



Leadership for Pastoral Development

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The invitation to prepare this essay included the suggestion that it focus on “reflections” from my “former work as bishop and now as seminary president.” I welcome such a focus, and ask the reader to keep in mind that what follows is offered as “reflections” and is not intended to be a program for pastoral development.

“In a context of vulnerability, we search for...ways to cope with change and complexity. But in order really to ‘look ahead’...for that we need something more than coping strategies. We need a place to stand.”¹ Craig Dykstra’s observations about theological education apply equally to the situation of pastors today. The context for ministry is shifting rapidly: a culture that is increasingly hostile to the faith and values of the church; congregations that are ambivalent, if not resistant, to breaking out of a mode of institutional survival to a missional stance within this culture; diffuse and often contradictory demands and expectations of the pastoral office by a membership that reflects the consumer mind-set of our society; a church that struggles to be faithful to Christ’s commission by reaching out to an increasingly diverse and pluralistic society; new opportunities for global partnership with Christians around the world.

All of this will require new learnings, better preparation, different skills, broader perspectives, stronger leadership, greater flexibility, and perhaps even more gifted candidates. But let us not delude ourselves into thinking that this will automatically render us equal to the challenge. Even “the pursuit of excellence” and the recruitment of “the brightest and the best” will not accomplish this. Please

¹Craig Dykstra, “Looking Ahead at Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 28/1 (Autumn 1991) 96.

understand, I am not attempting to diminish or dismiss any of these. But it is simply not possible effectively to become more competent, flexible, diverse, inclusive, and global without, at the same time, redoubling our efforts at greater focus and integration. However you spell it—formation, development, pastoral identity, integration, congruence, focus, centering, authenticity—it is absolutely essential that this continue as a primary concern in pastoral preparation. It is to this concern that I address these pages.

I. MAINTAINING THE CENTER

I use the word “continue” intentionally, because, in my judgment, those involved in pastoral preparation have worked hard at this task—but the need is only intensified by our rapidly changing context and expectations. From the very first step in the candidacy process, every effort

must be made to relate each facet of theological education to the candidate's own faith development as well as to a growing sense of the power of God's call and to the formation of pastoral identity. By development I am not thinking in terms of formal "stages" of development, i.e., of continuous progress in development. To describe what I have in mind, it might be more appropriate to speak in terms of a growing sense of dependence, the utter and total dependence on the power and action of God both in times of apparent success and in times of greatest weakness. To put it yet another way, we need to foster a growing sense of "where the power is" and a disciplined practice of drawing regularly from that well of divine grace and power. This recognizes that pastoral development is not a matter of straight-line progression. It is rather a matter of remaining centered in the midst of enormous changes in the church and in the world around us as well as in our own personal experience of life and faith.

This means that leadership for pastoral development will use the very best critical tools of biblical scholarship to help students understand Scripture while at the same time nurturing an openness to the transforming power of the living word as it speaks to us through the pages of Scripture. It will foster the ability to understand and articulate the rich faith traditions of the church while giving equal attention to helping students relate that tradition to the concrete experience of their own lives and of the lives of those whom they will be called to serve. Providing all the ingredients is never sufficient; most candidates will need assistance in learning to make connections with their own life experiences. Effective leadership will recognize that

the difference between theory and practice does not apply to theology, and finds no place in the structure of a theological school's life. Theology's orientation to practice and its definitive service of the gospel mean together that a school of theology can never be only a school.²

The present studies of ministry, including the current study in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, can help sort out how we order our ministry. But,

²"Statement of Mission," *Bulletin of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg* (May 1992) 8.

frankly, I am not as concerned about how we order our ministry as I am about nurturing a clear sense of the source and purpose of that ministry. The greatest value of such studies may simply be the conversation and awareness they generate regarding the importance of the pastoral office, an importance based in our desperate need to hear the faithful promises of God and encounter the living, saving presence and activity of God. One of the strengths of understanding ministry as office is the recognition that the pastoral role is rooted in something bigger than the person of the pastor and exists solely to serve the gospel and the church's mission to share the gospel.

II. INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Current studies of theological education, including the study in the ELCA, hopefully consider the changing needs for theological leadership and the challenge to deploy more effectively our limited theological resources. But neither the study of ministry nor the study of theological education has given much heed to the question of pastoral identity or formation. In fact, the ELCA study of theological education calls for greater diversity and multiplicity of

theological education and makes mission the driving force without giving much attention to the source and power for that mission.

Without a focus on this source and power from the very beginning of their pastoral formation, clergy will continue to flounder; they will lack a clear sense of identity and vocation, and seek to find this in other places, such as their own professionalism. No matter how important it might be to function professionally in ministry, emphasizing one's position, status, special gifts, training, or interests will never be sufficient to meet the demanding challenges of ministry today. This is aptly illustrated by Loren Mead's pastor-friend who flipped

back and forth; chasing roles as if they were fads...[from] pastor-educator...[to] pastor-counselor. Then followed in rapid succession human relations trainer, community organizer, consultant, renewalist, and most recently spiritual director.³

Mead goes on to observe that this loss of role clarity lies behind much of the stress and burn-out among clergy today. It is not just the rapid rate of change that causes confusion and diffusion in the pastoral office. These are caused, I contend, even more by our failure adequately to integrate theology and practice and to help our people, both clergy and laity, focus on the center and source of our faith and mission. Permit me to illustrate.

Often when our theology of ministry is translated into practice it gets cast in terms of power or authority. Pastors and lay leaders, instead of seeing themselves as mutually dependent on the power and authority of the gospel which shapes and empowers them in their respective roles, all too easily become drawn into a power struggle. Pastors can become defensive about the authority of the office or even

³Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1991) 34.

hide behind the office rather than engaging the congregation in healthy discussion about how both pastors and laity live by and for the sake of the gospel. On the other hand, the ministry of the laity can be reduced to a corporate understanding, where congregational councils see themselves as "boards of directors" who hire and fire pastors and who expect pastors to serve the needs of the congregation much as a CEO might serve the dictates of a corporate board. As Gustaf Wingren has helpfully pointed out, such understandings of ministerial authority reflect a gross distortion. The office of ministry was instituted to distribute

those means through which Christ works and lives in us. The authority lies primarily in the means of grace themselves. The means of grace do not receive any authority because they are ministered by those who have the office, but they possess authority in themselves because Christ has bound his own presence to them....The authority behind the means of grace is the gospel of Christ, and this gospel uses human beings as its ministers to continue Christ's ministry of forgiving and restoring those burdened down with guilt.⁴

Or, in the words of Gary Harbaugh,

Real authority...is not the dependence of others on the pastor and the pastor's reciprocal dependence on being needed. Real authority is based on the absolute dependence the pastor has on the Author of life...the true interdependence of pastor and laity is realized in their mutual acceptance of their common dependence on God.⁵

It seems that when such an understanding of the pastoral office informs and is integrated into the practice of ministry, it can free both clergy and laity to pursue their respective roles, engage each other, yes, and even call each other into accountability, without allowing themselves to be drawn into conflict over power and authority.

A similar challenge to integration is presented by our ecclesiology. Most pastoral candidates clearly understand the church to be both divine and human, the body of Christ and the baptized people of God. Yet, they are surprised, almost shocked when they begin to encounter the human side of the church. It is easy for them to slip into an adversarial posture vis-à-vis the church, both the church as congregation and the church as institutional structure. In some quarters "church-bashing" has been developed to a high art. The bitterness in some pastor/congregation relationships is truly tragic. Often the pastor's proposed solution is: "If they would only learn to do things right!" This often means to adopt the right liturgical practices or to agree to the pastor's sense of priorities and to support his or her career/professional goals. Similarly, it is easy to take out pastoral frustrations on the structures of the church when they do not measure up to expectations. I am not suggesting here that we should cease or even temper a healthy critique of the church in all its expressions. I am suggesting, however, that our ecclesiology

⁴Gustaf Wingren, "Authority," *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 160-61.

⁵Gary Harbaugh, *Pastor as Person: Maintaining Personal Integrity in the Choices and Challenges of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 122-123.

should spare us from surprise that things really are the way they are. Our theology should remind us that, finally, this is the only church we have and that pastors too are part of that body and of those baptized people. Even if our critique is totally correct and we have every reason for anger and disgust, we simply do not have the luxury of standing over against the church in total objectivity. As those who have been called to serve as ministers of the word, both law and gospel, we must share the pain and sorrow of our Lord over the brokenness and failings of the church (of which we are a part) and at the same time trust the power of the gospel to heal and renew.

The current clamor for strong leadership offers further illustration of our difficulty. I have been part of that "clamor" and continue to see the urgent need for strong, proactive leadership in the church. But as this clamor has elevated leadership to the status of buzzword of the decade, I harbor growing misgivings about this emphasis. One often gets the impression that the future of the church rests almost totally on its capacity to generate leaders and leadership. I remember vividly an experience some years ago working with a troubled congregation that had just rather unceremoniously removed its pastoral staff. The congregational leaders were struggling to gain a

clearer understanding of their situation and to determine direction and emphasis in calling new pastors. Just as I thought we were making progress in moving beyond a focus limited to pastoral characteristics and qualifications, the chair of the congregation with a rather dramatic upward sweep of his arm declared emphatically, “What we need is a pastor who is just on his (sic) way up!”

III. HELP FROM THE CORPORATE WORLD

I do not wish to dismiss lightly the church’s need for bold, decisive leadership during these critical times. But I suggest it is even more critical that such leadership be firmly anchored in something deeper than style, technique, and personal qualifications. In fact, there is an emerging body of literature from the corporate world as well as the social sciences that also attempts to move the discussion beyond questions of managerial technique and personal skill to issues of substance in leadership. This includes concern about such things as “human value management”⁶ and “authenticity” in leadership.⁷ Three days after the recent presidential election, President-elect Clinton received the following public advice from a seasoned political consultant: “The first thing you should do is ask...to use Camp David until Inauguration Day....Then go up there and think for two months. Take a few good books and a couple wise friends, but not hordes of office seekers.”⁸ Not bad advice for any leader who understands that good leadership is more substance than technique or style.

⁶Jac Fitz-enz, *Human Value Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

⁷Robert Terry, *Leadership: The Courage to be Authentic* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, forthcoming).

⁸Herbert Stein, “Go to Camp David—And Think,” *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1992, A27.

Another current author, Robert Kelley, goes so far as to claim that the present fixation with leadership is nothing more than a “romantic illusion.” He describes the downside of a high view of leadership as “utter dependency” that easily leads to “powerlessness” and “disillusionment” when leadership fails. He points to research studies which conclude that “the leader’s effect on organizational success is only 10 to 20 percent...Followership is the real ‘people’ factor in the other 80 to 90 percent.”⁹ He cites Jesus’ leadership as something powered in quite a different way so that through the efforts of unsung followers “he changed the course of history.”¹⁰

Isn’t it curious that the events in Eastern Europe happened without the benefit of the leadership myth or leadership training?...The democratization of Eastern Europe is a celebration of followership. The Berlin Wall fell not by any act of leadership but by millions of East Germans joining together to say they wouldn’t take it anymore.¹¹

Unfortunately, Mr. Kelley concludes his work with a list of qualities and principles of good followership and good leadership without addressing the larger question of finding a foundation or center in which to anchor both leadership and followership. But his observations are sobering in the midst of our current fascination with leadership.

Pastoral development that is anchored in the gospel is in a position to avoid assigning to

the leadership factor more than it can deliver. This does not render leadership any less essential. Rather, it helps locate the true value of leadership through its exercise in the service of the gospel. Furthermore, this also fosters the development of “servant leaders” who are able to avoid the trap of becoming servile. The result can be bold leadership for the sake of the gospel but rendered in the service of the gospel from a servant posture.

IV. PERSONAL CRISES

The spreading epidemic of personal crises among clergy also points to the critical need for a redoubled effort at integration in pastoral formation. In fifteen years of work with pastors in crisis out of the office of bishop, especially in situations involving boundary violations and sexual exploitation, I was always amazed at the great variety of circumstances and dynamics reflected in those situations. No neat patterns seemed to emerge, except for three general characteristics that surfaced quite regularly.

First, most of these persons were very strong, capable, effective leaders, “above average,” if you will. These were not marginal persons whose ministry could have been described as mediocre. Most of these were pastors whom the church council chairman would have considered to be “just on their way up!” These persons often operated primarily out of their exceptional personal strength.

⁹Robert Kelley, *The Power of Followership* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 17, 19-20.

¹⁰Ibid., 22-23.

¹¹Ibid., 30-31.

Furthermore, most of them seemed to be quite out of touch with their own vulnerability. Either through the strength of their personality or by a carefully honed coping mechanism, there were few situations they could not handle or rise above.

Second, many of these persons carried deep unresolved conflicts within themselves, often stemming from their early formative years and involving a parental figure or a sibling. Once again, they were usually strong enough to suppress this conflicted part of themselves and not allow it to interfere with their functioning.

Finally, most of these persons had not developed a very clear sense of their own boundaries or limitations, especially as this relates to their capacity to produce and to give. Therefore, when confronted with a situation of vulnerability they could not avoid or rise above, they began to come apart. They usually had already exhausted their large reservoir of personal strength. The resulting “crashes” invariably were both shocking and devastating to all affected.

Insights and techniques from the behavioral sciences are invaluable in addressing such situations. Sophisticated psychological testing instruments can help flag these persons for therapy or “screening out.” But I am not at all convinced that most of these problems can be identified at the candidacy stage, even with the most sophisticated testing instruments. We have made progress in understanding and defining boundaries, but I am not convinced that clearer awareness of boundaries will necessarily prevent such crises. More important than clear boundaries is a clear dependence on the source and center of our life and faith. Although we must utilize the best psychological and sociological research available to us, what we are dealing with at its very heart is a theological and spiritual issue. Most pastors understand what it means to be sinner/saint.

They can provide a good, theological explanation of *simul iustus et peccator*. They lead their congregation in the confession of sins and faithfully declare God's forgiveness. Where they need more help is in appropriating this to deal with their own vulnerabilities and unresolved conflicts and in coping with their own sense of power and powerlessness.

V. CONTINUING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The preceding observations also apply to the matter of continuing theological education for clergy. In my opinion, most pastors do not need another course or another workshop to teach them a new skill. I am not in any way suggesting that disciplined theological study is not a significant continuing need for clergy. I am suggesting that continuing education must go beyond "isolated courses." In addition to the need for keeping their theological knowledge and skills up to date, clergy need to hear good preaching, participate in lively worship, and engage in healing conversation. I am suggesting alternatives for continuing theological education that include these ingredients—"theological renewal events." These should still center in the best theological scholarship and reflection but also include corporate worship and personal devotions as well as an intentional experience of Christian community utilizing persons with skills in both personal counseling and group work. Instead of going off to isolated events and then returning without the

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benefit of support from others who have shared that experience, I suggest designing events that involve immediate peers with whom one could continue in ongoing study and conversation as well as natural prayer. Such an approach would recognize that the need to shape and integrate never ceases.

Finally, I am not convinced that we need a new paradigm for the pastoral office as some would suggest. If our present situation calls for a new emphasis, I would opt for stressing the teaching function, with "pastor/teacher" serving as the integrating paradigm. If it is true that the gospel is finally our only source of power and authority, then it is essential that pastors constantly engage in teaching so the church remains centered in that gospel. Here I am not just suggesting teaching in the formal sense of gathering people in a classroom, although that will remain an important means of fulfilling this role; I am thinking of teaching in the much broader and pervasive sense of constantly raising faith questions and theological issues: Is this program consistent with our understanding of the gospel? Is this decision faithful to the gospel? How did that event, exchange, or interaction reflect the gospel's power at work among us? We need to prepare pastors and teachers who have so integrated our rich faith tradition they are able to raise critical faith questions and help people make the same connections. It means developing in our candidates the capacity to view all of life, each event, decision, program, and interaction, theologically, through the eyes of faith. It requires the capacity to think theologically and to assist others in developing that same capacity.

In terms of leadership for pastoral development, this means fostering in candidates a sense of self and vocation that is so formed and informed by the gospel and by a sense of the power of God's call that these pastors or teachers feel secure and free enough to lead the church in mission that is truly global, inclusive, diverse, and centered. Such an approach to pastoral development in no sense diminishes the need for disciplined, critical scholarship; it actually heightens that need. It does not necessarily call for more courses in practical theology but

understands the concern for praxis to be an integral part of the scholarly endeavor. Thomas Swears, drawing on a phrase from one of his mentors, uses “reverenced scholarship” as an appropriate descriptor for such an endeavor. He notes that

the focus isn’t on information alone or on piety alone. It is on an informed piety in the service of the gospel. Both scholarship and the devotional life can help prepare a place of readiness for the work of the ordained ministry. Ideally, the pastor brings depth of heart and of mind to such tasks. The engagement of the mind only can be sterile. The engagement of the heart alone can lack substance. It is the connection between the heart and the mind that leads to integrity and competence in the various tasks of ordained ministry.¹²

Once again, even those who work in the corporate world are discovering that leadership can be effective only when grounded in a clear sense of identity, mission, and boundaries. Schaeff and Fassel describe this in terms of the need of healthy organizations for “permeable boundaries.”

¹²Thomas Swears, *The Approaching Sabbath: Spiritual Disciplines for Pastors* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

Boundaries are permeable only if the company can know who it is and still be responsive to information from the outside. Organizations with permeable boundaries do not pretend or protect themselves from data that challenges their most fervently held beliefs. They are constantly in the learning posture in the environment. At the same time, their sense of identity and mission is firm enough that they are not engulfed by new information. They are open to everything, utilizing what they need and letting irrelevant data dissipate.¹³

Permeable may not be the most helpful descriptor for the framework of pastoral ministry, but the preceding statement does capture the healthy relationship between change and challenge and a clear sense of identity, mission, and boundaries. It seems to me that we in the church, with our much firmer grounding in the faithful presence and action of God among us, can attempt no less in our efforts to provide leadership for pastoral development.

¹³Ann Schaeff and Diane Fassel, *The Addictive Organization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 220.