

Dr. Jekyll and Pastor Clyde

G. L. Forward

Jason Ford* was casually chatting with friends after church when Pastor Clyde Barnes approached. “Hey, Jason, have you got a few minutes?” he asked.

“Sure, Pastor Barnes. What’s up?”

“Well, first call me Pastor Clyde or just Clyde,” he said, smiling. “Most people do and I like it that way. I’ve been thinking about something and wanted to run it by you. Stan Parker, one of our board members, attends the same adult Bible class that you and your wife attend and he told me about your program in organizational communication at the university. I think you can help us,” he said earnestly.

For the next several minutes, Pastor Clyde outlined some ideas about conducting a congregational self-study and quizzed Jason about his studies and experience. Jason responded to the pastor’s inquiries, asking a few questions of his own but mostly listening, occasionally nodding in agreement. After the conversation had wound down, the pastor took a deep breath and stated with finality, “Jason, I’ve decided the church needs to do this and I think you’re the ideal person to do it! I’ll provide you with an office to use, secretarial support, office supplies and postage, and a \$1,200 stipend for your time and expertise.”

This last piece of news put a smile on Jason’s face! At the same time, his mind raced in a dozen different directions, thinking about all he would need to do and the best way to go about doing it. Pastor Clyde broke his reverie by adding, “Jason, I’d like for you to begin as soon as possible, this week if you can. Technically, an arrangement like this needs to be approved by the church board, but they won’t meet for another month and I don’t want to wait that long. But don’t

worry. The church needs to do this and you'll get paid. I don't think anyone will buck me on this. Besides, I can always make the board see reason later if anyone dares object!" At that point Jason and Pastor Clyde concluded with a handshake and a promise to meet again within the next couple of days to get things rolling.

A Great Opportunity

Jason and his wife Darla had a lot to talk about in the car on the way home that Sunday. In many ways Jason was an ideal candidate to conduct the sort of project outlined by Pastor Clyde. When the Fords moved to Springdale eight months before, they had planned to visit several area churches before deciding on a new church home. However, they attended North Willow Community Church on their first Sunday in the city and never visited anywhere else. As Jason had explained to his neighbors, "The people were friendly, the services inspirational, and the preaching short! There just wasn't a reason to look anywhere else." In addition, the Fords enjoyed Pastor Clyde's ministry. As they noted, the pastor seemed genuine and caring, the services warm and inviting, and the messages designed to help people.

Jason also found it easy to relate to many members of the congregation. The location of the church made it convenient for several parishioners who were employed at the university, and others, like Jason, were graduate students. Beginning graduate school at 39 meant Jason was a little older than most of these other students. Nonetheless, he had resigned his job and moved to Springdale to work on a graduate degree in organizational communication. He was fascinated by organizational dynamics and knew the study proposed by the pastor would allow him to explore them in detail. And, as luck would have it, he had just completed a course in survey research as a part of his program, so he felt ready to tackle the challenges of this assignment.

Perhaps most important of all, Jason was also an ordained minister in the same Protestant denomination as Pastor Clyde. When he moved to Springdale he had almost 10 years of pastoral experience. Pastor Clyde was aware of Jason's ministry background and educational work at the university and thought the combination of the two would uniquely qualify him for this assignment.

Defining the Assignment

Two days after their initial conversation, Jason and Pastor Clyde met to discuss the congregational survey. Pastor Clyde greeted Jason warmly and got both of them coffee as they started to talk. Although Jason estimated that Pastor Clyde was about 12 years older than he, they seemed to have a lot in common and he was looking forward to working with the pastor on this project. The two engaged in small talk until Pastor Clyde handed Jason a cup of coffee. Then Jason, who was always very task-oriented and anxious to get to work, took control of the conversation: "Well, I think the place to begin is to hear more about why you think a survey is a good idea right now."

The pastor's demeanor seemed to change. "There's just something wrong with the congregation," he blurted out, "and I need to find out what it is!" He went on to explain that attendance, giving, and lay involvement had all declined or stagnated within the last several months. "Maybe we just grew too big too fast, and we're experiencing the inevitable growing pains, but I'm having difficulty finding people willing to serve on the church board. Not only that," he continued, "but there's been significant turnover in paid staff in the last year and some people on the board are starting to grumble. You know there are always some malcontents who like to point fingers and criticize the pastor. The bottom line is, I'm starting my fourth year here and I've got to take control of this situation before it gets out of hand."

As a result of this meeting, Jason agreed to design and administer a comprehensive survey assessing all aspects of the church's programs, policies, personnel, congregational beliefs and values, and demographic characteristics. At the conclusion of this three-month process, Jason was to present his findings and recommendations to the church board in a half-day seminar. Following his presentation to the church board, a one-hour summary session was to be presented to the entire congregation during a special Sunday night meeting to be held a couple of weeks later and open to anyone who cared to attend.

Although Pastor Clyde had told Jason to begin work on the project right away, the pastor waited for official board approval before announcing the study to the congregation. In spite of this, word of the project began to leak out well before the official announcement. It seemed to Jason that everybody had an opinion about the survey.

Some seemed excited and energized by the prospect. Stan, a member of the church board, hinted ominously, "It's about time someone asked us what we thought." Irene, a member of Jason's adult Bible class, warned, "You're just stirring things up. You're asking for criticism and so you're going to get it. No good can come of this." An even larger group seemed indifferent, claiming nothing significant would happen because "people just say what they think you want to hear on those things anyway!" Jason either ignored or deflected these comments, stating, "I'm doing this by the book; the results will speak for themselves."

Background Information

Prior to designing the actual survey to be used, Jason investigated the historical background of the church. North Willow Community Church was begun just nine years before. A core group of nearly 100 members had sought and received permission from the bishop to leave the downtown congregation they were attending in order to plant a new church in the fast-growing northwest corner of the city. Over the course of the previous nine years, the congregation had purchased and renovated an abandoned public school building, increased average attendance to nearly 300, hired a senior pastor and two full-time associates, and organized a successful day care program. In addition, the church now operated on an annual budget exceeding \$850,000. Nonetheless, what started as an innovative, highly cohesive group of people with a strong organizational culture had now become a much larger, diverse, somewhat transient congregation. At present there seemed to be little feeling of shared history due to an almost constant churning of new families arriving and old ones leaving. Jason knew that churches, like other kinds of organizations, often cycle through predictable stages of advance and decline in response to changes in the environment. He thought, "Maybe this *is* just a case of growing pains!"

Issues With Pastor Clyde

As the project got under way, Jason inserted weekly announcements in the church bulletin and provided updates from the platform each Sunday morning. These announcements stressed the rationale,

content, and procedures for the self-study that all congregation members would soon receive in the mail. These announcements were designed to reduce uncertainty about the study, ensure members anonymity and confidentiality, and help increase the survey return rate. "You will not be asked to sign your survey, no other identifying data will be added, and no one but me will ever see the returned surveys," Jason promised the church members in accordance with standard procedures for protecting research subjects. In fact, Jason sometimes wished his research professor were a member of the congregation so that she could see how smoothly and professionally the survey was proceeding.

Every church member 16 years of age or older was sent a survey packet in the mail. Three weeks after the initial mailing, a second packet was mailed for those who had not yet returned a survey. As a result of the weekly reminders and second mailing, 72% of the adult church membership had participated in the study.

As the surveys were received and the data were tabulated, some clear and disturbing patterns began to emerge. Jason's initial euphoria began to fade. A number of relatively minor issues dealing with church policies and procedures that were consistently mentioned (e.g., regular reporting of church income, nominating committee membership and procedures, introduction of persons on the platform for worship functions, and so forth) could be easily addressed and corrected. However, one issue emerged that dwarfed all the others in significance. The picture that emerged, especially from the open-ended questions, was of a pastor with a very caring public persona who was reported, in private interactions, to be manipulative, deceitful, and verbally abusive. In fact, the survey data made it clear that the major impediment to effectiveness in the church was Pastor Clyde's leadership and interpersonal communication style. This was indicated by the following comments taken from the surveys:

There is widespread dissatisfaction with Pastor Clyde. He seems unaware of his own unhealthy needs and behavior. His outbursts are having a negative effect on morale.

There is no way to handle honest concerns about the church in a constructive way. If you disagree with the pastor, he is either defensive or responds harshly.

6 ♦ Case Studies For Organizational Communication

The pastor needs to be more receptive when people confront him. Many have left our church because they are intimidated by his reactions.

It is difficult for me to have respect for Pastor Clyde because of the poor way he has treated me and others. I used to serve on the church board, but *never* again!

The pastor needs to be more flexible and less dictatorial!

I work here at the day care center and see how badly the pastor treats the workers.

He's a control freak! I can't continue to attend here as long as Pastor Barnes remains.

Jason was surprised and confused by the comments he was reading. The pastor had seemed a little irritated when Jason refused to discuss the surveys that were coming in, but Jason really hadn't seen the kind of behavior these people were describing. Maybe Pastor Clyde was more distant and less friendly toward him, but he rationalized that everyone was busy and what mattered now was the finished project anyway.

Jason was further surprised when Pastor Clyde asked him to come into his office one morning. The pastor seemed agitated and upset. He abruptly began, "I understand some people are upset about the church board nominating process."

In fact, several people had mentioned that issue in the surveys Jason received. "How could Pastor Clyde know that?" Jason thought. His weekly announcements had guaranteed absolute confidentiality and anonymity to those who provided data, and the surveys were kept in the locked church office he was using for this project. The answer seemed obvious and Jason panicked. Pastors are human like everybody else, but this was inexcusable! He made some feeble excuse to end the meeting and left the pastor's office abruptly.

Although he did not confront the pastor with his suspicions directly, he immediately spoke to the church secretary. "Oh yes, I've seen him in your office on a number of occasions looking through the surveys and other material on your desk."

Jason shot daggers back at the secretary. "Why didn't you tell me this before!"

"I thought you knew," she stuttered. "I assumed you told him it was OK."

Jason turned without speaking and quickly hurried back to his office. He removed all the surveys from the desk and took them home, where they could be kept securely until they were no longer needed. Later Jason would shred them. Jason never confronted Pastor Clyde about this breach of protocol and, in fact, avoided him whenever possible. What had once been an easygoing and friendly collaboration about church matters became a strained and distant relationship.

Finally, Jason was done with the data tabulation and analysis. A devastating portrait of Pastor Clyde emerged, centered on a pastoral leadership style viewed by many congregation members as deceitful, abusive, manipulative, and demoralizing. Jason completed his written report according to the original timetable and made an appointment to share it with the pastor. The meeting was tense and awkward for both Jason and Pastor Clyde. Gone were the handshakes, smiles, easy conversation, and camaraderie they had earlier shared. At one point the discussion focused on this specific question from the survey:

The pastor's leadership style is helping the church function as it should.

The results of that question were as follows:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
19%	27%	24%	29%	1%

Jason stated that, as a former pastor, he was very concerned that 70% of the respondents were neutral or negative on that issue.

Pastor Clyde replied, "You can't tell the congregation that. When you get to that question, all you can say is that the largest percentage of respondents agree."

Jason was shocked, "I don't think I can do that," he said. "I think we need to share all the responses for each category of a question. What you say may be technically correct, but it's twisting the facts."

Pastor Clyde's normally composed demeanor seemed to transform before Jason's eyes. "Are you calling me a liar?" he shouted. "Look, some people are out to get me and instead of helping me you're letting yourself be used by them."

Shaken, Jason replied, "I'm not letting myself be used by anyone—I was hired to conduct a survey and I'm just reporting the results. I didn't ask for those answers, but it's what I got."

"You can't get out of it that easy," Clyde snarled. "I know some things about you that you might not want to get around!"

Stunned, Jason said he needed to go to class and asked for the dates of the board seminar and congregational meeting.

Pastor Clyde paused to regain emotional control and said, "I've decided to cancel the congregational meeting, but you'll hear from me concerning the board seminar." Jason was then paid the agreed-upon stipend of \$1,200 and dismissed.

A Crisis Looms

Two weeks after submitting his 30-page report to Pastor Clyde, Jason received a phone call from Stan, a member of the church board. Stan asked Jason when he would complete and submit his report. "We're kinda anxious to see the results," he added.

Jason told Stan that he had already submitted a written report and that he should speak to the pastor about obtaining a copy for each of the 12 board members. One week after that conversation Jason received another call from Stan, who told him he was looking at a copy of the report but that "it didn't make much sense." He asked to come over to Jason's home and arrived 40 minutes later. Stan then produced a copy of the report that he had received from Pastor Clyde. Stan asked, "Is this what you submitted to the pastor?"

What Jason discovered was a partial report of about 22 pages from which Pastor Clyde had awkwardly excised all comments that directly or indirectly referred to him or his leadership style.

"That's what I thought," Stan said. "He's not going to get away with this!" Stan took back his copy of the report and left.

A couple of days after his meeting with Stan, Jason received a call from the secretary of the church board. He said he wanted to arrange the details of the half-day board seminar at which Jason would deliver his findings and respond to questions from board members. Although the Fords continued to attend North Willow Community Church, Jason and Pastor Clyde had not had a conversation since meeting in the pastor's office several weeks earlier. Once the board meeting was called to order, Pastor Clyde asked if he could read a statement. In that statement Pastor Clyde said the board should never have approved a survey such as this and argued that it was inappropriate to challenge or question the "Shepherd whom God had called" and stated, amid tears, that "I never claimed to be perfect

but am doing my best.” The board secretary affirmed that no one was there to attack anyone but that “the board still needs to hear and discuss the report. We paid for it and deserve this much.” At this point the pastor stood up, looked around the room, and said, “Well, if you want to rip me apart, you can do it without me sitting here.” With that said, he left the room.

After hearing the full report, many people on the board confirmed that they thought the survey had uncovered the source of congregational disillusionment and demoralization and brought into focus long-standing interpersonal problems with the pastor. “Look,” Carl said, “we’ve had plenty of hints about this behavior before, but we either ignored them or made excuses, hoping things would get better. Well, things won’t get better till we do something about Pastor Clyde!”

Stan immediately agreed, but not everyone did. A minority of the board now attacked Jason. They argued that this method of data collection was inappropriate in the church and constituted a violation of the biblical admonition to approach someone in private if there were concerns that needed to be addressed.

Jason answered, “I did what you hired me to do, and I think much useful information has been uncovered.”

He was thanked for his time and excused while the board continued its deliberation.

Aftermath

Jason later learned that the board concluded there was a persistent, long-term pattern of manipulative, disingenuous, and verbally abusive behavior on the part of Pastor Clyde. This behavior characterized numerous interpersonal relationships involving both laypersons and paid staff. The board then debated its options. The board secretary confided that he had contacted the bishop and offered to provide a copy of the report for feedback. The bishop declined, saying, “This is an internal matter and needs to be handled by you. I have full confidence in Pastor Barnes. I wouldn’t have recommended him to you four years ago if I didn’t.”

Another member, Janice, said, “Well, it seems to me that we have two options. We can simply say that Pastor Clyde has lost the confidence of the board and we recommend that he resign, or we can agree that he stay here but only if he enters into counseling to help

him explore his communication behavior and find other ways to deal with lay leaders and church staff. We need to decide which of these options is best!"

Betty, who had been silent until now, said, "I find all this to be very upsetting. To be fair to the pastor, I think we need to do something about Jason Ford, too, some kind of censure for starting this whole mess in the first place."

At that suggestion, some board members rolled their eyes and grimaced, but others nodded at Betty in agreement. Animated conversations ensued as small clusters of board members began talking to the persons closest to them. The secretary rapped on the table and asked for attention. "Well," he stated, "there's lots at stake and lots to decide . . . we'd better get at it!" ♦

* This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

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