

Chapter 1

Connecting the Dots

The first snowflakes began to fall. I was concerned because I had a three-hour drive in front of me and I wanted to make it home that night. I was a new missionary, scheduling meetings with pastors in the hope their churches would support my family in our mission to teach at a seminary in Singapore. I hadn't seen my wife in many days, and I didn't want to wait another day before going home. The weather forecast said that a blizzard was on the way. My appointment was for 4:00 p.m., but the pastor whom I hoped to meet was late.

I sat in the office of a large church in a small town. The new building, designed by an award-winning architect, spoke of all the good things that money could do for a church building. But 4:00 came and went. I sat on a comfortable couch, keeping the church administrative assistant company. Just before 5:00 p.m., she received a call from Pastor Bill. He asked her to tell me that he had been held up, but if I would wait, he would make time to meet with me. I continued to wait. The assistant said she had to leave, but I could either stay in the church office or wait in a comfortable waiting area in the church foyer. I chose the foyer. As I waited, I could look outside into the parking lot. There was now an accumulation of almost an inch of snow with no sign of stopping. Teenagers began to enter the building. They went into

the gymnasium to play basketball while they waited for the youth pastor and youth meetings. Six o'clock came and went. I began to pray about whether I should continue to wait.

Finally, the pastor arrived at about 6:30 p.m., apologizing repeatedly for being late. There was something disturbing, however, about how the pastor appeared. His demeanor suggested something was wrong. When I shook his hand, I noticed a definite quiver in his grip. His speech was rapid. His facial features were drawn and tight. He looked down rather than at me. In fact, I noticed at times that he seemed to be looking off in the distance with a blank stare. He was definitely nervous and preoccupied, clearly upset about something. Nonetheless, he offered to take me to dinner. Though he had to attend a small group meeting that night, he said the least he could do would be to buy a dinner for me since he was so late for our meeting. The snowfall showed no signs of relenting, but I sensed there was something about this man, something suggesting he may have needed my friendship. So, I accepted his invitation.

Pastor Bill called his wife and asked her to meet us at the local restaurant. We carefully drove through the snow-covered main street, tires crunching through growing blanket of white. We arrived at the only restaurant in this rural community. We all ordered the special, spaghetti with meatballs. I allowed plenty of time to get to know Pastor Bill and his wife, Pat, before sharing about our mission to Singapore. I learned about their many years of successful pastoral ministry and about their family, including their children and grandchildren.

In the middle of our spaghetti dinner, however, the direction of the conversation abruptly changed. I was sharing about our future ministry in Singapore, my history as a pastor and a church planter for almost 30 years, and my counseling and teaching ministry. Suddenly,

Bill redirected the subject of our conversation. Something in him saw me as a person in whom he could confide. Perhaps it was my experience, or because I was not associated with anyone within his church, or maybe just because he was desperate and needed to talk to someone, whatever it was, he began to tell me his story.

He explained he was late for our meeting because he had just met with two of the elders of his church. They had accused him of verbally attacking a leader of the community. Bill admitted that he had had an exchange with this individual, but insisted he had remained passive and quiet when the leader actually attacked him!

The two elders made other accusations against him that Bill insisted had no basis in fact. They repeated charges that had come to them from "concerned" but nameless members of the congregation. Bill knew there was no truth to these charges. They then asked Bill to offer his resignation. They promised that if he refused to resign, they would make certain he was fired. They refused to listen to Bill's explanations. They had determined that Pastor Bill had to go!

Bill was absolutely shocked. The church was growing. They had just completed a major building project. The treasury was doing quite well. They were even considering a new missionary (me). How could they ask for his resignation on the basis of charges from nameless individuals and an attack from a person whose words were completely fraudulent?

I continued to listen to Bill and Pat. They were deeply wounded. It was not my place as a missionary to offer any advice, but I could befriend them. They told the story of how they had left an area of the country where they had been reared to come to this very different part of the country. They shared about how difficult it was to make the adjustment to this new place with different speech patterns and ways of behavior. They shared concern about what they

would do. Should they fight the charges? Would anyone believe them? Would anyone care? What would happen to Bill's career if he left suddenly without a plausible explanation? What church would consider him if he left without a place to go? What would happen if they stayed to fight the charges and then were forced to leave? Was there anyone who could help them with the struggle that was before them?

The worried statements of desperation continued for several hours. Bill seemed unconcerned about the time. He called a member of a cell group that he was supposed to attend that night and gave his apologies. He continued to vent, at times on the verge of tears. He was totally and completely shocked by how he was being treated by this church, the church that he had sacrificed to serve in so many ways. What would he do?

I could offer no advice. But I could pray, and pray I did, and I continue to pray for this pastor and the church he served to this day.

I finally left this small town about 10:00 p.m. The snow was now four inches deep, and it was still snowing. Bill and Pat offered a bed for the night, but I wanted to get home. I knew that if I drove slowly and with the Lord's help, I could make the trip. But I had another reason for driving home that night. I was deeply disturbed by what had just happened to my new friend. I needed time to pray and think, and the best place to do so was on a long, slow drive. I had been counseling church members, individually and in groups, for many years, but this time something was different. Something was bothering me; something I couldn't quite identify.

As I drove and prayed, I asked the Lord to help me understand why I was so upset. First, I knew I was disturbed because of the pain I felt in the lives of my new friends. I also knew I was disturbed by the disruption that was about to overcome a thriving church. I knew the

possibility of this church supporting a new missionary was very remote. In fact, this church did not become one of our supporting churches. But I knew I was disturbed by something more. Then I realized it: I was troubled because Pastor Bill's experiences mirrored my own when I was serving a troubled church. I too had been wounded, and I still felt the pain of being attacked. When I listened to the lament of my new friends, Bill and Pat, I was reliving the horror that had been a part of my life.

Though I had heard many similar stories from pastors previously in similar circumstances, I knew there was also something more disturbing me. What was it? I arrived at home after 3:00 a.m., tired and confused. I had seen many cars stranded on the side of the road, but the Lord had been good. I was coming home unharmed and safe. But what else was it that so nagged at me about my time with Bill and Pat?

My experience with Bill and Pat, sadly, was repeated a number of times in the course of raising support for ministry in Singapore. I never asked pastors questions that would provoke them to open up to me, but it still happened repeatedly, perhaps over a dozen times. One pastor told me a member of his church had died because of the attack mounted against him. Another pastor told me one of his children committed suicide after a relentless war against him and his family waged by a church member. I met several pastors who had serious physical ailments indirectly related to attacks they had endured. There were numerous stories of lies that had been spread, accusing the pastor of adultery, doctrinal impurity, or some other ethical or moral misconduct. A regular part of the attacks were claims the pastor had verbally abused someone. Often a member of the staff colluded with this charge. Since the accusation can only be subjectively confirmed, it cannot be effectively denied, placing the pastor in a very difficult,

defensive position. I learned from one pastor that his definition of a "seasoned pastor" is a pastor who has been fired at least once.

Sadly, even if a pastor did not tell me of problems, many times he would suddenly disappear from a particular church for no specified reason. When I would make a follow up call after a preliminary meeting with the pastor, I would be told he was no longer with the church. I would also be told that until the church had found a new pastor, the decision about accepting new missionaries would be put on hold.

One event occurred on an occasion when my wife and I visited a church on a Sunday morning. I was preaching with the hope this church would support us. We noticed something very strange when I began to preach. During the course of the early part of the worship, the sanctuary had emptied of many members of the congregation, including the pastor! After the worship, the pastor told me that he had been meeting with the church's board during the worship service. He had been fired and there was no chance that the church would consider a new missionary.

As I began to reflect on these situations we were constantly encountering, I suddenly came upon a sobering thought: The churches I was contacting were not troubled churches! Pastors of troubled churches do not accept appointments with missionaries who are seeking support! But a new thought crossed my mind. Why was the Lord allowing us to become part of the lives of so many pastors who had experienced turmoil of some kind, both in our past and also during our time of raising support? Why was the Lord allowing us to have opportunity to pray for so many hurting churches and pastors?

We have now been on the mission field for many years. All of the struggling pastors I met during our support raising days have been forced to leave their churches with the exception of two. These two are surviving, but just barely. At the time of this writing, I have heard of three pastors from supporting churches, churches that were not troubled at the time of our support raising, that have been forced from their pulpits in the last six weeks. Another long time friend, who has served as a pastor and a denominational executive for many years, has just been forced out of his church. Three of our supporting churches have closed their doors since we began our ministry in Southeast Asia. Struggles between pastors and churches were a significant part of the closing of two of these churches.

But why was I so disturbed by the night with Bill and Pat? Was it just because of their pain, the pain I was reliving, or was there something else?

As I have prayed about this subject, something has become very clear to me. It is not just that Bill and Pat and others like us have experienced pain. There is another reason. There are numerous books that have been written on the subject of turmoil in churches and pastors who are forced to resign. These books are often very well written, giving great advice to pastors and lay leaders who have a concern. But the problem is worsening. There is still a lack of hope for pastors and churches faced with these difficult problems. Why?

The reason is simple: We sometimes fail to see the depth of the causes for this problem and, as a result, we fail to recognize the real cure!

Are there troubled pastors who bring chaos to churches? Of course! Are there troubled churches that destroy pastors? Of course! But we aren't making the connection between the real problem and the real solution, and as a result, we are not offering hope to pastors and

churches struggling with these destructive patterns. In other words, we are failing to "connect the dots," failing to see the implications of what is happening in the church today and what will be required to stop it!

But there are simple, scriptural solutions. I have come to believe the reason I was so troubled by my night with Bill and Pat was not their pain, nor my pain; it is the pain that comes with the realization that we, the members of the American church, are not accepting the real causes of the problem, and thus, we are not facilitating the real cure. We have placed our pastors, churches, and denominations into situations with no cure, no hope for solving this staggering problem.

We sometimes understand what appears to be the cause, and we sometimes recognize what Scripture says, but somehow we are failing to understand how the real cause mandates strict adherence to biblical truth. Without understanding the severity of the cause and the application of biblical truth, we are destined to perpetuate the problem.

After the night with Bill and Pat, I determined to study the problem with renewed vigor. I determined that with the Lord's help I would do whatever I could to offer solutions to churches and pastors in an attempt to give them hope.

And though this book is addressed primarily to the problems of the American church, I discovered the biblical solution is much broader. These principles can address problems in any church in any country, and they can also address problems in parachurch organizations, denominations, colleges, and seminaries.

These principles address problems wherever humans may choose to congregate, whether a business, social organization, or religious institution – and yet these problems are much more

likely to erupt in volunteer organizations. The reason is simple: Volunteer organizations provide greater opportunity for troubled people to ascend to leadership positions.

An old adage is certainly true, "If I am willing to do the work in my church, most of the other members of my church will allow me to do it."

If you are a member of any organization where people congregate, be aware the principles in this book may be needed to correct problems within your organization. And if you are a member of a church or a religious organization, your organization is not *less* likely to see these problems erupt; it may be *more* likely.