

WHY I LEFT THIS CHURCH

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The church, we had joined, was perfect.

It had a divinely-inspired minister; strong, well-written By-Laws; a long-range planning committee; a sound budget; a Community College which offered Christian and non-Christian classes to the entire community; a working Church Council; and a church staff that was always available to help.

Yet, shortly after we joined, something went terribly wrong.

THE MINISTER'S FALL FROM GRACE

It seems when the minister was hired, his good friend of many years, Rev. Winthrop, had been the interim minister. Normally, the interim would leave the church when the new minister is hired; but, because they were friends, the new minister, Dr. David Brown, decided to keep the interim minister as an Associate Minister. This was a BIG MISTAKE.

Almost immediately, there arose a clan that believed that the interim minister was a better minister. That clan began to find fault with all that Dr. Brown did or said. Finally, accusations of wrong-doing were made — in secret. The Church Council had some group look into the accusations. However, rather than use the By-Laws, this group met with the church's lawyer who brokered a deal.

Under this deal, Dr. Brown was "released" and paid the full year's salary and benefits. Dr. Winthrop was released and paid the full year's salary and benefits. Another interim minister would be hired and a search begun for a suitable new minister.

Since Dr. Brown was paid over \$100,000 per year (including benefits) and Dr. Winthrop was paid almost as much, it forced the church into deficit financing. So much for a sound budget.

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TEST YOUR CHRISTIANITY

I believe that if you ever want to test your Christianity, you should join a church committee. However, Peggy and I wanted to make a difference in our church so we joined a couple.

LONG RANGE PLANNING COMMITTEE (LRPC)

I joined the Long Range Planning Committee. This was not a group of planners, it was a group of philosophers who were perfectly content to examine the churches role in Christianity through the ages and other such esoteric topics. The members even voted not to write any reports to the Church Council. Originally, when I joined, the Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) met once-a-week. I convinced them to meet once-a-month; but that didn't change their desire to remain a debating society.

When it came to the end of the service term for the current leader, no one volunteered to be the Chairman. I said, as I was rushing out the door, "IF no one else will accept it, I'll be the new chairman."

Someone interrupted my next meeting to tell me I had been elected Chairman of the Long Range Planning Committee.

I instituted an agenda for meetings. Each topic was spelled out and a prescribed time to discuss it. No time was allocated to endless debates on esoteric topics. IF it was not on the agenda, a topic had to be postponed until the next meetings IF 50% or more thought we should discuss it.

Needless to say, some members were excited when I resigned from the committee after my final Church Council meeting discussed later.

I'M A TRUSTEE

Not getting enough abuse, I decided to become a Trustee on the Board of Trustees. Once I was on the Board, I discovered that the committee didn't make many decisions. The Chairman of the Board ran a tight ship and controlled all that was discussed. IF he disapproved of the topic, it didn't get discussed or was postponed until it was forgotten.

It turns out that the Annual Budget was created by him, at his home, with time running out to meet the requirements of the By-Laws. He had another guy "help" him compose it; but, it was an accepted fact that whatever

the Chairman wants, this guy nods in agreement. There would be no discussion — only a vote, at the next meeting, to agree with the proposals. By the way, that meeting would be three months later. The Board would not meet in the interim because some of the members were Snow Birds and would be up North during those months.

I met with his Assistant, who was charged with compiling the funding allocations for each of the committees and clubs of the church. He was a Snow Bird and disclosed that he didn't have time to meet with those groups so he always used the funding requests from the year prior — which he created in the same manner as he was doing this year.

I asked what guidance had been given to the Choir Committee about funding a new Choir Director. I was told it would not be a problem as that committee would — surely — keep costs in line.

As it turns out, over the summer, while the Board of Trustees was not meeting, the Choir Committee met and hired a new Choir Director. Unfortunately, because the Committee did not do any research, the part-time Choir Director was getting paid more than one of the full-time Associate Ministers. So, to keep the Associate Minister happy, the church, A. K. A. the Board of Trustees, had to increase the pay of the Associate Minister.

All this because the Committee could not stand up to the Chairman.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS NOT SUNDAY SCHOOL

The Community College offered non-denominational classes, such as computer instruction, memoirs writing, and public speaking courses to the entire Sun City Center area. It was lead by one man, Harvey Kempke. Of course, he had a staff; but, he was always at the church — always working on making the Community College.

In the interim, I decided that we could improve the quality of the Sunday School. Carl Nissen, the man teaching the 10 of us, in Sunday School, was reportedly a retired minister. Although he may have known his Bible, he had a drab, condescending way of presenting it. So I reached an agreement with him which let me teach for one month — four Sundays.

I began teaching what I call the “Book of Joy,” A. K. A. “The Book of John,” from the Bible. I call it the Book of Joy because it is inspirational, uplifting, and motivating whereas some of the other chapters of the Bible tend

to get wrapped up in details, John focuses upon the promises of the man called “Christ”.

Within four weeks, we had grown to about 25 attendees. As the only Sunday School class, in a church for those 55+ years of age, we were proud of our efforts.

Of course, when my month was over and the “old” teacher began again, we lost all the new members we had gained.

In a related matter, I was surprised when our church got an award — as it did every year — for having the largest Sunday School in the United Community Church region of Florida. Since I was teaching the only Sunday School class which, at its peak, had 25 members, I was surprised. I discovered, much to my dismay, that the church was reporting the attendance of the Community College to count as our Sunday School. (No wonder the other churches were in awe of our Sunday School attendance.)

IN SEARCH OF A NEW MINISTER

The final “straw that broke the camel’s back,” was the search for a new minister.

As the church needed to find a new minister, Harvey Kempke was asked — and volunteered to head a committee to find a new minister. Peggy, offering her administrative skills from years of service as a warrant officer, joined that committee.

Peggy will have tell you whatever you wishes to relate about the workings of the committee; but, what I can tell you is that the outcome was our last effort for that group.

The Committee had narrowed the search down to two men and a woman minister. The woman preacher served a church in Sarasota, so Peggy and I went to hear her. She was full of the Spirit of Jesus and shared a wondrous sermon. During the service, she introduced — by name — each of the visiting couples she had been introduced to for a few moments prior to the service.

The lady was the hands-down selection of the committee except for one old lady. Contrary to the commitment that each had made to keep the committee’s deliberations a secret, she began spreading rumors that the Committee was going to recommend a woman.

The resulting fervor was unbelievable. Objections began to surface — not from the men as much as from the women of the church. Having a woman chaplain was just unbearable, unthinkable, and un-godlike.

During two back-to-back services, the interim minister called upon Harvey Kempke, the Committee Chairman, to explain the selection criteria and decisions of the committee.

Finally, with no other means to block the nomination, the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee seized upon an obscure By-Law to block the nomination. The same Church Council that had ignored the By-Laws in dealing with dumping its minister now hung on to every verse and chapter of the By-Laws like it was the original 10 Commandments.

At my final Church Council meeting, the Lay Leader of the Church tried to blame Harvey for not following the “rules” in the process of nominating this woman. (Since Harvey was visiting his sick wife, in the hospital, he was not at the meeting.) When the interim minister chimed in with the information that he was not sure “how” Harvey had been able to address two services before the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee had interviewed the woman, Peggy had all she could deal with.

Peggy rose to her feet and told the Church Council that she was appalled that it would give a mission to a group which followed that commission to the letter. She stated that she found it offensive that so many women were against having a woman as minister before they had even attended a service or met the woman. Finally, she found it contemptible that the Church Council members would rail against Harvey while Harvey was at the hospital, unable to defend himself. Peggy sat down.

I took the microphone. My words were something like:

“This church avoids dealing with problems; yet, it creates them one-after-another. With 26 committees, many manned by the same 10% of the membership, this place is harder to manage than the pentagon which houses almost 30,000 people.

“With a church membership of 1,341, we averaged only 610 people attending services in the last year. We reported to the world that 6,712 enrolled in our Sunday School classes. That’s 5371 more people than we have members. We’re using enrollment in our Community College as Sunday School enrollment. We lied to win another award.

“This church has taken “situational ethics” to a lower level than the Communist Party.

“The average age of this congregation is 73 years old. Yet, we do all that we can to discourage young people — which we define as 50-years-old — to join our church. We are the only church I know about that has a part-time minister who’s sole responsibility is to convince those who are dying to leave their money to the church.

“I, like my wife Peggy, am appalled by the Church Council’s behavior. It wasn’t just the mean-spirited handling of rejecting a woman who had been called to the ministry and served the church well. I was appalled at how it conducted the business of the church.

“If Christ walked into this meeting, would he recognize a “church” or a mean-spirited group of closed-minded, old people who don’t want progress but no longer contribute.

In closing, I turned to Rev. ____ and said,

“You, sir, gave the first sermon Peggy and I heard in this church. As we departed the chapel, at the end of the service, you shook my hand and said, ‘You, two, are too young to be in this church. You should find another church.’

“I laughed when I should have listened. I will miss you, my Christian friend.”

With that, I placed the microphone on the table, turned, and headed for the door. Peggy and I walked through those doors together. With the exception of attending the funeral of Lila Benham this year, we have not graced the doors of the church — nor will we.