

Grumpy Gus Understands

by Jeff Rainwater, 15 March 2017, somewhere in Wyoming.

In every meeting, there's always that one in the room... the one with The List... The %@*# (insert favorite curse word or benign substitute here) List... and he was sitting next to me, getting ready to unleash The List on us all! But wait; I should probably back up a bit.

I'm a District Superintendent in the United Methodist Church which means each year I help our Bishop appoint pastors to some 400 churches in our area. Every season, we have around 50 to 60 churches needing new pastors and, if we are lucky, some 50 or 60 pastors looking for new appointments. If we are very lucky those two numbers match exactly. Yeah, we're never that lucky. Imagine trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle... and your sister keeps stealing your puzzle pieces... while you're both riding a merry-go-round powered by your younger brother... who just drank a 2 liter bottle of Coca Cola! Did I forget to mention there's a countdown clock? Maybe you get the idea.

So each Introduction matters because if it doesn't work Sister Susie just stole five pieces. What's an Introduction? It's the meeting where we bring together some of the church leadership and the new pastor together for the first time. In the United Methodist Church, it's something like a shotgun wedding... only sometimes all I'm holding is a rubber-band gun and I'm hoping, praying, nobody notices the rubber-band is missing.

This meeting was different though. I didn't think the gun would be needed. This was a bright, energetic, gifted, young, pastor (with a family!... pay dirt!) meeting a church who, by all accounts, wants to go in a new direction... namely Out! Out into their community. Out into the world. Out with the love of Jesus Christ. This combination is the Holy Grail! And I had found it. So what was I thinking at this moment, "Geez, Jeff, DON'T. SCREW. THIS. UP!"

In spite of my anxiety, everything was going well. The pastor was smiling, the leaders were laughing. But then, I see it... out of the corner of my eye a flash of legal-pad yellow. And then he speaks, "I have a question or two..." I glance over at the speaker. He is NOT smiling. Have I seen him smile at all today? "I have a question or two. Do you mind?" I look down at The List. That is NOT a question or two. The page is filled, written in paragraphs.

"Oh boy," I sigh to myself, "Here we go." (Yes 'boy' was the word I thought, only it sounds like it has four letters starting with sh, but I digress). I had seen it before. As I said, there is always one Grumpy Gus in these meetings with a List and The List is not interested in a pastor's personal journey or how the Spirit has spoken uniquely in this person's life. The List demands answers, preferably 'yes' or 'no', to determine whether this future spiritual leader is in or out. As much as I hate this moment in the Introduction though, it's valuable because in every church there are more than a few Grumpy Gus's ready with their lists. Might as well see how the pastor handles this. I yielded the floor with a touch of dread.

"According to Paragraph whatsit in the Book of Discipline..."
(Oh great! A Grumpy Gus who's done research!)

"Pastors are supposed to take a full week of continuing education each year."
(Oh please! We are going to argue about the pastor being away for a week now?!)

"You will commit to taking your full allotted time for continuing ed., won't you? You promise to do that?"
(Wait... what?!)

I look over... the pastor is clearly in shock. He's not alone. After a quick, stuttering reply, "Uh... yes, of course," Gus continues. And I wonder: what else is on that list? I soon find out.

"Pastors are supposed to take 4 weeks vacation as well. You do plan to take vacation, right?... And sabbath once a week... And a month every 4 years... You do plan to do that, right?... " And then I saw it... Grumpy Gus grinned. He folded the paper, put it away, sat back in his chair and grinned. Grumpy Gus wasn't a Grumpy Gus after all. He was having a little fun and he got us both. He also was making his point. "Pastor, I want my congregation to be healthy, but that only happens if the pastor is healthy."

Gus is right. Pastors, when it's time to work, work hard. Remember Wesley's directions, "Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time." But also know your boundaries. Know when it's time for sabbath -- when it's time for rest. Guard that time carefully. Pastors, have you had a conversation with your Staff Parish Relations Committee lately about your needs? If not, it's about time. Your congregations need you to stay healthy -- physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Gus knows the Book of Discipline too. There's an interesting addition made in the 2016 Book of Discipline for the Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee: "To encourage, strengthen, nurture, support, and respect the pastor(s) and staff and their family(s)." You would think that would have been in there before (or wouldn't be needed at all)... but, sadly, no. Yet, God bless him, Gus understood. Gus, as a member of this committee, knew his job and he was ready to do it so that his congregation and his new pastor could thrive.

So here is my question to the laity: How are you making sure your pastor is staying healthy? Are you checking in to make sure she is taking her vacation? Are you encouraging other congregation members to not call her on her sabbath (whatever day that is)? Do you see the pastor as your partner in ministry and not your church's employee? How are you making sure your pastor is staying healthy so your congregation can be healthy? Believe me. It matters.

I tip my hat to you, Gus. Thank you for the important lesson. I will always remember the day The List was a blessing and not a curse!

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