

Criticism in Ministry
by Dan Hotchkiss, Sept. 17, 1991

Criticism. It's continual. No matter how you pretzel-twist yourself to please people, you fall short. And there are always helpful, caring people who will take the time to tell you so.

Most of us ministers are more affected by this than we show. The complainers, after all, are not mere customers. In our shop, there is no counter between us and them. With each concerned parishioner we connect in many ways. We pour ourselves out Sunday after Sunday, and sometimes they pour themselves out, too. So when "helpful feedback" comes, it can pierce our thin skin into the vital organs.

The worst thing we can do is overreact. Whether by proclaiming innocence or by announcing full reform, too strong a response ups the emotional ante. The old ministerial lore speaks of blood in the water that attracts the sharks. More recently, Ed Friedman cautions us to be "non-anxious." It doesn't always feel good, but it is a good idea when criticism comes to contain ourselves, to underreact.

Nor is it wise to enlist others to react in our behalf. This may be the chief mischief Ministry Committees get into. By setting themselves up as mediating bodies, by encouraging people to use them as a "conduit," they set up a classic triangle. No one (and certainly no committee) can be responsible for the relationship of two others. No one can respond to criticism of the minister except the minister.

I used to say to Ministry Committee members that if a member of the congregation came to one of them with a criticism of me, they should suggest the person speak to me directly. More recently, I have asked committee members to say: "Thank you for bringing that up. I will speak to Dan about it, and he'll be in touch with you."

If there is a magic formula for responding to criticism, I don't know it. It would require, I'm sure, perfect comfort with one's imperfections, utter common sense about what is real criticism and what is projection from the complainer's own life, and constant willingness to apologize. (Ministry, in my experience, means always saying you're sorry.)

In the end, the only real response to criticism in the ministry is more ministry. How can we meet your needs? How can we move forward? Let's plan together to do better in the future.

When we were ordained, we never promised to be perfect. But we promised to be faithful to our calling and to serve as best we can those who come into our care. Do that, and you're doing OK.