

## ***Being an Elder when you are really a Younger***

Dear José,

A number of years ago I celebrated my fortieth birthday, or as we self-absorbed baby boomers like to say, *the big four-0*. I was the center of surprise parties, middle age jokes and cards that in one way or another explored the theme of being *over the hill*. I didn't mind the celebrations. In fact, I rather like this side of the hill. Now I have really become what for years I had been pretending to be—a *senior* pastor. I first received the title at age twenty-six. It didn't fit.

It's hard to be an elder when you're really a younger. Like a little boy shuffling along in daddy's shoes, I often played the part. I found that the secret to pulling it off is summed up in one seven-letter word—D-I-G-N-I-T-Y. Even if you're doing something for the first time, you act as if you were born doing it. When it works, it's great. When it doesn't, well, it will make a wonderful story years later when you're secure enough to tell it.

This is where the story about my first baptism fits in. You can imagine my pride and nervousness the evening I stood at the top of the steps leading down into the baptistry tank. As I was about to step down, something went wrong. I don't know if I slipped or if I tripped over my long robe. What I do know is that the first thing the congregation saw was their young pastor tumbling into the baptistry. The splash triggered a small tidal wave that spilled over the edge on the organist who was seated below. So much for dignity!

In spite of, or maybe because of my embarrassment, the congregation enjoyed the mishap immensely. They laughed and kidded me about it following the service. For many Sundays thereafter I caught different ones smiling in the middle of my sermons and I knew what they were thinking about. But I also knew that they were seeing my heart, and that they were respecting my calling.

Whether you are young in age or young in experience, gaining credibility is a crucial leadership issue. So how does a pastor overcome the perception of inexperience and earn the trust of the congregation? I have found that several disciplines that affect one's strength of influence.

*Model personal credibility.* Effective leaders demonstrate by their actions and demeanor that they are worthy of trust. They make every effort to consistently display integrity, graciousness, dependability, enthusiasm and a willingness to assume responsibility. They don't demand trust. They strive to be trustworthy. This is why Peter admonished us to be *examples to the flock*. If we are going to lead, then our lives need to be worthy for others to follow.

*Invest in relationships.* Loving leadership begins with a heart check—making certain that our genuine desire is to serve people not use them. The more we care for people, the more they will respond to our leadership. Several skills will help: listening, laughing, playing, peace-making, patience-practicing and time-giving. Love is the most powerful motivator in the world.

*Magnify God's power and glory.* The authority to lead God's people resides in Jesus Christ. He is the head of the Church and we serve His desire. This means that the beginning point for us is profound humility. It also means that

we must exalt the sovereignty of God, the authority of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of prayer and the infallibility of God's Word. True believers long to be led by spiritually empowered leaders.

*Lead by following.* Building credibility involves our willingness to follow as much as our willingness to lead. Servant leaders evidence a sincere desire to be accountable to their governing boards. It is seen in their graciousness when decisions don't go their way. You will hear other pastors gripe and joke about ornery elders or domineering deacons. Please don't follow their lead. Modeling accountability will help you nurture a leadership team that practices mutual submission and servanthood.

*Earn the right to fail.* Most pastors want to serve in an environment where there is a freedom to fail, one where risk taking is valued. Such an environment is developed by building a history of successes. It is unwise to begin our ministries with high-risk and high-conflict attempts at change. Two years into my previous pastorate, I attempted to change the governance structure of our one-hundred-year-old congregation. I should have known better.

*Be patient.* When I moved to a new ministry, I was surprised by how little credibility I brought with me. After nine years of building trust in a previous pastorate, I found myself starting all over again. After a while one of our members confided to me, *I didn't know what to think about you at first, but you have really grown on me.* This comment caused me to reflect that building trust often takes longer than we would like to believe. The formula for trust is  $T+F=C$ .

*Time plus faithfulness equals credibility.* It is the reason why effective leaders take longevity seriously.

José, I could tell you other great baptism stories. I could also share other funny events and many precious highlights, so many ways that God has chosen to use me to touch His flock. However, for now let me just conclude by admonishing you to let the Lord widen your circle of influence as you deepen your commitment to be His faithful servant. Oh—and do it with dignity.

A fellow elder,

Jerry Sheveland

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*Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young,  
but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in faith and in purity.*

*1 Timothy 4:12*