

Make-No-Wave United Methodist Church

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I received an interesting email from a pastor today who “followed my advice” and raised questions about expectations and accountability in the church. He asked the “what is the church?” and “what is the church for?” questions, and zeroed in on what our membership vows really mean. He was shocked when the chair of the church council responded by saying, “well, we don’t have time to talk about this now. We have church business we need to deal with.” Later that evening, the chair of SPRC (Staff-Parish Relations Committee) called to schedule an appointment — “We need to talk. As soon as possible.” The pastor was surprised early the next morning when the SPRC chair, the Lay Leader, the church Council chair, and the head of Trustees all showed up together. The conversation went something like this (church leadership in bold; pastor normal type):

We need to know what’s gotten into you?

What do you mean?

This kick you’re on to push; to make us feel bad about not doing enough?

I’m not trying to make anyone feel bad. I’m just trying to offer people something better. I want to help people grow in their faith.

Well, that’s fine, but a lot of people are perfectly happy where they are.

I know they are, but that doesn’t mean they should be.

See? That’s exactly the kind of pressure we’re talking about. Who are you to judge what kind of Christians people should be?

It’s not a matter of “judging” anyone. It’s a matter of helping people grow in their faith.

You made a lot of people uncomfortable last night. You made it sound like we should be doing more.

We SHOULD be doing more! I brought up the issues for a reason.

But that’s not why people come to this church. People come here because they know they will be loved and cared for, not judged and made to feel guilty.

Being loved and cared for and becoming faithful disciples are not mutually exclusive. People should want both.

In your opinion. None of our previous pastors said any of this stuff.

But it isn’t just my opinion. It’s in the Bible. It’s in our Book of Discipline. I didn’t make this stuff up.

No, you said you pulled it off the web and we all know how reliable things are you can find online.

You're kidding, right? You're saying because I got the articles off the web that we shouldn't pay attention to it? All I raised were three questions: what is the church? what is the church for? and how do we hold people accountable to the promises they made to God and one another. That's all. These are good questions to ask.

But they're unnecessary. We're not trying to be super-Christians. We're just normal people who love God and need to know that God loves us. That's all. We don't need you telling us how we ought to live our faith. It's none of your business if we pray or not or read the Bible or even how often we attend church. You are here to be our pastor, not our conscience.

But I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't preach and teach from the Bible and challenge people to be the best Christians we can be.

Look, you're young and we want to support you, but you need to be reasonable. People are busy — we have full lives. We don't have time to be saints. We need you to do your job — lead worship, visit church members, teach confirmation, pray for us, and try to grow the church. We just don't need you making things harder than they ought to be.

I don't know what to say. You tell me you want me to do my job, but when I do my job you don't want me to. This is impossible. I didn't do anything wrong last night. In fact, I did exactly the right thing.

The pastor received a call later in the day from his district superintendent. Hoping for support, he was irritated to discover that his DS sided with the congregation's leadership, asking that he "back off." The DS told him that he needed to make this appointment work, and that he couldn't afford to alienate key leadership. Again, he heard that he needed to be "reasonable."

What am I missing here? I was called to ministry. I am part of a church whose mission is to make disciples, but when I bring up acting like disciples I am told to back off. If we can't even have discussions about what it means to be the church in the church, we're in big trouble. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that your "basic" questions are not "simple" questions at all.

This is one of the more dramatic responses I have received, but in no way is it rare or unusual. Some of our United Methodist churches are held hostage by low expectations, complacency, lack of vision, and a distinct aversion to anything remotely disciple-like. What are we going to do about it? When mediocrity becomes the standard, it is only a matter of time until we cease to exist. No relevancy, no urgency, no commitment = no church. Unless it is safe and even encouraged to rock the boat, makes some waves, and shake things up, we may be looking for a new church real soon.