Proverb 6.

When trying to transform a church, the most important thing is making people feel safe. If they don't feel safe, they will resist and growl. But if they feel safe, they will follow and grow.

THE REALITY IS THAT MANY, if not most, churches fear change. They want the church to be a stable point, an anchor, in a rapidly changing world. They face changes constantly at work, whether it's the demands of overbearing bosses, a competitive workplace, a cutthroat marketplace, the withering of grants and funding, or the fact that coworkers come and go. They face changes at home, whether it is the moving of children through different stages, marriages through different phases, or the chapters of life through different pages. Their health changes, their hair changes, their bodies change, their homes change, technology changes, music changes, their lives change. There are so many changes in life that it is hard to keep up. For example, the same people who used to be on the cutting edge of technology in college, having the best turntable and speakers, now feel intimidated by their phones.

Many, if not most, members hope that church will be the place that stays constant, steady, and that connects to an earlier, simpler, better time. But churches have to change. Otherwise what happens is exactly what is happening to the mainline church right now: they remain stuck in some sort of time warp where they have more in common with the mid-twentieth century than with the demands of the twenty-first century. Then they wonder why the young people stay away. Those young people never experienced that long ago golden age. People today don't need a church rooted in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s. They need a church that helps them navigate the demands of

the new millennium, which may mean adapting to, and adopting many of, the changes of the twenty-first century while still being rooted in the teachings of the first-century church.

When we get down to the basics of leading a church in the twenty-first century, which we are already well into, we have to come to terms with the fact that the main reason people don't want their churches to change is that they are afraid. They are afraid that a changing church will also mean the loss of their values, their belief systems, and their traditions. Nobody wants to take these away, but we do need to apply them in a new way in a new age.

Leading a church through all of this uncertainty requires leaders who can help members feel safe in times of transformation. We need church leaders who can point to what's possible and make it feel simple to accomplish. We need leaders who can overcome members' survival instincts, which lead them to cower in a corner and growl, protecting what little they have, and to help them come out and grow. This is not an easy task because it requires leaders who have enough personal strength to withstand criticism, anger, and resistance to keep members moving forward toward the future, rather than retreating with them into the past. Too many leaders let their churches lead them backward, which means that they really aren't leaders.

The reality is that the members who are most afraid of change will never help us leaders feel safe. That's not their role. They see their role as protecting what was. To lead means to project what can be, and to protect them as they move tentatively toward the possible. To lead means to help people feel safe, even if we are terribly anxious about the prospect that we may fail. No leader has ever moved people forward without personal doubts, anxieties, and trepidation, and without a risk of failure. But the great ones stay calm, stay focused, and help people feel safe in the same way we help our kids grow by making them feel safe.

It's not the growls that matter. It's the growth.

Proverb 7.

*Seeking shortcuts usually gets us lost, and when
we are lost, things always take longer.*

THIS PROVERB SHOULD BE OBVIOUS, but it's not. Too often what short-circuits church health, church growth, church ministry, and church mission is leaders seeking shortcuts to whatever it is they're trying to accomplish. When things aren't going well in churches, too often the leadership spirals down into a whole series of shortcuts that make things worse and cause churches to lose their way.

An example: For years our church had a terrible dampness and mold problem in our basement. Every summer the basement floors were covered with a glaze of water, causing mold to grow in the preschool carpets. We had to replace these numerous times, and even when we didn't, we had to pay for them to be professionally cleaned. We tried to prevent the problem by installing a number of dehumidifiers, but they were just fingers in the dike.

When we did a massive renovation a few years ago we discovered the source of the problem. Twenty years earlier the church had decided to turn part of the basement into a youth room. To do so, they took out window well windows, filled the wells in with dirt, replaced the windows with plywood, and put drywall over them. They didn't want to pay the cost of doing things right to create a watertight seal. Unbeknownst to them the walls seeped behind the drywall in the spring and summer, and water pooled on the floor. To take care of the seepage they installed a sump pump behind a wall under a stairwell. Four years before our construction, the pump short-circuited and burned out, which no one noticed because we didn't know it was there. The ones who installed

the pump had died or moved away. The workers told us we were lucky because it could have burned the church down. During renovation we discovered the burned-out pump, the plywood window replacements, and the source of our problems. By taking a shortcut to save money on covering the windows, the church ended up having to buy dehumidifiers, replace expensive carpets several times, buy a sump pump, and risked burning down the church. The $60 shortcut probably cost the church over $2,000 in the ensuing years and created many problems.

This example is just a microcosm of the kinds of shortcuts churches, pastors, and leaders take. For instance, in seeking church officers and board members, churches often settle for who will say "yes" rather than taking the time to look for someone with spiritual depth and leadership skills. They look for warm bodies rather than good leaders. In conducting meetings, committee and board members often care more about how quickly the meetings can end rather than the quality of the decisions made. Even in worship the focus is often on how close to noon the service can be over, rather than on whether or not people have actually experienced God. We seek short services, short sermons, short meetings, and shortcuts. Yet somehow we want these shortcuts to produce long-lasting, positive results. Unfortunately, they tend to lead to long-term problems. They get in the way of spiritual ministry and missional growth. They lead the church to lose its way.

Churches that do well make sure they take the time to do things well. They generally take the long way around. When members join the church, they ask them to take a number of classes over weeks, even months, rather than having them join quickly. They preach longer sermons that lead people to a deeper faith. Their services are somewhat longer because they seek quality in music, prayer, and worship in general. They take the time to plan their ministry and

mission well. They take time in making decisions because they want to make sure they are making the right decision, not the quick decision.

They take their time to do things right, and as a result they do things right. In the end what they do is shorter over-all because they only have to do things once. Think about it this way: Jesus took the time to do things right, even if it was painful, agonizing, and ultimately not what he wanted. He prayed that the Father would take the cup away from him, but in the end he said, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The result is a movement that has lasted 2,000 years and has 1.7 billion followers.

Proverb 8.

Avoiding problems usually creates bigger problems.
Avoiding problems is the result of avoiding pain.
And avoiding pain eventually increases pain. So deal
with problems before they become a pain.

TOO OFTEN WE CREATE MORE PAIN by avoiding pain. It's a natural consequence of our yearning for peace, calm, and security. Most people avoid conflict. Most people avoid pain. And the ones who don't are the ones we typically avoid because they inflict pain.

Why are so many churches in pain? A lot of it has to do with our expectations. We believe that churches should be harmonious places where there is no conflict or pain because they are where God resides. We have high expectations. The problem is that churches are often painful places precisely because humans naturally inflict pain on each other. We don't mean to, but when people rub against each other, they get rashes because they often act rashly. As I've often said, if you want a perfect church, get rid of the people. But if you get rid of the people, you no longer have a church. What a conundrum!

Churches exist precisely because people live painful lives. Human existence can both be precious and poisonous, as well as everything in between. We want churches to be pain free, but they are often painful. We are so quick to avoid pain that, like ignoring poison ivy in a garden, it spreads and becomes more pernicious than if we had just dealt with it when it was a small sprig.

The reality is that most of us don't know how to deal with small problems. Nor can we always tell whether they are really problems or just small irritants that should be ignored. So what do we do?

First, when faced with a potentially painful problem, *reflect on how the problem might grow if ignored*. But this must be done honestly, not anxiously. An anxious analysis would say, "Maybe if I don't do anything it will just go away." That's not a real reflection, that's anxious avoidance. A real reflection asks, "If I do nothing, will it grow? And if so, how large will it grow?" Will it eventually amount to nothing and remain a small issue, or will it grow to become divisive? The key to all problems is that the real ones divide people against God, and people against people, when unattended.

Second, *seek wise advice*. A mistake many in church leadership make is dealing with problems alone, which can create more problems when we act unwisely. Churches are intentional spiritual communities. We are meant to deal with issues together. So find someone in the community who has wisdom (don't just seek the person who agrees with you, or the person with power to help you). Let them help you sift through your options. If need be, take it to larger groups of wise people.

Third, deal with problem people *respectfully in a way filled with the Great Command*. When confronting a person or a situation, treat people the way we would want to be treated, even if they won't treat us the same way. Treating people respectfully in a crisis isn't weakness. It's strength. Always slow things down, resisting the urge to become angry or anxious. When in crisis, too many churches and their leaders are known for preaching the Great Command while then treating people with great contempt. When we become anxious or angry, we typically become defensive, and defensiveness drives others and us away from loving God as ourselves. The best way out of the Great Contempt is making sure that as our anger or anxiety grows, we pray and ask God to guide us. That is an act of loving God with all our minds, hearts, souls, and strength.

Finally, *always get ahead of the problem*. Too often, because we're fearful of conflict, we let the problems run away

from us. Get ahead of the problems by making healthy plans to deal with them. Don't wait till the problems grow, but find a way to create systems that deal with issues before they grow.

An example: Years ago I was involved in a church where a two-person task force was created to take care of a leaky wall. Each one had his own idea about how the wall should be taken care of. They were divided and wanted to let the church board decide between them—to choose a winner. Big problem! Instead, I got them together and told them that I didn't care what they decided. I only cared about how they decided. And so I told them that I wouldn't let either solution come before the board. They had to come up with one together or not at all, which would mean that the wall would continue to leak. They eventually came up with a solution together, and it taught them that working together was more important than being in charge.

Proverb 9.

When a person complains anonymously,
find out whether the person is the tip of an iceberg,
or just a chip of ice.

I N EVERY CHURCH, PEOPLE PASS ALONG complaints to pastors. But they do so protecting the anonymity of the complainer, saying something like, "Pastor So-and-So, I just heard that one of our members, who wishes to remain anonymous, doesn't like the new class you're teaching. She believes that you're misusing the Bible, and she's very upset! I don't want to tell you who it is because she asked me not to. But I think it's important that you know."

What do you do? Do you change your class? Do you spend a class defending your beliefs? Do you preach a sermon about the evils of criticizing others, quoting from Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves"? Do you ignore the comment, hoping it will go away, while maintaining a genuine fear that this may be part of a larger revolt?

The dilemma all starts with a single question: *Is the complaint the tip of an iceberg, or just a chip of ice?* Who made the complaint really makes all the difference. In any church there are grumblers whose grousing ultimately makes no difference in the end. They are always going to find fault with pastors, church leaders, and other members no matter what. They will find fault in the pastor's classes, sermons, newsletter articles, pastoral presence, and leadership. Nothing the pastor does will be good enough. Perhaps the pastor will be measured against a heroic pastor from the church's past. Perhaps the pastor will be measured against a television preacher. Perhaps there is no measurement because these people just don't

trust pastors. The fact is that whatever the reason for complaining, the other members know that these cranky pants are grumblers by nature, and so they avoid them. In other words, the complainers have no constituency—no group of people who follow their lead.

Also, in most churches there are people who just never understand the workings of a church, Christian theology, the spiritual life, or much of anything else. They complain because they don't understand much of anything. They may be heavily involved, but their lack of understanding means that they have no constituency. They complain out of ignorance.

The fact is that people like these are simply chips of ice. Their criticisms don't matter much because criticism is just their nature. They are like ice cubes floating in a drink. Over time their ability to chill the church melts away. They might have an immediate effect, but not a long-lasting one. If these are the kinds of people anonymously complaining, then whatever they have to say, reacting to their grumbles makes no positive difference. Defending ourselves, changing our classes, preaching about the evils of criticism will have no positive impact, and our responding actually can make things worse by making these chips of ice feel like powerful icebergs.

Meanwhile, there are many members who rarely complain. They support pastors, leaders, other members, and the church. They are always looking to build up the church. Often other members look up to them. They have a constituency. If they complain, we can be sure that they are the tips of icebergs. Their complaints are the visible tip of a whole series of submerged troubles. When a person like this complains, it's often because she has fielded many complaints from others. Or it's because he recognizes that the pastor is treading into dangerous territory, and so he is actually trying to protect the pastor from harm. In that case, the pastor may want to change the class or take more time to explain her thoughts better (don't preach about the evils of criticism no matter what the case is).

The point is that when we field a complaint, it is very important to know who the complainer is, despite the fact that the person relaying the complaint is trying to protect the complaining person. It's a delicate situation, so it's important to reassure the relayer that you will not divulge that you know who the complainer is. And you need to follow through by offering no recriminations or indication that you know who complained. In a similar way, it is important that church secretaries, office administrators, treasurers, program directors, and associate pastors don't automatically protect anonymity because doing so may actually create problems.

Ultimately, who does the complaining is more important than the complaint. Is the complainer a chip of ice, or the tip of an iceberg?

Proverb 10.

*Criticism creates stagnation, but praise
stimulates creativity.*

A LONG TIME AGO I SAW A SIGN in a store that I thought
was hilarious, so I had to buy it. It read, "The beat-
ings will continue until morale improves." This sign
captures the issues inherent in so many churches that struggle.
Why do so many people think that criticism and denigration
will improve the situation? Too often churches are filled with
critical people who cynically criticize the pastor, the leaders,
the members, the ministry, the mission, and anything else going
on. Will angry criticisms really improve a pastor's preaching?
Will complaining that no one wants to do anything really get
them to do anything?

It is quite natural to criticize others. We get frustrated by
what others do or don't do, what organizations do or don't
do, and what groups do or don't do. So in our powerlessness
to effect change, we disparage or denigrate. Yet our denounce-
ments rarely effect long-lasting, positive change. For the most
part they foster stagnation. The more people criticize each
other, the more their criticism paralyzes others. Look at poli-
tics: does unending criticism really get people to work together
toward compromise?

Why do we criticize so much when it can gain so little?
There's an energy to criticism that captures people. You've
experienced it when you've been complaining about someone
or something, and it's like a demonic dynamo takes over you,
causing you to get angrier, louder, more passionate, and more
forceful. It feels good to be righteously indignant. It gets our
hearts stirring, our blood pumping, and it focuses our minds.
But it also creates a kind of torpor in others. When people go

into a critical rant, their ranting shuts us down as we just listen without responding. That's part of the problem with persistent criticism: *it shuts people down.*

Criticism is at the heart of dysfunction. Most people misunderstand dysfunction, thinking it means that things no longer function. That's not dysfunction, that's non-function. Dysfunction is *functioning in pain*. We function, but all of our efforts with others become painful as relationships break down. Persistently cynical criticism eventually creates dysfunction. And too often Christians are dysfunctional. It's what led someone to say, "Christianity is the only religion where people eat their own." I don't agree that it's the *only* religion, since Islam and Judaism seem to do a bit of eating of their own, too, but the point is still good. We Christians can be guilty of criticizing each other to death.

If we want to thrive and be creative, it requires an environment of praise. I don't mean empty praises or praise for praise's sake. I mean authentic praise when people accomplish things. I also mean an environment where people are appreciated and complimented for what they are doing rather than criticized for what they aren't doing. That doesn't mean that every accomplishment has to be celebrated publicly and lavishly. But it does mean that good things should be acknowledged in at least small words of appreciation because small praises spawn creativity.

So, if you want a congregation to become more hospitable, don't criticize them for their inhospitality, praise them for the small steps of hospitality they take. If you praise them, you'll create a "self-fulfilling prophecy" that helps them to be more hospitable. If you criticize them, you also create a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads them to become what you say they are—inhospitable. If you want people to give more, praise them for the generosity they have, rather than lambasting them for failing to give enough. If you want ministries to thrive, praise the good that is already taking place. If you want mission to

thrive, praise people for taking small steps and engaging in small missions, which then helps prepare the way for them to take greater steps and engage in greater missions.

The key is to look for what's right rather than what's wrong, and to look for what's possible rather than what seems impossible.