

Ministering to Problem People in Your Church

What to Do With Well-Intentioned Dragons

Marshall Shelley



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To those
scorched by dragons
but not reduced to ashes
nor hardened beyond feeling,
who in the face of beastliness
maintain their humanity
and divine calling,
this book is dedicated.

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Foreword

I pastor a church in the Pacific Northwest; I am told from time to time that it is the most unchurched region in the whole of the nation. For some reason that holds appeal to people when it comes to faith and culture. As though a church in Portland is somehow immune to the realities of typical church culture because everyone is riding fixed-gear bikes and wearing scarves while drinking and eating local everything.

The truth is that any community of faith, whether in urban Portland or the Bible Belt, is made up of people—people for whom Christ died—some of whom you would rather punch than pastor on a given day. They may look different and talk different as you travel from city to city, but the same attitudes and actions have been present for thousands of years in communities of faith that we call the people of God.

I have a heart for pastors and their people. The reality is that all churches have challenging people. It is tempting to ignore difficulties and hope that they will simply go away. But in fact, to do so is to shrink back from caring for the flock,

knowing that disruptive people and circumstances can wreak havoc on a community.

As a pastor myself, I recognize how myopic my view of the world can get. I don't spend lots of time reading blogs or staying up on the current fads and debates that loom large in our bubble of evangelicalism. I spend most of my time with my nose down in my own city and church trying to lead, preach, discern, and follow Jesus. One of the drawbacks of this life is that we don't often take time to look up and learn from other people or even listen to see how others are addressing the common challenges in which we find ourselves.

That is where Marshall Shelley's insights and observations come in. It is incredibly helpful to hear the stories, see the battle wounds, and collect the wisdom of other brothers and sisters who have traveled the road on which you find yourself. After many years with *Leadership Journal*, Marshall has a vantage point that we do not. He can look at the many stories, find the commonalities, and help give direction to leaders who often feel alone in the mess of ministry.

The good news is that you are not alone. You are not going through something that others have not had to endure. The people and challenges that you are in the middle of are not unique to you. And, perhaps most important, there is help and wisdom to lean into that most people are not talking about. The good news is that Marshall is addressing the mess found in the midst of the beauty that is the bride of Christ.

Rick McKinley
Portland, Oregon

Introduction

Church or Dragon's Lair?

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down its tongue with a rope? . . . Its breath sets coals ablaze, and flames dart from its mouth.

Job 41:1, 21

Anyone who's involved in leading a church recognizes the irony: the community that gathers in the name of Jesus Christ is often populated by problem people who make things much, much harder for everyone. In this book, we call them "well-intentioned dragons."

Dragons, of course, are fictional beasts—monstrous reptiles with a lion's claws, a serpent's tail, a bat's wings, and scaly skin. They exist only in the imagination.

But there are dragons of a different sort, decidedly real. In most cases, though not always, they do not intend to be

sinister; in fact, they're usually quite friendly. But their charm and earnestness belie their power to destroy.

Within the church, they are often sincere, well-meaning saints, but they leave ulcers, strained relationships, and hard feelings in their wake. They don't consider themselves difficult people. They don't sit up nights thinking of ways to be nasty. Often they are pillars of the community—talented, strong personalities, deservedly respected—but for some reason, they undermine the ministry of the church. In most cases, they are not naturally rebellious or pathological; they are loyal church members, convinced they're serving God, but they wind up doing more harm than good.

They can drive pastors crazy . . . or out of the church.

Some dragons are openly critical. They are the ones who accuse you of being (pick one) too spiritual, not spiritual enough, too dominant, too laid-back, too strict, too lenient, too structured, too disorganized, or ulterior in your motives.

These criticisms are painful because they are largely unanswerable. How can you defend yourself and maintain a spirit of peace? How can you possibly prove the purity of your motives? Dragons make it hard to disagree without being disagreeable.

Relationships are both the professional and personal priority for church leaders—getting along with people is an essential element of any ministry—and when relationships are vandalized by critical dragons, many pastors feel like failures. Politicians are satisfied with 51 percent of the constituency behind them; pastors, however, feel the pain when one vocal member becomes an opponent.

Sightings of these dragons are all too common. As one veteran pastor says, “Anyone who’s been in ministry more than an hour and a half knows the wrath of a dragon.” Or, as ministry veteran Harry Ironside described it, “Wherever there’s light, there’s bugs.”

Research by *Leadership Journal*, a professional publication for church leaders, indicates that 80 percent of the pastors who read the publication need help with difficult people in the congregation.

And yet, many pastors enter the ministry totally unprepared for these attacks.

One pastor of a rural church considered an older deacon his closest friend in the congregation. The deacon, a farmer, generously shared produce from his garden and insisted on keeping the young pastor’s aging Ford filled with gas from the tank behind the barn. The deacon also happened to be the church’s biggest giver, providing more than 30 percent of the total budget.

One day the pastor, moonlighting as a school bus driver, had to discipline an unruly student. “I went strictly by the book,” the pastor recalls. He dropped off the boy at home and told him to tell his parents the bus would not be stopping for him the next day. He reported the incident to the school superintendent and thought the matter was closed.

But the next day, the deacon, a friend of the boy’s father, told the pastor he had overstepped his authority and completely mishandled the situation. “I think it’s time you looked for another church,” he said. “Your ministry here is over.”

Even though the school board backed the pastor, within

six months the pastor was forced to resign because of the influence of that deacon, who chose to side with the boy's family rather than the pastor.

"I was shocked," the pastor says. "I felt betrayed and isolated. I was innocent, and yet this incident cost me my job. I wondered why I had been singled out for such abuse. I was totally unprepared for this.

"In seminary I learned how to discuss infra- and supralapsarianism, and yet in thirty years of ministry, I've never had to use that knowledge. But I've encountered lots of unreasonably angry people, people who made up their minds about things and didn't care to hear any facts to the contrary. I was never even warned such people would be out there."

By now he has learned that in ministry, criticism comes with the territory—some of it deserved, some of it unfair, all of it devastating for an individual who loves people and wants to minister to them.

This is a book about ministering while under attack. It was prepared after interviews with dozens of pastors who candidly described the difficult people they have faced. It is not a psychological study of problem people, nor is it an exhaustive catalog of the difficult individuals pastors will encounter. Instead it is a book based on the accounts of veterans of the dragon wars. The lessons offered are lessons of experience. They may or may not apply in other situations, but they at least provide a glimpse of the potential conflicts. Perhaps the wisdom of battle-tested veterans will prevent others from walking unaware into an ambush.

Though winged, fire-breathing dragons may be fictional, the stories you are about to read are not. Only the names,

locations, and identifying details have been changed to protect present ministries. These are real-life stories of pastors who have succeeded, some who have failed, and all of whom have learned valuable lessons about continuing to minister amid the church's well-intentioned dragons.



Complex Conflicts

No matter what form the dragon may take, it is of this mysterious passage past him, or into his jaws, that stories of any depth will always be concerned to tell.

Flannery O'Connor

Despite Dwayne Wilson's sometimes brusque style and Virginia Wilson's high-octane zeal, Pastor Tyler Campbell considered the fifty-six-year-old church treasurer and his wife among the congregation's greatest assets.

Tyler discovered Dwayne's direct, no-nonsense approach right away. After his first service as pastor of Fair Glen Community Church, Tyler and his wife, Kristin, were standing at the rear door greeting worshippers. As Dwayne and Virginia Wilson came out, he took Tyler's hand firmly and said, "Our previous pastor was a good man, and he said you were a fine

fellow—the best we could possibly hope for in our situation.” Then he paused, looked Tyler in the eye, and concluded, “I hope he’s right.”

Tyler tried not to dwell on the comment.

Fair Glen Community Church, just outside Cleveland, was Tyler’s second pastorate, and he and Kristin, both in their mid-thirties, knew the value of the older, committed saints. Only their faithfulness had enabled the church to survive the lean years when attendance had dropped to fewer than eighty.

Both Dwayne and Virginia were deeply involved in the church. Dwayne, a former elder, handled the church books and taught an adult Sunday school class. Virginia led a morning home Bible study for women and enjoyed evangelism, or “soul-winning” as she preferred to call it. She seemed to have a knack for turning conversations toward spiritual topics, even if she did come on a little strong for some members’ tastes.

The Wilsons were not conspicuously wealthy—as a general contractor, Dwayne had been affected by the economy like most in the construction industry—but they were generous. Tyler learned that they had personally given the previous pastor a new Cadillac as a retirement gift. And for the two years the church was without a pastor, the Wilsons had single-handedly covered the church’s budget deficit at the end of the year.

Dwayne was also a forceful Bible teacher. He spent lots of preparation time listening to podcasts of his favorite Bible speakers, following along in his cross-referenced study Bible. His class was popular among those “in the second half of life.” He prided himself on taking the Bible literally, and

in class he would work through entire books of the Bible verse by verse, with only occasional detours to handle a topic such as prophecy in current events, the (subordinate) role of women, or spiritual gifts (at least those he considered still operative today).

Tyler cringed at some of Dwayne's dogmatic pronouncements. "I'm amazed how Dwayne insists on taking the Bible literally in some passages and how he explains it away in others," he once told Kristin. "His literalism is rather selective." But at the same time, Tyler was grateful for Dwayne's faithfulness and genuine desire to minister to his class.

Each year Dwayne would take some of the men from the class deer hunting in Michigan, and he had helped several families financially when job layoffs hit. The class was cohesive, said those who were in it; it was a clique, said those who weren't.

On the whole, Tyler was willing to put up with the 10 percent he questioned for the 90 percent that was positive in the class. Meanwhile, he began a class for younger adults, a group that had been somewhat neglected prior to his coming.

After Tyler's fourth Sunday, Virginia Wilson caught his arm following the evening service.

"Pastor, I met a young man who should be in your class," she said.

"Who is he?" Tyler asked.

"I met him in the shopping mall when I sat down to catch my breath," she explained. "Sitting next to me was this young man, and we struck up a conversation. One thing led to another, and he told me his story. He was arrested last year as a Peeping Tom, and he says he still struggles with those urges.

I told him he could be delivered if he'd turn his life over to Jesus. He seems interested, Pastor. He gave me his phone number, and I told him you'd give him a call. His name is Ernie."

She handed Tyler a card with the number.

"Uh, thanks," said Tyler. "Given the nature of the problem, I guess it would be better for a man to call."

"Oh, thanks so much, Pastor," Virginia gushed. "I just know the Lord is going to do mighty things through you." And she walked off before Tyler could say another word.

Tyler did call and offered to get together, but Ernie said no, he didn't think that was necessary. Tyler told Ernie about the church and their desire to be a place of healing and not judgment. And if Ernie ever wanted to talk about anything, Tyler's door was always open. Ernie said he might visit the church someday.

The next week, Virginia asked how the conversation went, and she was disappointed when Tyler told her.

"He seemed so open," she said, looking at Tyler with just a hint of accusation. "He needs Jesus."

"When a pastor takes the initiative like that, sometimes the person feels pressured," Tyler said.

"We can't expect *them* to take the initiative," said Virginia. "We have to reach out." True enough, Tyler agreed.

The following week before Sunday school, Virginia introduced Tyler to a young woman with wild, frizzy hair wearing blue jeans and a flannel shirt.

"This is Alicia," she said. "She wants to learn more about Jesus. She just got out of a treatment facility and is looking for a job. I told her Christ is what she needs. I'll leave you two alone so you can get acquainted."

Alicia spoke indistinctly, but Tyler found out she was on medication to control her emotional problems. Her story was hard to follow, but she said she had met Virginia at the shopping mall and she “got saved when I was little, but now I need Jesus to help me get better.”

Tyler told her he was glad she had come, and he hoped she would become a part of the church because the body of Christ was a healing community. Alicia sat through class but left before church.

That night Virginia wanted to know if Tyler had helped her. “She’s one who could really benefit from being in the church body,” he said.

“I met her sister at the mall, too. You could really do her some good,” Virginia said. “And by the way, you’ll want to visit the Bonners’ foster son this week. He’s really depressed because his girlfriend dumped him, and he’s not doing very well spiritually. And, oh yes, the Gibsons are having difficulties with their teenage son. I told them you’d call.”

Each week, it seemed, Virginia told Tyler of another person she’d met who needed his ministry.

Tyler told Kristin, “Virginia can unearth more needy people at a shopping mall than anyone I know. Maybe it’s because the only people willing to talk at malls are troubled people with no place in particular to go. She gets 1 percent into their problems, tells them Christ is the answer, and then turns them over to me.”

When it happened again, Tyler told Virginia his primary job was to equip saints like her for this kind of ministry.

“That’s true, Pastor,” Virginia replied. “But I know you also have a burden for souls, and these people are ripe for

the gospel. I'm locating needs so we can meet those needs and introduce the people to Christ." She was disturbed that Tyler wasn't more eager or effective in following up her leads.

Tyler and Kristin spent hours talking about the situation.

"I wish I could help those people she brings," said Tyler one night over supper. "But I get the feeling she wants me to preach at them and straighten them out in one conversation. Their problems are so complex—they are such high-maintenance people—that meeting their needs is a full-time job. I'd have no time for anyone else."

"Yes, Virginia thinks pointing out a problem is solving it," said Kristin. "She feels she's doing some great thing for God by spotting a need. She doesn't understand that meeting one need is more important than spotting fifty. Besides, the Spirit must lead both the giver and receiver of ministry. God has to be doing something in the person's life before our efforts will make a difference."

Tyler agreed. "She's an effective Andrew, but I can't possibly handle all the Simon Peters she's bringing. For one reason, not all of them come willingly—like the Bonners' foster son. He didn't want to see me; he needs a friend, not a pastor."

"Sounds like she promises them quick solutions to complex problems 'if you turn it over to Jesus,' which builds up some unrealistic expectations, too," said Kristin. "Poor Alicia certainly needs Jesus, but she also needs more treatment for her chemical disorders. I'm afraid Virginia doesn't understand that."

When Tyler tried to explain these things to Virginia, she misread his intention. "You mean pastors don't do evangelism

anymore?” she said. Tyler tried to clarify, but when they parted, he knew she was unhappy. Her closing comment: “Well, they sure don’t make pastors like they used to!”

It seemed like a minor disagreement at the time, but later Tyler saw his reluctance to handle Virginia’s “projects” as the beginning of his growing alienation, not only from her, but also from all the Wilsons’ disciples.

In the weeks that followed, Virginia did not bring any more problem people to Tyler’s attention, but she brought Tyler to the attention of her Bible study. Several of the women told Tyler they were praying for “his vision for ministry.” Another woman told Tyler she was quitting the group because the “hour of prayer” was “fifty minutes of talking about the pastor and ten minutes of prayer.”

Tyler asked the elders about the criticisms. They downplayed the problem. Since each Tuesday evening he had been taking a different elder along on his visits to church newcomers, and often these conversations turned to the gospel at the core of Fair Glen, the elders said they felt Tyler was sufficiently evangelistic. And they were pleased at the results so far—several families had become Christians and were attending the church, and the elders were feeling more confident about sharing their faith.

Tyler hoped that with time Virginia’s feelings would calm down, especially since the church was growing. After a year, Sunday morning attendance had grown from one hundred thirty to almost two hundred. And since the class Dwayne and Virginia taught was growing along with the rest of the church, Tyler hoped they would be happy.

They weren’t.

Soon Dwayne joined his wife in criticizing “the direction of the church.” Tyler heard reports that in Dwayne’s class he was recommending preachers that “teach the Word with more meat than you usually hear in sermons around here.”

Tyler decided to visit the Wilsons. Perhaps a pastoral call would mend fences. After talking about the growth in their Sunday school class, Tyler decided to be direct.

“Perhaps it’s just me, but in recent weeks I’ve sensed a distance between us. I know my ministry style is not like the previous pastor’s, but have I done something to offend you?”

“No, nothing specific,” said Dwayne. “It’s just that the church seems to have lost its first love. Virginia and I don’t want to see our church become lukewarm.”

Tyler fumbled for words. “I certainly don’t want to be lukewarm, either. I’m committed to serving the Lord here, and I’ve been encouraged by the number of people who’ve joined our church and said they really sensed the Spirit of God at work.”

He stopped. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to sound defensive. I do have a lot to learn about pastoring. Maybe you can help me. How do you think we can keep ourselves from becoming lukewarm?”

“We know you’re evangelizing in your own way, Pastor,” said Dwayne. “But we think you need to be more bold about it. Especially in the pulpit. You need to preach the Word. There are lots of kids in the church who are rebelling against their parents. You need to preach against that.”

“And if I preached ‘Honor your father and mother’ from the pulpit, do you think the problem would be solved?” asked Tyler.

“If you preach it strong enough and often enough,” said Virginia. “Scripture says, ‘My Word shall not return void.’”

“You also need to preach against divorce,” Dwayne said. “It’s a real problem in our church.”

Tyler knew all too well of the struggling marriages. He was meeting with four different couples, and in two cases, they had been able to reconcile their differences. In a third case, the husband left the wife for another woman and left the congregation. Tyler had encouraged the woman to stay in the church and continue her regular turn in the nursery. Some had questioned whether she should still be “in a leadership role,” and Tyler defended her, saying she’d done all she could to reconcile. But a few couples from Dwayne’s Sunday school class still weren’t satisfied.

In a fourth case, physical abuse had been involved, and the couple, on Tyler’s recommendation, had decided to separate temporarily while they continued to work on their problem. Tyler was encouraged by their progress, though they still had many obstacles to overcome. At least they were willing to keep working at it. Dwayne’s class was upset by their separation, but Tyler, of course, couldn’t share this confidential information.

“I hear what you’re saying,” said Tyler. “But I’ve learned there’s a difference between *pronouncements* and the *process* God uses. In other words, condemning something from the pulpit doesn’t eliminate it. Marriages are strengthened more by positive examples and support and dealing privately with problems than by preaching against divorce. Yes, parents ought to have authority in the home, and children should honor their parents, but I’m not sure putting your fist down is the way to convince kids of that.”

Dwayne and Virginia looked dubious. When he left that night, Tyler hoped they at least trusted his motives, even if they didn't agree with his approach.

Unfortunately his peacekeeping expedition only fueled the fire. The next Sunday evening, Dwayne handed Tyler a four-page handwritten critique of his morning sermon.

"Here," he said. "You mentioned the other night maybe we could help you minister better. These are some suggestions on how you could have preached this morning's text."

"Thanks, I'll look them over," said Tyler.

Dwayne had carefully reconstructed Tyler's sermon outline and written comments under each point. The comments ranged from "Deuteronomy 17 is a good cross-reference here—let Scripture interpret Scripture!" to "That's not how this passage was handled by Dr. McMillan" (Dwayne's favorite West Coast Bible teacher) to "Too many uh's in here—a sign of too little preparation."

The next three Sundays in a row, he did the same thing. A recurring complaint seemed to be that Tyler wasn't as forceful as Dwayne would have liked.

One critique quoted Tyler's sermon: "We cannot prove the existence of God—even the Resurrection we accept on faith—but we can look at certain evidences and base our faith on those. Faith is deciding to believe even without scientific proof." Dwayne's comment: "Perhaps you cannot prove God's existence or the Resurrection, but Dr. McMillan can! Listen to podcasts #1635 and #1874."

Tyler tried to learn what he could from the criticism without letting it paralyze him, but he began to dread each Tuesday when he would sit down to begin sermon preparation.

His stomach would knot, and he knew that no matter what he said, Dr. McMillan had already said it better. Of course, McMillan was more a professor than a preacher, and Tyler didn't feel he could bring as much scholarship into the pulpit as McMillan did. Verse-by-verse commentary might be fine in a teaching situation, but for Sunday worship, Tyler wanted to accomplish something else: He wanted to create an atmosphere where love, acceptance, and forgiveness could flourish, where the church could become a source of warmth and outreach in the community.

He asked his elders about his preaching style, and they didn't see a problem.

"Don't worry about it," said Kristin that night as they were getting ready for bed. "Dwayne is comparing live performance to production. Those podcasts are from talks McMillan has given dozens of times. Of course they're polished. Plus, they have been edited. The weak illustrations have been taken out. If he stammers or says 'and-uh,' they take that out. And if he misses the mark sometimes, they don't even release that tape. Comparing you to McMillan isn't fair. It's like a man falling in love with the women in movies or in retouched photos—they never see those women without makeup or when they're sick. In a sense, people today prefer illusion to reality."

"Thanks," said Tyler. "Are you saying I'm sick?"

Kristin snapped him playfully with a towel.

Tyler probably could have endured the critiques if they had continued to come only from Dwayne. But before long, three of the men in Dwayne's class asked Tyler if they could begin selling Dr. McMillan's CDs and DVDs at a table in the foyer.

To keep the peace, Tyler approached the board with the suggestion. The board saw no harm in it, since Tyler's podcasts were already available, and approved making available resources "from any reputable Bible teacher, with board approval." In fact, the board spent more time discussing whether the church would owe UBI taxes (unrelated business income) on items sold than on whether this request was a subtle attack on Tyler. When they finally concluded that the resources could be sold at cost, thus removing any troublesome income, the board seemed to think its job was done. They hoped this would lead to peace within the congregation.

But even after that concession, Tyler began to sense in Dwayne's class a growing disapproval of his ministry. They had their own agenda for the rest of the congregation: a Statement of Christian Lifestyle. Tyler first heard about it when he made another peacekeeping visit to the Wilsons' home.

"The church needs to take a stronger stand against compromise with the world," Dwayne said earnestly. "We need to spell out clearly what is right and what is wrong."

"In what areas?" asked Tyler.

"Oh, you know. Divorce, gambling, smoking, drinking, tithing, things like that. We need to let people know what the Christian life is all about. That's discipleship."

"I agree we are to be distinct from the world," Tyler said, carefully choosing his words. "And one of the ways we are to be distinct, says John 13, is in our love for one another. I'm reluctant to spell out a specific list of do's and don'ts, because it's been my experience that those kinds of lists often result in a legalistic atmosphere. Love falls victim to law. People

tend to look on the outward behavior without discerning the spirit within.”

“But by their fruits you shall know them,” said Virginia.

“Yes, we must stimulate one another to love and good deeds,” said Tyler. “And I feel that happens best with an informal system of accountability, where we discuss these things with one another but leave the final judgments to God.”

The rest of the visit was spent discussing whether the essence of faith rested more in attitude or behavior. Dwayne insisted that the church needed to be more directive. Tyler pointed out that the elders had discussed a lifestyle statement recently, and there hadn’t been much enthusiasm. They’d felt that spelling out the minutiae of the law, especially as specifically as the Wilsons wanted, would cause more problems than it would solve.

Afterward Tyler felt they’d somehow missed the core of the problem, but he couldn’t quite identify what it was. Whatever the cause, Dwayne and Virginia and the Sunday school class became increasingly restless with Tyler and the board.

During his sermons, no one sat grimly with arms folded; there were no cold, withdrawn glares. In fact, class members still nodded and smiled, but after certain statements, he noticed many of them glanced toward Dwayne and Virginia, as if to see whether or not they approved.

About this time, Tyler began suffering from colitis. The doctor told him there was too much acid in his system. All Tyler knew was that he was running to the bathroom seven times before the Sunday evening service, when he knew Dwayne would hand him another critique.

“Fortunately, I haven’t had to leave the service . . . yet,” he told Kristin with a smile.

His weekdays weren’t affected until one day he overheard Dwayne telling one of the elders, “Our pastor really needs to concentrate on his personal spiritual growth if he’s going to lead a congregation.”

When the other elder said he thought Tyler seemed “pretty spiritually mature for his age,” Dwayne continued, “Well, I’m hoping he’s spending enough time in the Word. So many of his sermon illustrations have been coming from other books—last week he quoted C. S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Mother Teresa. I wish he’d let Scripture speak for itself.”

After that, even yard work, which had been his release, was no escape from thoughts of the conflict at church. He couldn’t even finish cutting the grass without having to make two or three trips to the bathroom.

Part of his frustration was that the elders knew Dwayne was grouching, but they didn’t think it was serious. “He’s always had dogmatic opinions,” they said. “That’s why we’ve allowed him to be church treasurer but not an elder.” They didn’t know, however, what those opinions were doing to Tyler.

The climax in the conflict occurred just a few months later, right after Tyler had served as guest speaker in a church on the other side of Cleveland.

When Tyler had candidated at Fair Glen, he had asked the elders if he, as pastor, could take two weeks a year to preach at other churches. He enjoyed that kind of ministry, and he felt exposure to other churches helped him minister at his own. The elders had agreed.

In November, Tyler took the two Sundays to minister at a church thirty miles away. He arranged to fill the pulpit the two Sundays he would be gone, and he had one of the elders lead the midweek prayer service. He still managed four pastoral calls and a funeral for Fair Glen during that week.

But on the 15th, when he usually got his paycheck, there was nothing in the mail. Two days later, when it still hadn't arrived, he called Dwayne, the church treasurer.

"Say, Dwayne," Tyler said jokingly, "you don't happen to have my check, do you? My kids are getting hungry."

Dwayne didn't laugh. "No, I don't. You were off the last two weeks, weren't you?"

"Well, I spoke elsewhere on the Sundays, but I cleared it with the board. And I was here all week."

"I didn't hear anything about you being paid," Dwayne said. "I figured if you're off somewhere else, you get your money from them."

"Maybe this is something for the board to decide," Tyler said, suddenly feeling the effects of colitis. "Let's sit down together tonight after prayer meeting."

That night, after Dwayne told why he'd withheld the check, one board member said, "We gave the pastor permission to preach at these meetings. I don't see any problem." The others nodded in agreement.

"Well, what should I do?" Dwayne demanded.

"Write him a check," said the board chairman, Ray McGregor.

"For how much?"

"All of it," said Ray.

“Okay,” said Dwayne. “But some people come to this church to hear the pastor, and if he’s not here, they might not come back.”

Tyler apologized to Dwayne for the misunderstanding and said he was flattered Dwayne considered his preaching an attraction. Dwayne didn’t smile.

Two Sundays later, the stress caught up with Tyler. As he walked to the pulpit that morning, he saw Dwayne and Virginia in the fourth row, and he dried up. He couldn’t preach. He paused before the congregation for an uncomfortable moment and then said, “I’ve been going through some tense, distressing times in recent days. And to be honest with you, I’ve got nothing to say. I’d like to ask Ray McGregor, our church chairman, to come up and pray for me and for all of us this morning.”

As Ray prayed, some phrases from Psalm 102 came to Tyler’s mind. “My heart is blighted and withered like grass. . . . I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears.” When Ray sat down, Tyler quoted the verse and explained how it sometimes describes the human condition with stunning clarity.

“Now is such a time in my life,” he confessed. “And when that happens, I know I must trust God in the same way as did the psalmist, who, though no relief from his suffering was in sight, nevertheless drew strength from the One who could see the end from the beginning. In times like this, all we can do is look to God, even when he seems silent, and say with the psalmist, ‘In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like

a garment. . . . But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”

As he spoke, he looked at Kristin, and she returned his gaze steadily, confidently.

This unsermon lasted only five minutes, and the service closed early. Tyler was feeling better, but he tried to leave quickly out the side door. He wasn't quick enough. Virginia Wilson grabbed his arm just as he got outside.

“My twelve-year-old grandson was sitting beside me today,” she said. “And he heard the pastor say he doesn't have victory in his life. I ask you, how can my grandson have victory when it's not demonstrated even in our worship services? I don't want you to speak that way again.”

“My dear Virginia,” Tyler said, “Jesus loves you, and I do, too.” It was trite, but he couldn't think of anything else to say, and it left her confused just long enough for him to escape.

Tyler got into his car wondering if it wasn't time to resign, move back to Vermont, and look for work doing something, *anything*, else. Here at Fair Glen, he couldn't preach; prayer was a struggle; and even pastoral care, his favorite task, seemed impossible to do with integrity. *Maybe Virginia is right*, he thought. *I have no answers to this problem, and if I have no answers for myself, how can I offer help to someone else?*

The next time church elections were held, Tyler did persuade the nominating committee not to put Dwayne up for treasurer again. He had served for fifteen years, but the flap over the paycheck convinced the board he should probably take a sabbatical.

Dwayne, predictably, was hurt. He accused Tyler of trying to drive him out of the church. Tyler assured him that was not his intent. He set up a weekly breakfast with Dwayne to try to build a better relationship, but there was no warmth, no healing. The wounds were still too fresh. And in church business meetings, Dwayne made sure a dissenting voice was heard loud and clear.

When several church women wanted to begin a preschool and day-care center to minister to the neighborhood, Dwayne made an impassioned speech that day care encouraged women to leave their children and seek employment, “which undermines the very thing we’re commanded to teach—that women belong at home with their children. Anything else is a violation of God’s intended structure for the family. Plus, as the former treasurer here, I know we can’t afford it.” He had enough influence to sway the vote, and the proposal was defeated.

A few months later, the elders were discussing whether or not one of the younger men, Paul Dewey, should be nominated for a board position. The constitution didn’t specify age limits, but elders had always been more than forty years old (most more than sixty). Paul was only twenty-nine, but he had demonstrated “maturity and a servant’s heart,” as Ray McGregor put it. Paul, an electrician, had acquired and installed the church’s sound system without charge. He was continually volunteering whenever work needed to be done around the building. At Fair Glen, three elders were assigned responsibility for maintaining the facilities and purchasing necessary equipment. Ray suggested Paul would be an excellent choice for one of those positions.

At one of their breakfasts, Tyler decided to bounce the idea off Dwayne.

“I think we ought to have the whole congregation praying about this, Pastor.”

“Well, the idea is just in the thinking stage. We’re trying to weigh the pluses and minuses,” said Tyler.

“Pastor, elders have an important leadership function. Scripture calls them elders for a reason—they are supposed to be older. I heard Dr. McMillan say recently that the Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*, and that means older men. I think we should stick to what the Bible says.”

“Interesting point, Dwayne. We’ll have to study that.”

“If you’re contemplating something this major, it should be prayed about by the entire body.”

“I agree, Dwayne. And it will be—at the appropriate time. But you and I both know that there are times when discretion means you don’t go public before you’ve done your homework. If the elders decide *not* to recommend this course of action, getting people upset about the issue would only hurt the ministry.”

Dwayne was unconvinced, but Tyler hoped at least he was pacified.

He wasn’t. The board still had not made a decision when, at the next business meeting, just before entertaining the motion to adjourn, chairman Ray McGregor asked if there was any other business. Dwayne stood up and said, “Mr. Chairman, do I understand that the elders of this congregation are considering installing young people as elders?”

The rustling of papers and coats as people were getting ready to leave suddenly stopped. Dwayne waited for a response.

The room was silent. Tyler stifled an urge to shout, *You're the one who talked with me about this issue, Dwayne. Why are you asking now?* But he remained quiet and let Ray handle the question.

"I don't know about the term *young people*, Dwayne. We have discussed how old elders should be, but no decision has been made as yet. Okay, do I hear a motion to adjourn?"

"Just a minute," Dwayne interrupted. "Why is it even being considered when the Bible clearly indicates that all elders are older? Aren't we a Bible-believing church?"

"Dwayne," Ray said firmly. "This isn't the time to get into a detailed discussion. The question can't be answered quickly. The elders have been appointed the spiritual oversight of this body, and the elders are seeking God's direction in many areas, and if and when a specific proposal should be made to the congregation, you'll be the first to know. Good night, everyone."

Tyler was so angry he slipped out a side door and went home without speaking to anyone. As he and Kristin lay in bed that night and reviewed the events of the past three years, he said, "I'd sure love to have a *normal* church. Why can't we just get along like human beings?"

The next day, Tyler and Ray met to talk. They decided the problem needed to be tackled head-on, that since Dwayne had made an issue of it already, they might as well go public with a tentative proposal that elders must be at least twenty-five years old.

Over the next three months, the issues were debated in a series of congregational forums, several elders reported on the biblical evidence, and rejoinders were accepted from the

floor, giving Dwayne ample opportunity to state his case, which he did with fervor. These meetings were expressly billed as *not* decision-making sessions but times for seeking the Lord's guidance.

After three months, another business meeting was called, a vote was taken, and the congregation unanimously approved an amendment to the constitution that elders must be at least twenty-seven years old. It was something of a compromise, though neither side enjoyed the process of negotiation.

If this story were a fairy tale, someone would wave a magic wand and disagreements would disappear, leaving the principals at peace and the church prospering. In real life, however, dragon stories go on; the ends don't tie quite so neatly.

Two weeks after finally agreeing on the age issue, Dwayne approached one of the board members and said, "I wonder if our pastor is praying enough. Being a spiritual leader is an awesome responsibility for such a young fellow, and he really needs to maintain a quality devotional life."

When the elder mentioned the conversation to Tyler, Tyler felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. "I wish he'd spend as much time praying for me as he does worrying about me," he said.

Even church discipline has got to be easier than this, he thought. But there was nothing to discipline Dwayne for. He wasn't rebelling against God; he said he was desperately trying to obey Scripture, at least as he understood it.

The problem was that he and Tyler were on different wavelengths. Dwayne was primarily literal and dogmatic in his understanding of Scripture, latching on to one or two specific verses as the clear answer to any question; Tyler was primarily

contextual, looking at the literary, historical, and theological context of Scripture and trying to apply the “whole counsel” of God to today. Dwayne thought the church should emphasize more Bible knowledge; Tyler thought the people already knew more Bible than they could obey, that sermons should emphasize living out their knowledge.

Under such circumstances, Tyler is discovering that reconciliation takes a long time. Thanks to the support of the elder board, his job is not threatened, even if his health is. Tyler and Dwayne have shared countless breakfasts and apologized to each other, but in many ways, their situation is like two people trying to reconcile after a divorce. Neither wants to be hostile, but neither can forget the past. Rebuilding trust is much harder than building it. After conflict and separation, after two people have so seriously injured each other, even after apologies have been made, restoring spontaneity and carefree affection doesn't happen overnight.

Tyler is continuing to minister with the weight of a not-quite-resolved situation. He has preached sermons on forgiveness, as much to himself as to the congregation, but the feelings don't go away.

He has told Dwayne, “This may be your greatest spiritual test—to learn love and forgiveness when it's hard to do.” And that seems to be getting through. Both he and Dwayne are willing to continue trying to work together. Tyler consciously tries to think well of the Wilsons and understand their viewpoint, and Dwayne sends Tyler occasional notes of encouragement for particular sermons or specific instances of pastoral care to one of the Wilsons' friends.

The easy way out for Tyler would be to encourage Dwayne to leave, or to look for another church himself. But he is not willing to admit defeat—he believes warmer relationships are possible, even when the climate is still chilly. Nor does he see separation as the answer to confronting dragons.

The rest of this book deals with various kinds of dragons, their tactics, and the ways to handle them. But from the beginning a premise stands clear: The goal in handling dragons is not to destroy them, not merely to disassociate from them, but to make them disciples. Even when that seems an unlikely prospect.