

111
TIPS



to

**Survive
Pastoral
Ministry**

Margaret J. Marcuson

111 Tips to Survive Pastoral Ministry

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Published by Marcuson Leadership Circle
3439 NE Sandy Blvd. #102
Portland, OR 97232
503-701-7621

www.margaretmarcuson.com

Copyright © 2004 by Margaret Marcuson, Portland, Oregon

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without prior written permission by Margaret Marcuson or her representative.

ISBN: 978-0-9764366-2-0

Hello.

Feeling stuck in your ministry? Challenged? Invigorated? Whatever your circumstances, these tips will help you think differently about your leadership and your congregation, and show you new ways to approach the various arenas of pastoral life, including personal life.

Find a new perspective on some of the dilemmas and opportunities all pastors face. Begin to learn a different way to respond to people that gives you greater freedom. Gain clarity on what is yours to do as a pastoral leader, without taking on burdens that don't belong to you. Find out how to enable others to carry out their own ministry and calling.

Pastoral leadership is never easy, but it can be easier, more energized, with less effort. You may want to read one tip a day, or one topic per week, as you begin to incorporate these ideas into your own ministry.

Margaret Marcuson
Margaret Marcuson

• PASTORAL CARE

- 1 Train** others in your congregation to do hospital and home visits. You will multiply the pastoral care capacity of your congregation, and build leaders at the same time.
- 2 Learn** about the families in your congregation through pastoral care. This will give you a window into the emotional dynamics in the church. In the church, more than almost any other institution, people bring family emotional baggage with them in the door.
- 3 Challenge** your parishioners to grow through their difficulties. Don't stop at handholding, but help them to develop emotionally and spiritually.
- 4 Watch** for the neediest members. While they need support, they can use up a huge proportion of ministry resources (including your energy) and still come back needing more and more and more. Practice saying, "No" (just once) to repeat customers.
- 5 Find** those who are resourceful in the face of personal challenge. Look for ways to develop their gifts and help them find ministries of their own.
- 6 Know** your own family history. We bring our own family emotional baggage, too. When we are aware of our own emotional "hooks," we are more able to be present and genuinely helpful to people rather than mindlessly rescuing them.
- 7 Hone** your awareness of time spent with people. This will vary with job description, the size of the church, and the nature of the pastoral need. But our own anxiety can cause us either to want to bolt too quickly or to spend hours with people when they may not need it.
- 8 Pray** for those in need. Research continues to indicate that those who are prayed for do better in terms of their physical health. In addition, when we offer someone to God we are better able to let go of the outcome.
- 9 Set** times when you are not available. Constant availability can lead to burnout. Exercise discipline in the use of your cell phone—turn it off sometimes, and give others an opportunity to minister.
- 10 Pay attention** to key lay leaders in their time of need. Pastoral care is part of the larger ministry of the church, and those times can cement important relationships and enhance your overall leadership, to the benefit of the entire congregation.

• WORSHIP

11 Focus your attention beyond yourself to God. As important as your presence is in worship, it's not about you, but about helping people connect with God.

12 Pray before and during worship. Ask others to pray for you. This will help them and you both.

13 Know yourself and your own strengths as a worship planner and leader. Incorporate what you do best into your worship life.

14 Find ways to worship outside of your congregational responsibilities. This is easier said than done, but we all need to sit in a pew from time to time. Some suggestions: worship on vacation Sundays or attend a midweek or Sunday afternoon or evening service at a church from a different tradition.

15 Develop a team of people to help with worship. Keep the congregation from being totally dependent on you for their worship experience, and give others a chance to grow in leadership.

16 Laugh at the inevitable glitches (especially at yourself). Don't take yourself or the worship experience too seriously. God has a sense of humor, too.

17 Use story and drama to connect with people emotionally. Depending on your tradition and local setting, this may include formal liturgy, actors, personal testimony, video. Worshipers need to have the emotional part of their brain engaged.

18 Research the history of worship in your individual congregation. Ask questions of key leaders (here and there, not in a barrage). Ask things such as: what have been the great strengths, where have been the conflicts, who have been the key players?

19 Remember that worship can easily become a focus for anxiety in a congregation. Keep an eye on the process and don't get too distracted by the content. Notice who gets upset about what and when, keep asking yourself, "Why is this surfacing now?" and, "What else is going on in the congregation?"

20 Keep the long view when introducing worship changes. Don't take criticism of changes personally, and use it as an opportunity to learn more about your people and about the congregation. A sense of humor helps here, too.

• P R E A C H I N G

- 21 Develop** your own voice in preaching. The best preachers are authentically themselves in the pulpit. Find out who you are, and tell your people.
- 22 Respect** the boundary between you and those you preach to. Self-disclosure is important, but share yourself to serve those you preach to, not to do personal work that is best done outside the pulpit.
- 23 Lead** through preaching. Use the pulpit as a place to define your own vision for the congregation's ministry. Do this in some way every month.
- 24 Tell** stories. People learn better through story than through didactic teaching.
- 25 Take** the long view. The best preaching is about a long-term relationship. People develop slowly over time. Be patient.
- 26 Say** "I" or "we" more often than "you." When challenging from the pulpit, place yourself with those who are being challenged. People will hear what you are saying much more clearly.
- 27 Ask** for feedback to help you improve. Look beyond the "nice sermon, pastor," feedback at the door, or the "I can't believe you said that!" tirade. Develop some simple, clear questions, and ask members you trust to write down feedback over several weeks.
- 28 Increase** your repertoire of preaching options. Experiment from time to time, dramatically read a longer piece of Scripture, do a dialogue sermon with a colleague or church member, or try some humor.
- 29 Illustrate** your sermons with stories about members who are involved in ministry (make sure to get their permission first). This is one of the best ways to coach people to take on ministries of their own, and has much more effect than telling them they ought to.
- 30 Face** difficult issues directly from the pulpit. It's important to pick your battles, but whether it is a hot social or theological topic, or a struggle in the congregation, don't pretend it doesn't exist. Say, "I think" or "I believe," defining your own position, rather than telling others what their views should be.

• MUSIC

- 31 Remember** that music is one of the two most volatile areas of ministry. (Children/youth is the other). Don't be surprised when people get reactive about the music ministry.
- 32 Consider** carefully whether to sing in the choir, if your church has one, even if you love to sing. You need some distance from this high-anxiety area of ministry. You can do it but keep your ears open.
- 33 Hire** musicians who are as emotionally mature as possible. Talent is important, but the ability to work with others and be supervised by someone is at least as critical.
- 34 Listen** for all you can learn about the history of the music ministry in your congregation. Fights about music are often the focus of anxiety, not "about" the music at all.
- 35 Watch** for those who are able to stay calm in the middle of turmoil in the music ministry. Look for ways to make them leaders.
- 36 Keep** your sense of humor in this above all areas, as in so many others. Don't take criticism personally.
- 37 Challenge** the musicians to respond maturely to criticism. Stay aware of the tendency to get defensive and to defend the musicians to the congregation. Defensiveness rarely helps.
- 38 Develop** your own clear philosophy of music and its contribution to worship. Share that with lay leaders and with musicians in a self-defining and non-blaming way: "That's just the way I see it."
- 39 Coach** music leaders to use music as a way to enhance worship, not as an end in itself. Some musicians will find this easier than others. If they can't see this point you may need another musician.
- 40 Train** your own eye on the larger goal of connecting people with something beyond themselves. Church music is not just about the music, but also to help people move toward God.

• LEADERSHIP

41 Know who you are and what you want to be about in this life. This is a deeply spiritual question, and working on answering it will make you a better leader. Try writing a page or two in longhand on the question, “I am called to . . .”

42 Work on the process of being yourself while staying in touch with those you lead. While a challenging task, anyone who is motivated can get better at it.

43 Get clear about what you think and communicate that thinking with lowered anxiety. The more you do this, the more results are likely to improve.

44 Expect resistance when you move forward as a leader. Don't take it too seriously, and stay on track while connecting with those who are resisting.

45 Be neutral about the difficult issues in the congregation and in yourself. You will find yourself learning more and being less hooked by the challenges you face, and this will improve your leadership. This doesn't mean you should never take a stand, only that you need to manage your own feelings.

46 Take each issue that arises in church life as a gift from God: an opportunity to work on your own growth and ability to manage yourself. This is easier said than done, of course. But it is possible to get better at this as we practice.

47 Find a coach, mentor or colleague who can help you reflect on the leadership challenges that arise. When something comes up where you just can't see straight, you need an outside perspective on how you are being hooked. Ideally, this person should be someone who asks questions more than gives you advice.

48 Consider how your own family history may be affecting your leadership. If you can face the hot issues in your family of origin you will automatically become a better leader.

49 Keep the long view in mind. Short-term quick-fix programs and results will not affect a congregational system in the long run. God has an eternal view, and you can at least keep a ten-year horizon in mind.

50 Remember the best leaders are themselves in their role. God called you to this congregation not to imitate someone else but to use your own gifts in your own way. That doesn't mean you say “my way or the highway,” but that you relate to your church and the people in it out of your authentic self.

• LEARNING

51 Use your congregation as a continuing education seminar. Everything that happens in your church, positive or negative, is an opportunity for you to learn about yourself, about the church, about the people in it and their families.

52 Read books that interest you outside of ministry and theology. Make friends with your local librarian who can recommend new and old books.

53 Find colleagues who still enjoy ministry after many years, have a sense of humor, and are flexible, and take them to lunch from time to time. You will learn something about what it takes to hang in there for the long haul.

54 Research your own family history so you can find out more about what makes you tick. Once again, the places we get stuck in ministry usually if not always come out of our families. Don't try to fix your family, just try to learn about them so you can work on yourself.

55 Be a learner. Some suggested areas, beyond the usual theology and ministry nuts and bolts: family systems theory (highly recommended), entrepreneurship, and whatever else interests you. And find something completely unrelated to ministry and fun for you to explore: beekeeping, auto repair, painting.

56 Develop your own curiosity about the world and people in it. More than a specific field of study or method of learning, this is a way of being in life that will help sustain you in ministry. Some people do well with a daily discipline of study; others like to go away for a chunk of time. It doesn't matter what you do as long as you do something that feeds you.

57 Don't worry too much about learning the latest techniques of ministry, whether administrative, worship or any area. Keep tabs on what others are doing, but remember your ministry has to fit you. This is not an argument for a know-nothing ministry but for ministry as authentic self.

58 Remember that it is not the amount of information you take in but what you do with it. You can never learn everything there is to learn. Develop discernment about what information is truly important to you in your context and filter out the rest. (One colleague has a separate e-mail address for denominational e-mails and only checks them weekly.)

59 Glean from members of your congregation knowledge that can benefit your ministry. It will help you to learn from them and will help them to know you view them as a resource.

Don't be a know-it-all. You are not required to be an expert in everything and in fact it is not only exhausting but also impossible.

60 Study the history of your congregation and the families in it. Nothing (except your own family history) will teach you more about how to minister in the place where you are.

• SPIRITUAL LIFE

61 Find someone outside the congregation to serve as a spiritual sounding board. This can be a spiritual director or a spiritual friend or a mentor.

62 Pray for your congregation. This is part of your work.

63 Practice prayer for yourself. It is impossible to sustain the work of ministry over time without spiritual sustenance.

64 Look for a way of prayer and worship that fits for you. Plenty of people will give advice on how to do it (contemplative prayer, charismatic prayer, walks in the woods). There is no right way to pray. Just do it, and you will get better at it.

65 Read some Scripture devotionally. It doesn't have to be a lot, but it needs to be something that is not related to sermon preparation. One verse a day is better than none, and it may be better than a whole chapter.

66 Get out of town for a spiritual retreat. Overnight is better, but a day will do. Some distance is essential for the discernment necessary to be a spiritual leader.

67 Find the way that you pray best and practice it. Go with the flow, and do what works for you.

68 Do some spiritual practice. It almost doesn't matter what it is, whether prayer, silence, Bible study, or devotional reading, as long as you do it regularly.

69 Try some new practice or discipline. If you are inclined to contemplative prayer or if your tradition uses only informal prayers, try using written prayers. If you always use written prayers, practice pouring your heart out to God. If you love silence, join a prayer group. This is about developing your spiritual repertoire.

70 Go out into nature sometimes. Do this whether or not you are an outdoor person. Seeing trees, hearing birds, and smelling earth will help shift your perspective.

• FAMILY

71 Know that for clergy family life intersects with congregational life in a way that is not true for almost any other job. It is a blessing and a curse both. If we can enjoy the benefits without getting knotted up about the drawbacks, we and our families will be a lot happier.

72 Set boundaries for yourself and for your family. An inability to take a day off or vacation does not benefit you, them, or the church. At the same time, some flexibility is always warranted. This is just as true for single as for married clergy.

73 Remember that the intersection of church and family exists for single clergy, too, especially in the way family of origin issues impact ministry. Keep learning about your family.

74 Give your children room to be themselves, if you have children. That doesn't mean tolerating anything and everything, but it does mean controlling your expectations of what it means to be a pastor's kid.

75 Manage what you say at home about people at church, both with your spouse and children, if you have them. Remember that in many cases they have relationships with these people, too. We can get family support at times of stress, but we need to be conscious that we are not just running off at the mouth about church people.

76 Watch your own sense of responsibility for the church. Pastors who feel responsible for everything at church find it harder to set the boundaries that are essential for a healthy family life. Remember it is God's church, and you can let go sometimes (in fact, the more the better). To the degree you can do this you will be better able to be present for your family.

77 Take your vacation (all of it).

78 Have fun with your family, or with friends if you are single. Fun is worth it for its own sake, and it will benefit your ministry, too, by freeing you up. Find out what is fun for you and do it (and this will be easier if you let go of some of the emotional responsibility for the church, see above).

79 Keep a sense of humor, just as essential in family life as in church life. But don't tell the funny stories about your kids from the pulpit (at least, not until they are grown).

80 Pay attention to your relationship with your parents (whether they are alive or not, whether it has been good or not). This will help your children and grandchildren more than anything else you can do (far more than nagging).

• “COMPLAINT DEPT.”

81 Know that complaints are an issue in every area of ministry. The more you don't take complaints and criticism personally, the better off you will be emotionally and the more you will be effective in ministry.

82 Maintain some humility. Sometimes complaints are about an area where you need to improve.

83 Avoid getting defensive. It takes energy, and it undermines your effectiveness as a leader.

84 Apologize when necessary. It will go a long way toward defusing criticism.

85 Expect criticism and complaints when you take a stand or move in a clear direction as a leader. This is not about you; it is about the whole system reacting to an upset in the balance. Stay on course, and don't let it throw you. Coach other leaders to do the same.

86 Notice that complaints may bubble up in areas that are not related to the direction you are moving. For example, if you take a stand or make a move to develop worship in a new way, problems may come up in the youth group or the building committee. This is normal. Churches, like other systems, resist change in a variety of ways.

87 Watch how people express their views about something they don't like. Those who can define their position in terms of themselves are more mature than those who say “you should,” or “you shouldn't” or “they always” or “they never.” This will give you a clue as to those who are more mature than others.

88 Use care when expressing YOUR views about something you don't like. Try not to react but to think through your response first. As above, define your position in terms of yourself rather than others: “I” rather than “you” or “they.” Take responsibility for your own position.

89 Notice when the petty everyday stuff starts getting to you. Some days, weeks and months it will wash off your back, other times it will be like fingernails on a chalkboard. This IS about you and your own emotional state, and finding some ways to get a little distance physically or emotionally will help.

90 Remember that a complaint-free church is probably going nowhere. That much togetherness works against growth and development. Complaints are part of the price of progress. Don't take it too seriously.

• ADMINISTRATION

- 91 Make** sure you are reliable. If you say you will do something do it. Your credibility as a leader will be enhanced, and the ministry as a whole will benefit.
- 92 Keep** your time from being eaten up by the details of administration. Everyone has a different tolerance for these tasks but you will find it hard to lead effectively if you are spending your time proofreading the newsletter. Find someone else to do these detailed tasks!
- 93 Exercise** the ministry of delegation. Others will grow as you are able to let go. Even if you are a fabulous administrator and love it, find ways to involve other people.
- 94 Understand** the difference between leading and managing. Both are essential and they are not the same thing. Know your own strengths in these two key areas and find others who can complement you.
- 95 Remember** that the best leaders surround themselves with people who are better at certain tasks than they are. Don't hesitate to do this in all areas of church life, and especially this one.
- 96 Know** your own rhythm of work. One of the blessings of pastoral ministry is the great freedom around setting your schedule. (But be sure to show up Sunday morning...)
- 97 Set** limits for meetings. They expand to fill the time allotted.
- 98 Respect** the challenge of change in this as in all other areas. For example, long-time administrative secretaries are a very important part of the system. If you need to make a change here recognize that there will be waves and prepare for them.
- 99 Bear** in mind the emotional aspects of time management. It's not just about setting priorities and making lists. Just working harder and trying harder is not the answer to every problem—sometimes letting things sit is the better part of valor.
- 100 Ask** for help when you need it, whether you struggle in this area or feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of paper.

• MONEY

101 Remember that this is a high-anxiety area for many people. Family issues around money will be played out in the church.

102 Learn as much as you can about your own family history with money (over as many generations as you can). This will help you manage your anxiety about money in the congregation.

103 Share the responsibility for money challenges with the leadership. It is their church. When you feel anxious, ask yourself, “Whose anxiety is this, really?”

104 Ask the congregation to give (more than once a year). Once a month is not too often to talk about stewardship in some way.

105 Lighten up! Cultivate your sense of humor in this critical area. People get very serious about money, especially when it is tight, and this inhibits their ability to creatively solve problems.

106 Define your own views on stewardship to the congregation. This will be much more effective than trying to willfully convince people to give more.

107 Move in the direction of less secrecy around money rather than more. Different churches will be in different places on this spectrum, of course. But in general a move toward openness will help spread the responsibility for the church’s financial life more broadly.

108 Resist the temptation to help the church balance its budget on your salary. Salary negotiations always benefit from a light touch and clear thinking (not always easy to achieve). Know your own bottom line.

109 Expect church anxiety around change to show up in this area. Don’t take it too seriously or personally. At the same time, don’t allow denial to overtake you or other church leaders.

110 Keep looking for the emotional processes at work within the church. Money is a convenient focus, but problems with money are always symptomatic of other issues.

AND TIP NO. 111

(all the others depend on this one):

Remember that it’s not all about you. No single pastor can make or break a ministry. Let go and trust God and God’s work in the people.

*How to use this booklet to
support your ministry
and the ministry of others:*

One

Give this booklet to your moderator,
president or other key lay leader.

Two

Give this booklet to your staff.

Three

Use this booklet with your
pastoral relations committee.

Four

Use this booklet with
your governing board.

Five

Use this booklet
with a colleague group.

Six

Send this booklet
to your judicatory executive.

Seven

Give this booklet to your spouse.

Eight

Send this booklet to your seminary.

Nine

Keep copies of this booklet on hand
to give to colleagues in need.

Ten

Send this booklet to colleagues
as a Christmas gift.

About the Author



Margaret J. Marcuson is a leader of leaders, ordained minister, and teacher and student of human systems. She speaks and writes on leadership and has a private practice serving faith and corporate leaders nationally as a consultant/coach through her company, Marcuson Leadership Circle, based in Portland, Oregon. She is often called on to guide clergy through personal

and congregational crisis. She is on the faculty of the Leadership in Ministry Workshops, and has taught in the Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry's Pastoral Leadership Program. She is a frequent guest speaker in churches. Her seminar and conference speaking crosses denominations, including the American Baptist Churches, United Methodist, Church of God, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian and Episcopal. She has written for numerous publications, including Faith@Work, The Bible Workbench, The Five Stones, and Clergy Journal. She is also the author of *The Leadership Adventure: 21 Readings to Prompt Thoughtful Leadership*.

You may contact Margaret at:

Margaret Marcuson
Marcuson Leadership Circle
3439 NE Sandy Blvd. #102
Portland, OR 97232
503-701-7621
margaret@margaretmarcuson.com
www.margaretmarcuson.com



MARCUSON LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

Leaders practicing an easier, more effective way to lead.