

How to Sabotage Your Church

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I hesitated a little to write this essay. It seems a bit like writing instructions on how a terrorist can make a bomb. But then I realized that the folks who tend to sabotage their churches already know all these techniques. Somewhere hidden on the dark side of human nature are the intuitive skills to wreak havoc in an organization, including a Christian congregation. Once the temptation to damage the church is strong enough, every one of us has the weapons available to do the deed.

For the past 30 plus years, I have worked as a church consultant. After about 15 years as a pastor, I became a roving interventionist, attempting to help churches in their deepest times of dysfunction. As one of my organizational psychologist friends says, "I am a student of organizational craziness." Out of this experience, I have had the opportunity to interact with some of the most effective church saboteurs and observe some of the most unhealthy church systems.

Some church saboteurs are well-meaning people, who just let their anger or frustrations overcome their better sense and their Christian maturity. Some saboteurs are dysfunctional personalities who go from church to church breeding unrest and conflict. Whether you are an intentional saboteur or an unwitting perpetrator, here are five of the best ways you can sabotage your church:

1. **Threaten to leave the church.** This is often the "spoiled brat" syndrome. The person says, "If I don't get my way about which organ we put in the sanctuary, I'm leaving the church." Or, it may be more subtle, such as, "I just don't know if God will let me stay in a church where the pastor reads his sermons." Either way, it is an effort to manipulate the decision of the church.

How would a mature Christian handle a decision about leaving a church?

- a. First of all, he/she would say nothing about it to other church members.
- b. He would discuss his/her dissatisfaction privately with the pastor and make every effort to work out the problem.
- c. If ultimately deciding to leave, the person would go quietly, saying nothing to foster unrest in the church or influence anyone else to leave.

How does the mature church handle the person who is threatening to leave?

- a. Congregation leaders do not allow the saboteur to sway the decision-making process of the church. You can't let the "brat" rule the family.
- b. The church member hearing the threat says, "I will be sad if you leave, but you must do what you believe God is leading you to do. Don't you

think it may be difficult to find a church where they will let you have your way all the time?”

2. **Threaten to withhold your offerings** until the church does what you want done. This is especially effective if people think you give a lot to the church. It scares (terrorizes) church leaders into letting you have your way. This makes Christian stewardship a means of controlling the church, rather than a solemn expression of one's worship of God and desire to support the work of his Kingdom.

How would a mature Christian handle decisions about stewardship?

- a. Make those decisions a matter of prayer and a search for God's leadership. When you give money to God, give it freely and without strings attached. It is a sacrifice of praise, not a purchase of voting shares in the corporation.
- b. Discuss any major shifts in your giving to the church with the pastor. Let him know your reasons for reducing your giving.
- c. Keep your giving patterns private, and do not discuss them with other church members unless you want to give a testimony of generosity and blessing.

How does the mature church handle the person threatening to withhold money?

- a. The congregation does not let the threat of offering reductions keep them from making the decisions that are in the best interest of the church.
- b. Leadership will say, “How much you give is between you and God. But I am sure that church decisions won't be influenced by threats.”

3. **Create unhealthy triangles** in the church by talking to third parties about your complaints or disagreements with other church members. This is a cowardly approach to church life, because the complaining party lacks the courage or skills to speak directly with the person with whom they have an issue.

How would the mature Christian handle interpersonal problems?

- a. Follow Matthew 18. Go directly to the person with whom you have an issue. Take a witness or a mediator, if you desire, but do NOT discuss your grievance with other church members.
- b. Make every effort to work out the problem, exercising Christian charity, forgiveness and grace. Apologize for any part you had in the misunderstanding.
- c. Do not discuss the problem, whether resolved or not, with other church members.

How does the mature church handle efforts to create these triangles of unrest?

- a. The mature church leader says to the complainer, “I am sorry you have a problem with John. I bet we could see him right now if I called and asked him to meet with us. That way you can speak directly to him about your complaint.”
 - b. The complainer will begin to back-pedal and resist the meeting, but insist that the biblical pattern of working out differences within the church be followed. (As a pastor, I found that word got around very quickly that, “if you go to Pastor Bob with a complaint about another church member, he will make you go talk to the person.” It tended to reduce the number of those complaints.)
4. **Sow negativism** within the church. Church members always have a choice of talking about the positive and uplifting things in the church, or the discouraging and difficult things. There is also the constant choice of “perspective” that they can take. Some people by nature, and others by choice, choose to speak in a negative way. Their pessimism and predictions of doom can become contagious. They can terrorize other church members with their predictions of catastrophe.

How would the mature Christian handle the tendency to be negative?

- a. Work on one’s own spirituality to become a more thankful and praising follower of Christ. The tendency to worry and fret about the church must be resisted.
- b. Keep quiet about your negativism.

How does the mature church handle negative people?

- a. Encourage them not to spread their negativism.
 - b. Hear the person’s pessimism as a cry for help and a need for pastoral care.
 - c. Emphasize the positive and upbeat events and trends in the church.
5. **Become the “clearinghouse” for complaints** within the church. This is a common “power play” in church life. If you listen sympathetically to the gossip and complaints circulating in the church you become more powerful. Word gets around that you like to hear the negative talk, and people will be glad to bring it to you. Unfortunately, unless you are a trained therapist, your listening does no good for the complainers, and it does significant damage to the church. Your use of the statement, “A lot of people have come to me with complaints about the music the choir is doing,” is like any other threat that attempts to coerce church leaders.

How does the mature Christian handle complaints that come to him/her?

- a. Refuse to become the clearinghouse, regardless of your position in the church.
- b. Insist that people go directly to those involved.
- c. If you can't avoid hearing the negative, you can avoid repeating it.

How does the mature church handle the gossip monger or complaint collector?

- a. When the person refers to "a lot of people" who have come with complaints, insist on knowing exactly who those people are and what their specific complaints were. It is the only way the church can respond responsibly to the issues.
- b. Do not empower the person by expressing any approval of their collection of complaints or their sharing of them.
- c. Let the person know that gossip is not helpful in the life of the church.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it is exhausting to think about this kind of dysfunction in the church. It is a sad reality that the church is often its own worst enemy. The answer to dysfunction in the system is for the system itself to develop "immunity" to the forces of sabotage.

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