

Apple Valley Church

Merriam Sheppard didn't really want to be president of the church council at Apple Valley Church (AVC). Merriam had attended AVC for about ten years and had been very active in various church fund raising projects and other church activities, so she was well known throughout the congregation of about 750 people. She had begrudgingly been elected to the council the previous year but had no interest in being the council president. But her name had emerged as a compromise candidate. Harold Carson, as vice-president, was next in line to be president but to be president he had to have the endorsement of two-thirds (or six) of the nine members on the council. Church by-laws stated that the president be selected from the membership of the council but the entire congregation voted their approval or rejection of the council's recommendation for president. In order to be recommended to the entire congregation for acceptance, a council member had to be endorsed by a majority of the council. Presently, Harold had only four endorsements and it looked unlikely that he would get the five required. (Harold needed only five votes of eight members as he could not vote for himself). Hence, the council was looking for a candidate that five could endorse and recommend to the congregation as the next president. Merriam eventually agreed to be council president, received endorsement from seven members (Harold withheld his endorsement and Merriam couldn't endorse herself). Merriam was approved and confirmed by the congregation as council president.

Right from the start Merriam felt the council presidency was intimidating as there were serious issues that the out-going council president refused to deal with. The first problem was the church had recently taken on too much debt to build a new building. Monthly contributions from members were not enough to cover both operating expenses and payments on the building. The second problem was some very contentious issues that were dividing the church.

Concerning the budget problem, Merriam had been warned about Gary Madison. Madison was, as one council member described him, a self-appointed expert on budgetary matters who was more than willing to roundly criticize the council, but had no suggestions about how to reduce church spending. Council meetings were open to any member of the church. Madison had regularly attended council meetings to complain about and harass the council about their management of church financial matters. Madison attended the first meeting presided over by Merriam. After the treasurer's report Merriam asked if there were any comments. Madison immediately started complaining vigorously that the council was negligent and incompetent and not doing its job by continuing to fund budget deficits by taking funds from the savings account to cover revenue shortfalls. Some council members responded to Madison by stating that they had had this discussion before and that the council expected the church to reach a breakeven point of revenue and expenses in about two months and no budgets cuts were necessary. Madison then asked what would happen if they didn't reach the point where expenses equaled member donations? What would they do then? One member then moved that discussion of this issue cease so they could move to the next agenda item. The motion was seconded and approved unanimously. The next item was the pastor's report. Madison turned red and stomped out. After the meeting Harold Carson told Merriam that one of her first official tasks should be to do something about Gary Madison.

The first divisive issue concerned ordination of openly gay and lesbian pastors. Apple Valley was actually a moderate church politically as was the city of Apple Valley in which it was located. But that moderate label was actually kind of deceptive. The city of Apple Valley was the site of a state university which tended to attract moderately liberal faculty and students. Apple

Valley was also the location of a large heavy equipment assembly plant which attracted fairly conservative blue-collar workers. AVC, like the community, was comprised of these two very different groups that lived and worshiped together uneasily. For the most part the members of the church who were associated with the university had no problem with the ordination of gays and lesbians. The members who worked at the plant had objections and wanted the council to pass a resolution that AVC would never hire an openly gay or lesbian pastor. The more moderate and liberal members of the church let the leadership know that if such a resolution was passed they would leave the church and form their own.

At the center of this controversy is a man named Greg Hoover. Hoover, once openly gay, claims now to be “reformed” and tells anyone and everyone in that church that they (the church) should do all they could to “redirect” gays and lesbians back to heterosexuality (which he claims is “natural”), and be kind to gays and lesbians but never, never allow one to be appointed to any leadership position in the church, especially not pastor. Some members of the church were indeed listening to Hoover and he was effectively polarizing the church on this issue: the church was dividing into two camps—those who wanted an “inclusive church” and would welcome gay and lesbian persons in any leadership position and those who were opposed to this.

The senior pastor (Tim Hartman, or “Pastor Tim”) and the council president met each week to discuss church issues, plan meetings, etc. At their first meeting after Merriam was elected council president, Pastor Tim was very direct and blunt with Merriam: he was a few years from retirement and he was afraid that the church would eventually split over the issue of gay and lesbians in the church. He said his hope was just to hold the church together until he retired and then that conflict would be his successors’ problem. He felt something had to be done about Greg Hoover, however. Some things were not options: they couldn’t kick him out of the church, that would antagonize many members, and they really couldn’t restrict his right to discuss the issues as long as he did it in a civil way. Pastor Tim told Merriam that he had talked to Hoover and tried to get him to be less vocal but this had no effect on Hoover’s behavior. Pastor Tim said that he felt Merriam needed to confront Hoover as she was the elected leader of the church.

They also discussed another issue that was dividing the church—abortion. AVC belonged to an organization called the National Organization of Churches (NOC). One of many advantages of belonging to NOC was that AVC purchased health insurance, a retirement plan, and other benefits for AVC employees at a much lower price through NOC than if they went out and bought it on their own. NOC, however, included all kinds of churches from very “conservative” to very “liberal.” Therefore, NOC had to offer a health insurance plan that met the needs of that range of churches. One of the provisions of the health plan was that it did pay for abortions. Harold Carson, the council vice-president was aware of this, and had been pushing the council to withdraw AVC from the National Council and obtain an employee benefits package elsewhere. Carson felt it was hypocritical for AVC to (unofficially) oppose abortion, (there was no official AVC stand on the issue) and then support a health care plan that paid for abortions.

Pastor Tim and Merriam discussed this and Pastor Tim told of his dilemma. He didn’t like the health care insurance provision that paid for abortions, but quite simply AVC could not afford to leave NOC and buy their own benefits package. A benefits package comparable to what they had now through NOC would cost about twice as much if purchased on the open market. Given the tight financial situation of the church, the church would probably have to cut some of the benefits and pass more of the cost on to employees if they withdrew from NOC. That would be a disaster for some employees and they would probably leave to find employment elsewhere. Pastor Tim was blunt on this point: Merriam needed to do “some serious arm twisting with Harold Carson, or else he will wreck this church on the rocks of financial disaster.”

If that wasn't enough, Merriam had one more issue on her plate. Recently, Marianne Hartman, a 20-ish woman who had been Youth Director, had left AVC because she had gotten married and left town with her new husband. Associate Pastor Daryl Wamsley had selected Russ Rivers to replace Marianne. Rivers couldn't have been more different from Hartman. Hartman was a young college graduate, working at her first "real" job after college. Rivers was in his 40s, was a recovered drug addict, had tattoos up and down his arms, and presented only an associate's degree. But Russ truly brought a lot of life experiences to the job. But there was opposition in the congregation to Russ' appointment to the Youth Director position. There were two main concerns about Russ: (1) he was just different—most church members thought of the Youth Director as young and female, (2) some parents privately worried about whether they could trust their teenage daughters with this man. Wamsley, however, was firmly committed to Russ as Youth Director. He was certain that Russ was a believer, had good values, and could teach the youth of the church a lot.