

**“Dependency in Congregational Life, or Mommy! Daddy!”**

by Rev. Kenneth Gordon Hurto, District Executive, Florida District

It was the fourth call that evening and Marianne Lopez was both tired and fit to be tied. “Am I the only grown-up in this church?” she lamented. “I didn’t sign up for this when I agreed to be on the Board!”

Earlier, the RE Director had called wanting Marianne to talk to the Minister concerning a disagreement they were having about a forthcoming children’s service.

Then, Shorty McNeil called to say, “Marianne, someone left the lights on in the social hall. I don’t have a key, so perhaps you could run by and turn them off.” Marianne had the good sense not to do that, but did make a note to talk to the Administrator the next day.

After that, her favorite movie was interrupted. Haddie Thurston, 85 and a member for more than 40 years, demanded, “Marianne, you know I’ve been a member of this church for a long time. I have been talking with several others. When is the Board going to deal with the boring, tedious, and inept sermons this new minister attempts to deliver? I cannot believe what’s happening. You, and I mean you, Marianne, need to do something ... and soon!”

Now it is was Tyson Wellborne, who was frustrated that he could not get help with the upcoming auction. He wanted to know if Marianne would call the twenty names he wanted to give her. Her suggestion that this was the work of the Auction Committee, not the Congregational President, fell on deaf ears.

Are you the only grown-up in your congregation? ... Sometimes!

When congregational leaders transition from members-at-large to leaders, other members relate to them differently.

A loyal church member in one of my congregations, having just been elected to the Board, was assaulted by one of her friends, who said bitterly, “Now, you’re one of THEM!” and refused to talk with her thereafter. Bewildered, she turned to me for consolation. I joked, “That’s what they pay you the big bucks for!” It wasn’t much comfort.

Barry Oshry is an author and educator who has studied human systems. In his book *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*, he suggests that every group, including churches, contains three functional groups. He calls them the Tops, the Middles, and the Bottoms. Board members are Tops, or the Head of the congregation. The Body of the congregation comprises the Middles and Bottoms, who all look to the Head for direction and guidance. When the Head is clear about its role, the Body follows along.

The Board President is the Top of the Head, and as such receives messages like Marianne Lopez’s four phone calls. At times it may feel as though members expect the Head to fix every problem or referee every disagreement. This dependency is natural, even inevitable. However, member dependency can leave a Board President feeling as if she is Mommy to a whole congregation of, well, not grown-ups. It’s exhausting.

The Alban Institute, a church research organization, discovered with alarm that most congregational presidents leave the church soon after their tenure is over. And is it any wonder? Consider Marianne’s evening. It’s tiring work, and the big bucks, well there aren’t any. We must all pay attention to this situation!

Dependency is a challenge that congregational leaders will face. As a leader, you are not the congregation’s Mommy or Daddy. Don’t take on responsibility that is not yours. Don’t make those twenty calls. Stay out of the middle of other people’s squabbles. Give responsibility back. Let folks know that they have the power to address problems. This is effective leadership.

If you have agreed to be a leader, you must BE the grown-up. You may not be the only grown-up, but at times it may seem that way. There’s simply no way to get around it. It is part of our

shared life. If you can remember always to love your congregants throughout every late night call, all will be well.

Perhaps, knowing that, it might be a tad easier. Bless you for your courage to be a leader!

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