

The Obstacle

by Douglas Walrath

For years, a challenge that pastors have repeatedly talked with me about is that of a church patriarch or matriarch who is the channel through whom everything must flow. This person often has peculiar ideas, a dominant personality, and a desire for power. Strangely, he or she is kowtowed to by the congregation—and thus is the person who seems to be the obstacle to progress. In a large church, such a person is a small fish in a big pond. But in a small-town church he or she can be a big fish in a small pond. Most pastors have wrestled with how to overcome this kind of situation. What follows is the finest answer to this question I have come across, written by Douglas Walrath. You might be surprised by how Walrath proposes you deal with that challenging personality in your church!



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—Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director

During the years I worked as a consultant, I was invited to assess the capability of a very small congregation to reach out to new people who were moving into their parish. The pastor was especially discouraged. He described his church as a “stubborn bunch,” unwilling to change, and not at all open to new people, especially as leaders.

During the interviews I conducted with the 34 members of this church, a pattern quickly emerged: more than half the people had the same surname. In fact, I discovered that 30 of the 34 resident active members were a “Smith” by blood or marriage. Late in the afternoon I interviewed the patriarch, J. Catfish Smith. When I asked Mr. Smith whether what I had discovered about the composition of the congregation was accurate, he responded with classic understatement: “Yes, we do have some influence in this church!”

The next day I met with the pastor and district committee to share my findings. When I talked about the dominance of the Smiths, the pastor quickly agreed. “He’s the problem,” the pastor said. “If you want to get anything done, you have to figure out a way to go around him. But that’s hard to do

because no one will cross him.”

Work with, not around, traditional leaders

Listening to this pastor’s analysis, I understood why his efforts to introduce changes into the life of that small church were continually frustrated. He could not accept the fact that *any* significant changes in the life of this congregation would be established only with the patriarch’s approval.

In truth, it would be foolish to suggest that a pastor could or should push aside a powerful, traditional leader like Mr. Smith. I found myself bringing this unwelcome news to the district committee gathered to help that 34-member congregation “get on with being a church.” Those who prove to be effective pastors in small-town congregations dominated by traditional leaders (and there is at least one in nearly every small-town congregation with which I am familiar) rarely try to go around them. One cannot circumvent them successfully—not without great cost.

I am aware that my viewpoint is contrary to

the counsel usually offered: Traditional leaders from the past who stand in the way of changes are characterized as the “old guard.” They should be gently but firmly encouraged to step aside.

There are congregations with whom this approach is appropriate. I recommended it myself on many occasions when I worked as a church consultant—like for a new suburban church which had grown from 50 to 850 in 4 1/2 years. I moderated heated debates about the size to which the congregation should be permitted to grow. When I met a seminary classmate at a conference several years ago, I asked how he had managed to lead his suburban congregation effectively for so many years. “Actually,” he replied, “I’ve been in the same place for 16 years, but I’ve served four congregations!” I believe congregations like these need to develop new programs and include new leaders.

People whose lives are marked by constant change are served well by congregations and leaders which are able to refocus their program. But, methods developed by leaders who serve churches in rapidly changing contexts are not directly transferable to small-town churches.

Understand the context of the traditional leader

Small-town congregations are rarely situated in rapidly changing social contexts. Small-town congregations are composed mostly of the original families. Many small congregations in rural communities have lost population. Thus they are made up of people who have not experienced positive change. Members of churches in these contexts are far more skeptical about the benefits of change.

Thus, traditional leaders see that resisting change is an essential role. They protect their church against the harmful changes facilitated by cultural “outsiders” who don’t

see or appreciate the needs and interests of their small-town church. Even when church members find leaders like Mr. Smith difficult to deal with, they usually still affirm him because he stands between the congregation and what they perceive as potentially harmful change. They are not likely to shift their allegiance to new leaders until it becomes clear that the changes they want will not be at their expense.

Don’t attempt to displace

No action can displace traditional leaders in small-town churches. Displacing them from offices does not displace them as leaders. Unlike leaders in larger churches, their power is not organizationally based. I sometimes refer to traditional leaders as “contextually rooted” leaders, to indicate that their power stems from roots beyond the church. Their authority in the church is derived from the position they hold in the family and community. So long as their social roots are solid, attempts to replace or circumvent them are likely to fail.

Unless contextually rooted leaders in a congregation are obviously psychologically dysfunctional, the pastor who wants to succeed in helping a small-town church become more effective will not try to circumvent or displace them. Traditional leaders hold what Roy Oswald calls “reputational power.”¹ He clarifies the critical difference between those who hold formal or official power in a congregation and those who hold informal or unofficial power. An office gives the one who holds it certain rights and privileges and, perhaps, some authority, but not necessarily a lot of power. As the pastor of that 34-member church discovered, there is a difference between what one is authorized to do and what one is able to do. By virtue of his office, the pastor was authorized to lead the congregation, but he lacked the power to effect any significant change. The patriarch, on the other hand, held no office; he had no

official power. But he controlled everything in the church he wanted to control. The pastor couldn't go around him.

The qualifier: reputational power

The patriarch held "reputation power." Traditional leaders who hold reputational power are powerful because others believe they are powerful. Participants in small churches expect those who hold reputational power to exercise that power no matter who the official leaders are. I do not mean to imply they *should* be the most powerful leaders, only that they usually are. A pastor who wishes to become an influential leader must contend with the reality of their power.

Even Jesus accepted this reality. After His first sermon, for example, He did not confront the reputational power in the synagogue; He slipped away by merging into the crowd (Luke 4:16-30). He confronted those with reputational power only when His own reputational power was clearly established. Among His own disciples, He did not seek to displace the obstinate and often difficult Peter from his dominant role in the group, but rather worked patiently with him to help him grow in faith and effectiveness.

Working with traditional leaders is usually the best and sometimes the only way to help a small congregation become more effective and faithful. Several years ago the small congregation where I am a member joined with several others to rehabilitate some substandard housing in our area. When the work was finished, the administrator of the rehabilitation program invited a woman who holds a great deal of reputational power in one of the congregations to become the administrator of the completed housing project. She is a woman in her 60's from an old, established family in the community. Little in her past seemed to equip her for this job. Some of us wondered

whether she was qualified.

We discovered very soon that her reputational power helped her to be qualified. Late one night, shortly after she began working in the new position, the village police called to tell her they were responding to a complaint about a loud party in one of the apartment units. A sizable fight had broken out. She said she would meet the police at the scene of the trouble. When she arrived, the police advised her not to enter the apartment. She ignored their advice. She walked into the middle of the brawl and told those involved to stop fighting immediately. They did! She told them behavior like theirs would not be tolerated and that if they provoked another incident like this one she would evict them. They believed her. She has reputation power which, *in the minds* of those fighting, exceeds even that of the police in our village.

The solution: accept those with reputational power

With only a minimum of encouragement, those who hold reputational power can play extremely helpful roles in a small-town congregation. One secret of becoming an effective pastor lies in discovering which contextually rooted leaders to support. First impressions may be misleading. It often requires patience to discern the true nature of traditional leaders.

In 30 years of working with small churches, I have found that only a few of those who hold reputational power are genuinely disturbed individuals who use their influence in inappropriate or destructive ways. Though there are clearly situations in which traditional leaders should be challenged to step down, the widespread belief that the pastor should move quickly to seek new leaders is usually not a sound strategy. It feels to the church that the pastor is telling them to cast out their parents and

grandparents who, though they may be difficult at times, are nonetheless worthy of the respect given to them.

In a small-town church, unlike a large church, there is not an endless supply of potential leaders who could take the places of those currently recognized as leaders. Small churches by nature are not able to include new leaders easily. New leaders, including new pastors, not only must be capable to be accepted; to have real influence they must gain contextually-rooted authority.

In most small churches members have seen pastors and programs come and go. Strong characters and the leadership they offer may not always be the best, but they persist year after year. A pastor who wants to help a small church become more effective and faithful is most likely to succeed by working with, not by trying to displace or go around, its contextually rooted, traditional leaders.

¹ Roy Oswald, *Power Analysis of a Congregation* (The Alban Institute: Washington, D.C., 1985).

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