop in the middle and say, “no, that won’t work, either.” After two or three of these false starts, Jim stopped and exclaimed, “Damn! I wouldn’t have your job!” We went on to have a delightful lunch exploring the dynamics of leading an organization of people who choose to volunteer their time, talents, and contributions for an organization they value, because of—and sometimes in spite of—who is the pastor at the time.

The church is a business—and it isn’t. We all have heard some version of these expressions: “the church *is* a business” or “the church *is not* a business.” They’re both right! In some cases, the church wants to learn from business and its entrepreneurial efforts of reaching and expanding, as well as developing best practices for the organizational portions of the church. At the same time, the analogy breaks down when we try to apply it to leadership. Business is hierarchical, in which people are accountable to their bosses because their jobs literally depend on it. The church is completely different. People work in the church because they choose to serve, because they sense a call from God, because they gain a sense of meaning and purpose from their service. Leaders in the church, especially pastors, have to remember that no one *has* to work in the church. They choose to work for many reasons—but they rarely work because you order them.

Church people sometimes do unhelpful things—because they’re people. We pastors often forget that church people are first and foremost “people.” We often assume—at our peril—that all church people are “nice,” that they all have pure, altruistic motives for coming and serving God. In some cases, this is true. Thanks be to God for these people! At the same time, many—some would say most—of the people are here for a mixture of motives, some altruistic and some deeply and darkly selfish. All organizations must deal with these realities—including the church.

The only power you have is you. Serving a volunteer organization means that you have the enviable—and, at the same time, aggravating—job to motivate people without any real authority

over them. Your personal influence, combined with a shared vision for your church, is all you have to bring people together, to encourage them to fulfill God's deepest desires for your community and our world. This is our call. This is our calling. This is the reason we go to work every day.

Our ultimate “job” is the building up of the Body of Christ. I was fortunate to meet the Rev. Dr. Findley Edge early in my ministry. In fact, he officiated at our wedding over forty years ago. He also developed a strategy for empowering lay members to perform based on Ephesians 4:11-13: “(God) granted that some are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” It brings our calling together with our day-to-day service into the light of what God is doing—or trying to do—in this world. With God, we begin where people are—wherever they are—and help them to move forward in faith and action, in personal piety and kindness, in mercy and justice for others, as well as themselves. We lead honestly and caringly, loving them enough to tell them the truth in love, all while providing a structure and format for moving forward together. We have to begin somewhere—so let's begin here!

Building up people requires lots of thought and lots of planning. Let's be honest: you have more important things to do than create the documents included here. There are so many responsibilities on your plate these days that you're not sure how you will get them all accomplished—and sometimes things fall off your plate and roll under the table. But you almost always get the “big stuff” done on time. That's exactly why I took on this project to compile and refine these materials for you. These resources are designed to save you time and energy in two areas:

1. **Planning your work.** Most church projects take at least nine months to plan and implement, so these resources give you a jump on your planning phase. There's more information on good planning practices in the *How to Encourage Good Committees* section. By reading these resources, and adapting them to your situation, you can save several months of work. You're welcome!
2. **Empowering and encouraging your people.** We all know that people learn better when they have written materials included in their process, so these resources are designed to be orientation packets for your leaders and members. Simply make the appropriate revisions (church name, committee name, dates, etc.), and email them/hand them out when you are enlisting leaders and/or orienting the group. They will help your members to feel more comfortable—and make you look good!

You are the people of God—so go out and act like it! This saying began as a children's sermon, and became the first line in all my benedictions. It helps me—and hopefully my members—to remember that everything we do has its beginning in God's infinite love and eternal plan, and that we are simply living out God's love in our daily actions. My hope is that these resources will support your ministry, and save you some time to do other more important things. My prayer for you personally is that you will be reminded and rekindled in your gratitude for God's many blessings, and that you will always remember that you are not in this ministry

alone, that there is a whole “cloud of witnesses” who are ready, willing, and able to walk with you. Let us know how we can help you along the way.

We're all in this together,

Bob Sheldon