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Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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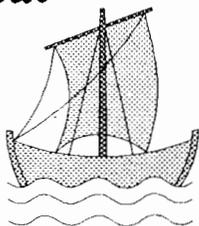
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Rocking the church boat

Many church members and pastors get upset when a member rocks the boat by objecting to something the church is doing or by questioning official church doctrine or policy. But sometimes the church boat needs to be rocked.



When we never question what the church is doing, we get so self-satisfied and comfortable that without realizing it we stop being the church. Our congregations become mere social clubs or service organizations. We mistakenly assume that we're already doing all that God wants. We begin thinking that what we like is always what the church needs to do. We replace the Gospel with nostalgia.

It's scary when the boat starts rocking

Most change is uncomfortable at first, however, so to keep ourselves comfortable we often deny the need for change. Even when we see that change is needed in our churches, we resist the boat-rocking that it requires. We say, "Wait until the trouble affects me personally. Then maybe I'll consider doing something about it."



This lets the problems keep getting worse. Sometimes it lets them get too big to be remedied.



To get us into action we need some people to rock the boat. Otherwise we won't notice that we've gone aground and we're stuck.

Boat-rocking can be helpful or harmful

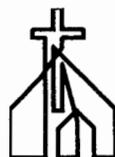
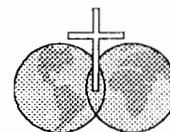
Although some boat-rockers harm the church, others help it by doing what God wants done. How can we tell which is which? In his book *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with*

(continued on page 2)

Prophets rock the boat

Throughout history and in every society God has provided prophetic voices to speak God's word. Prophets have special God-given ability to recognize God's will and to communicate it to the people around them.

God instructs some prophets to speak mainly to the world, and some to speak mainly to the religious institutions of their day. In the Old Testament we



read about prophets whom God instructed to speak God's word to the temple and its connectional system of local shrines and priests. We also read about prophets who confronted powerful kings who were oppressing people.

In later centuries, Martin Luther and other reformers spoke God's word to the Roman Catholic church when it became corrupt. John Wesley spoke out against the hollow religious practices of the Church of England in which he was a priest, and he attacked the poverty and injustice that he saw all around him.

Prophets aren't popular

Prophets are often unappreciated, because they shake things up. The people who know them best tend to be especially unwilling to see them as having any special insight or authority.

Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.

—Matthew 13:57

You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

—John 15:18-19

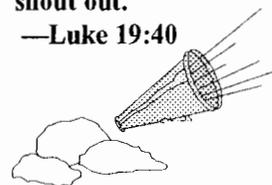
Jeremiah's hearers threw him in a well and mistreated him in other ways. John Wesley had to stand on his father's grave to preach, because it was the only remaining place from which the church authorities couldn't oust him. But prophets

feel compelled to speak despite the personal consequences, and their words eventually bear fruit because they come from God.

God doesn't call us all to be prophets, but God calls each of us to pay attention to the prophets among us. Who do you think today's prophets are?

"If these were silent, the stones would shout out."

—Luke 19:40



(Rocking the church boat, continued from page 1)

Destructive Conflict (Augsburg, 1988), Dr. Kenneth Haug, a pastor and clinical psychologist and the founder of the Stephen Ministry program, addresses the question of how to distinguish helpful boat-rocking from destructive boat-rocking.

When we rock in the wrong way, Haug believes, we become what he calls antagonists. In his view, they are a small but powerful group that endangers the church. "Destructive conflict caused by antagonism," he finds, "though caused by so few, has the power to disrupt, even to destroy, the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ through the people of God."



Antagonists aren't just critics or activists

Haug warns us, however, that real antagonism shouldn't be confused with mere criticism or healthy conflict in the church. The church needs

There have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.
—1 Corinthians 11:19

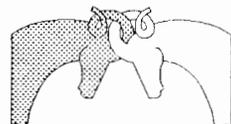


to hear opposite views on issues, Haug assures us, in order to stay aware of its purposes and true to them. So antagonists aren't merely people on different sides of an issue.

Antagonists aren't the same as activists, either. Activists, Haug explains, are devoted to issues. They push for change in a group's thinking or behavior, and they want action, but unlike antagonists they are issue-oriented rather than person-oriented. They value their opponents as human beings, and they make the effort necessary to understand opposing viewpoints.

ACTIVIST? constructive critic?
destructive critic? antagonist?

Antagonists want control



In contrast to activists, Haug says, antagonists "wantonly, selfishly, and destructively attack others." They attack the person or performance of others. They tear down rather than building up. They divide people rather than pulling them together. They cite evidence that has no substance and can't be proved or disproved.



Should I speak or keep quiet?

In my early life I usually kept quiet and accepted whatever people in positions of authority said. I didn't ask questions, raise objections, or deliberately break rules. Now, however, I've come to see that keeping quiet or expressing only agreement can mean disobeying God's will. Still, I'm rarely sure when to speak up and when not to.



I find that many people appreciate having questions asked and having varied viewpoints expressed.

- The head of a church organization once asked me to be on its board because he felt I would speak frankly. "I know I can count on you to tell me what you really see happening," he said. "If the emperor really doesn't have any clothes on, I know that you'll say so, and I need that."
- I heard an executive say he never wanted people on his management team who would merely parrot his own views. "If two people on my team see things exactly the same way," he said, "one of them is unnecessary."

Many other people, however, see unacceptable conflict where I see helpful presentation of different views.

ditto ditto
yawn . . .

▪ When everyone in a church class or meeting merely keeps quiet or expresses only agreement, I find the meeting dull and pointless. Why spend our time on subjects about which we aren't going to say anything new or even ask our real questions? But just when I thought one church group I was in had started getting interesting, because we had started discussing real issues and expressing varied views, some members dropped out. One said, "I couldn't stand all that conflict." I was astounded. I hadn't been aware of any conflict.

▪ A member of my church complained, "In the other churches I've been in, when anything is proposed people just say 'Great!' and do it, but here people always question everything and try to change whatever is proposed." I'd never even noticed this, but it made him stop coming.

▪ Some pastors say, "My staff and lay leaders must support me," meaning they must never admit disagreeing with the pastor. To me, this seems dangerous.

▪ When members of a church committee I was on were asked about continuing for another year, one said, "I will, but not if Barbara does." I was amazed and hurt. He had been absent a lot, had said little, and had seemed uninterested. I was interested, had attended often, and had brought information and suggestions that I thought were useful. However, he was asked to continue and I wasn't.



Silence and conformity can be appropriate at times, but at other times they can mean disobeying God. What do you think makes the difference?

They go out of their way to make trouble. They make demands that can never be satisfied. And they usually direct their attacks against people in leadership roles, because their real goal is getting control, without regard for the cost to others.

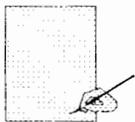
Haugk says that in order to keep antagonists from destroying our churches every one of us must help to confront them and the problems they cause, even though this kind of confrontation is uncomfortable for many of us.

Me—an antagonist? Surely not! (Maybe so!)



When I first read Dr. Haugk's book, it gave me a jolt. I felt strangely drawn to it, but at the same time, I felt afraid to find out what it said. His description of antagonists came too close for comfort. The feeling was like becoming aware of the symptoms of a terrible disease and noticing that I've experienced some of them. I feel that I need to find out more, and yet I'm scared to. What if I really do have the disease? Maybe I'd rather not know.

How do I know if I'm an antagonist?



I found Haugk's book disturbing because I've done things that he says are characteristic of antagonists. I often take notes. I'm sometimes sarcastic.

I've been a pest. I've pointed out people's errors. I've acted charming to people I was also criticizing. I've taken thick folders of unnecessary papers to meetings. I've broken rules. Haugk lists these behaviors among the red flags that he says antagonists typically display, although he assures us that displaying some of the red flags doesn't necessarily mark a person as an antagonist.



I think I'm what Haugk calls an activist, rather than an antagonist. But it's dangerously easy to attribute noble motives to one's own actions, so I can't help wondering if I am one of the people who are keeping the church from accomplishing its mission instead of helping it. I believe we all need to ask ourselves that question continually.

Prophets also raise red flags

However, we also need to remember Isaiah, Jeremiah, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and the

other God-inspired prophets and reformers who have dared to speak up when God called them to do so. We need to remember Jesus, too. All these Spirit-led people did some of what Haugk says antagonists do, but they weren't antagonists.

Prophets do some tearing down in response to God's call. They don't just build up. Change involves discontinuing part of the present situation, and true prophets recognize that.

**The Lord said to [Jeremiah], "Now I have put my words in your mouth ... to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."
—Jeremiah 1:9-10**

How can we know?

How can we know whether we're harming the church or helping it when we rock the boat? Being uncomfortable isn't a reliable clue. Surgery always involves pain, but that doesn't mean we should never have surgery. Putting up with temporary pain



is often the only way to avoid the greater, longer-lasting pain or even death that would come from refusing the surgery.

So what clues *are* reliable? I'm afraid that none are completely reliable, but here are some that I consider very important.

- When I think I know what the church ought to be doing, I need to recognize that I may be merely rationalizing in order to justify my personal preferences. I need to take a hard, honest look at myself and my motives before deciding to rock the boat.

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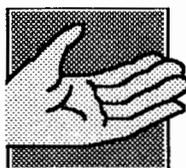
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▪ Above all, I need to keep seeking God's guidance by praying, looking at the overall message of the Bible, and hearing the views of other Christians, including those who disagree with me.

▪ Then I need to go forward, saying and doing what I believe God calls me to say and do even if it means becoming unpopular because of making other church members or a pastor uncomfortable.

▪ However, I must also keep remembering that despite my good intentions and my efforts to discern



God's will, I could be mistaken. Rocking the boat is often what God calls us to do, but staying open to new information and new insight is essential for boat-rockers who really want to help the church. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

What do these stones mean?



Connections 6-95

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Rocking the church boat



Being a Christian means continually changing

Someone came to [Jesus] and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "... keep the commandments." ... The young man said to him, "I have kept all these ..." Jesus said to him, "... Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor ..." When the young man heard this word he went away grieving ...
—Matthew 19:16-22

In a recent issue of his leaflet *The Parish Paper*, church consultant Lyle Schaller writes, "Perpetuating the status quo is not the road to a transformed life." That's true not only for individual Christians, Schaller reminds us, but also for congregations. "The Christian faith is a transformational religion," he points out, "and change is central to transformation."



Who, me? But I'm already a Christian!

Most of us can think of plenty of other people who need to change, but we'd rather not think about needing to change ourselves. We tend to assume that because we're Christians we're already doing what God wants. We know that we have our little faults, of course—we should pray and read the Bible more often, maybe, or be more patient with the people who bug us—but surely we don't need to make any major changes.

Maybe we do. Nowhere in the Bible do I see Jesus telling anyone, "You're doing exactly right. Just keep doing what you're doing." Instead, he urges everyone to change. Sometimes that means letting our boat be rocked.