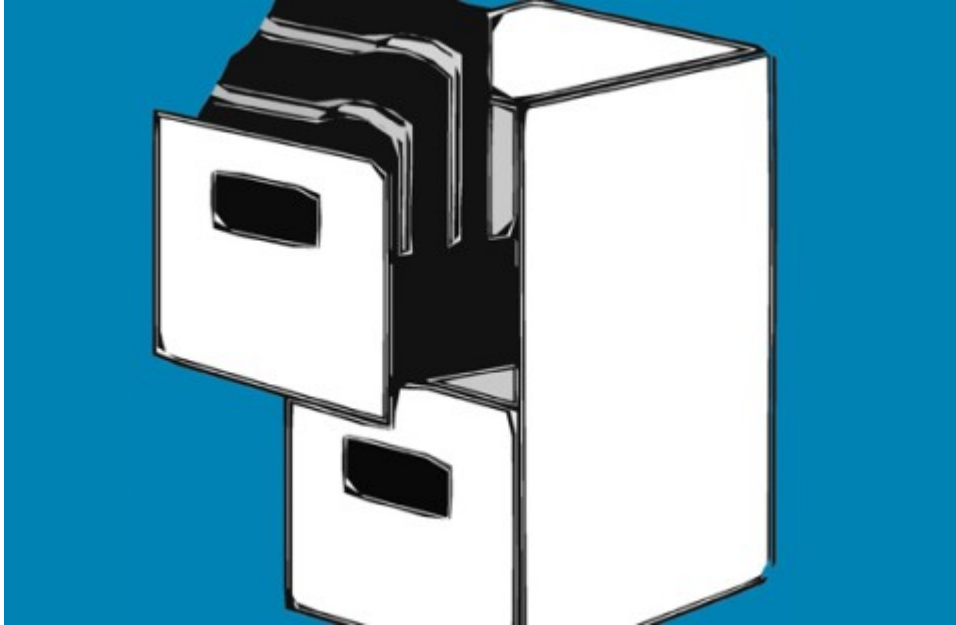


Paper chase: Case by case

by [Ellen Blue](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue



*Congregational life presents a broad range of conflicts and dilemmas in which theological and ecclesial issues are entwined with the complex drama of human relations. Such challenges are also moments in which Christian witness can be clarified. This fictional narrative, which is followed by an analysis, is the second in a series. This story first appeared in *Attentive to God: Thinking Theologically in Ministry* and is used here by permission of Abingdon Press.*

Being a senior pastor seemed to come naturally to Larry. He had grown up working in his parents' business after school and during summer vacations, and he had seen his parents deal effectively with employees in many kinds of situations. When he went away to college and took some management courses, he discovered that his parents had intuitively been applying several management theories, especially those that called for helping employees enjoy their work and expand their capabilities.

When he went to seminary, he discovered some other ways of looking at how his parents had dealt with employees: he found theological language about empowerment and treating others as one might treat Christ. He had come to see one task of a senior pastor as helping the members of his staff to grow spiritually

and to learn to answer more fully the call of God upon their lives.

Not surprisingly, Larry's staff worked well together, and their congregation was growing steadily. The new associate pastor, Stephanie, was relatively young herself and quite enthusiastic about her new position, which focused on children and youth. In her first six months, the youth group gained several new members and became a more visible and active part of the church.

At a staff retreat in January, Larry and the staff picked out several Sundays for special churchwide emphasis in the coming year. One of them was the Sunday in April nearest Earth Day. Stephanie was excited about that choice because she was convinced that every age group among the children and youth could participate in some appropriate way.

Larry had always avoided micromanagement, and it never occurred to him to ask Stephanie for a complete rundown on what she planned to do with every single age group. He learned by reading the draft of the April newsletter that the senior high youth were going to observe Earth Day and celebrate the gift of God's good creation by washing dishes. Specifically, they were going to wash the dishes that they hoped the adults would use instead of paper plates and cups for the coffee time that preceded the 11 o'clock worship each week. They planned to continue the project through the Sundays in April and May and then decide whether they would extend it into the summer.

"Hmm," Larry thought, "that sounds like a lot of work. I hope Stephanie doesn't wind up doing the dishwashing herself, and I'll bet they don't carry on through the summer. But it's a great idea, and it's certainly in tune with the resolution we passed at our regional conference last year to ask our conference center to avoid using paper tableware. We'll just see how it goes."

Ten days later, four days after the newsletter had been mailed out, Larry got a call from Stan Mitchell, a parishioner in his late sixties who made one of the larger financial pledges each year and faithfully fulfilled the obligation. Stan asked to see Larry, and they set up an appointment for that afternoon. Larry found himself wondering several times what Stan wanted to see him about; he was not the sort of person Larry expected to ask for counsel or help with a problem. It crossed Larry's mind that since Stan was a former executive who had retired a year or so ago, he might be thinking about estate planning and want some advice about making a gift

to the church. Larry was always mildly uncomfortable discussing money, but he steeled himself to be ready if that was the conversation Stan had in mind.

He found himself watching for Stan's arrival, and when he saw Stan's BMW enter the parking lot, he went to the door to greet him. "How's retirement?" he inquired, and was surprised to hear Stan's answer that it was not necessarily all it was cracked up to be. As Larry listened, he thought he detected an undertone of boredom in Stan's description of his new life. After a while, he asked what in particular Stan had wanted to discuss with him.

Though he thought he was prepared for whatever Stan might say, Larry was shocked to hear him speak angrily about the youth group's Earth Day project. Within a few sentences, he made it clear that he considered the project a personal insult to him and his former occupation.

"Stan," said Larry, "I'm sorry you're upset. I need a little help, though, in understanding how you feel this relates to your career. The paper company you worked for produces cardboard containers, doesn't it? I had never heard that it makes paper plates and cups, too!"

"It doesn't," Stan replied, "but that's beside the point. What the church is saying is that people who make paper are bad. She's making me feel like my whole life was a sinful waste. It wasn't! I've done lots of good things for this church that ought to be appreciated."

"She?" Larry asked, fearing he knew the answer.

"That new youth minister," Stan said. "She's stirred the young folks up about this. There are plenty of us in this town and in this church who've made our livings making paper. Who is she to condemn us?"

"Uh, I don't think that's what she had in mind at all," Larry said. "And if you didn't make paper plates and cups, I'm not sure why you're feeling that this is aimed at you personally."

"Paper is paper," Stan said firmly, "and sin is sin. You had better stop her before she runs me off and everybody else who's had to work for a living. Somebody has to pay the bills around here." Looking at his watch, he stood up and said, "I've got to go. I have to pick up my wife at the hairdresser. She wants me to go with her to pick out

a lamp. She's been buying lamps without me for 44 years, and I don't see why I have to get involved now."

"Stan, could we talk some more about this tomorrow or the next day?" Larry asked. "I see that you feel very strongly about this, but I'm not sure I understand all I need to about your objection to the project."

Stan made an appointment to return to see Larry in two days. When he left the office, Larry just sat there, wondering, "How could I have been so wrong about why Stan was coming in? What will I say to him day after tomorrow? And I better talk to Stephanie today."

Read [M. Craig Barnes's response](#)