

Alternative Routes To The Top

While the author chose to travel the road of the major league pastorate, some of our distinguished leaders have preferred to climb by the routes of executive positions, on one of the boards or agencies of which every denomination maintains an abundant supply. Or, for a deluxe trip to the top, others select the avenue of the college presidency. These are legitimate options for the man who plans, eventually, to wear the episcopal miter (this, of course, being a figure of speech as no bishop of a standard-brand church would be caught dead wearing a miter).

Convinced that the aspiring ordinand (for bishop, that is) deserves a presentation of the possibilities via these routes, the author-without first-hand experience-will rely on his years of observation, plus painstaking research into the subject, to offer sound guidance here.

To begin with, the ambitious clergyman, who finds himself entertaining the idea of trying the board or agency route to the top, must submit to a thorough and honest self examination. Not everyone is temperamentally and physically suited to this type of service. For the most part, it involves endless meetings of committees, whose sessions are just short of interminable, frequent staff briefings, lengthy report meetings (usually in inverse ratio to the importance of what is reported), inter-board liaison conferences,¹ attending church assemblies, conclaves, etc., most of which are held in outlandish and difficult to reach locations.

The Honest Self-Examination Prior To Seeking Board Service

So, before you commit yourself to the board service route be very certain in your own mind that you are equipped for it. You will need to possess the capacity to endure infinite boredom, along with what is known in horsey circles as “a good seat” (which takes practice), sturdy kidneys and a digestive system, which can cope equally well with the monotonous diet of the served luncheon or banquet (no choice of what you will eat) and the uncertainties of the fare in third-rate hotels; (board executives stay in first-rate hotels, when available, but they aren't always available).

The Blessings Of a Board Executive

When making your decision as to the trail you will travel, you should weigh against the rigors of board or agency service its manifest advantages, some of which are:

(1) Freedom from the pressures, responsibilities, and nagging worries, which are an inevitable accompaniment to the pastoral ministry. Board secretaries do not have to raise money-they spend the money which is raised in local churches for the purpose of supporting denominational boards and agencies. Nor does an executive secretary have to cultivate and please an entire congregation. He has only to please his immediate superior, (not an overwhelmingly difficult chore for a bright chap), and when he works his way up to a really choice spot he doesn't have to please

much of anybody. This freedom greatly-reduces the wear and tear on the central nervous system, slows down the aging process and in general has a salubrious influence on one's outlook on life. Best of all, a board secretary does not live under the necessity of grinding out a new sermon every week. He makes many speeches, to be sure, but they are always to audiences which are hearing him for the first time because with rare exceptions, board secretaries are not invited back to speak where they have once spoken. Thus, one address, with perhaps a few interchangeable funny stories to fit particular areas and situations, is serviceable for years and years. Take care, though, to have the address retyped from time to time. A yellow, crackling manuscript is a dead giveaway and is the mark of an intellectually-lazy man. But this is no problem, for you will be provided with secretaries who can do this for you.

(2) A board executive, has an unparalleled opportunity for making contacts, which, if carefully cultivated, can be translated into the votes he will need when he runs for the office of bishop.

In the first place, since he travels extensively, the board man can ingratiate himself with many leaders of the denomination, a privilege denied the clergyman tethered to his parish, who has little access to any but the big shots in his immediate area. Also, board executives use a fair amount of their time in preparing and mailing promotional material to thousands of pastors. This material is supposed to promote the work and interests of their particular agency, but it is accepted practice for executives to avail themselves of the opportunity to promote themselves. A ceaseless stream of letters, brochures (in four colors, preferably), and other forms of printed material, always with the executive's name at the top and

his signature as apparent as Martin Luther King at a Ku Klux Klan rally, at the bottom is bound to have a cumulative impact — even though this form of communication receives at best a casual perusal before it is discarded by its recipients.

(3) There is no way to tell whether a board executive is a rousing success or an abject failure. The work of a pastor can be gauged and assessed by the application of established criteria. How much money did he raise last year? How many new members did his church receive? Did he add to the church plant, or payoff a mortgage? Is his Sunday School growing? Things like that. However, nobody knows for certain what a board executive is supposed to be doing, let alone what he has actually done. And few of his professional peers, preoccupied as they are with their own concerns, care very much. They suppose “the chaps at the Vatican”² are doing a bang-up job because the chaps at the Vatican have gone to no little trouble and expense (not their own) to convince as many of their brethren as it is possible to reach by the United States mails that they are doing a bang-up job.

We arrive, then, at the one and only valid objective test of a denominational executive's effectiveness-which is the effectiveness of his personal public relations program.

It can be safely assumed that any board secretary, who fails to exploit the opportunities for personal publicity afforded him by his office, is likely to be hopelessly-incompetent at anything else he is doing and should not be included in that select list from which bishops are chosen.

(4) The denominational executive has an expense account. He has mileage

allowance, a per diem, or provision for hotel and restaurant expenses and other supplements to his income. This makes it possible for him to schedule vacation trips, which coincide with reimbursable travels in the interests of his work, reduces substantially his grocery bills and enables him to enjoy life in ways not open to the pastor of a congregation.

(5) There are many men who desire to serve the Lord as one of His ordained servants, but who, because they do not like people very well, or because they are not inclined to expose themselves to the pressures of parish life, or because they are taken in by the illusion that the really important work of the church is done at the board and agency level. For any other of a number of good and understandable reasons, they prefer to serve in a “connectional” capacity (this means they are connected to the church, but not to a church).

How To Pretend You Prefer The Pastorate

You may be among this number. If you are, and if you are so fortunate as to land such a job, you must never forget that good ecclesiastical taste requires you to claim that you didn't really want it. Never, even in an unguarded moment, hint that this task suits you to a T. Board executives are expected to constantly protest as a matter of form, that they long for the quiet joys of parish life, and to pretend that they plan soon to return to it. If some thoughtless and insensitive type asks, “Why, then, do you not do so?” the proper reply is that large and vital enterprises of your board are at the moment, have been for some time, and will be into the foreseeable future in crucial stages of development, which require the delicate guidance of a man with experience, administrative skill and competence in this particular

area; a combination of qualities which, by coincidence, no one but you possesses. Only a soldier, with no sense of duty whatever, would desert now in the midst of the battle when to do so would, in all probability, issue in a crushing defeat for the forces of righteousness. It is the weak and the unworthy, who put their personal preferences above their clear and manifest duty, you imply.

There may be times when you will entertain the uneasy conviction that your job — or for that matter, your entire board or agency — could disappear without serious inconvenience to the Army of the Lord. Now and then you will be petrified at the possibility, however remote, that you might lose your job and be forced to earn your living as a parish pastor. Even in the face of such debilitating thoughts, don't forget to complain stoutly and with frequency of the “higher call” which an incorruptible sense of duty has prompted you to answer, but which, to your eternal regret, has robbed you of the opportunity to serve a church.

The College Presidency Its Toys And Hazards

An even surer alternative route to the top of our blessed profession is the road which leads to the president's office in a denominational college. Presidents of church-related colleges have always been considered prime bishop material.

You should be warned, though, that this appealing alternative to sweating it out in the parish ministry is not an easy sea to navigate. The American landscape is cluttered with church colleges, but the trustees sometimes heartlessly choose a professional educator for president, though a stableful of deserving preachers is available.

However, one can still be had if, for you, the right combination of circumstances obtain. These are:

(1) A presidential vacancy in a college whose board of trustees includes a wealthy layman from your congregation, who has contributed vast sums of money to the college (and who, of course, is enthusiastic about you).

(2) A presidential vacancy in a college whose board of trustees includes an influential clergyman who can more-or-less name the president, and who does not fancy himself as a college president, but would like to have your job.

It is apparent, then, that if you land a presidency, luck will play a large role in the accomplishment. But, let us assume that providence smiles on you and you do bring it off. Your difficulties are not at an end, for you must put in a decent number of years on the job before entering the final lap of the race for the episcopacy. You must manage these years so as to convince the churchman that you are stressing the spiritual function of the college; and at the same time convince the educators that you are progressively-subordinating the role of the church, and are concentrating on improving the school's educational rating. You must do these things while spending about sixteen hours of your eighteen-hour working day raising money. It is an exhausting service, and you will be glad to trade the president's office for the more restful precincts of a bishop's study when the time comes.

Before you begin to move your personal effects into the president's office you should familiarize yourself with the nature of a denominational college. Otherwise, you will, in all likelihood, end up in one of the numerous bear traps or disguised pitfalls with which your path

ahead is studded. Your campus may appear serene and peaceful in the twilight of a fine spring evening, but nothing could be more deceptive. It is, in fact, a raging battlefield, and that lovely lawn which grows so green in the quadrangle is fertilized by the blood of many a former president, to which yours may be added, if you are not careful.

Service as president of a church college deserves a volume all its own, and one wonders why such a dissertation has not been written. Since some simple policies and administrative procedures, envisioned in advance of your incumbency, will be indispensable if you are to survive the academic climate long enough to post an impressive record; the author-who has spent more than two decades observing at close hand the operation of denominational colleges (including several years' service as trustee of one of them) outlines here a sketchy, but adequate description of the hazards you will face and helpful suggestions for overcoming them.

These hazards can be subsumed under four divisions which are here listed in order of descending importance (and danger). They are (1) the faculty. (2) the board of trustees. (3) the college's constituency (preachers and laymen, local businessmen, etc.) and (4) the students.

Living With The Faculty

Fix firmly in your mind that the faculty actually runs the college. Quite naturally. it runs it to suit the tastes and convenience of the faculty.

For public relations purposes you will need to talk constantly about "a faculty of stalwart churchmen," but you will soon discover that this is a fiction of the pious imagination. The time is long gone when you could staff a college faculty with stalwart churchmen.

The department of religion is about the only one for which you can be certain of enough Christians and churchmen to meet your needs. Even here, your choice may lie between some hopeless birdbrain or an intelligent but regrettably radical type who will give the school a bad name among the very people you are trying so hard to convince that you run a safe, conservative, seminary-type operation. (Since the main function of the religion department is not education but, public relations, better hire the birdbrain. He will do less actual harm.)

For the departments of language, natural sciences and history you can pick up an occasional Christian layman, because these are ancient and established disciplines and their practitioners feel no particular need to prove that they are intellectually-respectable by hostility to something as unacademic as the church.

It is, however, next to impossible to find a psychologist or a sociologist who is not vocal in his scorn of organized religion. This is because psychology and sociology have not yet gained the status of bona fide sciences and their disciples, thus, lack the academic security of a chemist or a historian. And insecure academics always reassure themselves by shouting constantly that they are more academic than anybody. A popular and convenient way to do this, in a denominational college, is to sneer at the church.

Cultivate the faculty no matter how much it irritates you; tell it that you work for the faculty (which is the truth) and that its welfare is your prime concern. Refer frequently to your unalterable devotion to the cause of academic freedom, for "academic freedom" is the faculty's favorite phrase. It means to the professors their right to do as they damn please, and your espousal of the protest cause assures

them that you will not meddle with their scandalously-light teaching loads, petty side rackets, personal prerogatives and the like. Above all, soft-pedal your references to the church-related nature of the college when speaking to the faculty. They consider the college's church-relatedness academically-disreputable and a mark of intellectual shame and so do not like to be reminded of it. Save such speeches for money-raising junkets to the churches and business groups where it will be appreciated.

The board of trustees will be, for you, a source of continuing pleasure throughout your tenure. You will have no trouble whatever with it.

For one thing, it will be made up, mostly, of the same kind of people who made up the official board or session or vestry of your church, so you will feel at home with it. The bulk of the college board will be successful, affluent businessmen who look on the college as a business venture. Since they have problems in their businesses they will be sympathetic and understanding about your problems. Since their employees are frequently-fractionious, unreasonable and troublesome, they will comprehend your problems and comfort and console you when your employees, that is the faculty, are fractionious and unreasonable and troublesome.

Trustees love to build new buildings since new buildings are visible, tangible signs of prosperity, growth, success and a going institution; which coincides with your need to demonstrate that you can run a prosperous, growing, successful institution.

Also, college trustees, as a rule, are not given to excessive piety, and this will be a blessed relief for you and will help restore your cheerful outlook on life, after your

frequent and necessary association with the clergy and leading laymen of your denomination. You will come to regard your trustees with an ever-deepening affection.

As for your constituency, all you need to remember is that the bulk of it and the really influential people in it will be clergymen and active laymen of your denomination. Most of them think a college ought to be a Sunday School with dormitories; and there is no reason for you to confuse these good and loyal churchmen by any evidence that such is not entirely the case. If they do spot holes in the image, console them with the information that you are making their idea of what their college should be the great guiding principle of your administration; and that it can be achieved in short order, if only the churches and the alumnae will sharply increase their financial support of the institution.

Never Mind The Students

You need pay little attention to the students since they are a negligible factor in all but the best of schools. The faculty looks on students as necessary annoyances who only interrupt the real business of higher education, which is private research, attendance at learned societies, the carrying on of faculty feuds and the like. The trustees think of them as customers. The dean of students thinks of them as behavior problems. You should think of them as opportunities for public relations. Have your picture taken crowning the homecoming queen, entertaining students at tea in the president's manse, counseling an eager freshman in your office, speaking earnestly to the student body at a chapel service (be sure the bridge games going on in the congregation are not visible in the photo), and in other situations which portray you as a benevolent and beloved

father figure to these clear-eyed young Christians. Anything more than this is neither necessary nor desirable.

A few practical procedures to keep in mind when beset by problems, dilemmas, and the stresses and strains, arising out of the cussedness of human nature, are in order. Don't worry too much about faculty dissensions. College professors engage in feuding and fussing much as other people engage in tennis or girl watching. It is what they like to do. There is no recorded case in all educational history of a college faculty agreeing on anything. It will split ranks and contend violently over a major curriculum change or the hour established for faculty meeting with equal abandon. All experienced college administrators tell the faculty it is the decision-making body of the institution and then go ahead and do what needs to be done while the argument continues to rage. Usually the faculty will not even notice that a decision has been made.

Finally, keep as clear as possible from all matters of internal administration, for it is here that the fair linen of many an otherwise-promising candidate has been smirched and soiled. Let the dean handle this end of the enterprise. Then, if things get really rough and something simply has to be done, you can always fire the dean. Deans do not have friends and, like managers of professional baseball clubs, know when they are hired that when the good of the team requires a sacrifice, they will be it. Remember that you aren't going to be here forever. You should be safely perched on a bishop's throne by the time you have run through three or four deans. The average term of office for college presidents is just over four years, and when you have been one, even for a considerably shorter time than this, you will understand why. Strong men decline and sturdy souls shrivel in this branch of the Lord's

service. But you must persevere and give the impression that you thrive on it, else you will not be one of the front runners when the pack, pursuing the episcopacy, heads into the last lap of the glorious race-which is the subject to which we now turn our attention.

1. Each denomination now has so many boards and agencies that liaison conferences are essential

in order that (1) duplication of programs is avoided; (2) each board can keep an eye on every other board to see that no one group tries to outdo the others; (3) personnel can keep informed as to attractive staff positions on other boards which are likely to open up, thus enabling the empire builders to (a) get the job for a friend or (b) if it is sufficiently attractive, get it for themselves

2. Every protestant denomination refers to its headquarters city as "The Vatican."