

# **SPRC TRAINING EVENT 2008**

by Michael G. Roberts, District Superintendent

A few weeks ago I had a conversation with an uncle of mine about the church he was attending and the controversy surrounding the pastor of that church. Just for your information, this is not a United Methodist church and it is not located anywhere within a 100 mile radius so don't try to figure out who or where. Suffice it to say that in this denomination the pastors are not appointed. There are no District Superintendents and no Bishops.

According to my uncle (and I admit that I've only heard one side of the story), there is a power struggle in that church. The pastor has been there for 17 years and now, for no publicly stated reason, the two "ruling families" of the church have decided that this long term and very productive pastor needs to go. Again – no stated reason – just that he needs to go. My uncle says that the majority of the church members are solidly behind the pastor and do not want him to leave. In fact, a church-wide conference was held and the vast majority of those present voted to retain the pastor. In this church, unlike the United Methodist Church and most of the churches in this other denomination, church-wide votes apparently are taken regarding the pastor's status.

On a hunch, I asked my uncle if the pastor was in his early to mid-fifties. He said he was and I shared with him the mind set that many churches of that denomination have: Once a pastor turns fifty, the congregation begins to think that they have to have a younger pastor – and this is where that denomination and ours is a great deal alike. Most churches in both denominations want pastors who possess engaging personalities and very bright minds. They want outstanding preachers who will spend 15-20 hours per week in sermon preparation but only preach 15-20 minutes each Sunday. The pastor will spend 20 hours per week visiting in homes and nursing homes, and he or she will make drop-in visits at all of the members' businesses as well as community activities. But they also want the pastor to spend 8 hours a day in the office and be there when someone calls or needs to come by and talk. He must be a very good administrator – knowing every thing that's going on in the church. He is to be available for all weddings and baptisms and funerals. He needs to belong to at least one civic organization and attend all the church activities from children's plays to mission

trips. He needs to attend all of the evening business and program committees. He needs to be married and have two or three children - certainly no more than four, because children mess up parsonages. If a parsonage is provided, the pastor should have no pets. The parsonage and parsonage yard must be kept clean and well manicured. And finally, the pastor should be no older than 32 years of age and have 25 years' experience.

That is what practically every church wants in a pastor. But I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that there is no such pastor. He or she does not exist. But the good news is that almost every pastor I know possesses at least some of those qualities or several of those qualities in varying degrees. Your pastor possesses some of those qualities. But not all of them.

Now to be perfectly fair, there are some pastors who have equally unrealistic expectations about their churches. You can probably detail those expectations better than I can, but suffice it for me to say that even though pastors are called by God they have not yet reached perfection. They are going on toward perfection, but in the meantime they are still very much human with human tendencies.

In fact, even though I want you to know that being a pastor for 35 years before taking this job causes me to be a little partial, I realize that there are pastors who are either in the wrong church or maybe in the wrong vocation. I was at a District Superintendents retreat last week and Greg Jones of Duke Divinity School was one of our speakers. He told us of the ongoing struggle they are having of helping some students realize that what they think qualifies them for ministry is really not qualification at all. He told the story of a young seminary student who asked one of his supervisors to list some qualities a pastor should possess. After hearing terms like humility, patience, long-suffering, hard working, insightful, compassionate but firm, studious, sacrificial, leadership builder, visionary, administrator, recruiter, teacher, preacher, counselor, financial and personnel specialist, program director, and skill in dealing with all age groups --- after hearing that litany of qualities, the young puzzled prospective pastor asked, "Well, what ever happened to just being good looking, bright and charming?"

I admit to you that there are a few pastors who think they can get by on their appearance and charisma. But there are an equal number of churches that have unrealistic expectations of their pastors and other staff members. Finding the balance is the challenge that we all face: Bishops, District Superintendents, SPR Committees and Pastors.

Next let me say that I don't think we will find the answer to that dilemma in *The Book of Discipline*. *The Book of Discipline* is (in my opinion) a good starting point. It sets the framework for how to conduct business, and I do believe that all churches need to stay within that framework. Departing from it will only set the stage for future failures on the part of the pastor and congregation. That said, however, I don't believe all the answers to problems that arise in the local church can be found in the book of law, the *Discipline*. At some point in time, other qualities have to be the rule of order. The *Discipline* cannot possibly cover all of the possibilities that will arise in the local church, so other guidelines need to be considered.

What I want to do in the time we have together tonight is not stick our noses into the *Discipline* and think that if we do it just this way all our problems will be solved. As I've already said, I think the *Discipline* does give us excellent guidelines. There are things we do according to the *Discipline* and it helps us stay out of trouble. For instance the *Discipline* says:

1) Committee members should be "engaged in and attentive to their Christian spiritual development. . . ." In other words, nominal Christians have no business on this committee, and Christians who are on the committee should be intentionally growing in their faith. Talk to your Lay Leadership committee and tell them not to put someone on the SPR who is sporadic in their church attendance, who doesn't attend Sunday School or Disciple Bible Study, who isn't a part of a small discipleship group, who isn't mission-minded and who is not generous with their time, talents service and gifts. Actually you can say that about all positions of leadership in the church, but especially the Staff Parish Relations Committee. How can a person on SPR objectively give guidance to the pastor and other church staff members when they are not personally engaged in their own spiritual growth and they are not supportive of the things the pastor and staff are passionate about?

2) The *Discipline* also says that along with the Pastor and staff, SPR members should identify the church's values, goals and mission. What's your church's purpose and how can you help your pastor fulfill that purpose? Does your church have a written mission statement? If so, what are your pastor and staff doing to live out that mission statement?

3) The *Discipline* says that the SPR committee should assist the pastor and staff in identifying their "real" gifts and how those gifts can best be used. Let me explain this: Most preachers will describe themselves as good or above average preachers and, therefore, they don't have to spend as much time in sermon preparation as others need to. But that's not true. Let's face it: At least half of all preachers are average or less than average. Now, without insulting your pastor you can help him or her to see that maybe they should take a continuing ed course in preaching. Maybe you could encourage your pastor to set aside one afternoon each week when he or she will not be interrupted and can study and write sermons. In my first appointment I had a dear lady suggest that I take a month off during the upcoming summer and do nothing but work on sermon topics and preparation. I didn't do it but I should have. Or how about this: If your pastor lacks a pastoral bedside manner during hospital visitation, you can lovingly encourage him or her to do some reading on pastoral care or even accompany another pastor on hospital visitations to see how it's done more effectively.

Of course, the key to all the suggestions you make to your pastor is "how" you make the suggestions. If you have taken the time to develop a good rapport with your pastor, he or she will take your suggestions as a sincere effort to improve the ministry and the church. On the other hand, without a tactful loving approach your pastor may be hurt and become defensive.

All the details of how the SPRC is to work can be found in the *Discipline*, paragraph 259.2 and following.

Let me also say that those dreaded evaluation forms that you receive late each summer could be excellent tools in helping your pastor develop the skills he or she needs to conduct ministry. Frankly, I don't know anyone who really likes to do those forms. Most SPR members don't like telling pastors how to do their jobs, and those that do enjoy it probably shouldn't be the ones setting

the bar. Now if you have the perfect pastor and you are the perfect SPR Committee – no problem. But if your situation is anything short of perfect, there will be a tension among the SPR members when evaluating a pastor - and there should be. What you say to your pastor during those times of evaluation can be devastating, so I recommend the following:

- 1) Saturate your meeting – before, during, and after – with prayer.
  
- 2) See the Fall evaluation time as one when you truly want to help your pastor become a better pastor. Don't even discuss possible changes in the appointment at the evaluation meeting. That's the time you are trying to make your pastor and church the best they can be, and talk of a pastoral change at that time can be detrimental. "Why even try?"
  
- 3) Do not compare your pastor with other pastors – especially ones that have preceded him/her or those that serve in churches close by.
  
- 4) Start out listing all the things you really like about your pastor, and list them in glowing detail. Be sure to tell him/her why you are glad he/she is your pastor and list all the things he/she has done right.
  
- 5) Be fair in your criticisms. Remember that 50% of all pastors are average or below average preachers. Every church cannot have a dynamic communicator. But where a pastor lacks one skill, he/she might more than make up for it in other areas. It's always wonderful to have a great orator, but when you or someone you love is going through a crises, what do you want, a great speech maker or a compassionate pastor and sound counselor? What I'm saying is this: Your pastors can attend preaching seminars; you can encourage your pastor to set aside a full day each week to do nothing but research and write. You can encourage your pastor join a toastmasters group or take a Dale Carnegie course, and your pastor will improve in the area of preaching --- SOME. But they will never be classified as among the "greats." Remember also that not all pastors will be great administrators. In fact, some of them cannot balance their own check book, let alone understand all the details of a church finance report. In these situations, instead of criticizing your pastor for

administrative failures, why not surround him or her with volunteers or (if you can afford it) hire a staff person who can do that work and free up your pastor to do the things he/she excels at? And let's face it folks: Some pastors are just timid and a little shy. They're not bubbly and effervescent. Some of them even seem "stand-offish." And what you might perceive as disinterest or even unfriendliness is really a sign of insecurity. Well, guess what's going to happen when your evaluation says that he/she is distant, uncaring, unfriendly, and generally cool to the membership? I'll tell you what is going to happen: They're going to withdraw further into a shell of insecurity. Some pastors are just not back-slappers and glad-handers, but they are great listeners and prayer warriors. The bottom line is this: Be fair in your criticism, and focus on those areas that can be improved upon. When there is improvement, affirm your pastor and hand out some "attaboys" or "attagirls." Remember that the carrot is much more effective than the stick - especially with preachers.

6) Take into consideration that (in most cases) you weren't just assigned a pastor, you were assigned a pastoral family. I'm not implying that you should expect the pastor's spouse to play the piano, teach a Sunday School class, lead the UMW or UMM and be present every time the church doors are open. Neither should you expect the pastor's children to be little angels. When you receive a pastor, most of the time you receive a conglomeration of personalities, likes, dislikes, needs, peculiarities, gifts, talents, skills, illnesses, insecurities, resentments. . . . Let me stop here and remind you that a lot of spouses and children who come to your church are not happy to be there. Children have had to leave very secure environments and best friends and ball teams, and if they are teenagers they have had to forfeit their hopes of graduating with their classmates. Spouses have left secure jobs and now they are unemployed, and the family income will be drastically cut until they find employment - where they will have to start at the bottom - again. Let's face it folks: All parsonages are not equal. Some pastor families leave spacious new parsonages or housing allowances only to move to 40-, 50-, 60-year-old parsonages that are smaller and need lots of work, the children will have to share rooms, or there is no room for what few articles of furniture they have been able to accumulate. Put yourself in that situation: You are told where to live, the size house you will live in, and the colors that all the rooms will be. The furniture is left over from the previous pastors (plural) who inherited it when a prominent church member decided they no longer wanted

it in their house. (Fortunately, there is not as much of that as there use to be.) But just put yourself in that situation and understand that for your pastor and pastoral family, sensitivities can be at a high and insecurities and disappointments can be deep. This will effect the performance of your pastor. Keep that in mind when you are doing your evaluations.

7) Finally, when you report on the outcome of the evaluations, make sure that the spokesperson for the group is tactful, compassionate and genuinely desirous of the pastor's emotional and professional well being. Pastors are deeply emotionally invested in what they do, and when an evaluation is handled critically or even matter-of-factly, as though it is nothing more than a sales or status report, it can be discouraging and demoralizing. So put your best and most compassionate communicator in charge of detailing the evaluations.

So far we've talked mostly about the evaluation process that takes place each Fall. Let me shift gears a little and talk about a couple of other issues that seem to be recurring issues.

The one complaint I hear more than any other from church members – not SPR members but members in general – is that the Pastor has loaded the SPRC with all his or her favorites and nobody else's concerns or complaints are considered or even heard. You need to know that I have an open door policy and I will listen to almost anyone who calls or writes. But during the course of the conversation I always ask, "Are you a member of the SPR and if not, have you communicated your concern with them?" At this point I'm usually told "They won't listen. The preacher has stacked the SPR, and if you disagree with him or her on anything, nobody listens."

Well, I try not to pass judgment on the validity of those complaints; they might or might not be true. But I do want you to know how important it is to listen to everyone in your church. Even if you feel the complaints are without merit, your position on the SPR necessitates that you listen objectively and then you try to mediate. Hopefully there will be a simple explanation and the issue can be resolved. If not and the issue keeps surfacing, you have the responsibility to speak to your pastor about it and perhaps even bring it up at the next SPR meeting. The important thing to remember here is to be open, fair and objective.

The final thing I want to talk about tonight is setting pastoral compensation. It is the SPR's responsibility to recommend salary levels for the pastor(s) and other staff and employees. I personally want to encourage you to remember a few things:

- 1) Cost of living adjustments are not raises – but they certainly are appreciated when actual raises cannot be afforded. Try to give your pastors and staff raises. If you can't, at least try to make cost of living adjustments. If you can't do that, at least observe Pastor Appreciation Month in October.
  
- 2) Secondly, remember that the SPR can only make recommendations to the Charge Conference regarding pastors' salaries. The Charge Conference can adjust those recommendations up or down when it meets, but your role is to recommend. Also, there is a misunderstanding about the role of the Finance Committee regarding salaries and other expenditures of the church. The Finance Committee serves in an advisory capacity when it comes to salaries and setting budget. They can make recommendations, but the SPR has the responsibility of recommending the salaries – not the Finance Committee. In fact, when the Administrative Board or the Charge Conference votes on budgets or expenditures or salaries, it is the Finance Committee's responsibility to make sure the wishes of the Board are carried out. One way to understand this is to remember that the Finance Committee is the "How Committee" – not the "How Much Committee."
  
- 3) Third, we have a problem in the Annual Conference with the way pastors' compensation packages are being computed and reported. Quickly let me say that the SPR is not the source of the problem - but the SPR is the only group that can help resolve the problem. The problem revolves around the issue of Accountable Reimbursement.

First let me say that I don't know of any business or any salary paying organization that says to its CEO or its employees: "We are going to set your salary at X amount of dollars (say \$50,000) but we expect you to pay all of your travel, business and other professional expenses out of this salary and we are not going to reimburse you. If you want to, you can take part of the salary we give you and designate it as Accountable Reimbursement for tax purposes, but that's up to you." There are four major problems with this:

- a. If you expect your pastor to pay all of his or her professional expenses out of the salary, then you're really not paying a \$50,000 salary. You're paying between \$40,000 and \$45,000. Like I said, I don't know any business that does it that way.
- b. Second, if you let your pastor choose how much he wants to designate as an Accountable Reimbursement total and then report that to the IRS, he is breaking the law and you are encouraging it.
- c. Third, because most preachers don't understand the correct way of setting up an accountable reimbursement, many of them are claiming things as accountable reimbursement that should not be claimed. Again, if the IRS were to ever call their hand on it, they would be in a world of trouble.
- d. Fourth, because there are a few churches that are doing Accountable Reimbursements correctly, when their pastors are moved they are often hurt financially. I'll explain this in a minute.

So, what do we do? Well, beginning at this session of Annual Conference we are asking all churches who receive a new pastor to create a legitimate Accountable Reimbursement for their pastor(s). Next Fall, when all salaries are considered, we will be asking all the remaining churches to create an Accountable Reimbursement. We don't have time to go into a lot of detail about it tonight, but basically this is how it will work.

When you set your pastors' salary, we want you to take into consideration what it will cost your pastor to do ministry. Create a line item in your budget that will reflect that amount, or as much of that amount as you can afford. This will not be reported as part of salary, but it will be reported on a separate form at Charge Conference so that the Bishop and Cabinet can know how to treat pastors when they do eventually move. In other words, we wouldn't want to move a pastor who is making \$50,000 with a \$7,000 A.R. to a church that pays \$52,000 but only has a \$2,000 A.R. That would actually amount to a \$5,000 loss in income for that pastor, so we will need all that information during the appointment process. Then, when that line item is set, the pastor will be responsible for submitting receipts and mileage reports before he or she can draw from the account. It will be a "use-it-or-lose-it" account.