



Speaking the Truth in Love to a Longtime Member

by Gary A. Shockley

During my third year as pastor of the Austin Church in north-central Pennsylvania, I faced a leadership crisis that threatened the effectiveness of my ministry there. The church had been experiencing significant numerical and financial growth. New faces entered the sanctuary every week and for the most part were warmly welcomed into the church. However, one woman – the matriarchal leader of the church – was threatened by this growth.

I had heard rumors that Lillian had been quietly trying to dissuade people from visiting our church, that she would say things like "You don't want to come to our church, because our pastor is terrible" or "Our church is much too old and formal for younger families like yours." Of course, I didn't believe Lillian could be saying such things. Why wouldn't she want the church – her church – to prosper? Then one Sunday, I heard Lillian speaking loudly to a new family, "If new people like you keep coming to our church, there won't be enough room for those of us who belong here." I couldn't believe my ears!

The next morning, before I had a chance to call her, Lillian appeared at my office door. "Pastor, I need you to sign this form recertifying me as a lay speaker in the church for this next year." Lay-speaking status is granted by the United Methodist Church to laity in a local church who have completed continuing education classes on things like preaching, theology, and leadership in the local church. Lay speakers are also required to serve in a leadership capacity in their congregation under the guidance of their pastor. Imagine the timing of Lillian's request.

I asked Lillian to sit down, and as calmly as possible I recounted for her the reasons why I could not and would not sign the form granting her a renewal of her lay-speaking status. Lillian and I discussed the things I heard her say to the visiting family that Sunday morning and the rumors others had passed on to me about the things she had been saying out in the community about me and the church. I learned from her that the rumors were true and had been born out of her fear of losing what she had come to love – a small, tight-knit church family. I told Lillian that, as a lay speaker in the local church, she needed to work with me, not against me, in the ministry of the church and that I felt I had no choice but to delay her recertification until the following year.

I suggested that Lillian and I meet together on a weekly basis for a month, and then once a month after that, to work through some of the issues that divided us. To my surprise she immediately agreed to this. We agreed that we would invite another leader in the church to meet with us for the first few sessions so that we would keep on track. We mutually agreed on a man we felt had good conflict-management skills. I felt positive about the direction we were heading. I didn't know that the storm was only just beginning.



As the matriarch of the church, Lillian was related to more than half of the members of that congregation. The next Sunday as I stood in the pulpit to preach, more than 20 people, Lillian's family members, simultaneously rose from their pews. Scattered throughout the congregation, they stood quietly and defiantly for what seemed to be an hour (actually it was only a minute or two), and then, with as much commotion as they could make, they stormed out of the church. For the second week in a row, I was stunned speechless. I waited until the last demonstrator left with a slam of the door and picked up where I had left off in my sermon.

Immediately following the service a handful of people met me at the back door and pleaded with me to reconsider signing Lillian's papers. They implored me to go after the people that left, apologize to them, and beg them to come back to the church. I replied to them that I could not do any of those things. I told them about the plan Lillian and I had agreed on, but it was little consolation to them. I stayed with that plan.

As a result of my decision not to sign for Lillian's recertification, our church lost about 20 members. Some of them were Sunday school teachers, leaders of the board, and strong financial contributors. The one person we didn't lose was Lillian. To her credit, she stayed active in the church and met regularly with me. We worked hard together. With the help of the other church leader who guided us, we were able to voice our concerns to each other, discuss our theologies of ministry, and debate our understanding of the meaning and mission of the local church. When the opportunity came for her recertification as a lay speaker in the church, we celebrated the signing of her form over lunch. By the end of my sixth year of ministry at this church, Lillian had become one of my closest friends and ardent supporters—a tribute more to her than to me.

My most fruitful experiences in ministry came as the result of working through the tough times. When I remained committed to the local church I was appointed to serve and, more important, to becoming the spiritual leader God desired me to be, I grew as a leader. Spiritual maturation begins when we seek to know ourselves in light of the God who loves us. Truly effective leadership grows from there as we seek to know the people we are called to serve, often-times in the midst of chaos.

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