How to con a pastor

A few friendly pointers

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the September 18, 2013 issue

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So you've decided to make your way in life by bilking ministers. There are easier strategies; most pastors don't have much money. Moreover, defrauding clergy violates several of the Ten Commandments—seven and eight, most obviously, but also a side of two and, if it's a Sunday, three.

But if you're going to do it anyway, at least try to give us a decent performance. Having spent a number of years now in the kinds of churches that entertain the travelers of the grift circuit, I've learned a few things about rip-off attempts. I've seen some great efforts—even some leaving me uncertain that they were scams—and others that were just shamefully bad. How can you increase your odds of walking away with some cash?

Don't appeal to naked pity. Straight-up sob stories are not usually effective. We hear a lot of them. We give a lot of our money, and sometimes our congregation's money, to fund social service agencies and other emergency aid outlets. And a lot of us are compassion burnouts. We need variety in our lives like anyone else.

Do appeal to more complex motivations. Be in some other kind of trouble, something that doesn't immediately call dollar signs to mind—ideally, something that is at least partly of your own making. Remember that our business is aiding

sinners, not victims. Protection from danger is a good thing to need, or moral counsel for a serious dilemma. Most of us imagine helping people in tight spots or wading into morally ambiguous waters. Let us do that!

Relatedly, *don't* act really religious. Pastors are often less pious and less gullible than you'd expect, and it's not unusual to meet a good-hearted pastor who distrusts or even scorns ostentatious sanctimony. Besides, if you are so God-fearing, full of faith and quick with a Bible verse, surely a pastor who actually knows you would have fronted the cost of a transit pass. Like the pity case, this play is just too obvious.

On the other hand, *do* come off as skeptical, reluctant and even morally dubious. You don't have a church. You don't feel at ease in one. Remember that most pastors don't really believe in innocence and aren't attracted to it. Most of us expect people to be radically flawed, and we're gratified when someone doesn't pretend not to be. It simultaneously validates our worldview and engages our need to be helpful.

To summarize where we've been so far, a bad play might go like this: "Good morning to you, Pastor! Praise the Lord! How are you today? Me, I'm blessed (or doing my best to pray without ceasing like the Lord says, or just trying to walk in his ways). I was wondering if you could help me with a little problem I'm having."

At this point I know you're a fraud and you're after money that I don't have. My mind quickly shifts to getting you out of my church as soon as possible so I can spend the rest of my Sunday afternoon watching baseball.

A good play starts out like this: "Look, I don't know if I should even be here." At this point maybe offer to leave—a risky move, but potentially persuasive. "I'm in trouble. I thought maybe if I could talk to someone or pray with someone I could figure things out."

If you really sell this part, money doesn't even enter my head yet. However hardened and cynical a pastor might be—and there are urban pastors who make beat cops look like Henry James heroines—he or she most likely still believes in the possibility of the sincerely lost sheep.

More than that, some of us are still eager to meet these creatures. This is a hard part of the short con. You need to seem a little desperate, maybe even a little scary, but not so much that the pastor puts you out or calls the cops. It's hard for me to

juggle multiple suspicions. If my first thought is, “What if this guy is dangerous?” and you’re in the door long enough to resolve that fear, my mind will not immediately leap to, “What if this guy is ripping me off?”

Moving on: *don’t* talk about money early in the pitch. If you can avoid it, don’t talk about it at all. Remember that we didn’t get into this line of work to hand out cash to people, we don’t really like dealing with money (unless we’re crooked ourselves, in which case good luck), and many of us are weighed down by our personal and institutional need of it. The sooner money comes up, the sooner we figure out that something’s suspicious.

On the other hand, *do* stick with a compelling story. Here’s what we, often as not, *did* get into this line of work to do: to hear people’s stories. Give us a good, meaty problem—not something outlandish but something likely to be outside our daily experience. Get us engrossed in the story so we’re looking for ways to help. Make sure to repeat some bad religious advice you got from another pastor, which bank-shots our desire to help off of our vocational vanity.

We don’t want to give out money, but we do want to provide counsel, forgive sins, give aid, make calls on people’s behalf. If you’ve got a good story and—this is crucial—you tell it in a disorganized, nonlinear fashion, reluctantly dropping new and fascinating details, you stand a good chance of really engaging your target.

Doing this plausibly is enormously difficult. Even a youngish pastor like me has heard a lot of crap and is not as bad at detecting it as you might think. The short con requires good acting and patience, because the most effective play is one that leaves the mark to *suggest* giving the money—especially as an alternative to doing something more difficult.

If you do all these things well, you’ll walk off with a twenty more easily than a wheelchair-bound dialysis patient can get a five. A really good confidence game is just a one-person play in which the fourth wall is totally demolished. If you can get people to *want* to believe it, they’ll believe it—and if you can get them to believe it, they’ll want to participate, too.

And that, in a nutshell, is the theological significance of your unusual line of work. The true confidence trickster is a rare specialist, but a lot of human interactions have the structure of a confidence game. The truth of a given matter is not always the main concern. The way we select and withhold details—in everything from the

personnel file to the funeral sermon—is not meant to bear full and fearless witness to everything we know and are. It’s meant to create a particular effect.

A pastor wants to be complimented on a sermon he knows was mediocre because he’s depressed and wants to be validated by his people. The people want to give the compliment because they want a good relationship with their pastor. Except for the very few things we witness or are informed of by reliable third parties, we have to take people’s confessions at something like face value. The presenting issue—the mediocre sermon, the desperate trouble—is sometimes not much more than a baffle hiding a need for validation, for a sense of purpose. A good con game will be indistinguishable from a truly needy case, and it will succeed for the same interpersonal reasons.

In long-term human relationships, confidence (or its lack) comes from endless iterations of interactions. I wholly trust my parents to be honest with me in matters pertaining to my own well-being and to look out for my interests as far as they can. When I take their advice, it is not because I have investigated it thoroughly myself. It’s because I have always experienced them as capable and trustworthy. Your challenge—and it is not always so different from ours as pastors—is to create that kind of confidence in the space of one conversation.