

Are your church boards happy?

by EARL S. JOHNSON JR.

How do the members of the session, Board of Deacons, and Board of Trustees get along in your congregation? Do they work cooperatively together or is there constant turmoil, bickering, and disagreement?

Last December I watched the deacons in our church as they prepared Christmas baskets for needy families in our school district and put together cookie trays for our shut-ins. They were having a good time, laughing, joking, obviously enjoying one another's company. It was a moment that reflected who they really are, a caring, cooperative, supportive group — Christian brothers and sisters who put the needs of the church and community first.

Not all the boards many of us serve are like that, of course. Some of our church officers can be contentious, discourteous toward each other and fellow church members, and uncooperative with staff. Church leaders frequently cause trouble, using the session or another board to push their agenda or make the church in their own image. The trustees might be jealous of the session, for example, and insist that the real power and know-how about church business resides only with them. Occasionally the deacons can form a kind of caring clique, reserving all ministries of sympathy and compassion to themselves. Elders can adopt policies that are not transparent, are patronizing, or divisive. It is possible that a pastor may have personal problems that prevent him or her from ministering effectively.

Several years ago Edwin H. Friedman contended in his book *Generation to Generation, Family Process In Church and Synagogue* (The Guildford Press, 1985) that congregations often function like family systems. When the elders, deacons, and trustees are happy in their church and are open and responsive to one another they teach new board members to be the same, to adopt a similar positive attitude toward decision making and ministry. When the boards are dysfunctional, however, the current officers, like relatives in a spiritually or emotionally sick family, teach new board or church members to respond in the same way.

Friedman contends that the only way to deal with a dys-

functional church family is involve it in family therapy and counseling. Just as a therapist might need to talk to all the family members in order to understand the family system, so it is often necessary to have an outsider take a close look at the systems that are making it difficult for the congregation to function in a healthy way. Unfortunately, members often think it is embarrassing to admit the problems really exist. We hope that if we do not talk about them they will go away. But the longer problems are allowed to continue, the more dysfunctional the congregation becomes, and sometimes the family remains disturbed for generation after generation.

In the Presbyterian Church help is available from many sources. Often a good place to start is by having the pastor or session contact the executive presbyter in the presbytery office or the chairperson of the Committee on Ministry. It is also possible to get excellent advice from individual therapists who are experts in congregational systems, organizations like local

Samaritan Counseling Centers (interdenominational counseling services around the country), or professional mediation groups that specialize in working with churches and congregations, non-profit groups, or local companies.

In families and churches where members share mature love, problems are dealt with openly and constructively so they can continue as centers of support and nurture. As Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:9-10, *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.*

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