"If you had only told me..."

What pastors wish their parishioners would say to them

Got a minute?

Yes, I know you're busy with a million things to do today, and sitting down to speak with your pastor is at the bottom of your list, right after organizing the kids' closets and sorting out the canned rhubarb. But I really think we need to talk. Why? Because it's very easy for us to greet each other on Sunday, to exchange pleasantries during the coffee hour after the worship service and yet dance around important matters that affect our relationship as pastor and parishioner. In fact, it's entirely possible for us to spend the next decade merely talking at or past each other without really talking to each other.

Of course, I know that you don't want to bother me needlessly – you often comment about how busy I seem to be. But I don't want to be so preoccupied with my work that I become distant and unapproachable, like some evil genius hidden deep in a castle dungeon or a high priest who never exits the Holy of Holies.

May I tell you something? Pastors like myself crave feedback from their parishioners and often feel terrible when they are perceived as remote, or worse, disinterested. These misperceptions are sometimes based upon mistaken assumptions ("the pastor can't be bothered with that") or false conclusions ("if the pastor isn't a gregarious backslapper, then he must be a snob").

Allow me to share just a few of the things I wish you and others would discuss with me.

Sermons

Every Sunday I stand at the end of the aisle and greet my parishioners as they file out of the sanctuary, but very few ever make a comment – positive or negative – about the sermon. Some are thoughtful enough to thank me for the message, even when I haven't been in top form. But what I long for is interaction with the sermon. Do you understand the sermon? Was it helpful in your walk with the Lord? Was it edifying? Perhaps we should follow the example of our Presbyterian brothers who schedule a Q & A session following the service in order to discuss the sermon. Or maybe just a comment here or there about an insightful point made during the sermon, a helpful illustration or a pointed application would be constructive.

If there are criticisms of the sermon, I pray that I would be humble enough to accept them graciously without becoming defensive or upset. I still remember one parishioner (a mother with small children) who cautioned me about using highfalutin words like "pernicious" in a sermon. She was absolutely right. The temptation (especially for young pastors fresh out of seminary) is the urge to impress parishioners with the breadth of their learning and theological vocabulary. But a word fitly spoken will carefully deflate the over-inflated ego that insists upon throwing out terms like "semi-eschatological" during the course of a sermon.

By all means, never send your pastor an anonymous letter. I'm inclined to agree with a veteran pastor who once remarked there was a special place in hell reserved for people who write anonymous letters. Decency and Christian charity demand that we speak the truth to each other in love. If you have a specific complaint, don't bottle it up or let it simmer for months on end. Speak openly, calmly and judiciously with your pastor. He will respect you for it.
Pastoral needs

Some parishioners are reluctant to contact their pastor, even when there are serious pastoral needs. Some people don't want to burden the pastor; others simply never think of contacting the pastor or elder when a crisis arises. But any pastor worth his salt will drop whatever it is he is doing to attend to a pastoral need within the congregation. Few things are as frustrating and hurtful to a pastor as receiving word, second-hand, that a parishioner is in the hospital or has been diagnosed with cancer, or that a parishioner's unmarried daughter is now pregnant and won't come to church anymore.

Finances

Elders and deacons, please do your pastor a favor and discuss his finances with him on an annual basis (preferably before you draft the budget for the following fiscal year). Whatever you do, don't wait for him to come to you. Talk to your pastor and see if he is meeting his family's financial needs. Find out if he is adequately prepared for his retirement or if he needs to make changes to his financial habits. Just don't leave him in the dark. Perhaps he's too embarrassed about his finances to approach the deacons or fears that he'll be rebuffed or humiliated if he expresses any financial needs.

You see, there are many things that we need to talk about. So pull up a chair and let's begin.

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