

Ten things I didn't learn in seminary: Politics of the pastorate

by [John Esau](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue

1. Church members want pastors to succeed. Yes, there will always be resistance to change, and we pastors tend to fall into thinking that the church and its members are against us. But when we do, we are theologically and practically wrong. The church is our friend and our ally. It is in the church's self-interest for those of us in pastoral roles to do well.

2. Pastors are called to be priest and prophet with a little bit of king thrown in. We have no problem with the prophet side of this: most pastors want to be agents of change, spokespersons for God. We are ready to embrace the public ministry of teaching and preaching. But there are two other nonnegotiables to pastoral ministry: the priestly or the person-to-person ministry carried out in face-to-face relationships, and the kingly, the administrative ministry of caring for the church as a whole.

3. Pastoral ministry is a political vocation. This may not come as good news, but it is a reality with which we must come to terms. Pastoral survival depends upon the broad consensus and support of those whom we are serving. This doesn't mean doing what we think people want done, or saying what we think they want to hear and losing our own sense of authenticity and integrity in the process. But in my experience, any pastor who's done well has possessed some political smarts and good judgment.

4. Perception is more important than piety. Perception is the evidence of the truest form of spirituality, the ability to see and hear accurately. Piety is not the same thing, but we often have trouble understanding the difference. Accurate perception—about oneself, other people, reality in general, and about God—is the greatest key to functioning effectively in ministry.

5. Persons with significant personality disorders ought not to be in ministry. These are what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychological Disorders* calls Axis II problems. In most respects persons with Axis II personality disorders do not appear

to be ill, and that makes diagnosis difficult. Yet they are unable to perceive reality. They are often highly rational and logical, with an incredible ability to justify their own behavior. They will always claim that someone else is at fault if something goes wrong. This has been one of the most important learnings for me, but also one of the saddest because there is so little that can be done to change the destructive patterns.

6. Pastors probably won't be tried for heresy, but we may come close to crucifixion if we fail to respond pastorally to crises. Not to respond to a personal crisis in the congregation because it is one's day off or because it is "after hours" is inexcusable and will, I can assure you, become grounds for dismissal.

7. The office of ministry empowers us to do things we didn't know we could do. One of the reasons that I am so passionate about the importance of the pastoral office is that I learned how valuable it was in enabling me to function beyond my natural gifts—beyond myself. There is also grace in the church's office of ministry that it grants to us while we serve within it.

8. We pastors have to create our own support group; the church won't and can't do it for us. This is not to say we can't have friends in the church or that there don't need to be structures within the congregation to deal with important pastoral agendas. This is also not to say that the church as a whole can't minister to us, even as we minister to it. When good ministry happens, there is a mutuality experienced and shared. But when it comes to finding personal relationships that support, nourish and give us perspective on life and ministry, we must find them ourselves. No one owes us this. No one can do this for us.

9. There is no single personality type that makes an ideal minister. Myer's-Briggs and the Enneagram are not predictors of pastoral success or failure. I have observed congregations get the pastor they thought they wanted, only to discover too late that they got what they didn't want. I have also learned that there are a significant number of introverted pastors in what some have described as the extroverted job of ministry. What we introverts have had to do is to learn how to be temporary extroverts.

10. Ministry is good. In fact, I have come to believe that we ought to speak about the *gift* of ministry, not as something we give to the church but that the church gives us. It is a daunting task that requires our highest levels of competence and character.

The margins for error have been greatly narrowed in ministry as in many other vocations. But in this opportunity to serve God through pastoral ministry we have been given a wonderful gift, one that is personally enriching and potentially fulfilling in the most ultimate manner—for the glory of God and the kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

As the apostle Paul said: “Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:1).