



# Coaching as a Model for Pastoral Leadership

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When the final buzzer sounds, every eye in the stadium focuses on one object: the scoreboard. Who has emerged victorious? Which team or individual has proven themselves to be better than their opponent? These seem to be the only questions that matter in terms of sports. Coaches at every level routinely lose their jobs if the number of wins doesn't quite stack up. Accordingly, coaches from Little League through the professional ranks have become much more concerned with the results, that is, the wins and the losses. The victims, of course, are the players, as they become commodities or tools with which the coaches can reach their desired goal. We wonder how many pastors sometimes have a similar approach to ministry. Often we lament, "If only I did ministry X, I could get more people to come on Sunday mornings" or "If only we did Program Y, we could have more money for the general fund." But there is a cost to such thinking. Good coaching, like good pastoring, must be reenvisioned from that of a power-over relationship to one of leading in vocation so as to create genuine community in which people serve one another and the world in discipleship to the risen Christ. In this article, we aim to use our experience of coaching as a model for transformative pastoral leadership.

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## KNOWING YOUR X'S, O'S, AND V'S: THE FOUNDATION OF VOCATION

As first call pastors from Augsburg College and Luther Seminary, we are still deeply steeped in theological reflections on vocation, since both of these institutions lift up this important facet of our Christian identities. Two things about vocation are of particular value for coaching as a model of pastoral leadership: all Christians are called to service; and vocation is God's mask in the world. Pastors, by their call, are set aside in particular for the ministry of word and sacrament, but they are also called more generally to provide leadership within communities of faith. A few comments on each are in order.

Martin Luther's view of vocation was always about serving our neighbors and not ourselves. No matter what position we hold professionally, no matter our social standing, no matter our family situation, we are all called to serve one another. Luther writes, "If he is a Christian tailor, he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor. When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living."<sup>1</sup> Christian living then is based in service no matter our vocational calling—service not only to our employers or governmental leaders but to all of creation.

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The second quality of Luther's theology is that our vocations are a means through which God works in the world. This can be anything: sibling, spouse, partner, coworker, etc. When we exercise our vocations in the world, we are doing God's work through our own hands, because it is God who is functioning through these vocations. In this sense, God is always present in the world. The office of ministry is no different; here God works through people to bring about God's kingdom through proclamation of the word, administering the sacraments, and congregational leadership (though leadership, of course, is not left only to the pastor).

But "ministry" is not just set aside for a select few; it is open to all of God's people in varying forms. For some, this may be the ministry of Sunday school; for others, coordinating food drives; still others, leading Bible studies, and so on. God gives the whole church gifts, talents, and abilities to function and live out the gospel message. This takes place in the local congregation, the larger synod, and also in

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, "Sermon in the Castle Church at Weimar" (25 October 1522, Saturday after the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 10/3:382 (Gaiser's translation), quoted in Frederick J. Gaiser, "What Luther Didn't Say About Vocation," *Word & World* 25/4 (2005) 361.

the worldwide Christian church. However, this also extends to other areas of life, specifically to our vocations outside of the church walls. The church affirms Luther's teaching of the priesthood of all believers, and in doing so, the church deliberately supports and lifts up people in their vocations in the world. The vocation of coaching falls within this category.

### THE DOUBLE-GOAL COACH

Above, we listed a few of the pastor's vocational duties, and it seems to us that these are very much related to the duties of a coach. As mentioned previously, the primary vocation of the pastor is to proclaim the word and administer the sacraments, with the additional call to lead congregations. Similar to this, the coach's vocation is to nourish the players with support and encouragement, to teach them about the sport as well as about life, and to equip them with skills with which to lead lives that are fruitful. Outside of the specific development of players, the coach must also be cognizant of developing the program, doing this through visioning, game planning, and fundraising. In other words, the coach is called to lead. Do these qualities of the coach not sound reminiscent of pastoral leadership within congregations? As you may have noticed, the vocation of the coach is not focused solely on the coaching of the sport, but also on instilling values and traits that make these young women and men mature, ready to face life and all that it has to offer.

The Positive Coaching Alliance, whose motto is "better athletes, better people," seeks to provide all athletes an excellent sports experience through character building as well as positivity.<sup>2</sup> This national program, which is supported by local, collegiate, and professional coaches, achieves these goals by cultivating double-goal coaches, triple-impact competitors, and second-goal parents. Of these three avenues that seek to transform youth sports, double-goal coaching applies most closely to pastoral leadership.

The double-goal coach, in short, is one who "prepares athletes to win and teaches life lessons through sports."<sup>3</sup> In other words, through the process of coaching a specific sport, the coach also instills within each of the players life lessons such as hard work, patience, teamwork, and listening. Such character-enhancing lessons are taught alongside of striving to win, but not with a win-at-all-costs attitude. Rather, the double-goal coach seeks to better the person first (athletically and in terms of character) with the hope that winning will become a natural byproduct of such intentional coaching. The double-goal coach does this by coaching and modeling three principles: the "ELM tree" of mastery, filling emotional tanks, and honoring the game.

While our culture (sports and otherwise) seems to be obsessed with results and winning, the ELM tree of mastery allows double-goal coaches to hone in on

<sup>2</sup>The Positive Coaching Alliance, Our Story; <http://positivecoach.org/our-story> (accessed June 25, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>Jim Thompson, *The Power of Double-Goal Coaching: Developing Winners in Sports and Life* (Portola Valley, CA: Balance Sports Publishing, 2010) 8.

the bettering of players and not simply on winning.<sup>4</sup> First, E stands for effort, where coaches encourage the athletes to give all that they have into the sport no matter their role or whether they are in practice or in a game. Such efforts translate easily to life in terms of school, work, etc. Second, L stands for learning. This is critical for any person because if people do not learn, they cannot grow into their vocational callings. Athletes must learn plays, techniques, and more in order to become the best players they can be, just as they must learn new subjects to be better students or workers. Finally, M stands for mistakes. Often we wish to ignore or to hide our mistakes for the sake of appearances, but double-goal coaches seek to find the mistakes, because they want to make the athlete better. Such learning from mistakes creates a culture of growth and betterment.

The next principle of double-goal coaches is to fill emotional tanks. This sounds rather straightforward: care for the emotional well-being of the athlete. But it also takes into account the coach and how she or he might fill or deplete this tank, not just the athlete's current state of emotions. The Positive Coaching Alliance notes that some of the things that coaches do to fill emotional tanks are truthful and specific praise, expression of appreciation, listening, and nonverbal actions. Emotional tank drainers are criticism and correction, sarcasm, ignoring, and nonverbal action.<sup>5</sup> The benefit of such coaching is that the players who have a fuller emotional tank are more likely to exercise the ELM tree of mastery both in the sport and in life.

The final chief characteristic of the double-goal coach is honoring the game by respecting rules, opponents, officials, teammates, and themselves.<sup>6</sup> When athletes and coaches alike are able to do this, they make a conscious decision to move away from the win-at-all-costs attitude to one that seeks to compete with intensity, but also with honesty and humility. What would it look like if professional athletes honored their sports by respecting the above list? It seems to us that that the message would be much different than the one currently received by many of our youth (selfishness, attention seeking, greed, etc.). Change must begin somewhere, so it may as well begin with the double-goal coach. Pastors have much to learn from the double-goal coaching model, almost all of which can be directly related to leading congregations.

## THE COACHING PASTOR

Seminaries are wonderful training grounds for pastors and other future leaders of our church. The education gained there is essential in forming the firm foundation on which pastors build our ministry, with specific emphasis on word and sacrament. However, education for ministry is not done primarily in the classroom. It is done in the world, in the midst of God's creation. How then do we gain

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 31–32.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 41–42.

the experiences necessary to provide quality pastoral leadership? Though several options exist, including our current structures of internship and contextual education, coaching also provides an excellent model of pastoral leadership.

Several things are necessary in order to be a successful coach. Among other things, one needs to be an expert in the game, have trusting relationships with their players, understand how to motivate players, have a firm grasp of team dynamics, be strategic in planning for practices and games, and be an effective communicator. These are all necessary characteristics of an effective pastoral leader, as well. As a pastor, one needs to be an expert in Scripture and the confessions of the church. The pastor also must know how to build strong relationships, motivate people, and teach people to work together toward a common goal. While it is true that God can speak through Balaam's ass if necessary, and God's word is not dependent on the character of the preacher, effective pastors in our society need to be strategic in planning how to run their congregation, missional activities, and educational programs. Overarching all of these things, the pastor needs to be an effective communicator in preaching, teaching, and evangelizing.

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However, neither coaching nor pastoral leadership is a self-centered activity. When you are coaching any sport, you are not the one on the floor or field scoring the points or playing defense. You are not the one actually playing the game. Instead, as a coach, you work to equip your players with skills and knowledge. You work to teach proper techniques, ways to overcome adversity, how to work with others, and how to act on the court. Pastoral leadership works to accomplish the same things, except in faith and life as opposed to a sport. Pastors work to equip people with knowledge and skills. Pastors teach the Bible, doctrine, and faith practices. Pastoral leadership works to instill the techniques of individual study and ways to serve. Pastors walk with people through their entire lives and help them, through faith, to overcome adversity. Pastors promote working with others and help people understand how to live out their faith in the world.

Also like coaches, pastors have to understand that everyone has a different role to play. On a basketball court, there are different players at different positions. Each of those players has a specific skill set and personality characteristics. It is the coach's job to figure out how to help players use those skills to the best of their ability to accomplish one central goal. Life is no different. Each person in our world

has multiple vocations, and they can be discerned as the activities where their great desire meets the world's need. We all fulfill many vocations, and pastors must understand that each person's vocation is different from the next. But pastors also must understand how to help people discover and use those vocations and the accompanying skills they have to further God's goal of creating a more trustworthy and loving world. Together we create a team, we embody the church, which is coached by the pastor and ultimately owned by God.

#### TEAM EKKLESIA

In many of his writings, the Apostle Paul seems deeply concerned about unity in the church.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Rom 12:4–5)

Over and over again, we find Paul writing to various churches in order to quell disputes and motivate people to continued unity for the purpose of building and solidifying the church, so that the message of Jesus Christ could be preached throughout the world. Above all, Paul realized that in order to achieve God's purpose for the world and for the church to survive, the church needed to learn how to work together despite its differences. Paul was a double-goal pastor! If the church were to grow and flourish, each of its congregations needed to be taught and strengthened. Each church needed to be able to be relied upon to minister to the people in their respective areas of the world. The church as a whole was only as strong as the strength of each individual congregation.

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In sports, coaches fight the same battle, only on a much smaller and much more inconsequential scale. Each member of the team must be strengthened and taught. Each player must be trusted to perform their specific role on the team. In order for a team to be victorious (on the field and in life), all players must do their parts. No singular player can win a team game. Since every member of the team must be counted on to perform, each must be treated as an equal, regardless of their level of talent. That is not to say that each member of a team gets treated exactly the same, as each must be dealt with in respect to their own particular gifts, talents, and struggles. But all members, despite their differences, must be made to feel equal members of the team.

Paul seems to have understood this as well. When writing to Philemon, Paul

does a masterful job in articulating a certain level of equality with his use of familial language, despite their difference in social status. To be sure, using the example of Onesimus is problematic, since team members are not “slaves” to their coaches, and slavery itself can no longer be justified in any sense. Still, in that day, Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, has his status elevated when Paul refers to Onesimus as his son. Paul further elevates Onesimus by using the familial language of brotherhood when talking about his own relationship with Philemon. With these two statements, Paul links Onesimus and Philemon not as slave and master, but as family. By this, Paul lifts up Onesimus’s identity as Christian, called to the vocation of discipleship. With Onesimus on his “team,” Paul is then better equipped to share the gospel, and realizes that, despite being a slave, Onesimus is an important member of his team with an important role to play. Without his work, the goal of sharing the gospel with the world becomes that much harder.

#### **PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: EQUIPPING PEOPLE FOR MINISTRY**

No player finds success on the court or field without proper preparation and coaching. Before the game actually occurs, players must be properly equipped both mentally and physically. Accordingly, a coach typically puts more thought, time, and effort into planning practices than anything else. Coaches are tasked with figuring out the right drills to simulate future game situations, demonstrate strategies to players, and to teach the necessary skills of the game. Practice is a safe space for players to experiment and try out newly acquired skills in order to prepare for the necessary competition ahead. It is also in practice that coaches condition players to be able to endure the physical stress put on their bodies for the entire game.

The job of the double-goal pastor is much the same when it comes to ministry. Instead of practice in a gym or on a field, pastors seek to prepare parishioners for the rest of their week. Worship, while primarily an exercise of praising and serving God in the moment, also provides sustenance for the week ahead. People are taught the Scriptures through preaching. They are taught to recognize how God is at work in the world and in their lives. They learn new ways of seeing the world. People are introduced to new faith practices and given safe space to try them out. Above all, they encounter Jesus Christ through word and sacrament. That encounter conditions congregants to endure everything they will have to face in the world. A true and tangible encounter with Christ enables people to participate fully in the world with the confidence that they are well prepared and well led to carry out their particular vocations.

Like a coach, pastors must also understand that people learn in different ways. Some players need plays written on a board or in a playbook. Others need to walk through game-like situations. Still others need to watch game film. Pastors also need to apply this to the work of the church. While worship remains central, the time, place, and style of worship can vary. Pastoral leaders also need to under-



stand that the learning done in worship must be supplemented by additional opportunities like Bible study and service opportunities.

In addition, a coach must be a visionary and strategic planner. Before a game, the coach must think about the ways in which their team can be successful, what ways the opponents might counter their strategy, and adjustments that may need to be made. A coach must always be working to develop and institute the best game plan and the right goals to achieve success. A pastor is no different. As the functioning head of the congregation, a pastor must set the course for the congregation. The pastor needs always to be looking for the best game plan to help the congregation achieve God's purpose in the world. And it is critical that pastors be strategic thinkers when it comes to the congregation's struggles, and be ready to adjust accordingly. Strategic coaching is done not just on the corporate level, but also for the individual. Coaches need to understand how best to develop their individual players. Individual development helps foster corporate success in addition to greater confidence, satisfaction, and dedication of the individual player. Pastors and other congregational leaders, like coaches, must always be thinking ahead in order best to prepare their members and congregation for the challenges that they may face. When pastors are strategic in leading their congregations, the church is able to better adjust to challenges. When the faith of individuals is nurtured and developed, people find greater confidence to speak about their faith, satisfaction with their lives, and dedication to their faith. When this is accomplished, a strong desire to love and serve the neighbor closely follow.

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#### PASTORS AND COACHES

The vocation of pastoral leadership is ultimately similar to that of a double-goal coach. Pastors are called to serve God's people and creation in a way that focuses not solely on attendance numbers, financial giving, or keeping up with the latest trends in ministry. Rather it focuses on preparing people within the congregational walls for faith as a way of life. Double-goal coaching as a model for pastoral leadership shifts the focus away from financial giving and participation numbers to the process in which people are called, equipped, and sent by God into the world.

From our experience in coaching at the high school level, we have learned that coaching has a lot to do with confidence. Such confidence is not a sense of



pride or arrogance; this confidence is trust and faith in the vocations that God has bestowed upon each and every one of us. Pastoral leaders must constantly return to a focus on vocation, not just theirs, but to all of those to whom they minister as a source of such confidence.

Everyone on a team has a position to play and must play it well in order for the team as a whole to succeed. Not everyone can be a point guard or a quarterback, not everyone can be a pitcher or a goalie, but everyone on a team serves a unique function that betters the team. In the Christian church we find ourselves in the exact same situation. We all have different gifts, talents, and abilities that allow for us to lean into the vocations that God has given us. It is when we do this that we can be God's hands and feet in the world, helping to bring about the coming kingdom of God. ☩

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