

14 Symptoms of Toxic Church Leaders

Most church leaders are godly and healthy. A toxic church leader, one that is figuratively poisonous to the organization, is rare.

But it is that church leader who brings great harm to churches and other Christian organizations. And it is that leader that hurts the entire cause of Christ when word travels about such toxicity.

In a post from last week, I noted the traits of long-term, healthy pastors. I now travel to the opposite extreme and provide symptoms of the worst kind of ministerial professionals, toxic church leaders.

1. They rarely demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. Paul notes those specific attributes in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. You won't see them much in toxic leaders.

2. They seek a minimalist structure of accountability. Indeed, if they could get away with it, they would operate in a totally autocratic fashion, with heavy, top-down leadership.

3. They expect behavior of others they don't expect of themselves. "Do as I say, not as I do."

4. They see almost everyone else as inferior to themselves. You will hear them criticizing other leaders while building themselves up.

5. They show favoritism. It is clear that they have a favored few, while they marginalize the rest.

6. They have frequent anger outbursts. This behavior takes place when they don't get their way.

7. They say one thing to some people but different things to others. This is a soft way of saying they lie.

8. They seek to dismiss or marginalize people before they attempt to develop them. People are means to their ends; they see them as projects, not God's people who need mentoring and developing.

9. They are manipulative. Their most common tactic is using partial truths to get their way.

10. They lack transparency. Autocratic leaders are rarely transparent. If they get caught abusing their power, they may have to forfeit it.

11. They do not allow for pushback or disagreement. When someone does disagree, he or she becomes the victim of the leader's anger and marginalization.

12. They surround themselves with sycophants. Their inner circle thus often includes close friends and family members, as well as a host of "yes people."

13. They communicate poorly. In essence, any clarity of communication would reveal their autocratic behavior, so they keep their communications unintelligible and obtuse.

14. They are self-absorbed. In fact, they would unlikely see themselves in any of these symptoms.

Yes, toxic leaders are the distinct minority of Christian leaders. But they can do harm to the cause of Christ disproportionate to their numbers. And they can get away with their behavior for years because they often have a charismatic and charming personality. Charming like a snake.

Do you know of any toxic church leaders? Do these symptoms seem familiar?

Thom S. Rainer *is the president of LifeWay Christian*

Resources. For the original article, visit .