



# RESPONDING TO AGGRESSIVE EMAILS

## 5 Tips for Church Leaders

Every church leader knows that sinking feeling of opening an email that begins with the words, “We know you’re doing your best BUT ...” or “I don’t mean to be critical ...” or “Several people have mentioned to me...” Emails like these can feel like a punch in the gut before you even finish the first sentence. They often carry more heat than light, and they can leave you feeling defensive and even angry. But handled wisely, even aggressive or passive-aggressive messages can become opportunities for pastoral care and kingdom clarity.

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Before you even start writing, you need to decide who gets a response. My policy is, if the person signs their name, the message deserves a thoughtful reply. Anonymous letters or emails go in the trash. Relationship context also matters. A stranger lobbing verbal grenades from another state because they caught wind of your sermon on social media is not worth the same attention as a connected leader or someone engaged in your local congregation.

### 1. Begin with Respect and End with Grace

Start by acknowledging the courage and effort it took for them to write. Even if the tone is sharp, thank them for sharing their perspective. Find something you can affirm, their passion for truth, their concern for the church, their desire for faithfulness. This lowers defensiveness and sets a pastoral tone.

*Example: “Thank you for sharing your concern. I can tell you care deeply about the church’s witness. My hope is that we can continue to walk together in Christ’s love, even if we see things differently.”*

End the email or note with blessing and openness. Modeling grace in the closing paragraph keeps the relationship intact and points back to the importance of unity.

*Example: Even though we may not see this the same way, I’m grateful for your passion and for caring enough to send this to me, instead of continuing on in silent frustration. .*

### 2. Offer a Window into Your Process

People often assume leaders make decisions casually. Sharing a glimpse of the prayer, discernment, and conversations behind your choices demonstrates thoughtfulness and intentionality. Instead of defending yourself with “why you’re right,” share the steps that you and/or your team took to lead through the situation in question. Admitting that it probably didn’t happen perfectly, can also de-escalate the tone.



*Example: “Before we adjusted service times, our team prayed and gathered input from families, volunteers, and staff. We wanted to choose a schedule that served the widest range of people. I know not everyone agrees, but please know the decision was not made casually.”*

### **3. Correct Mischaracterizations Without Malice**

Aggressive emails sometimes misstate facts or assign unfair motives. It’s important to kindly but firmly clarify what’s true, without being sharp or defensive. State the facts, but keep the tone pastoral.

*Example: “You mentioned that no one has reached out to families in crisis. In fact, our care team has been walking with several of them personally. I realize that may not have been visible to you, so I wanted to clarify what has been happening behind the scenes.”*

### **4. Keep the Focus on the Gospel**

Don’t let the exchange spiral into political debates, personal attacks, or side issues. Redirect the conversation toward Christ, the mission of the church, and the call to live as a redemptive community.

*Example: “I understand your frustration with how we handled \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in latest cultural outrage here). At the same time, I want to keep bringing us back to our central calling: to love God, love our neighbors, and help people take their next step with Jesus. That’s the lens we try to use in our teaching and leadership. If we had handled this the way you suggested, it may have side-tracked us from our central focus.”*

### **5. Recognize Email’s Limits and Redirect Toward Relationships**

Tone is hard to read in writing, and strong feelings can easily get misinterpreted. If the conversation feels too heated or complex, suggest continuing it in person or by phone. This grounds the issue in care and accountability and ratchets down the keyboard warrior effect.

*Example: “I realize this topic stirs strong emotions, and email isn’t always the best medium for this kind of conversation. If you’d be open, I’d be glad to sit down with you or give you a call so we can talk it through more fully.”*

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One final practice is to pause for prayer and reflection, maybe even up to 24-hours before you hit send. I sometimes even remove all the names and specific references and run my reply by a trusted friend to check for any blind spots.