

They Don't Teach This at Princeton . . .

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There I was, sitting in the sanctuary of Old First Presbyterian Church in San Francisco for the plenary session of a national conference on urban ministry. For the entire nine years I've been in ordained ministry, I've been going to conferences like this one.

Someone always talks about shifting paradigms in the first fifteen minutes. Something about the word "paradigm" and the gravity with which it is pronounced brings out the smart aleck in me.

This particular speaker challenged the gathered paradigm shifters boldly to "Forget everything you learned in seminary!"

"Done" I shouted, thus befriending the fourth year Princeton student on my right.

For the next three days I kept crossing paths with this student. At the coffee urn, on the walk back to the hotel, at various "breakout sessions."

He didn't ask, "Tom, what do you make of these new paradigms?" with wide-eyed expectation. I just commented on what I had seen, simply spur-of-the-moment, down-home-country wisdom of a simple, rather dense preacher.

At the closing jazz buffet, he said, "You should write these down. No one teaches us this stuff at Princeton." So I share some of them here, hoping that perhaps a young minister or two may be spared a *faux pas* and that non-clergy may gain an insight into our lives, worldviews, and even – gasp – paradigms.

Sound bites and insights

Don't be too proud to take leftovers home from church functions. Especially the pork chops.

The most important attribute of a church secretary: laughing at your jokes. They have spell check now.

Learn the children's names.

When giving a children's sermon, get down on their level. Kneel. Sit. Do something. Do not tower over the children. You're taller than they are, get over it.

Learn at least one entree and one dessert for church potlucks. Make them from scratch.

Learn to remove live bats from the church. You will need a canvas bag, a long stick, and nerves of steel.

That imitation you do of your theology professor isn't funny anymore.

Admit your mistakes. Make more.

Read *Elmer Gantry*.

Keep your promises. Insist that churches keep their promises to you.

Remember, everyone you meet is carrying a heavy load (Matthew 11:28, NRSV).

Stay in touch with people who make you laugh.

Listen to old people.

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When old people repeat their stories, repeat your listening. Try to learn why this story is so important.

Endure compliments, don't deflect them; let them penetrate your defenses. (You already do this with criticism.)

Don't confuse hospitality with friendship.

Don't work out personal issues in the pulpit. Your insurance coverage includes therapy.

People remember "cute" but they are not changed by it.

Most people won't get the Zeppelin references in your sermons. Do not be discouraged by this.

Know where the plunger is. Nothing that needs to be done around the church is beneath you.

Some tasks are not worth your time.

Use warm water for baptisms, unless your congregation likes screaming.

People who ask for money from the church never tell the truth. The truth is always worse.

It's note "The Fourth Gospel." It's John. Leave the other seminary words in seminary. Especially hermeneutic, paradigm and lectionary.

Offer to prayer for people. Then do it.

When there is a guest organist, go over every part of the service with her beforehand. If she could read your mind, she'd be on Oprah.