

TEN COMMANDMENTS
for Pastors New to a Congregation

Lawrence W. Farris

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In Gratitude to
The Reverend Garnett E. Foster
Partner in Theological Dialogue
Finder of Extraordinary Restaurants
Witness for Justice and Peace

Having been a new pastor three times and having mentored several other pastors new to a position has led me to identify ten essential elements that make for a good start in a new ministry. These “Ten Commandments” are intended to help new ministers begin well so that their ministry may flourish and be fulfilling, both to them and to the congregations with whom they serve. And knowing how precious time can be in a new pastorate, I have endeavored to keep this book short enough that a new pastor might actually be able to read it!

Clarence Jordan, founder of the Koinonia Farms Community in Georgia, once observed that the biblical Ten Commandments are like natural law in that we cannot break them. When we do violate them, it is we who are broken, and we serve only as illustrations of the commandments’ wisdom and truth. These commandments for new pastors are not like natural law. They can, and most likely will, be broken by every new pastor, to a greater or lesser extent. Blessedly, we are forgiven our mistakes, both by God and usually by the congregations with whom we are in ministry, in order that we might learn from them.

A pastor friend of mine says there is really only one commandment for the new pastor: Don’t let the urgent crowd out the important! While I agree with the truth of that injunction, it is my belief that pastors who attend to the ten commandments I have set forth will have an easier and more faithful beginning with a new congregation, a beginning that sets a good and strong foundation for years of fruitful work. Avoiding some of the more common pitfalls of a new pastorate will allow new pastors’ gifts to be freely and joyously offered to the glory of God and for the nourishment of Christ’s church.

Thou Shalt Be a Cultural Historian

“Some Israelites have come here to search out the land.”

JOSHUA 2:2

“Well, Reverend Farris, it’s like this. I never saw Reverend Flint but what he had on a three-piece suit — tie, vest, wingtips, everything. Heck, in this town, even the bankers and undertakers don’t wear three-piece suits! Reverend Flint just didn’t get it. He never, ever took the time to get to know who we are and how we live. And that’s why he’s gone!”

That comment, made to me by a member of the Reverend Flint’s congregation shortly after his failed ministry had come to a ragged end, points to at least two truths about new ministries. First, it suggests that congregations, like the communities of which they are a part, are cultures. All congregations have unique histories, unwritten rules, carefully observed customs, cherished traditions, spoken and unspoken expectations of ministers and members, functional norms, famous and infamous characters, powerful legends, set patterns of relating to insiders and outsiders as well as buildings and geographical settings.

And second, new ministers, like the Israelites heading into Canaan after a sojourn in another and different context, are entering a land which is new to them and must be thoroughly searched out.

Mark was a second-career minister who had grown up in a large, active, and affluent metropolitan church. However, after seminary, he found himself called to serve an established church in a rural community. In short, he found himself in a setting radically different from that which he had previously experienced. Regrettably, his model of ministry was limited to that appropriate to his large, urban church — lots of community-focused ministries, extensive education and music programs, highly liturgical worship. From day one of his work in a very different context, Mark set about the task of re-creating that small town church in the image of his previous church experience. Needless to say, the congregation, which had been in that community for over one hundred fifty years, and had seen many a pastor come and go, did not respond positively. Conflict ensued, and Mark's efforts were frustrated at every turn. Attendance at worship and church school declined sharply, giving decreased significantly, and participation in fellowship activities dried up. Finally, and wisely, since he would not adapt to his new circumstances, Pastor Mark moved to a church in an urban setting better suited to his model of ministry. But the church and its people had suffered, suffered over two years of mostly unnecessary and unproductive conflict, and suffered the humiliation of not being known and appreciated for who they were.

Like the first of the biblical Ten Commandments, this first commandment for new ministers is the most impor-

tant. If the new minister gets it right and follows it well, many of the other commandments will, if they do not fall completely into place, at least pose many fewer problems. Before we can minister faithfully and effectively in a new setting, we must understand that setting in all its richness and complexity. In entering the life of a congregation, we are crossing the River Jordan. We are entering new and unfamiliar territory, and we need to search it out carefully and understand it well if we are not only to survive, but thrive, therein. And so, we need ways to unearth the details and nuances of the current culture, the history of the people, and the specifics of the place to which God has called us to serve. There are a number of ways historical-cultural explorations can be undertaken, and some of this work can be done even before the new pastor arrives on the scene.

Written Histories

Reading church and community histories, if they are available, is an obvious first step and can be quite helpful. While generally written with a positive spin, these documents can help identify important people and key turning points in the congregation's and the community's life. A close, between-the-lines reading of these, along with annual reports and governing board records (not all of them, but a sampling of those from critical times in the congregation's life) will allow the new pastor to begin to understand some of the deeper currents which have shaped the congregation. Who were the founders, and why did they form the church? How did the congregation respond after

its building burned or when a major industry left the community or when there was a dramatic increase or decrease in population? What ministers are remembered fondly, and what were they like? What needs prompted new construction or remodeling? Was there a period of "glory days" that strongly imprinted the congregation's self-understanding? Are there long-standing Sunday school classes or fellowship groups that perhaps wield as much influence in the congregation's life as the governing board? What was part of the congregation's life at one point, but is no longer — a local ministry or a style of worship service, for example? When is the congregation at its best? What conflicts has the congregation engaged, and how has it handled them? Is the congregation relatively unified in its theological stance, or is there significant diversity of perspectives? What other churches are in the community, and what are relationships with them like?

By doing such reading, I learned one congregation I served had, in its earliest days, taken a special offering for the poor of its community every time the Lord's Supper was celebrated. In that act of faithfulness to Christ's command to care for the least was born the congregation's deep and abiding commitment to extend itself generously on behalf of the disenfranchised. In another, a long defunct but well-remembered "folk service" of the 1960s became the basis for continuing openness to innovations in worship. In yet another, the arrival of a new industry had meant a dramatic increase in the community's population, and a church previously stable in membership had struggled to integrate many newcomers.

Listening to the Old Timers

While written histories usually cast the past in its most favorable light and tend to soft-pedal problems, they nevertheless can give a broad overview from which to proceed to more personal and interactive cultural explorations. While much of this will happen naturally in the course of conversation, it is helpful to structure some occasions for information gathering. One I have found most helpful is to gather a few of the congregation's long-standing members in the church sanctuary to ask them to reminisce about important moments they recall happening in that special and sacred space. Weddings, baptisms, funerals, comedic moments, even the occasional memorable sermon may all be recounted. The conversation flowing among those older and faithful members is often a pleasure for the new pastor to overhear, and can be the source of crucial insight into congregational culture and dynamics.

On one such occasion, a very elderly gentleman⁸ said to the others gathered, "Remember when there was a movie projection booth up there on the back wall? And how we'd hang a sheet across the front of the chancel and show movies for the whole town?" (That, not surprisingly, occurred in a congregation with a tradition of opening its facilities, usually at no charge, for many outside groups as part of its ministry.) A gracious and rather quiet woman spoke up, — "Oh, and remember when we had that ten-inch downpour? The water just gushed through the roof. Wasn't it then that we changed to a center aisle and angled the pews towards one another so we can see each other as we worship. I like that."

— “And thank goodness for Mrs. Hasting’s bequest that helped us recover from that flood! What a wonderful Christian woman she was. I still miss her.” And in but a few moments, the new pastor knew where the congregation learned to keep their facilities in good repair, how the sanctuary found its present configuration, who one of the heroines of the past was, and that the congregation could see a crisis as an opportunity for change.

— “And remember when Reverend Anderson preached that sermon damning the board from here to eternity — mostly because it wouldn’t go along with him — and then stormed down the aisle taking those families with him? I always thought those folks would come back, but they never did.” In the long silence that followed, the sorrow over such divisiveness was palpable.

But more than just sharing and learning history, such conversation shows that the new minister cares about where the congregation has been before she arrived, and that she values the memories of the old timers. Furthermore, holding such a conversation in the sanctuary gently reminds the participants that worship is the heart of the church’s life. A tour of the entire building and grounds might well follow with more memories evoked and shared. Of particular interest here is how the use of various spaces has changed over time and why. If the church has a preschool, how were its rooms used previously? If the kitchen has been moved, when and for what purpose? What prompted additions or remodeling projects?

At the end of the tour, I like to sit the group down with a cup of coffee and ask them, “And where do you think our congregation needs to go in the future?” All kinds of answers usually come forth:

— “I hope we always have our good music in worship. That’s been such a blessing to me.”

— “We’ve got to figure out how we’re going to get more parking if we’re going to grow.”

— “We need to keep training people in caring for one another to keep our family feel, especially for folks who are new.”

— “Do you think we could ever build a retirement facility? Our community really needs one.”

By the end of this conversation, the members of this group know they are valued by the new pastor not only for their memories, but also for their dreams. It is likely that they will spread the word that the new pastor is eager to learn about the congregation, leading more folks to come forward with memories, stories, hopes, and visions. And the new pastor will know a tremendous amount about the congregation’s culture, history, and possibilities for the future.

History-Telling Congregational Supper

Another helpful approach to learning the culture is to have a congregational history-telling event in conjunction with a church supper. A good way to do this is to have people seated for the meal according to their presence during various pastorates (i.e., those who want to remember Pastor A’s time at one table, Pastor B’s at another, and so on, going back as far as possible). As people eat, they are asked to share what some of the congregational accomplishments were during that pastorate, and to recall what some of the challenges were. Using the word “challenges”

for the second part of this exercise elicits more complete and helpful input than using the words "problems" or "failures." A designated recorder for each group takes notes on what is shared.

After the supper, all the groups are gathered. A person other than the new pastor (a colleague from another church of the same denomination is often a good choice) asks each group to share its collections of accomplishments and challenges, allowing the new pastor to be in the role of observer. These are recorded on large sheets of paper, one for each pastorate, for all to see. This is best done chronologically, from the most distant up to the most recent pastorate.

Through this activity, congregational members will learn an enormous amount about their own history and thereby become clearer about the congregation's identity. Newcomers present (and they should be particularly encouraged to attend) will be helped as they become acquainted with the congregation's journey before they themselves came to be members. Usually there is lots of laughter; sometimes more than a few tears. The new pastor gets to observe not only all the information collected on the sheets of paper, but also the congregation at work on this task. What's the mood? Who seems to dominate, and who is *not* talking (these may be crucial people to listen to at another time)? Where are the awkward silences when something important, and perhaps painful, may not be coming out in full? And what are the main themes, traditions, commitments over time that distinguish this congregation's life? These issues will become clearer through this evening of reminiscing and storytelling, and with them much of the congregational history and culture. The pastor's later review of the sheets will help continuities

and norms of the congregation's life begin to emerge so that a sense of the parameters within which the congregation functions can be discerned.

Much more detailed and structured approaches for analyzing congregational culture are available, and it may be useful for the new minister to draw upon these, particularly if the congregation has recently, or repeatedly, experienced significant conflict. The roots of church conflict often run deep into its history, and the careful searching out of the background and sources of conflict will be essential in getting off to a good start.

It will also be worth the new pastor's time to contact one or more of the previous pastors of the congregation, particularly those pastors who served during a time of significant change in the church's life. The same issues of achievements and concerns explored by the congregation can be addressed fairly briefly, but often from a different, and hopefully insightful, perspective. Furthermore, make sure to check in with either a leader (i.e., bishop or executive) or long-term member of the denomination's regional governing body to get his or her perspective on what have been the identifying marks and moments of the congregation's life. Simply asking, "What comes to mind when you think of First Church?" will give a helpful capsule view of the congregation.

The Larger Community

Such historical and cultural explorations should not be limited to the congregation itself, as if the congregation lived in a vacuum apart from its community context. Un-

derstanding the community, and how it and the church interact, is crucial. An easy and usually pleasant way to learn about the community is to take an old timer (rather than a Chamber of Commerce community booster), either from within or without the church, and drive all over the community in which the church is located. This may take some time, especially if the church is in a large urban area, but it is time well spent. Asking the tour guide questions about how neighborhoods have changed, who lives in what neighborhoods, what abandoned buildings used to house, what used to be where new housing is going up, where people came from who lived in the community (e.g., ethnic migrations), what the economic base is and how it has changed over the years, what the schools are like, and so forth will yield an abundance of information. A good tour guide will share anecdotes that will help the new pastor begin to understand the local language, historical references, and legendary characters.

On such tours in different communities, I have quickly learned about the town dairy which had stood where the new high school now was located; about how and when the Italian American community had come to town, primarily to work as stonemasons; about past neighborhood rivalries so strong that crossing the wrong bridge into the wrong neighborhood could lead the offender to an unintended swim in the river below; about how the many churches in a city came to exist; about the environmental commitments of a developer who had beautifully laid out several subdivisions; about what a now-abandoned factory had meant to a community and what happened when the business had closed; about where to buy the freshest and cheapest seafood; about where the poor had moved

when displaced by gentrification; and about a local eccentric who sometimes got into a car stopped at a traffic light and asked to be taken home.

As the community tour is taken (and on other occasions), it is helpful for the new pastor to ask people she meets who are not members of the church what their impression of the church is. Is it perceived as friendly or unfriendly? Does it have a special program like a Christmas pageant or Lenten music presentation or Vacation Bible School that is valued by the larger community? Is it known as a church willing to help people in need? Listen to discern if there are significant differences between the church's self-perception and that of the larger community.

"Café Society"

In every community, no matter whether urban, suburban, small town, or rural, there are "local watering holes" where much of the community interaction occurs. Whether cafés or coffee shops, lunch counters or fast-food restaurants, pizza joints or taverns, time spent listening carefully in these gathering places will yield a wealth of information about how the community functions. It may take a while before the regulars begin talking freely, but the wise minister who lingers over a cup of coffee will eventually learn how the community sees the church being served, how local politics really work, what the most crucial issues affecting the community are (e.g., schools, employment, etc.). In addition, the minister will learn the best place to get a car repaired, who's the gentlest dentist, and all manner of other helpful information!

OBEYING THIS FIRST commandment allows the new minister to begin to see how he is going to fit in. To the extent allowed by our personal identity and integrity, we can conform our behavior to that of the congregation and community where we are called to serve, and not end up being the only person in town in a three-piece suit. The church is a community shaped by the grand narrative of God's work, by its specific corporate narrative, and by the narratives of its members. People appreciate having their stories, their place, their families, and their traditions taken seriously. They know they matter when the new pastor is not so driven by his own agenda that he will not take the time to "know who we are." And they will be more open to change if they are first assured the new minister understands the nature of what he desires to change and that he is not under the illusion that all really important ministry will occur subsequent to his arrival. A new minister who is full of ideas for the new congregation and does not obey this first commandment will sooner or later meet significant congregational resistance. On the other hand, one who is not driven by any particular agenda for change and does not obey this commandment may well find a ministry beset with stagnation. We simply cannot minister to or with a congregation until we know its people and their cultural context. Beginning this task of learning the history and culture is a crucial first step, and an important ongoing work to undergird a new ministry.

As the salesman sang in *The Music Man*: "Ya gotta know the territory!"

Thou Shalt Spend Thy Blue-Chips-for- Change on Changes That Matter

Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

MATTHEW 23:23

In the beginning of a new pastorate, there exists a window of opportunity for change during the so-called "honeymoon" period of the first twelve to eighteen months. During this time, the congregation is discovering who the new pastor is, and is often more willing than at later times to let the pastor initiate changes, even some quite substantial ones, in the life and ministry of the congregation. A new pastor has a certain number of significant changes she can initiate. These are her "blue chips," and they need to be spent wisely and well, for they are usually only two or three in number.