

Getting Into The Major Leagues

We will assume that you, an eager, ambitious and diligent young preacher, who is wholly dedicated to serving the Lord in the highest possible echelons of the church militant (for the truly dedicated holy man desires above all other things to render maximum service through his blessed calling), have soaked up the wisdom in these pages and are laboring mightily to polish and perfect yourself along the lines herein described. It occurs to the author that you might assume this is all you need do to cinch a bishop's throne; that your progress toward the grand prize of our high calling will be automatic, that the rapidity with which you overtake the purple will be governed only by your speed in assimilating and applying to your work the skills recommended in this text.

It is incumbent upon the author to warn you that such is not the case, that to depend on professional competence alone is to rest your future career on a frail reed. Hundreds of intelligent, capable and well-trained clergyman have naively trusted in their ability to get them ahead, and are perplexed and discouraged to find themselves at middle age — enduring the privation and boredom of village parishes, surrounded by cornfields and loutish parishioners and not much else.

Now, this in no sense invalidates the instruction in previous chapters of this book. You must master the skills in which we have been tutoring you, but you must, also, do something more: You must learn how to pick your way through the obsta-

cles distributed on the trail like a mine field by those who have made it to the top of the ecclesiastical mountain. These obstacles are designed by those who have arrived to slow down the eager young clerics, panting up the glory road behind them. While this may seem callous and cruel and un-Christian to tenderfoot divines, you will understand someday that this is the church's way of eliminating the unworthy, the defective, the flawed seekers after spiritual power. It is, to be sure, an application to the spiritual realm of Darwin's principle of the survival of the fittest. And if an occasional injustice is done, if, now and then, an able, but unwary, pilgrim is waylaid on the journey to the celestial city; or, on the other hand, some boob picks his way through by sheer luck, it is a little price to pay to insure the church a small, but steady, procession of leaders who have made it across the stormy Jordan. For you the rigors of the trip to the top can be reduced substantially by a thorough briefing on the terrain ahead. This is what we now propose to do for you.

The first requirement of any successful campaign or plan of attack is to eliminate, insofar as is possible, the element of chance. This is best accomplished by carefully plotting the entire operation and then executing the plan step by step.

Since you are freshly-ordained and standing on the bottom rung of the ministerial ladder, you are probably twenty-six or twenty-seven years of age and the proud, but nervous, possessor of an

insignificant pastorate in some God-forsaken town, several miles from nowhere. You are a rookie in the Lord's game, and you have been assigned — as are most rookies — to a Class D league, but you are filled with the giddy sense of being a certified professional.

Your first inclination will be to entertain visions of a spectacular performance out here in the bushes. You will dream of this down-at-the-heels parish suddenly coming to life; of the natives emerging from their spiritual torpor, under your inspired preaching, to renovate the church, forsake their ungodly ways, and unite behind you, to transform the community into a model of decency and Christian behavior.

This, of course, will not happen. Such congregations as are assigned to beginning preachers have seen pastors like you come and go with monotonous regularity.¹ They may like you personally, but they are completely immunized against your pleas for transformation, no matter how persuasive. They have heard it all before. Nothing is going to change here, nothing is going to happen.

The thing to do is to be realistic — get out of there as fast as you can. But it is standard procedure for every beginner — no matter how promising — to serve out a sentence in one or two parishes of this classification. It is hard to endure now, but will be an item in your service record of considerable value, when you are competing for the top positions. You can point with pride to your humble beginnings, much as experienced politicians brag about having been broke or hungry when young, or that they were born in a log cabin. It is during these lonely, miserable, frustrating years that you should improve the time by laying out what we might call, your Professional Progress Chart. This is

simply a timetable telling you where you ought to be, professionally, at each stage of life.

The first three stages involve little more than putting in the required number of years, much as promotion in the Army is tied to seniority and nothing else — up to a point.

For the clergyman has arrived at the continental divide when he has been around the county-seat parish or Grade B city church long enough and is ready to move on and up. This should occur, between his thirty-fifth and thirty-eighth year. He needs to be called up to the major leagues now, or the summons may never come. Except for the late-blooming pastor, a rare type, who breaks into the big time after his hair thins and his paunch thickens; the fellow who hasn't been chosen for a position of some prominence before he is forty, isn't going to be and might as well resign himself to spending his declining years serving a series of increasingly-tedious and obscure congregations.

What you don't realize now as you wait it out in your first parish, which is a class of job always in abundant supply, and for which there are never enough ordained candidates, is that the situation reverses itself when you are ready for a desirable spot. (You should always remember that it is bad form for a minister to speak of “a better job” or “a bigger church.” When you are anxious for a promotion say that you want “a larger field of service.”)

Now, there is an abundance of available and more-or-less presentable candidates for a rapidly-shrinking supply of really worth-while pastorates. You are faced with the necessity of being chosen for advancement from out of a sizable pack of eligible preachers, all of whom — at this stage of the game — appear to the

naked eye to be pretty much alike. An added burden you will have to bear, throughout this already-difficult undertaking, is that you must never betray the slightest desire for larger, better-paying and more important responsibilities. Worldly ambition is unbecoming to the Lord's servant. A preacher who cannot conceal his eagerness to get ahead is unfit for the plush posts he so passionately desires, and is likely to be struck from the list of contenders long before the finals, by those who control who gets what.

Ninety-nine out of a hundred ordinary, well-trained and generally-acceptable clergymen will plug away at their jobs until one day, after four or five years in a county seat parish, notice within themselves a feeling of restlessness and a haunting, anxious question, "Will I ever get beyond this mediocre level?" Then, in a mood of quiet desperation, they look about frantically for some larger and more attractive pulpit, which may be falling vacant in the near future, and go after it with all the single-minded abandon with which the greyhound chases the mechanical rabbit at the dog track. Like the mechanical rabbit, the tasty morsel, of a parish they are pursuing, always eludes them. Some fellow pastor whom they had never thought of as a competitor for the job is announced as the next incumbent of the vacant major league pulpit.

After a couple such experiences a man usually resigns himself to a perpetual sheol of bitterness and oblivion, taking out his frustration by complaining constantly that "You have to be a politician to get anywhere in the church." He is right, of course. But he should have been bright enough to have figured this out in time for the knowledge to have done him some good. When a man grasps this principle only after he has suffered because of it, it is too late for him to benefit by it.

The Chaps Who Get The Job

Let us look now at the chap who did get the job. What has he been doing in these years which the defeated candidate wasted working at his job and hoping for lightning to strike him?

He has been making contacts, that's what. He took the trouble to analyze the power structure in his conference or diocese or synod. He discovered that it was composed of officials, such as a bishop and district superintendents and synodical executive secretaries, plus a handful of active laymen; plus one or more "king-makers," usually clergymen who are ecclesiastical Jim Fadeys, wielding influence, not by virtue of their office, but through their careful cultivation of significant contacts over a period of years.

He then related himself to this power structure. He had the good sense to be unobtrusive about it; at first, meekly asking for a bit of advice from these princes of the church, or performing small, but welcome, services for them. He displayed at all times a demeanor which was respectful, alert, eager to learn, and anxious to serve. In short, he saw to it that the power structure was aware that he existed, that it knew his name, and that it was pleasant to have him around.

Before long the boys in the back room were speaking of him as "a comer" or "a promising young man." Then, by some unfathomable process of a mystical nature, the time arrives when the power structure decides "we ought to do something for Jim." So, when the next major league vacancy occurs the word is dropped in the right places that "Jim Goodfellow is the man for whom you are looking." Why so many otherwise intelligent preachers seem unable to comprehend that this is how things are done is one of the continuing mysteries of our profession.

It occurs to the author that, while it is unnecessary to define the terms of our ecclesiastical nomenclature for our clerical readers, the thousands of laymen who will no doubt purchase this book that they may have a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes in our profession may not understand what we mean by “major league pastorate.” Following is a check list, by which you can measure any church as to whether it rates major league status or not. A bona fide major league church will have:

1. A minimum of 1500 members in the congregation (2000 or more is better).
2. An impressive plant (new or old-it makes no difference).
3. A professional staff of at least two ordained clergy, a director of education and — for secure major league status — a full-time choirmaster. Next to a congregation of the wealthy and socially prominent, the best status symbol a church can have is an impressively-long list of paid staff members.
4. A five-figure salary for the head pastor, plus a generous expense allowance.²
5. At least two office secretaries.
6. An annual current expense budget in excess of one hundred thousand dollars.
7. The Sunday worship bulletin, church newspaper, and general mailings to the congregation. printed rather than mimeographed. Mimeograph and other semi-printing processes will not do. It has to be done in a printing shop to count. Remember that we are describing the major leagues, and in the majors you have to travel first class.

8. No regular Sunday evening service, on the grounds that this practice is a hang-over from an earlier generation, and that sophisticated people have something better to do with their time on Sunday evening than spend it in church. Seasonal vespers, concerts, and other special programs such as dramatics or lectures are, however, quite respectable and permissible in even the flossiest of parishes.

9. Robed choirs and gowned clergy.³

We close this chapter with a word of reassurance to our young clergyman determined to be a bishop. As you wait out the inescapable dreary years of your early career, as you labor unceasingly to perfect yourself in the techniques of your profession, as you sedulously cultivate the power structure, which controls preferment in your synod or conference or diocese, you may become weary with well-doing, exhausted by good works and question your choice of vocation.

When you have at last bagged a major league pastorate, the pride and joy and prestige and affluence and a host of other spiritual benefits, too numerous to mention, which accompany the prize will bathe you in a benevolent glow, and all your previous anxieties and sufferings and boredom and frustration and poverty for the sake of your calling will recede into the far reaches of your memory and seem as nothing. And you will now know what St. Paul was talking about when he wrote to Timothy:

“Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra,⁴ what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me,”

1. Which explains the seemingly incongruous fact that the smallest churches are aware of the latest theological fads in the seminaries long before the larger churches hear of them. The small churches have heard all about Barth, Bultmann, Niebuhr and Tillich from their frequently changed young theologs, while longer-tenured pastors are relentlessly boring their larger flocks with a steady diet of Walter Rauschenbausch and Henry Nelson Wieman.

2. There is no need, however, to overcompensate the lesser members of the ministerial staff. As a matter of fact, a large church in a metropolitan center is in the fortunate position of being able to

choose from any number of preachers who are willing to join its staff at the prevailing wage rates (always modest) or even less to gain the status of being associated with a prestigious congregation or to escape the ennui attendant upon serving a sleepy village parish, or both.

3. Below the Mason-Dixon line the "gowned clergy" measurement does not apply. Five thousand member churches down there will appreciate a caparisoned choir, but southerners still cherish the image of a non-clerical clergy, so the preacher usually wanders into the sanctuary in a sack suit.

4. Some of the Apostle's early pastorates.