

Pastors and the word "my"

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Recently a fellow pastor closed a conversation by saying, "I'll get my secretary to send you that document from my Christian Education committee."

I bit my tongue. I wanted to say, "Wow, I didn't know it was legal in Minnesota to own even one person, let alone a whole committee!"

Ownership language employed by pastors is a pet peeve of mine. Using the pronoun "my" to refer to employees, committees, pulpits, choirs, communion tables--really anything other than actual personal property--sets my teeth on edge. Whatever the speaker's intent, I hear misplaced priorities and dangerous assumptions.

Overuse of the pastoral "my" identifies the church as overly pastor-centered. If the pastor owns the committees and sanctuary and other employees, the implicit message to others is one of arrogance, control and a lack of welcome. Such language also undercuts the empowerment of the congregation to take ownership of its ministry. If church members hear the pastor referring to things as his or hers, they have less incentive to take responsibility themselves.

Most of all, using such language is just plain bad theology. No person is owned by another, and no committee or choir is the pastor's alone. Instead, the whole church shares the work of the whole church. Using "my" language is theologically lazy and totally misleading. When the pastor leaves, the work will go on--it's not for or owned by the pastor. It's to the glory of God.

With this in mind, I tend to avoid even the phrase "my congregation" in favor of "our congregation." I hope this communicates that the church is owned by no one person, and certainly not by

me. Yes, many people refer to a church as "my church," and I know what they mean. That's okay--especially for folks who aren't the pastor.

Ultimately, however, it's important to remember that the church and everything and everyone in it belong to God.