

9. Real Churches Treat Staff Infections

A leader in our church is creating a serious infection.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. (3 John 9-10)

Every church needs a shepherd for God's sheep, and, as churches grow, every shepherd needs a staff. Some staff are volunteers that lead ministries and some are paid staff members. The wrong staff can damage a church for decades and the right staff propel us to vision- fulfillment. Church staffing is as critical as the engine in a jet.

One of the toughest transitions in a growing church is the change in responsibility for who calls the staff. In a baby church, the congregation calls the pastor and the first ministry leaders, as we see in Acts 6. As a church grows, the calling of staff shifts from the congregation to the key church leaders, as we see in Acts 11-13. It is a tough transition for churches to entrust to the elders the "hiring and firing" of staff.

What about a staff infection? They do happen, and they must be treated carefully. A staff infection might be the reason you have picked up this book. There is nothing more dangerous and more draining than a member of the pastoral staff who becomes the source of infection in the body of the church.

"It was the most pain that I have ever experienced in my life," said Cleveland Cavaliers basketball player Drew Gooden, who contracted a staph infection in his right leg three years ago while with the Orlando Magic. "I kept playing on it, thinking it was going to heal. But the infection got worse and worse to the point where my leg swelled up and I couldn't bend my knee" (*New York Times* 2006).

Senior pastors who have experienced a staff infection give the same testimony. Everything else in the church might be healthy, but if there is a staff infection, the senior pastor is miserable every day. This metaphor of a staph infection is useful for treating a serious staff infection in the local church.

Not every sickness is a serious staff infection

The website of the Centers for Disease Control describes a staph infection:

Staphylococcus aureus, often referred to simply as "staph" are bacteria commonly carried on the skin or in the nose of healthy people. Approximately 25% to 30% of the population is colonized (when bacteria are present, but not causing an infection) in the nose with staph bacteria. Sometimes, staph can cause an infection, (www.cdc.gov)

Just as 25% to 30% of the population can carry staph bacteria without a staph infection, so too, many members of a pastoral staff carry bad attitudes and strained relationships without the presence of a full-blown staff infection. Sometimes there is not a staff infection; there is a catfish in the tank (see Chapter 4).

Sometimes we are ready to use the shepherd's rod to discipline the disobedient when, in reality, we are just clashing with a catfish. Not every animal that howls is a wolf and not every infection is serious. There are "low grade" illnesses that leaders must learn to live with as people disagree and live out the reality of difference and diversity in the local church. A church board must give room to the pastoral staff to work through the stages of team development as they form, storm, norm, and perform.

Form: The members of the pastoral staff experience God's call.

Storm: They experience conflict in defining roles and responsibilities.

Norm: Experiences clarify roles and each embraces their responsibilities.

Perform: The staff experiences real progress by working together.

When a new pastor joins an existing church staff there is always a "shakedown cruise." Just as a new sailing crew must learn how to navigate waters together, so too a new pastoral team must sail into ministry together. Storms reveal our priorities as we throw baggage overboard. Teamwork develops as we see who can handle the ropes. And core values are clarified as we seek common solutions. As the crew completes the first leg of the journey, everyone must decide if they want to change ships. Everyone must come to a settled conviction of God's call in their own life and in the lives of the members of the team. We also must negotiate our spot on the ship. All this is like the physical pain caused by exercise—it hurts, but it is necessary.

Furthermore, healthy leaders can get sick from time to time and there is no serious infection present. Every church needs an occasional aspirin or even antibiotics. The antibiotics of forgiveness and forbearance can clear up many tensions and troubles. "Bear with each other ..." (Colossians 3:13). Some staff are real bears to live with; but then again, we probably are too. The stress of close relationships, the clash of roles and responsibilities, and the strain of minor illnesses are not a staff infection.

When the immune system is down, serious infections come

Staph bacteria are one of the most common causes of skin infections in the United States. Most of these skin infections are minor (such as pimples and boils) and can be treated without antibiotics...

However, staph bacteria also can cause serious infections (such as surgical wound infections, bloodstream infections, and pneumonia). Staph infections occur most frequently among persons in hospitals and healthcare facilities (such as nursing homes and dialysis centers) who have weakened immune systems. (www.cdc.gov)

What can cause a weakened immune system in the church? There are some sins that can open the door to a staff infection. Spiritual pride, hidden hypocrisy, and loveless license and legalism will weaken a church and make the staff vulnerable to infection.

Spiritual Pride

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. (1 Peter 5.5) C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* calls pride the Great Sin.

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free, which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty of themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think that I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone who was not a Christian who showed the slightest mercy of it in others. There is no fault, which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault, which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking about is Pride or Self-Conceit; and the virtue that is the opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called Humility. (Lewis 1948, 117)

Churches can develop a sense of spiritual pride. Conversions are attributed not to the Holy Spirit, but to great preaching. Overflowing crowds are attributed to an architect rather than to our only Savior. The congregation trusts the dream team of leaders rather than the Triune God. We can forget that God gives the growth according to his good pleasure and not according to our plans, our preparation, and our preaching.

Jim Collins wrote the masterful book, *Good to Great*. He followed it up with *How the Mighty Have Fallen*, because even some of the great companies he studied ended up failing. He identifies that pride comes first. Stage One kicks in when people become arrogant, regarding success as an entitlement, and they lose sight of the true underlying factors that created success in the first place. (Collins 2009,21)

Hidden Hypocrisy

Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. (Luke 12:1b)

Diotrephes probably started out zealous for the faith, but he became a man who did not really love the Lord - he loved to be first. He became a new kind of Christian Pharisee. Jesus warned us, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matthew 23:27-28).

The word "hypocrite" comes from a Greek word meaning "to act in a play," and thus refers to being a spiritual actor. The leaven of hypocrisy is trying to appear righteous to others when we have walked away from God on the inside. It is taking a church position when we know we are not qualified. Integrity is when the outside and the inside are clean before the Lord! Integrity is when who we really are in private matches who we appear to be in public. Integrity will grow a church while hypocrisy will kill one.

License and Legalism

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough."

(Galatians 5:6b-9)

The Corinthian church was infected with immorality and the Galatians were into legalism. In Corinth, a man was sleeping with his father's wife and church people boasted of their "unconditional love." That is not God's love; it's license.

Love must be tough; like a father who disciplines his children because he really does love them. A church that does not discipline its members is infected.

Moderation in morals is treason against God. Anger is not always wrong, and peace is sometimes far from right. The lack of moral indignation is the lack of manhood. He who is not angry at sin is not in love with virtue. While there is an anger, which is holy love and pity aflame, there is a kind of prudence, which is one of the deadly sins. The continuous enjoyment of worldly ease sensualises the mind till the grossest vices are but mildly rebuked or tolerated. A gentle reproof encourages sin and makes it seem as slight as the censure implies. To reprove sin mildly is to patronize it. (Strahan 2009,128)

At the same time, the opposite extreme—harsh legalism—drives away the next generation. Legalism adds our works to the finished work of Christ for salvation. Legalism also adds the Law of Moses or other rules for spiritual growth. Legalism says the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures are not enough; you need added rules and regulations. There are any number of legalistic rules: No meat, no alcohol, no caffeine, no dancing, no divorce, no TV, no movies.

People are hungry for churches where freedom in Christ is characterized by faith expressing itself through love, and not just a tight circle of leaders who demand conformity to their every personal conviction. The tragedy of legalistic churches that I have seen through the years is that there are very, very few young people!

When legalism invades, the young people leave. Second-generation Christians leave legalistic churches and search for healthy churches full of love.

All of these sicknesses can be healed and all of these weaknesses in the immune system can be treated. Serious infections can be avoided. But if they are tolerated, dangerous infections can easily grow in the church. It is easier to take preventative measures than to remove a staff infection that has spread from one staff person through the church.

The toughest staff infections start with loving to be first

Dr. Craig Williford and Carolyn Williford have done the church a great service in writing *How to Treat a Staff Infection*. In the book, they discuss many different infections.

- Temporary Paralysis: Widespread Inability to Make Decisions
- Permanent Dilation of the Pupil: An Extravagant Taste for the Spectacular/Expensive
- Stiff Neck: “Ownership” of a Specific Church Program
- Swollen Brain: A Firm Belief That “I Pretty Much Know It All Already”
- Underdeveloped Brain: “It’s Gotta Be New to Be Good”
- High Blood Pressure: A Belief in Reaching People... through Outrageous Activities
- Flaccidity of the Lips: Gossip is Passed Off as “Prayer Requests”
- Lack of Large Motor Coordination: A Habitual Pattern of Arriving Late
- Permanent Paralysis: An Urgent Ministry Need Merely Leads to ... Inertia
- Narcissism: What do You Do When You Are the Problem?
- Central Nervous System Disorder: When the Board and the Leaders are Out of Sync
- Rigidity of the Body: Too Fixed in One Place to Budge—Even an Inch
- Blocked Carotid Arteries: When the Supervisor is the Problem (Williford and Williford 2006, 7,8)

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first,... (3 John 9)

I would put the disease that Diotrephes brought into the church at the top of this list. Staff Infection: “The love to be first.” Every healthy church has a plurality of elders and a lead pastor who is the “first among equals.”

A Diotrephes does not believe in a “first among equals.” He loves to be first, period. He might be the lead pastor who develops a dangerous dictatorship. This leader is self-willed. His way is Yahweh. He loves the power, and he will use it to accomplish his purposes because he believes that he is doing the will of God from the first chair.

In a healthy church, a lead pastor serves in the office of overseer (1 Timothy 3:1). This is a singular office. There is also a plurality of elders.

The lead pastor is a first among equals, but if they love to be first there is a staff infection.

The staff infection can be in someone other than the overseer. I have seen elders try to usurp authority that the constitution does not grant because they believe they need to steer the ship. I have seen executive pastors decide that the senior pastor needs to go, work to convince the elders that a change is needed, and try to position themselves to be the new lead pastor of the church. Any staff person can become infected with “the love to be first” and bring a staff infection into the church.

Staff infections spread with shunning

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, *have nothing to do with us.* (3 John 9, emphasis added)

A healthy church is a place people can speak the truth in love, even when they disagree. One of the dysfunctions of a church is when people are afraid to say what they really think for fear of being rejected. Staff infections are present when one staff member will have nothing to do with the people in the church who do not line up behind him.

For example, a worship leader is called to equip all of God’s people for their work of service. A staff infection in the worship ministry breaks out when the worship team excludes everyone who does not “embrace our vision, rather than finding ways to develop and use the diverse gifts and skills of people that are consistent with their maturity. Woe to the worship service led by Diotrephes.

A youth leader is called to equip God’s people for their work of service among the youth of the church and the community. A staff infection in the youth group starts when the youth pastor decides that there is a lack of leadership coming from the pastor and it is necessary for him to step in and take the reins.

“Your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). The God-called staff of a local church are to be a comfort to the shepherd, not a stumbling block. The shepherd’s staff is to strengthen the leader, not challenge every move. The staff of the shepherd is to guide and guard the sheep so that they can be healthy and multiply, not line up members behind one of their own who has a personal vision of the ministry. Diotrephes is as dangerous as a wolf when he divides the flock to gain a following.

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and

will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31a)

Staff infections fester with gossip and slander

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. *So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us.* (3 John 9-10a, emphasis added)

Staff infections fester when someone who loves to be first gossips about the people who do not line up behind him. It is one thing to speak up in appropriate contexts in order to advocate needed change. It is another thing to speak against people behind their backs. The members of an effective shepherd's staff must "have the back" of the other staff members, not a sharp tongue that accentuates their flaws and suggests that they would have a better way.

The snake that poisons everybody: It topples governments, wrecks marriages, ruins careers, busts reputations, causes heartaches, nightmares, indigestion, spawns suspicion, generates grief, dispatches innocent people to cry in their pillows. Even its name hisses. Its called gossip. Office gossip. Shop gossip. Party gossip. It makes headlines and headaches. Before you repeat a story, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? If not, shut up. (ad found in *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12,1981, 12)

Staff infections endanger the church with rejection

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. *Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers.* He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. (3 John9-10, emphasis added)

Staff infection comes when one staff member tries to put out or to keep out of the church people who do not line up personally with him. One modernday Diotrephes told the new pastor that, as a member of the search committee, he had voted against him. Then this Diotrephes tried to block every new idea coming from the new pastor and tried to run him off. His MO is refusing to welcome people he cannot control and undermining shepherds who are called by God.

We endanger everyone if we do not deal with Diotrephes. There is a way to deal with him. *"So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing."* The shepherd must use his rod, backed by congregational

authority, to discipline Diotrephes. There is a process of discipline that is outlined in Titus 1 and Matthew 18 that gives us insight into the proper process.

Stage 1: First Warning

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning. (Titus 3:10, NASB)

There are two extremes in dealing with defection. The first is denial. It is easier just to let the lack of performance slide. It is simpler to say nothing. Many let the problem build until there is an explosion. When conflict is allowed to build until there is an explosion, someone gets burned; often it is the whole body of Christ.

The second extreme of dealing with defection is quickly kicking out of the church the person that is creating the difficulties. Some say that you need to *“fire them fast and hire them slow.”* That sounds good, but is it biblical? Even a “heretic (literal Greek word) and “divisive” person in Titus 3:10 is given a first and second warning. Even a staff person who is defecting from his responsibilities deserves to be treated like a brother. Even a tough business executive like Jack Welch of General Electric fame followed a process.

My first job was to get a close look at my team. With a couple of exceptions, I found them wanting. I'm the first to admit I could be impulsive in removing people during those early days. Over the years I learned a lot about how to do it. Its the toughest and most difficult thing we ever do.

If I learned anything about making this easier, it's seeing to it that no one should ever be surprised when they are asked to leave. By the time I met with managers I was about to replace, I would have had at least two or three conversations to express my disappointment and to give them the chance to turn things around. I would follow up every business review with a handwritten note. Some may not have appreciated my candor, but they always knew exactly where I stood.

We eventually found an evaluation method we really liked. We named it the vitality curve. Every year wed ask each of GE's businesses to rank its top executives ... whom they considered the top 20%, the middle 70%, and finally the bottom 10% ... the under performers generally had to go. (Welch 2001, 82)

As we listen to corporate America, I suggest two cautions. First, watch out for the failure to develop people as well as the tendency to use people.

Using people to achieve organizational goals is the antithesis of spiritual leadership. Firing personnel can be a symptom of failed leadership. Occasionally, a leader may have no choice but to dismiss personnel, but too often firing people is merely a more expedient way to achieve desired ends than investing time and energy to help employees develop their potential. (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001,123)

Second, watch out for breeding fear.

Top-management downsizing and reorganizations that have the side effect of increasing fear, distrust, and internal competitiveness reduce cooperation and collaboration, thereby further undermining economic performance. (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard 1996,44)

We also need to be sure to take the speck out of our own eye and not think that we have no faults or flaws in a failing situation. The person to whom a staff member is accountable must show them the problem and monitor the progress. If the progress is insufficient, then it is on to stage 2.

Stage 2: Second Warning

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning. (Titus 3:10, NASB)

We are not talking here about well-intentioned people. When we come to the second warning of Diotrephes we are dealing with the rebellious, the defector, the betrayer, the factious, the wolf. Some staff defections demand instant removal. There is no first and second warning for sexual immorality. There is no first and second warning for the pastor who steals money from the church or steals another person's spouse. There is no first and second warning for a violation of the law of the land that demands that the offense be reported immediately to family services or the police. There is a time when we move immediately to stage 3.

Some infections come from wolves within the flock that the apostle Paul warned us about in Acts 20. These wolves arise from within the leadership of the local church.

The wolves distort the truth to divide the flock! Wolves take a truth and twist it to gain a following. "This is a self-willed person who thinks he is right, and who goes from person to person in the church forcing people to make a choice" (Wiersbe 2003, 268). Titus 3:10 tells us what to do with wolves. On the other hand, sometimes we are dealing not with a wolf,

but a lion. A lion speaks his mind; if you take the time to tame him, he or she can be a solid teammate.

Stage 3: “Beg Off”

Reject a factious man after a first and second warning. (Titus 3:10, NASB)

The word *reject* means to “beg off.” We are to “beg off” from false Christians “having a form of godliness but denying its power. *Have nothing to do with them*” (2 Timothy 3:5). Titus 3 and 2 Timothy 3:5 give the same command. We are to have nothing to do with a twice warned Diotrephes and we are to have nothing to do with churches that deny the gospel of grace (See Chapter 12). We do not try to change them, we beg off.

Matthew 18:15-18 outlines a just process for settling a conflict between two Christians. Titus 3:10 outlines a just process for dealing with a Diotrephes. We warn once. If the bad behavior occurs again, we warn a second time. If the bad behavior occurs a third time, we “beg off.” With a paid or unpaid staff person, this means releasing them from their position. There is a time to “beg off” from someone and head in a different direction, rather than engaging in an endless process of trying to get them on the same wavelength. This is a very painful step and it should be taken only after a clear first and second warning have been fully documented and discussed by the elders. The elders must guard a good process, the flock of God, and the leadership of the local church.

A staff member can beat us to the punch and resign. A wise pastor once remarked to me: “Never kick a rat on the run.” It is dangerous to ask someone who resigned to reconsider a resignation. If God called him to leave and go to another place, who am I to stand in God’s way? If God did not call him to leave and he is not listening to the Lord, we do not want him to stay.

The hiring and firing of paid and unpaid staff cannot look like it does in a corporation. Companies can hire and fire at will based upon what is best for the company. The church must carefully study the Scriptures, listen to wise counsel, and seek God’s will.

According to 1 Timothy 5:20, if an elder of the local church is dismissed because of sin, he must be admonished before the entire membership. If a staff person is dismissed because of a lack of performance, that is different. But, if the staff infection is from a Diotrephes, he must experience the rod of discipline in front of church

members.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. *So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing*, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church. (3 John 9-10, emphasis added)

A staff infection is painful. If we carefully and prayerfully follow Titus 3:10, and Scriptures like Galatians 6:1-2 that admonish us to also examine and guard ourselves, we can see God work, and new health and vitality can come to our church. In all these things, humility before our Lord is to be our posture.

For he was humbled to exalt us, he became a slave to free us, he became poor to enrich us, he was sold to redeem us, made captive for our deliverance, condemned for our absolution, he was made a curse for our blessing, an offering for sin for our righteousness, he was marred that we might be restored, he died for our life. So that by him harshness is softened, anger appeased, darkness made light, injustice justified, weakness made strong, dejection consoled, sin prevented, scorn despised, fear made sure, debt cancelled, toil made light, sadness rejoiced, misfortune made blessed, difficulty erased, disorder ordered, division united, ignominy made noble, rebellion quelled, threats threatened, ambushes uncovered, assaults assailed, effort weakened, combat combated, war warred against, vengeance avenged, torment tormented, damnation damned, ruin ruined, hell held prisoner, death done to death and immortality made immortal (John Calvin, Preface to French Bible, 1539 quoted from CT).