

## Jim's Tool Box

### Apologize for What?

Earlier in June, I read Rochelle Melander's article "Learning to Apologize" in a recent edition of the Alban Weekly e-mail distributed by the Alban Institute. This article is adapted from Rochelle Melander's book *A Generous Presence: Spiritual Leadership and the Art of Coaching* (copyright © 2006, the Alban Institute. All rights reserved)

The article struck a chord with me. So much of what happens in ministry is based on personal relationships (pastor and parishioner(s); parishioners to parishioners; clergy to clergy; staff member and staff member). There are many opportunities for things to go wrong in those relationships.

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The ability – the willingness – to apologize when something goes wrong or someone is hurt is essential to building and maintaining good

relationships so that ministry can continue unimpeded by the "bumps" and "hurts" that come our way. Of course the same principles apply to our relationships in our families and with our friends when something has been said or done that hurts another person.

I found Rochelle Melander's article presents several helpful tips around the work of offering apologies when needed. **Michelle offered a four-step process in her article.** The following is an excerpt from her article:

#### 1. Hearing Our Sin

*One of the most important and difficult parts of the apology process is hearing how we have hurt another person. It's not comfortable to hear about our mistakes. We want to defend ourselves. We want to say, "No, you're wrong, I'm not that bad!"*

*Instead, we need to be still and listen. It's always helpful to the person we have hurt if we can attempt to understand how our words, action, or inaction might have been hurtful. It's important that we hear everything the person needs to say. In my experience, the best way to do this is to listen quietly and then ask, "Is that all?" If not, say, "Tell me more." We can repeat this invitation until the person we have hurt tells us that they are finished speaking. When they are done telling us their story, it is helpful to check that we have understood them. "Is this what you are saying?" we ask, repeating the story they have told us. We do this until we get it right.*

#### 2. Saying We Are Sorry

*We take responsibility for our failure—intended or not. We say, "I'm sorry." We do not qualify our apology by saying, "I'm sorry..."*

*... if you thought I was trying to hurt you."  
... if you took offense at what I said."  
... if you felt that way."  
... if you heard me say that."*

*When we qualify our apology, we avoid taking responsibility, and we demean the other person. It's as if we are saying, "Well I had no hand in this hurt. I'm sorry you . . .*

*... are so sensitive."  
... expect so much."  
... misunderstood."  
... are confused."  
... don't hear well."*

*Apologies do not need a lot of words. The best apology is a simple, "I'm sorry."*

#### 3. Making It Right

*Misunderstandings and mistakes provide us with the opportunity to better the relationship. Both parties need to discuss what can be done to bring healing. That includes asking the questions:*

- *What do we need to do or say to make the relationship right again?*
- *What does this situation teach us about needs that have not been met in the relationship?*
- *What does this situation teach us about the most helpful ways to express these needs?*
- *What do we need to do or say differently from now on?*

*Often, the fixes in these situations are quite simple. Maybe our congregational member needs some verbal indication that we heard and understood her. Perhaps we need to receive clear requests for help—hints are not enough. If we do our work together, we will end the conversation with a better relationship than we began with.*

#### 4. Asking for Forgiveness

*Before we set aside this chapter in our lives, receiving forgiveness is critical. As a friend of mine was saying the other day, we're not so comfortable with these words, "I forgive you." We're much more likely to say, "No big deal," "Don't worry about it," or, "What's done is done."*

*But none of these words has the power of "I forgive you." To say "I forgive you" is to say we are letting go of any claim for punishment or payment. We are ending our hold on the other person. We are setting them free.*

*In order to move forward in any relationship, we need to know that our sins are forgiven. It's hard to be content with the "no-big-deal" phrases when we suspect that this was a big deal. The people in the relationship need to move on from a place of freedom, no longer worrying that the sin will*

*plague the relationship. If the wronged person does not offer forgiveness, simply ask, "Do you forgive me?"*

Along with sharing good words about the steps we need to take when we need to offer an apology, Melander also reminds us of some actions that are not helpful. **She writes in her article about the things we need to watch out for in our apologies:**

*Most of us have developed ways of dealing with conflict. Some of these habits may become reflexes, mostly unconscious habits. We often develop these habits as a way of protecting ourselves from being hurt in a relationship. But self-protective habits can also halt communication, keeping relationships from growing. The following actions are self-protective habits that are not helpful in a conflicted situation.*

#### **Avoidance**

*Nobody likes conflict. Some deal with it by practicing avoidance. Instead of treating the complaint seriously, we may make a joke, minimize the situation, leave (physically or emotionally), or brush off the complainer.*

#### **Defending**

*What is it they say in sports? The best offense is a good defense. That may be true in sports, but it can make a mess in a personal relationship. Some of us react to conflict by defending ourselves. This may mean explaining our actions or blaming other people or events for our behavior. We may place our need to be right—and defend our rightness—over our care for the other person or the relationship.*

#### **Attacking**

*When an animal feels cornered and sees no escape, it attacks. Humans do too. In response to confrontation, we may avoid taking responsibility by attacking the person who raises the issue.*

#### **Conditional Apologies**

*As mentioned above, apologies that avoid taking responsibility by shifting the blame to the person who has an issue with us are not apologies. An apology takes full responsibility for hurting another person.*

#### **When Apology Is the Only Song**

*Sometimes relationships, even professional ones, can develop unhelpful patterns. Kenny Rogers sang, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, and know when to run." Coaching or ministry relationships can become mostly about "how you done me wrong" and less about moving forward. In these times, when apology is the only song you sing, ending the relationship may be healthier than continuing a relationship that is frustrating for both parties.*

Rochelle Melander concludes her article with a brief reflection on the place of repentance:

*Hearing how we have failed or disappointed God and one another can be some of the most painful moments of our lives. In order to repent, we must stay in the room with people who are telling us the truth about ourselves. We need to hear the people who have hard things to say to us no matter how much it hurts. We need to turn toward the relationship, toward the ones we have hurt, be it God, client, spouse, parishioner, child, or friend. We apologize and ask for forgiveness. We do all of this knowing that we rest in God's hands. Our repentance, our work, and our words, cannot save either us or the relationship. Only God can.*

Our ability and willingness to offer genuine apologies can go a long way in both experiencing God's grace in our lives and helping others to know God's grace, too. **To whom do you need to offer an apology today? What's holding you back? Do the right thing, and start the process of healing today.**

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