

PASTORING THE HARD CASES

- DAVID L. ALLEN



PREACHING COACH

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Dr. David L. Allen is founder and editor-in-chief of PreachingCoach (preachingcoach.com), a ministry dedicated to equipping pastors and ministry leaders to communicate with clarity, competence, and confidence. Through personal and group coaching, podcasts, webinars, eBooks, Ministry classes, and other resources, PreachingCoach trains and mentors those who desire to communicate more effectively.

In 2022, Dr. Allen became the Distinguished Professor of Practical Theology and Dean of the Adrian Rogers Center for Biblical Preaching at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee.

He began preaching at age 16 and has taught preaching from the bachelor to the doctoral level since the late 1980s. He earned his MDIV from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, where he became Dean of the School of Theology in 2004, and the founding Dean of the School of Preaching in 2016. He served as the Distinguished Professor of Preaching, Director of the Center for Expository Preaching, and held the George W. Truett Chair of Pastoral Ministry.

Dr. Allen is also a graduate of The Criswell College, Dallas, Texas, where he taught and held the W.A. Criswell Chair of Preaching from 1998-2004. He earned his PhD in Humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington where he majored in Linguistics with the goal of using the principles of linguistics in exegesis and expository preaching.

He has been senior pastor of two churches in Texas from 1982-2004 and served as interim pastor of 14 churches for almost 20 years.

Over the past 40 years, Dr. Allen has led or participated in more than 400 preaching workshops, conferences, revivals, and other events in the US and in more than a dozen countries abroad.

This extensive background equips him to champion, teach, and model “text-driven” preaching, and he co-edited a book by that title, as well as numerous other books and articles on preaching, Old Testament, New Testament, and theology. His books have been translated into Spanish, Korean, and Portuguese.



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INTRODUCTION

My first pastorate began in 1982. I had not been at my new church more than three weeks when we had two new believers to be baptized. I asked one of my deacons, Don, to fill the baptistry on Saturday so we could baptize on Sunday morning. When Sunday rolled around, I was excited to preach my sermon and to baptize our two new believers. After Sunday School ended, I left my office and walked down the short hall in our little church toward the sanctuary. Suddenly I was accosted by an older deacon in the church right in the middle of the hallway with people coming and going. “Who filled the baptistry” he angrily bellowed at me! I was caught off guard and couldn’t understand his anger. He was red faced. “Well, we are going to baptize two people today, so I asked Don to fill the baptistry,” I calmly responded. “That’s my job” he roared with a raised voice. He then proceeded to instruct me I should contact him whenever the baptistry needed to be filled. I promised him I would.

During my 16-year pastorate at that church, brother Johnny would on occasion be a difficult church member to pastor. I was to learn that there would be others . . . many others.

No seminary course can prepare you for dealing with the difficult people in your church. Even if you've spent years building a healthy church, you cannot escape dealing with the hard cases—difficult church members. Why? There is no perfect church. If you find one, don't join it—you'll ruin it!

Pastoring people is never easy, but some church members make it particularly difficult.

When a church member's negative attitude is not addressed properly, other members may be affected. They may become resentful. They may lose respect for you as a leader. They may develop their own negative attitude.

Difficult people can disrupt the unity of the church. Ephesians 4:1-6 is an important text about unity in the local church. All Christians are

exhorted: “Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The Holy Spirit creates that unity. We must maintain it. No pastor wants a difficult, toxic, divisive church member. Some of God’s sheep often bite. They press all your buttons. Difficult church members can try a pastor’s patience and drain a lot of time and energy. It takes skillful management and patience to handle the hard cases. How do you handle drama at your church? You must learn to act and not react.

I’ve learned a few things over the years about dealing with the hard cases.

Don’t treat difficult people as if they are antagonists. Often, difficult people have good motives, but they struggle to channel their energy appropriately. You can help them by de-escalating their challenges rather than exhausting yourself trying to prove them wrong. When I was a young pastor, I often fell into this trap. I imagined that those who were cantankerous in their disagreement with me about something were just opposed to my leadership. I learned that was not always the case.

However, some of the hard cases in your church are indeed challenging your leadership!

Remember the movie “Field of Dreams”? Shoeless Joe Jackson coaches Archie Graham about what pitch to expect after the first two pitches barely miss his forehead. The dialogue goes like this:
Shoeless Joe Jackson: “The first two were high and tight, so where do you think the next one’s gonna be?”

Archie Graham: “Well, either low and away, or in my ear.”

Shoeless Joe Jackson: “He’s not gonna wanna load the bases, so look low and away.”

Archie Graham: “Right.”

Shoeless Joe Jackson: “But watch out for in your ear.”


When it comes to the hard cases in your church: “watch out for in your ear”!

Do deal with difficult people immediately. Another mistake I made as a young pastor was assuming that if I ignored a problem, over time it would simply go away. That seldom happens. The pastor must quickly and effectively address, coach, and counsel church members with difficult attitudes for their sake, for the church's sake, and for the pastor's sake!

Difficult people will consume your time as a pastor. There is a famous principle, the 80/20 principle, developed by an Italian economist named Pareto. The 80-20 rule maintains that 80% of outcomes come from 20% of causes. A variation of this that is true for pastors is 20% of your people (the difficult, hard cases) will consume 80% of your time.

Not only that, but difficult people will drain you emotionally. It doesn't take many encounters with the hard cases to find your emotional tank registering empty.

Learning how to work with all kinds of people is essential to succeeding as a church leader.



MY “TOP 20” LIST OF “DIFFICULT CHURCH MEMBERS I HAVE KNOWN:”

1. Nolan Know-it-all. Nolan knows everything. There is nothing Nolan does not know. Since Nolan knows everything, there is nothing you can tell Nolan that he does not already know. Watch out for in your ear.

2. Spencer Spiritual. Spencer is a cut above all your other regular church members. While others are of Paul or Apollos or Peter, Super Spiritual Spencer is of Christ. But his spirituality is not really a spiritual maturity. It is a feigned spiritual maturity. Watch out for in your ear.

3. Carping Crawford. Old Carp is the critic. Carping Crawford reminds me of Lucy in the Charlie Brown comic strip. In one scene, Lucy is yelling at Charlie Brown: “Charlie Brown, you are a foul ball in the line drive of life. You are a seven-ten split in the tenth frame. You are a dropped rod and reel in the lake of life. You are a missed free throw, a shanked nine iron, a called third strike. Have I made myself clear!” Watch out for in your ear.

4. Ted Talker. Every church has a Ted. He constantly talks, and usually wants to talk to you. One reason Ted talks is he wants to hear what he has to say (and he wants you to hear him talk too). He needs to talk to you before church. He needs to talk to you after church. He just needs to talk to you. Watch out for in your ear.

5. Woody Woe-is-me. Woody is the church hypochondriac who always wears his feelings on his sleeve. When you greet him with a cheery “How are you today, Woody!” He responds with a melancholy strain right out of the TV show Hee Haw: “Gloom, despair, and agony on me. Deep, dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all. Gloom, despair, and agony on me.” Watch out for in your ear.

6. Harry Hand grenade. Harry is the deacon who waits until agreement has been reached at the end of a long meeting, then reaches into his pocket, pulls out a hand grenade, pulls the pin, and rolls it out on the table. Two hours of wrangling work to forge agreement he blows to smithereens. Watch out for in your ear.

7. Suspicious Susan. SS is constantly watching you like a hawk, wondering what you are up to. What nefarious agenda are you as the pastor trying to pull in the church. Her furtive eyes darting to and fro, she is dubious, skeptical, and distrustful. She would wiretap your office if she could. Watch out for in your ear.

8. Opinionated Oscar. Oscar not only always has an opinion, but he always feels compelled to give that opinion. In a business meeting, committee meeting, deacons meeting, or any other meeting where Oscar is in attendance, expect to hear from him. Watch out for in your ear.

9. Bill Bell Cow. Since most of you are not country boys or girls, let me explain what a bell cow is. The bell cow is the cow with the bell attached to its neck. Other cows follow the bell cow. In many rural or small city churches, Bill Bell Cow is the most influential member. Bill is like the old E. F. Hutton commercials: when Bill speaks—people listen. They speak in a business meeting and everybody listens. If Bill is against it, others nod their heads in agreement with Bill. If Bill is for it, others nod their heads in agreement with Bill. Strategy: Win over the Bell Cow to your way of thinking and your plans for the church. Take Bill to lunch and ask him what he thinks about what you are planning to do. Take the time to get Bill on your side and life will be much less difficult! Watch out for in your ear.

10. Gabe Gatekeeper. Gabe holds a position of formal power in the church, or at least he thinks he does. Bill is oftentimes a committee chair, an elder on a board, or part of the deacon body. Bill controls meetings by setting

the agendas and is not afraid to leverage his position of power. Watch out for in your ear.

11. Arti Argumentative. Arti loves a good argument. Arti loves to argue. Arti loves to argue with you—in person in the hallway while you are on your way to preach on Sunday morning; in an email; a phone call; or any other venue he can find. No one really knows why Arti is so argumentative. He just is. Watch out for in your ear.

12. Porcupine Polly. Polly is prickly, insensitive, blunt, black-and-white, self-righteous, has a knack of upsetting others in the church, and generally a genius at creating church drama for the pastor to sort out. Watch out for in your ear.

13. Andy Attention-Seeker. Old Andy for some reason must have attention—your attention. He expects regular time with you the pastor every time he is at church. He is not beyond creating or manipulating situations as a way of getting attention or getting your attention. Andy might just be lonely and insecure, or he may have a more serious issue like depression. Watch out for in your ear.

14. Cory Complainer. Annoyed, often by trivial things about the church (people, programs, property etc.), Cory likes to point these out to the pastor, expecting his prompt attention to solving them. Cory can be pushy and demanding. Watch out for in your ear.

15. Larry Legalist. Larry is on the clipboard committee. He love rules, procedures, traditions, and the church Constitution. Dot all your “I”s and cross all your “t”s or Larry will be on your trail. Watch for him in any church town hall or business meeting. Larry’s view is a praying knee and a dancing foot don’t grow on the same leg. Larry feels compelled to force his brand of legalism on other church members, and on you as the pastor. Watch out for in your ear.

16. Thomas Theologian. Thomas is your friendly neighborhood church theological expert. Thomas loves to discuss, debate, and disagree with you the pastor on any theological issue, however minor. Watch for Thomas to show up soon after every sermon. Sometimes Thomas will argue with you about the color of the eyes of the antichrist in Revelation. Watch out for in your ear.

17. Cranky Craig. Old Cranky lives up to his name well every Sunday. He comes to church always with a burr under his saddle—a constant cause of trouble or annoyance. Cranky Craig can quickly instill crankiness in other church members. Watch out for in your ear.

18. Corner-cutting Connor. Triple C knows how to save a buck and is quick on the draw in church business meetings when finances are being discussed. Triple C always chips in his two cents worth when budget approval time rolls around or when the new building program kicks off. “I don’t think we need to buy 10 pencils; 5 will do.” Watch out for in your ear.

19. Gabbi Gossip. Gabbi is one of the most difficult of hard cases in your church. She is also one of the most dangerous. See what a large forest can be set on fire by such a small spark (James 3:5). Put her on your Top 10 Most Wanted list. Watch out for in your ear—because she is whispering in everybody else’s ear.

20. Nancy Negative. Nancy is one of those people who was “born in the objective case and the kickitive mood.” When she dies, God will have to install a suggestion box in heaven. If she drowns, look for her upstream—she’s against everything! Her twin brother is Ned Negative. Some Sunday mornings you will feel like speaking to Nancy or Ned from the pulpit and asking: “Would you mind standing up and lead us in a word of criticism? Watch out for in your ear.

Not all hard cases are like my top 20. Some people, through no fault of their own, have experienced the reality of a fallen world. These special cases require a different set of guidelines.

1. The Mentally Challenged. Pastors who have not spent much time with these precious children of God may be nervous and feel they do not have the competence or confidence to minister to them. Of all people in your church, they need your love and your patience. Spend time and get to know them. Find out their rhythm and how best to adjust to it. If you are struggling to connect, reach out to their families to gain insight and learn how best to serve them. These special members can bring the greatest joy to you and your church.

2. Abuse Victims. In recent years there is a rise in awareness of those who have suffered or are enduring suffering because of physical, mental or sexual abuse. The pastor must protect the sheep. The church should be a safe haven for all. Don't neglect loving and serving these special members.

3. Trauma Survivors with PTS. Soldiers returning from military service, survivors of shootings, first responders, and those in similar circumstances need your pastoral care.

4. Those with Dementia. Can you imagine the helpless feeling of knowing you are beginning to lose your memory and yet you cannot do anything about it? Don't shy away from these special people. Love and serve them pastorally.

5. The Depressed and the Suicidal. Much pastoral wisdom is needed in caring for these people. They need your care. Find ways to encourage and serve them. Connect them with biblically based Christian counseling as needed.



SOME HELPFUL STEPS IN DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CHURCH MEMBERS:

1. Don't lose your cool! Don't be defensive and thin-skinned. Chuck Swindoll taught me a good lesson in my early years as a pastor. I heard him say in a sermon: "Think of criticism like an archery target. The bullseye is in the center with larger concentric circles. When people criticize you, they seldom hit the bullseye—but they seldom miss the target altogether." Wise words. Heed them.

2. Ask the right questions. Is this difficult church member sinful by their words or actions? Is he/she causing division? Or, does this person just annoy me because of their personality, etc.?

3. Get clarity. Find the problem beneath the problem. The wise pastor knows that sometimes the stated problem is not the real problem. Some difficult people are not actually angry with the leader. They can be, in fact, angry at a host of other issues or conflicts found elsewhere in their lives. Discern.

4. Have private conversations. There are precious few problem issues that can be solved publicly. Follow Matthew 18:15-17 and start out in private.

5. Focus on solutions. Though there may be some tough cases where no solution can be found, usually there is a solution. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. Remember Captain Kirk who said: "I don't believe in the no-win scenario."

6. Exercise church discipline when warranted. When the hard case or problem person is acting sinfully and refuses to repent after following Matthew 18:15-17, don't be afraid to proceed to church discipline.

7. Keep an “Appreciation File.” Psychologists tell us that 10 positive comments are needed to offset one negative one. Keep every encouraging letter, note, email, text, or voice mail. You will need to revisit them down the road when you are discouraged. All anonymous letters go into “file 13”—the trash.

8. Remember 2 Timothy 2:23-25. “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”

And remember . . . watch out for in your ear!



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