

Clergy Health Initiative Program Design Advisory Group

Case Study

Arthur, aged 44, became a United Methodist pastor after his seminary graduation in 1989. Arthur married Gina, a nurse, while he was still in seminary. They had 3 children: Thomas, age 16; Lisa, age 13, and Neal, age 10. They lived in a three-bedroom parsonage three blocks from church.

Arthur was senior pastor of Centenary UMC, a 520-member suburban church in Greensboro; his appointment began in 2002. His associate pastor, Jane, aged 53, was a second-career pastor who had been at Centenary for two years. During his tenure at Centenary, the parish size grew modestly, and Arthur implemented new programs in outreach and youth programming that the congregation was proud of.

Arthur's father also served as a pastor in a different denomination. He had never been happy with his son's rebellion against his authority, though he was secretly proud that Arthur was pastor of such a large church. Arthur's mother was an alcoholic, and her illness was largely a secret to those outside the family. Arthur avoided confrontation whenever he could, since his break with his father was so painful. He preferred to smooth over difficulties with promises to work harder, or to "understand" better.

Arthur's mentor was a seminary professor whose compassion and listening ear came at a critical time in Arthur's development, as his choice of vocation and denomination were being assailed by his father, and his marriage was pending. They had stayed in touch since Arthur's graduation, going to lunch 3-4 times a year, and communicating by phone or e-mail. The content of their lunch talks was largely spiritual, with a nice give-and-take of ideas and mutual prayer. This past December his professor's wife became terminally ill, and the mentor became unavailable to Arthur as he cared for his wife. Arthur felt guilty that he hadn't visited his mentor, and that he wasn't calling him more regularly to offer support.

Two years ago Arthur was content with his job, and the congregation seemed happy with him. Things changed considerably in January 2007, when a retired Army colonel, Colonel Brooks, became head of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee (SPRC). Colonel Brooks voiced a variety of criticisms: the parish was not growing as fast as it should; the pastoral staff didn't account adequately for their work time; Jane seemed "ineffective" at managing her Sunday School responsibilities; and the pastor's oldest son seemed to have dropped out of youth group. Other members of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee were either persuaded to agree with Colonel Brooks, or were afraid to confront him. And, ever helpful, Colonel Brooks encouraged other congregants to call him with any concerns. The Colonel felt free to call Arthur at any time to "share" these concerns with him and demand a response plan.

Lately, Arthur's stomach hurt frequently, and he was having serious difficulty sleeping. He hadn't seen a doctor for 3 years, and he was avoiding going because he didn't want to face uncomfortable diagnostic tests for his stomach ailment. He usually

managed a day off on Friday, but had joined the United Way board and now had lunch meetings on Fridays twice a month. Arthur hadn't exercised since he left his last charge, where there was a pick-up basketball game he could drop into each Tuesday night. His other favorite form of recreation, playing the fiddle, really didn't work in the confines of the parsonage. Arthur's two older children complained that he was mean and cranky all the time. In fact, Thomas said last week, "You're such a grouch lately, I'm glad we never see you anymore."

Gina, a registered nurse, became the executive director of a local hospice in 2004. She, too, was busy and could not join Arthur on his day off. She was very happy in this job, describing it as, "finally finding her own calling." She was, however, struggling to maintain a good relationship with her daughter, which had become more conflicted since Lisa entered middle school. Although Gina, too, noticed Arthur's moodiness and distance from the family, she seemed just as glad not to have to contend with another stress.

Arthur sensed that Jane, too, was frustrated. She seemed to want him to take on the SPRC directly. She knew their criticisms of her, but expected Arthur, as her boss, to stick up for her. He didn't do so enough to please her. In fact, he didn't seem to do anything well enough to please her. It didn't help when she burst into his office while he was playing a computer game. She accused Arthur of "hiding out".

Arthur was tempted to call Ralph, his friend in Winston-Salem. They were seminary classmates, and always enjoyed bumping into each other at annual conference activities and committee meetings, though they never had time for much other socializing. Then Arthur remembered that he'd heard a rumor that Ralph was being considered for District Superintendent (DS) in Greensboro. It wouldn't work to "spill his guts" to someone who would wind up making decisions about his future.

Arthur decided to seek help for his conflicted parish from his District Superintendent. They did not have a close relationship. The DS was proud of his past work in turning around a troubled parish, and conveyed the attitude that anyone could do the same if they were willing to "give it their all". To Arthur's surprise, the DS was sympathetic at first, assuring him that a retired military man could be a formidable opponent. After four months of phone calls and a visit, the DS decided to "fix" the problem. He called Arthur to a meeting to discuss one of two possibilities: engaging Colonel Brooks, Jane, and the issues of the church, or moving.

It was two hours before the meeting, and Arthur sat at his desk with an empty sheet of paper before him, thinking about what he should say to the District Superintendent. An instant message popped up on his screen. It was from Gina.

The largest hospital in Greensboro's president called me and asked me to help them think through their palliative care unit. I love it! I can't believe it - this is the biggest compliment! This is unbelievable! Gina.

Ugh. Thanks a lot, Gina.

Arthur's stomach clenched in spasm, and he was aware that he was sweating. The paper was there, still blank as ever. What should he write?

1. What are your concerns about Arthur's health?
2. Has Arthur done something to cause these problems?
3. What "solution" would you recommend?