



## ***Ten Faces of Ministry: A Conversation***

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*Ten Faces of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) is the result of a survey of 5,000 Lutherans from The American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. The book is written by Milo L. Brekke, Merton P. Strommen, and Dorothy L. Williams—all of Search Institute. It attempts to bring together and to interpret data from questionnaires having to do with opinion on pastoral and congregational effectiveness. The conversation was initiated, taped, and edited by James Burtness, but the final manuscript was read and approved by all participants. Darold Beekmann is Bishop of the Southwest Minnesota District of the ALC. Walter Sundberg is Associate Pastor of Como Park Lutheran Church, St. Paul. Burtness and Terence Fretheim are on the faculty at Luther-Northwestern Seminaries. Occasional reference is made to *Ministry in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), which is also based on work done by Search Institute and edited by David S. Schuller, Merton P. Strommen, and Milo L. Brekke.

**JB:** What kind of a book do we have here?

**WS:** I would say the specific goal of the book is to show how ministry is made visible in the church. The authors are careful to state their intent to describe, rather than to prescribe. They are talking about what “is” without drawing conclusions about what “ought to be.”

**DB:** That’s true. I suppose that since these people come from a background of considerable experience in doing this sort of thing, however, that this experience has influenced somewhat how they proceeded with this book, and even what things they have brought to the interpretations.

**JB:** That’s an interesting point. When you say “influenced,” what do you mean?

**DB:** Well, I don’t know if I want to place a lot of emphasis on it, but I sense that although it was a scientific effort, it was more than data that was brought into the conclusions. It was some of the whole experience of conducting and interpreting this type of religious survey. And I think that some of this came through in the section entitled “Reflections.” That was a helpful part of the book, and again they

acknowledged what they were doing there. But the book as a whole goes beyond the data that they collected.

**JB:** One of my favorite quotes is from Ian Barbour, a physicist, who says that all data are “theory-laden.” What it means is that there are no such things as uninterpreted facts. If that’s true in physics, it’s certainly true in sociology. And so, one is always dealing not only with data, but

with the point of view of the people who gather and select and interpret the data. And that's sometimes difficult to sort out.

**WS:** I do think that sociological study in the church is crucially important. Just think of the impact that Dean Kelley's book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, has made.

**JB:** You reviewed that book in the first issue of *Word & World*, didn't you?

**WS:** Yes, and I reviewed it because I think it's such an important book for us "main-line Christians." We can learn a lot from sociological studies, including *Ten Faces of Ministry*. Ministry, after all, *can* be studied this way. It *is* penultimate.

**JB:** Ministry is penultimate?

**WS:** Yes. It's...less than Jesus.

**TF:** I think it's important to say that, so that we don't dismiss this material too quickly with the observation that it's descriptive and not prescriptive. There's considerable value in this data, I think, as an occasion for shaping ministry more intentionally, for gaining some sense of what people's expectations are, so as to speak and act in view of those expectations. The data are valuable even if one determines that such expectations are incorrect or unrealistic. It's a truism that the more one knows about the context of ministry, the more effective one's ministry is likely to be. And people's perception of ministry is a very important ingredient in the context of ministry. It may well be that one will decide that people ought not get the kind of ministry that they want, but it is important to take those perceptions into account in the shaping of ministry.

**DB:** I was encouraged by the perceptions of lay people that came through in this book, very encouraged.

**JB:** In what way?

**DB:** In their understanding of ministry, of the church, of the gospel.

**JB:** Can you think of any specific items?

**DB:** Well, one of the things that comes to mind, for example, is in the section on counseling, where lay persons—as I recall anyway—even more than pastors, saw counseling as something more than just someone with psychological skills helping somebody else sort through problems. They were looking for a theological dimension to counseling. I think some of that type of thing ran through the responses of lay persons quite consistently.

**JB:** Yes, that is encouraging.

**TF:** The stress, however, does seem to be more on the personal than on the theological dimensions of ministry. The three areas that are considered to be most desired in a minister are labeled, first, "personal faith and spiritual depth;" second, "person for others;" and third, "critical awareness of Lutheran heritage and

theology." Then, set over against the three most desired perspectives are the two least desired, which are "dominating influence."

**JB:** Not only least desired, but "not wanted."

**TF:** Right,...and "ministry-defeating behaviors." Now I think what's especially striking is that the most desirable and the least desirable characteristics do not relate specifically to the presence or absence of an objective content for ministry or a particular skill at all, but focus on the minister as a person, on personal faith commitment or on self-defeating personality characteristics. That especially strikes me. And in the *Ministry in America* study the results are

remarkably similar. They have ten desired characteristics that emerged in their survey, and the top four lie within the area of the clergy's personal commitment and faith, and center in the minister or priest as a person, rather than in particular leadership skills.

**JB:** Now I find that both surprising and disturbing, I guess....

**WS:** Why do you find it surprising?

**JB:** I find it surprising because, as a Lutheran, I should have thought that we've done a sufficiently good job of saying that Christianity is about Jesus, the Bible, the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacrament, that it should be clear that the person of the pastor is secondary to all that. Apparently, we've not said that very well or very clearly.

**TF:** I think that the concern for the minister as person is significantly related to the culture of which we are a part in this particular time. The concern about the personal life of the clergy is paralleled by conversations regarding political leaders and others in our society. Private lives of public figures have become increasingly the subject of open discussion. People are wondering whether the private lives of public figures are not more relevant to their performance than has been thought to be the case. And I think another factor, certainly, is the increasing number of personal problems among clergy and the recognition that matters of life-style sometimes have a deleterious effect upon ministry.

**DB:** I agree. I wonder if what Terry is referring to relates to what you said just a moment ago, Jim. We've done a good job of teaching that the gospel is centered in Jesus Christ and not in the person of the pastor. Perhaps we've gone so far as to give the impression that the personal life of the pastor doesn't matter. Another way to say it is that people are looking for something authentic. And they're looking for it to be embodied in a person.

**WS:** They can see it no other way.

**DB:** That's right. That's right. It came out in the section on worship and liturgy. I think the word used there was that they're looking for pastors who "care" about worship and liturgy, and I interpret that to mean people who do it in an authentic way.

**TF:** It's very important, it seems to me, though, that we not end up with a moralistic view of ministry—defining it primarily in terms of certain behaviors. And I think *Ten Faces of Ministry* at times does tend to do that. I think it should also be emphasized that the integrity of the church ought not to be placed disproportionately upon the clergy as if other Christians had no particular responsibility in this area, as if the charge of hypocrisy, which is often directed to the church, is due solely or primarily to clergy behavior.

**WS:** When the clergy go wrong, that's when there's real trouble.

**TF:** Yes, but it's important that setting a Christian example ought not to be theologically associated with a question which they ask here about behaving morally in a way that's above reproach. That received a relatively low score in the study.

**WS:** I think that "morally" is a charged word. They should have picked another term. What people are against is a secular life-style which includes loose living or indifference to living a life of integrity. The word "moral" in our society means "moralistic" or "moralism."

**TF:** In *Ministry in America* it's interesting that George Lindbeck states that for Lutherans there's a different ranking that emerges at that point, that issues relating to life-style seem to be less important for Lutherans than for many of the other Protestant denominations.

**JB:** I find the shift between “moral” and “life-style” interesting. Are you...does the book...tend to use those terms interchangeably?

**TF:** The book uses the phrase “behaving morally in a way that is above reproach.”

**JB:** And people don’t like “secular life-style.”

**WS:** No, negatively it’s very important to them.

**JB:** What does that mean? What would I have to do to be called a person with a secular life-style? How should I behave to avoid being seen as one with a secular life-style?

**TF:** Living with a sense of the confession of sin and forgiveness is one thing that they lift out of the data.

**DB:** I sense that what people are looking for, even though they are disturbed by behavior that they consider immoral or inappropriate, is whether the person really believes. They’re looking for signs that...again coming back to authenticity...signs that there’s real faith. That puts these other things in a different perspective. And I think that sometimes people are seeing signs that some of the “secular behaviors” are more important to the person than matters of faith.

**WS:** Probably something like ambition for one’s career could be called “secular.” Consumerism would be “secular.” In the ministry such things are more noticeable.

**TF:** In *Ministry in America* they’re a bit even more precise with regard to some of these personal characteristics. Number one here is “service without regard for acclaim.” Number two is “personal integrity,” being able to honor one’s commitment by carrying out all promises despite pressures to compromise.

**JB:** But both of those are very secular virtues. Neither has any necessary connection with Christian faith.

**TF:** It’s number three that finally gets to Christian example. This cluster describes one “whose personal belief in the Gospel manifests itself in generosity which the people in the community can respect.” And number four is “the willingness to acknowledge limitations and mistakes, recognizing the need for continued growth.”

**JB:** Now that again is a very secular virtue. What I’m interested in pressing is the question whether the book helps us somehow to objectify those signs or evidences

of personal faith for which people apparently are looking. Or are we still in a sea of subjectivity? I have my idea of what personal faith and spiritual depth are, and I look for those things in a person. And you have yours, and you look for those things. Is there any help here to spread that out corporately so that the signs and evidences have some kind of objectivity?

**TF:** I’m not sure this is responsive to your question, Jim, but just to come to some of the difficulties inherent in the way in which they group this material, the third most important area is called the “critical awareness of Lutheran heritage and theology,” and this area is not very well defined. Matters that one might expect to find handled there are treated under other areas. For example, in the personal faith area one finds items such as this: “acknowledges one’s own sin and confesses this to God;” “goes about work in a way that reflects the liberating power of the gospel.” One could group all of those under “critical awareness of Lutheran heritage and theology.” And they all receive a very high ranking. So that, had the grouping of data been different, “critical awareness of Lutheran heritage and theology” might have come out ahead of “personal faith and spiritual depth.”

**JB:** I think that's a tremendously important point. When I said I find it disturbing that "personal faith and spiritual depth" are listed as number one, I guess that relates to the current cultural emphasis upon the individual. I do fear the focusing of Christianity on the individual rather than on the gospel. In a time when everything tends to be pushing toward this personal development, personal growth thing, I think we have to be particularly careful not just to go with the flow.

**TF:** Yes. Another point regarding this "most desirable" area of "personal faith and spiritual depth" is that there are very few questions dealing with such matters as one's knowledge of the Scriptures or one's use of biblical languages. It seems to me that the results are skewed by the imbalance in the questions. The objective content of the faith, or ministry perceived as a more objective task, is left to the side. The content of the faith is slighted. If there had been more concern about, for instance, knowledge of the theology of the prophets, fluency in Pauline theology, in other words if they had broken down the content questions in the same way as they broke down the personal issue questions or the skill questions, I think the results might have been quite different.

**WS:** I think I understand what they mean by personal devotional faith. People look for in ministers, and appreciate when they find, someone who quotes Scripture spontaneously, who is willing to talk about God to people in a given situation. They're looking for people with a stable family life. They're looking for a person who is there for other people, but in a way in which Christian things are evident and above board. Resurrection faith, that's what I think.

**JB:** I guess I would want to add to the list an impression that when one is in the pulpit preaching...you used the word "authenticity," Darold...that the person cares about what is said, that the person believes what he or she is saying. I think that I find it disturbing that too often...whatever that percentage is, but too often for me...I get the impression that preaching is some kind of a job that one has to do, some task, something that one gets paid to do. I don't catch many signals that preaching is some kind of passionate necessity. I find that upsetting. I'd like to add that to your list.

**DB:** People are looking for some proclamation. They are looking for some substance, and the book doesn't allow that to come through very well. A place where that lack could be dangerous would be in the use of some of these things by call committees. How is anyone going to say what is wanted in a pastor until that person wrestles with the nature of the church in ministry and the substance of the gospel? And that's the frustration. I find a lot of use in the church today of some very irresponsible things, with call committees for example, that rate the characteristics of the pastor apart from an adequate treatment of the nature of the church and its message and mission.

**JB:** Do you think that such things as job descriptions and interview in the call process may reflect some of those problems?

**DB:** Absolutely. We've more or less sold out to the democratic process. If we take a majority vote, we think we have somehow arrived at the truth. The whole matter of the office of the ministry needs to counterbalance that. I think there has been a healthy shift away from the dominating pastor and that sort of thing. But we need to balance that shift.

**WS:** Another place where I think the book could be dangerous is evident when we

consider the future of the church. Terry, you said that you're concerned about objective content. I think the point is absolutely valid, but look at what it says about seminary seniors. They say, according to this book: "To sum it up, we put less emphasis on Christianity as a set of beliefs and formal actions, and more on Christianity as a way of life—a faith lived out together in a gospel community." An inexperienced seminary senior reading this book could unconsciously respond, "Well, this is what I think anyway, so I'll just go right to it." An uncritical reading of this book could be dangerous.

**JB:** Should we say something about the two "not wanted" pastoral perspectives, namely "dominating influence" and "ministry-defeating behaviors"?

**DB:** Well, it certainly struck home. I think the two probably are related. At a time when there was more authority vested in the office of ministry, and a kind of "Herr Pastor" view, we didn't have to have the social skills that are necessary today. People put up with a lot of things and just accepted the pastor as being that way. And, after all, the pastor's function was not to "relate" to us, but to tell us what to believe and what to do.

**WS:** Just for clarification, "ministry-defeating behavior" characteristics are listed as secular life-style, self-centered isolation, evidences of insecurity, instability, self-isolating behavior, insecure authoritarianism, undisciplined living, and impersonalness without trust. They are all self-evidently negative characteristics, except, I suppose, for secular life-style.

**JB:** You'd have a difficult time promoting any of those.

**TF:** They're not only "ministry-defeating behaviors" but person-defeating behaviors.

**JB:** Now those are names that are given to clusters of items, right? The actual statements on the questionnaire would not be so self-evidently negative, I suppose.

**WS:** Some might be. "Undisciplined life-style," for instance, would be something

that would get a minister in trouble. Between the lines here, I think that what people are worried about is a minister who is overly private and protective, who won't answer the phone, who wants to stay home, who is reluctant to give, who, when he or she does show up, has a far-away look in the eye. People pick that up fast. And yet, on the other side, ministers need their privacy if they're not going to burn out.

**TF:** It's interesting that in the *Ministry in America* volume, they have three low-ranking characteristics. The harshest criticism centers on what people described as "undisciplined living." The second most serious negative describes the self-serving minister who avoids intimacy and repels people with a critical, demeaning and insensitive attitude. And the third most serious set of problems clusters around expressions of professional immaturity, actions that demonstrate insecurity and insensitivity when a person is buffeted by the demands and pressures of the profession.

**JB:** The discipline thing is interesting because I think that there is, in Lutheran circles particularly, a tendency to think about discipline as law, and we want to live by gospel. We like freedom and spontaneity and creativity, and discipline is somehow a negative word for us. Some Lutheran pastors feel that for the sake of the gospel they must be undisciplined.

**WS:** It's the old antinomian thing again.

**JB:** I don't know. Darold, what do you think about discipline among parish pastors?

**DB:** I think that's true. I think in many cases it's a reaction to a piety with which they

grew up. And some of them are still proving that they are free of that. And they do some of the dumbest things. They seem to have to do them in such a way that everybody notices and understands they are free.

**JB:** “Sin that grace may abound.”

**DB:** The same thing, done in a more appropriate way, would often cause no problem at all.

**JB:** What about Part Two: “Five Ministry Skills”? What should we say about that section?

**TF:** It’s very heartening that the skill areas did come in Part Two. It seems to me that one of the dangers that we’re faced with in the church today is perceiving ministry in terms of functions. Even though the data do not reveal that ministry ought to be primarily ministry of the Word, letting that understanding provide the indispensable framework and foundation for the various aspects of ministerial tasks, I think it is helpful that the five ministry skills are ranked after the five pastoral perspectives.

**JB:** There is, I suppose, a massive movement in the church to define ministry in terms of skills. There are all kinds of skill-oriented ministry training programs, and the tendency is present in theological education, too. I think that Lutherans have a particular stake in saying that those skills are necessarily secondary. Very important, but secondary. An example is administration. There are people who say it’s the most important thing in ministry, and people who say it’s absolutely worthless. The question is whether this book helps us to place administration in

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proper perspective. I guess I think that it does. I love the title of chapter 7: “Making Ministry of Administration.” The chapter begins with these words, “The tone of voice in which some pastors pronounce the word *administration* makes it sound like profanity. The tone identifies it as representing all that the speaker abhors, avoids, puts off, and hopes will someday fall off the bottom of the pastoral priority list. Our study presents evidence that younger pastors hold this view more strongly than older pastors, and seminary students more strongly still.” I think that that’s a very accurate and telling statement. I think that administration is a dirty word for many pastors, and I think it’s a dirty word because they are poor administrators. It seems to me that the good administrator is one who is able to handle material in such a way that the Word and sacrament ministry does get the time that it deserves. Administration is secondary, but it is important precisely for the sake of ministry.

**DB:** Yes. There can be a ministry of gospel-informed, gospel-shaped administration. And that’s where skills come into the picture. It’s too bad, but I think what happens sometimes is that we don’t provide adequate training in the skill area, so then some purely skill-oriented people come in and devise some techniques for us that are inconsistent with the gospel. But I am amazed at times at how some pastors have difficulty in simply helping a group come to some kind of decision.

**JB:** The illustration in the book is of an orchestra conductor. They say an orchestra warming up before the conductor arrives bears certain similarities to some congregations. The total effect is of energized chaos. It does take some skill to orchestrate that energy. And that’s what administration is, that’s ministry in administration.

**WS:** You need natural skills as a “people” person. You have to like people, you have to

be open, you have to facilitate the movement of the congregation.

**DB:** I think some sense of order...

**WS:** Keeping the records?

**DB:** No, no, no, no. I think it's...

**WS:** Running the Church Council?

**DB:** No, no. You see...not at all. That's what people tend to associate with administration.

**TF:** It's interesting that the most important item in the ranking is the development of personal trust. How crucial that is in enabling things to happen administratively.

**DB:** And the sharing of congregational leadership. Administration is important in helping to equip and coordinate. An example would be the Church Council before it begins its functions, so that when people do assume responsibilities they can run with them.

**JB:** Administration is something that is assumed in government, in business, in the military. As people move into new positions, they are given training in administration. It is a skill that can be taught and learned. I think it's a kind of Manicheanism in the church that makes us think that administration is unspiritual, or something. Administration is a form of ministry, or can be.

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**DB:** It relates a lot to leadership, I think. I don't know if leadership came through clearly enough in this book. We've gone through a period where there's been some feeling that to "enable" means to back off, to leave a vacuum so that people will pick it up. I think that's a false assumption. I think people are looking for some handles to help them share leadership. That requires some strong leadership, and some of the leadership requires administration.

**JB:** Let's ask about the value of this book from the perspective of your three positions. Darold, you're the bishop of the Southwest Minnesota District of the ALC. From your perspective as a bishop, what would you say about the value of this book?

**DB:** Well, I think it's something that was said at the beginning, that sociological studies like this are important so that we have some sense of where people are. We need to take a look at how we incarnate or embody the gospel in the midst of the people of God. I think the book can be helpful in our wrestling with that, but we must be careful that we don't make it something more than that, in the sense of being prescriptive. That would be dangerous.

**JB:** Terry, from your point of view as Academic Dean at Luther-Northwestern Seminaries...

**TF:** There's a sense in which the book reinforces current directions in theological education, namely an increasing concern for matters of personal formation, spiritual development. In a way, I think that's salutary so that theological education does not simply focus on skills or simply on the classical theological disciplines in a narrow way. On the other hand, it's disturbing if a book like this would push us too far in this direction so that we become overly concerned with ministers as persons, encouraging too much self-analysis with regard to how they are coming across in this situation or that, rather than just throwing themselves into the life of the parish or other ministry situation. I would like to just pull a statement of George Lindbeck from his summary on the Lutheran response in *Ministry in America*. He says something like this. There's only one supreme norm for ministry in terms of which all the various criteria we have noted must be assessed. Does the criterion in question promote the communication of the gospel



of the new life in Christ, understood in accordance with justification by grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone? If it does, it's mandatory; if it does not, it's prohibited or a waste of time.

**JB:** Walter, you're just now beginning active work as a parish pastor. From your point of view, what might the value of the book be?

**WS:** Well, for someone who has practiced public ministry only intermittently, the book was instructional. I think it describes the situation I'm about to enter. But I am a bit worried about the book, for the reasons that Terry gave. And I guess that comes also from my own perspective of being involved in theological education. So it was helpful for me, but it makes me a bit nervous. I'm glad for this conversation.

**JB:** So am I. Thank you all very much.