

## How to Deal with Antagonists

You won't have to find them. They'll find you.

Each ministry leader will encounter antagonists. Antagonists are not those who merely disagree or hold a different point of view. *Antagonists oppose the leader.* Antagonists are hostile to the exercise of leadership by anyone but themselves. They want to be in charge and will take hostile actions if they do not get their way.

How do you spot an antagonist? First and foremost, they are *unreasonable*. You cannot discuss matters profitably with an antagonist or persuade him with sound argument because the issue isn't really the issue. The real issue is control, although the antagonist will never say that. The antagonist will keep coming up with doctrinal, philosophical, or practical reasons for his opposition, but the essential point is control. Whenever one of his objections is addressed, the antagonist will not be satisfied. He will go out of his way to find another issue over which to oppose or undermine the leader.

Eventually the antagonist will move from issues to personal attacks against the leader. The leader's unwillingness to appease the antagonist will be used by the antagonist as proof of the leader's ungodliness and incompetence. Antagonists will major on things that cannot be proven or disproven, such as questioning the leader's motives and making subjective accusations. When you start hearing the antagonist use words such as *dictator* and *hard-headed* to describe the leader, you will know that the conflict has moved into the personal-attack stage. The antagonist's goal is to win and to cause the leader to lose.

The bottom line is that antagonists are self-centered. They are like little children who throw a tantrum when they don't get their way. In fact, antagonists may at times throw actual tantrums in an attempt to intimidate. (Remember, if your adversary wishes to make a fool of himself, get out of the way and let him.) Most of the time, however, antagonists will use more sophisticated ways of undermining the leader. They will try and provoke the leader into doing or saying something that will discredit the leader. Antagonists will use bully tactics to get their way. They will slander the leader under some spiritual guise like "sharing a concern." They will use divide-and-conquer techniques to cause dissension among a leadership team. Antagonists are bent on control and they will use whatever means necessary to gain it. They are self-righteous crusaders.

I have not seen many antagonists repent. That would be the best outcome, but most antagonists are not willing to lose face by admitting they were wrong. An antagonist typically digs in until he wins or is forced to leave.

What, then, should ministry leaders do when dealing with an antagonist? First, keep your cool. The antagonist wants you to react to him and argue. He wants you to lose your temper, thus giving him ammunition to use against you. Remember that *your goal is to stop unacceptable behavior through*

*non-reinforcement*. If you react to the antagonist, you are only encouraging him to keep it up and you are undermining your ability to give spiritual leadership in the situation.

Second, use appropriate authority. In a meeting, respond thoughtfully, forcefully, and responsibly. The purpose is not to change the antagonist's mind, which you won't. The purpose is to help the more reasonable people see the issues clearly and to isolate the antagonist. Make sure reliable third parties are included in any setting that involves the antagonist. Make sure that your leadership team keeps a united posture. Do the hard work of communication and preparation so that the antagonist does not get to operate in an informational and relational vacuum which he will be more than happy to fill. Be patient and consistent. If there is one thing an antagonist hates, it is not getting a return on his efforts. A frustrated antagonist eventually will do something that completely undermines his own credibility and precipitates his exit.

Unfortunately, before they exit antagonists may influence some people and create the very real possibility of a wider breach in the church. In this situation, it is helpful if some official leadership group has previously been given, via the church constitution or policy manual, the assignment of protecting church fellowship and addressing conflict. The pastor and staff are in a no-win situation if they are responsible for conflict management. They will be perceived as having a conflict of interest and thus impure motives. It is much better if a properly functioning deacon body or another official leadership group has the assignment and authority to make decisions, including exercising church discipline as needed. The time to prepare to address conflict is before there is one. Don't wait until a referee is needed before deciding who the referee is going to be.

Finally, church leaders, do not stimulate antagonism unnecessarily through your own actions. Do not assume that disagreement means opposition. Do not jump to conclusions about people's motives. Keep relationships primary. Define the mission of the church and communicate it a lot so that members will have a context in which to understand leadership decisions. Stay informed and be available. Honor processes; do not circumvent them in the name of expediency. When an antagonist rears his head, pray, seek counsel, and proceed deliberately. Maintain a tender heart and tough skin. You can weather this storm in the strength and wisdom of the Lord.

One of the association's priorities is to equip church leaders. You're not in this alone. Please let Dr. Minton or me know how we can assist you. Remember, *though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken* (Ecclesiastes 4:12 ESV).