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Tough love

Leading with the rod and staff. Wilson Gunn, general presbyter in Washington, D.C., has earned a reputation as a straight shooter with a sense of humor.

by [Edie Gross](#)



Photo by Mike Morones

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January 4, 2010

It's not quite 10 a.m., and the Rev. Wilson Gunn, the general presbyter at the National Capital Presbytery, has already had to issue a warning once today.

In this case, he had to email a retired pastor who apparently still was officiating funerals at his former church, in violation of the rules.

"I'm sending an email saying, 'Please come to my office and explain to me why you're doing that,'" said Gunn, who oversees 108 churches in Washington, D.C., northern Virginia and part of Maryland.

On good days, Gunn helps new churches define their missions and older churches refine theirs, ushers pastors into welcoming congregations and explores with colleagues the future role of the Presbyterian Church as the world around it evolves.

On rougher days, he referees conflicts between pastors and their congregations, addresses ethical violations and even tackles sexual misconduct cases, all of which have earned Gunn a reputation for being able to face the most unpleasant tasks with courage, grace and a sense of humor.

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“There are days when you have to go up to somebody who’s given a lot of years and say, ‘You know, you are not cut out for pastoral service.’ It’s no fun -- ever,” said Gunn, the general presbyter for almost six years. “But some of us remember the pastoral office is rod *and* staff. The rod is to pull the sheep into line, and the staff is to ward off the wolves. The 23rd Psalm didn’t use the Care Bear motif.”

Questions to consider:

- What are helpful practices for an institutional role in which you are both supporting and disciplining pastors?
- Does your organization have a policy addressing sexual misconduct? How can such policies be beneficial to you and your organization?
- Are you able to be a tugboat, nudging others to move with their own momentum and solve their own problems? How do you attend to the art of this practice of nudging?
- Do you agree with the “Tips for leaders” at the end of this article? How might you adapt this list for your particular organizational role?

fire at the beginning. He was juggling, ‘Which situation do I do first?’ He not only survived it, but gained a lot of respect from it.”

Two of the complaints Gunn handled were found to be without merit; three others resulted in pastors being excluded for three years from the presbytery, after which they could apply for reinstatement. None of the cases involved criminal behavior.

Handling ethical violations of that nature takes up an inordinate amount of time and energy, Gunn said. The presbytery hasn’t received a sexual misconduct complaint in two years, he added.

“I hope that day is done,” he said.

The gentle art of nudging

Gunn credits having a great mentor with some of his success clearing those early hurdles. In Texas, he worked under the Rev. Dave Wasserman, now the interim executive presbyter at the Presbytery of Grand Canyon in Arizona.

Among other lessons, Wasserman reminded Gunn that speaking the truth in love often takes considerable courage. That advice was especially helpful in the beginning, Gunn said, when he struggled to be assertive with his staff. Gunn encourages incoming executives and even pastors to line up their own mentors and support groups.

If a complaint about sexual misconduct or financial malfeasance comes in, Gunn is quick to wade in. But when it comes to other issues, he said, sometimes it’s best to offer advice and let the other parties work out the problem on their own. Wasserman agrees, offering a “Thelma and Louise” analogy.

“I don’t think any of us wants to let anyone else jump off a cliff,” Wasserman said, referring to the film’s climactic final scene. “But up to that point, I want to give a lot of room. If you step in, you may end up rescuing and you may not teach the system something it needs to learn. Sometimes, failure is a great teacher and if you intervene and prevent that from being visible, you’re not serving the system

‘Thrown into the fire’

Gunn, a father of four who enjoys sailing and playing the string bass, pastored churches in North Carolina and Virginia for 20 years before becoming an associate executive at Grace Presbytery in Texas, where he oversaw church development. He jokes that the position kept him popular because he helped hand out money.

From there, he came to National Capital Presbytery, where some of his earliest tasks were less enjoyable. In his first three years at the helm, he handled five sexual misconduct cases, including one that was on his desk the day he arrived. This has resulted in an unintended expertise in such matters.

He’s certainly not the first church official to deal with that sort of thing, said the Rev. Betty Meadows, president of the Association of Executive Presbyters and Gunn’s counterpart at the Mid-Kentucky Presbytery. But most executives have some time to settle into the job first, she said.

“There was no honeymoon period where you get to know the pastors, get to know the churches, your committees. No -- bang, bang -- you’ve got to hit the ground running,” she said of Gunn. “He was thrown into the

well.”

Put another way, Wasserman said, institutions are like ocean liners and good leaders are the tugboats. Tugboats don't *pull* great ships out of port. They bump up against them, nudging them in the right direction. Once the ship is sailing correctly, it moves with a momentum all its own, Wasserman said. Over time, good leaders learn the art of nudging, he said, teaching the institutions to solve their own problems.

When members of a congregation call Gunn to complain about a pastor, for example, he nudges them back into the chain of command, insisting they address the problem first at the church level before running to the presbytery. If a church is struggling to fulfill its mission, he nudges it toward the presbytery's three-year transformation program, which includes training and goal-setting for clergy and laymen.

If pastors approach him with concerns, he offers what he calls “good counsel,” wading into the fray only if he sees a revolution on the horizon.

“When you send a third party in there, it complexifies the process,” he said. “You're better off equipping that leader to lead and protecting their authority as pastor.”

On occasion, some ministers within Gunn's presbytery wish he'd intervene more on their behalf, said the Rev. Bill Teng, a member of the National Capital Presbytery's council and pastor at a Virginia church. He praised Gunn's propensity for “saying it like it is” and noted that Gunn often calls pastors on their birthdays and the anniversaries of their ordination. But, he said, some pastors perceive Gunn more as a disciplinarian than as a confidant.

“I think many pastors in the presbytery are still confused as to what exactly his role is,” Teng said. “They need to have someone in the so-called power structure in whom they could confide.”

Gunn says that pastors need to understand that he wears more than one hat. “I understand my pastoral role is toward the congregation and its ministry,” he said. “Some folks imagine I'm a pastor to pastors, but I'm not. I can be friendly and pastoral. But if you're not value-added to that congregation, I'm asking you why you're there.”

Teaching others

Among his colleagues, Gunn is known for being a straight shooter who's more than willing to poke fun at himself to get a point across. When executives get together to discuss challenges, Gunn is the one who lightens the mood, Meadows said.

“If you know he's in the room, you know you're going to laugh -- belly laugh -- before we're out of that room,” she said. “Healthy laughter is a sign of the spirit of God.”

Gunn uses that sense of humor as well as his own personal experiences to help train incoming church executives, teaching sessions on ethics and sexual misconduct. Gunn is as candid as he can be about issues that people in organizations -- including religious institutions -- are often loathe to discuss.

He cites the pioneering work of the [Rev. Marie Fortune](#), who more than 30 years ago founded the FaithTrust Institute, a national interfaith organization working to end sexual abuse and domestic violence by urging communities to talk openly about those problems.

He encourages new church officials to be just as proactive when it comes to addressing such breaches. That means establishing a policy addressing sexual misconduct if one doesn't already exist within the organization -- and reviewing it regularly to see if it needs updating.

The Rev. T. Alan Thames said Gunn's tips came in handy when he had to handle a few ethics cases and some minor staff issues early in his tenure as executive presbyter at the Whitewater Valley Presbytery in Indiana. Though his presbytery already has a policy on sexual misconduct, Gunn's training session helped him realize the need to revisit it, said Thames, who became an executive in January.

“It was very, very helpful to have him be really blunt,” said Thames, who was a pastor for 25 years prior to becoming an executive. “He's very plainspoken about it. He was willing to kind of unpack with us the repercussions of not doing it well.”

A sense of humor helps, too.

“To have somebody say, ‘All right, buckle your seatbelt, here we go, here’s the first few things you’ve got to do....’ You look at this guy with a great Texas drawl and a great sense of humor, and you just trust him,” Meadows said.

Helping leaders be leaders

Effectively teaching others how to handle sticky situations is one of Gunn’s greatest strengths, said the Rev. Graham Hart, who helped Gunn develop training programs for new church executives. In truth, it would be easier for Gunn -- or any other presbyter for that matter -- to waltz in and tell pastors and committees what to do, said Hart, the general presbyter at Peace River Presbytery in southwest Florida and past president of the Association of Executive Presbyters.

That might fix one problem, but it wouldn’t create any structure within that organization to handle the next one, Hart said.

“Part of what we do is help leaders be leaders. As a general presbyter, part of our task is not so much to weigh in on all that, but stay above it and stay under it in a way that helps God’s mission,” Hart said. “I think Wilson keeps that big picture in mind when dealing with tough situations.”

These days, the bigger picture for Gunn includes helping the Presbyterian Church tackle 21st century issues such as multicultural dynamics and gay ordination while building upon its historic foundation as an incubator for education, health care and justice. Congregations should make sure the din of daily conflicts doesn’t drown out “the voice of God” as God calls them in new directions, Gunn said.

The long-term health of the church requires deep reflection at all levels about “not only are we doing things right, but are we doing the right thing,” Gunn said. “What worked in 1950 is done. Eisenhower doesn’t take our phone calls anymore.”

Ten tips for leaders from the Rev. Wilson Gunn:

- Understand the values of your organization. When everything else is shifting, those should stay consistent.
- Get clarity on the range of your authority, “and if you have none, at least you have a conversation, ‘Well how is this going to work?’ ”
- When it comes to sexual misconduct, establish a clear policy that outlines what constitutes a violation as well as the organization’s response. Revisit that policy regularly and even have it critiqued by others.
- Embrace the concept of checks and balances. Make the best decision you can as a leader, but support, and even encourage, the right of others to appeal your decision to higher authorities. It’s not about “winning” but about protecting the church’s ministry.
- Turn to a mentor, coach and colleague group for advice, and practice self-care by taking days off, practicing the Sabbath and pursuing leadership training. Do something that’s beautiful.
- Resist the urge to fix every problem. Instead, teach leaders to lead. “There’s a fair amount of knowing what not to do and when not to do it.”
- Listen.
- Be straightforward and encourage the whole system to be appropriately transparent.
- As Jim Collins points out: Get the right people in the right seats on the bus. But unlike Collins, we don’t put people off the bus. We take everyone who professes Jesus to be Lord and Savior. It’s a big bus.
- Remember that our “currency” is relationships.

