

Chapter 6

The Other Minor But Unavoidable Obligations

A medical doctor can slice and/or dose his patients and be done with them, except for collecting the bill. A lawyer can draw a will or sue. A teacher can bore his classes three or four hours a day and spend his evenings with a pipe and a detective story. We live in the time of the specialist. The daily routine of most business and professional men is more or less the same. Their activities are related to a field of endeavor which they have mastered because nearly anyone can master a certain task, if he performs it often enough and is not distracted by duties of a different nature and calling for another set of skills.

Not so the preacher. He is supposed to be an orator, administrator, business manager, psychologist, school superintendent, scholar, community leader, fund raiser, teacher, after-dinner speaker and master of ceremonies, to name a few of the trades in which he needs some degree of proficiency.

No one, of course, is going to shine at all these things; and it is not necessary that you should. Recent research has shown us that 93.786 per cent of those men who do become bishops are not especially good at any single pastoral skill, but are passably-capable in all of them. What you need to do, as you prepare yourself in the early days of your career for eventual membership in the select circle of the ecclesiastical elite, is to learn how to discharge the miscellaneous duties of the ministry so that you will be recognized as

competent, but without letting them consume any considerable portion of your time or energy.

Among those duties, which you will be expected to perform satisfactorily, are a group which are of a minor nature, but each of which some of your good people think is your major task.

How To Live With The Sunday School

Every church, as you know, has attached to it a number of subsidiary organizations. Most important of these is the Sunday School. While the church has been going now for some two thousand years, the Sunday School has been around only about two hundred years. Amazingly, in those two hundred years it has nearly caught up with the church in size, organizational loyalty, and the reverence with which its zealots treat it. It is, in fact, a separate religious institution, masquerading as a part of your church, but actually in direct competition with the church. It has its own organizational structure, its own budget, its own promotional program and its own worship services. Therefore, many of its adherents consider it an adequate substitute for the church; as witness the big procession heading for home as soon as Sunday School is dismissed. These people never think of attending church. They get their weekly dose of religion in Sunday School.

You may be distressed at this state of affairs in your early pastorates, but the

wisest course for you to follow is to learn to live with it, because the situation will not change. Remember that you are responsible for the Sunday School. You will have to work with it. So we include two principles to keep in mind at all times as you deal with it, which — if you observe them scrupulously-should enable you to stay out of trouble.

The first principle is that the Sunday School is a sacred cow; and, thus, should never be criticized, improved or tampered with in any way. The fury of a woman scorned is a mild irritation compared with the animosity elicited from a good and faithful Sunday School superintendent to whom it is suggested that the S.S. could stand a little refurbishing. If you, his pastor, are so witless as to suggest it, you will succeed only in mobilizing the entire Sunday School organization to a dedicated and unrelenting effort to oust you from the church.

So, whatever your private opinion, let your public utterances as to the S.S. be excessively-laudatory. Lay it on thick. It is like complimenting a woman-never be afraid that you are overdoing it, because you can't.

The second principle is that you must not confuse the function of the Sunday School with education. Admittedly, the name "school" is misleading; and inexperienced pastors nearly-always waste enormous amounts of time and effort trying to make of the S.S. a teaching enterprise, before they discover that the Sunday School does not exist in order that the pupils may learn anything. In fact, the genuinely superior Sunday Schools are those which impart the least factual information to their students. This apparent paradox is explained when you remember that S.S. teachers are volunteers, that they are dealing with material about

which they know nothing (and probably haven't even read), so whatever they do manage to teach is likely to be misinformation — which is worse than no information.

What the S.S. does exist for is:

(1) A baby-sitting service. Harassed young parents, badly in need of sleep or time for other activities impracticable with small children all over the place, look on the S.S. as the perfect, or nearly perfect, solution to their Sunday morning problem. It is entirely free (except for pennies for the collection), and enlightened churches have what is known as "extended sessions" in their Sunday Schools, which keep the kids for upwards of three hours. Little wonder that the S.S. is highly thought of by the young families of the community.

(2) A form of entertainment for adults who get up early on Sunday morning and don't care to read the Sunday paper or watch TV. What else is there for older people to do at 9 A.M. on Sunday morning?

Most churches have one to four large, enthusiastic and loyal adult Sunday School classes. Sometimes they are built around the personality of a teacher. In such instances, the teacher is a direct competitor of the preacher and nothing delights him so much as outdrawing the preacher on Sunday morning, a not infrequent situation.

Other adult classes prosper by appealing to a certain age group. The so-called young married class is an example of this species. It usually has a clever and distinctive name such as "Cum Duble," "Twosies" or "Ball-and-Chain," and goes in heavily for social events.

You will be expected to visit these classes, and the average freshly-minted seminary graduate is appalled at the

theology dispensed in them. It ranges from fundamentalist pietism through salvation by thinking gorgeous thoughts; with both extremes frequently-included in the same lesson by the same teacher, with no one bothered, in the least, by the inconsistencies.

Take your cue from the class and don't be bothered either. You simply can't afford to be finicky about theology, when dealing with the S.S. The surest way to kill off a large, popular adult Sunday School class is to insist that it devote itself to serious study. Americans have, for a long time now, been told that if a group of people who know nothing whatever about a subject spend an hour or so pooling their ignorant and uninformed opinions; the end product will be insights, whose truth is beyond question and an occult wisdom, unobtainable by lesser methods. This is the faith on which the adult S.S. class is founded, and to destroy it is to destroy the institution.

Remember, too, that the religious education enterprise of your denomination is a powerfully-vested interest. Your publishing house sells S.S. lesson materials by the bale, a vastly profitable undertaking. Also, there is a strongly entrenched religious education hierarchy, with hundreds of employees which is dedicated to keeping the S.S. movement large and vigorous. You are in no position to fight a battle with this well-equipped army, so don't try. Accept the Sunday School as a fact of your professional life, pat it on the back, as often as possible, and refrain from any attempt to change it.

Hitting It Off With The Ladies

Like unto the Sunday School is the Women's Society or Ladies' Aid or whatever your denomination calls its female auxiliary organization. It, too, has aspects of a separate denomination — a local presi-

dent and an astonishingly-large slate of officers, a separate and complete religious program, including worship services, mission projects, budget, etc., and an aggressive national hierarchical structure. It, also, has many members who find in it a sufficient source for their religious needs; and who, therefore, have little or nothing to do with the church.

If you think the author issued a strong warning against tampering with the Sunday School, then double it and raise it to the tenth power, when dealing with the ladies. If there is any one rule, the breaking of which you cannot survive, it is "Never, never, interfere in any way with the operation of the female auxiliary of your Church." These good, faithful Marthas will try your patience with the incredible dullness of their programs, the unpredictability of their administrative decisions,¹ and their taste in wallpaper, paint, etc., which-in your early and smaller churches-they express by decorating the parsonage. But, they do raise whopping amounts of hard cash, a portion of which finds its way into the operating-budget of the church and, thus, helps underwrite your salary. So to offend the ladies in any way is to work against your own best interests.

The author has little counsel to offer in the matter of getting along with the Ladies' Aid. Some clergymen distinguish themselves in this pastoral activity, some don't. But an analysis of fifty-three preachers who have had signal success in dealing with female auxiliaries, even though the latest research methods, were employed (including feeding statistical data into the maw of an electronic computer) has failed to isolate any clear-cut method of approach guaranteed to work. In the light of these confusing results, the author can only conclude that some charismatic quality as yet undetectable by IBM, is probably what gets the job done.

Some pastors with outstanding records in hitting it off with the ladies, claim that charm is the answer — which you either have or you don't have. Others rely heavily on prayer. In any case, the author intends to pursue this line of research and upon uncovering significant information will publish it immediately-perhaps in later editions of this book.

The Art Of Pastoral Counseling

Let us now consider the art of pastoral counseling. We refer to it as an art because that is what it is in spite of our seminaries' efforts to make of it, a science. Pastoral counseling is very much the vogue these days. It has achieved status by becoming a separate, specialized academic discipline with its own department in graduate schools of theology, and its own professional journals, and a fast-growing nomenclature understood only by its initiates. Some seminarians—a growing proportion of each graduating class in fact — frantically-search for jobs as hospital chaplains or ministers of counseling or faculty positions, where counseling is taught, in order to devote all their time to this field, free from the interruptions and annoyances of parish work.

Probably you have come to your first pastorate with the ambition of becoming, as rapidly as possible, a wise, benevolent and beloved spiritual counselor to your flock and the community in general. What will happen is that you will sit for weeks and months in your empty study, vainly hoping for someone to get their personal life into such a mess that they will come to you to straighten it out for them. As the passing days deny this hope you may in despair conclude that you have been assigned to the one sinless parish in all Christendom.

Your parish is, of course, as well furnished with wrongdoers as any other; but

even those who might be inclined to seek pastoral counsel, are put off by your unlined face and hair as yet untinged by gray. People assume that preachers of any age are unacquainted with the less savory aspects of human behavior and are easily shocked by confession of any species of sin more spectacular than an occasional errant thought. But a young preacher is thought to be so naive that he would be entirely-useless in extricating a bona fide sinner from the consequences of his escapades. So, it is not the uniquely high rate of virtue in your parish which is preventing you from becoming a counselor to the guilt-ridden, but your youth.

When the day does come that a parishioner makes an appointment to “talk over a personal problem” you must quell your excitement. You will be anticipating a technicolor tale of lurid misdoings, but what you will get is a long and tedious account of a petty personal peeve from someone who has exhausted his (or more likely her) list of captive listeners and has turned to you as a last resort.

Don't be crushed. By the time you have put in twenty years on the job you will have heard, in clinical detail, descriptions of every possible form of human misconduct. You will discover that original sin is quite unoriginal in its specific expressions. This fact is the cause of great boredom among experienced pastors, psychiatrists and other personal counselors. What will shock the pants off you the first few times you hear it, will eventually become dull with repetition. The time will come, although you cannot possibly believe it now, as you wait for a counseling case to come to your lonely study, when you will be able-after hearing a sentence or two from your counselee-to finish the story for them in every particular except names and dates. When the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes wrote that there is

nothing new under the sun, he was undoubtedly speaking out of long experience as a pastoral counselor; after all, he is still referred to as "the preacher." Contrary to popular belief, a veteran pastor is the least shockable man in the community, with the possible exception of a newspaper reporter on the police beat.

The experts tell us that effective personal counseling takes a sinful amount of time; and time for this sort of thing is something you don't have. You need to employ your working hours in raising money, attending meetings and making contacts which will help you up the hill of a successful career in the church. Time spent in counseling is time lost to the main and central concerns of our calling. However, if you will keep in mind two or three techniques as you seek to become a proficient pastoral counselor, without wasting undue amounts of time, you will get by in good shape.

The first is to convince yourself that no special skill is needed for this area of your work. Every now and then you may be tempted to attend the many clinical training sessions for pastors, which have become so popular in recent years. But, this is not at all necessary. Mainly, what you need to do in counseling situations is to listen. Most people love to talk about themselves. They especially-enjoy talking about their sins, and tend to exaggerate their wickedness. Very few people, they discover, are willing to listen to them for anything like a satisfying length of time. They have, then, two alternatives: they can seek out a psychiatrist, who will listen at a set rate of twenty to fifty dollars an hour; or they can go to the pastor who will do the same thing for nothing.

No one doubts that listening to a counselee spill the beans is, for him, excellent therapy. But he is likely to spill them a lot

faster to the psychiatrist at those rates than he is to the pastor who, after all, is costing him nothing.

You must restrain yourself. from actually giving your counselees any counsel. In the first place, this isn't what they want from you, so it is unnecessary. In the second place, they might actually-follow your advice and then, if it turned out badly, hate you for it.

Just listen. And when you decide you have listened long enough, have a word of prayer with the counselee, rise from your chair, look at your watch, and bid them good day. And that's all there is to pastoral counseling.

One or two other unavoidable obligations of our sacred profession deserve a passing observation.

Many churches now have men's organizations. Unlike the female auxiliary, these are no trouble at all. They are simply a slightly-sanctified version of the Kiwanis Club. See to it that at their monthly dinner meetings the fellows are well fed and well-entertained. That is all they want or need.

When you advance to the grade of parish which maintains an office in the church, surround yourself with the accouterments of executive efficiency. Among these are wall-to-wall carpeting, a large desk, luxurious furniture, a dictating machine, and a push-button telephone. This has the effect of impressing the people, strengthening your image as a successful pastor/executive, and sustaining your own ego.

Finally, promote yourself a month's vacation as soon as you are able. The author lists this under the heading of "unavoidable obligations" because it is an

essential status symbol for the clergyman on his way up. You may have only enough money to get out of town and be forced to spend a miserable double fortnight free-loading off your inlaws, but do it. Preachers with only two weeks off when they are in their third pastorate, probably will spend their professional life in churches which grant a two-week vacation. If you can't manage a month off, no one will believe you can manage anything else and will let you languish in the foothills of the mountain named ecclesiastical success.

To help you remember that these unavoidable obligations, though minor in nature, must be mastered, we close with the words St. Paul appended to a somewhat similar list of offices when instructing a young pastor: "Practice these duties, devote yourself to them," he wrote, "so that all may see your progress."

1. Women make all decisions by some superrational, mystical, intuitive process totally incomprehensible to men.