



## **Ministry in Public Places**

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My ordination class celebrates thirty years since we assembled on the stage of the Chautauqua Amphitheater near Jamestown, New York, that hot June day in 1958. There were about fifty of us, all headed for parish ministry. The robe I wore was my grandfather's (lined for Minnesota winters), and my father placed his hand on my head as I knelt.

I had grown up in the faith and had lived in Minnesota. What else did I need? The only non-orthodox part of my Augustana background was my name. My grandfather Anderson was a pastor near Sioux Falls and nearly everyone was an Anderson, so he dropped his last name, took Ford, and became an American.

After the ordination service, I was ready to do battle for the saints in my rural parish in southwestern Minnesota. My grandfather started his ministry in this same area in 1902; my father, a few miles away in 1928. I was off to be the pastor of a traditional parish. Like nearly every other member of my class, I was also full-time janitor and secretary; but I was also part-time organist and choir director. A budget of \$6,600 doesn't allow for excessive staff! The first month in the parish brought the appropriate moments of wonder, loneliness, and anxiety to the life of a new pastor. In due course, I figured I would move on, but until that time, I did the necessary work that ministers do.

During the next year I received a few inquiries from other churches. A man called me from a church my grandfather had served a half century before, saying they were having financial difficulty. "We figured your grandfather built our church so maybe you could help us!"

On Labor Day weekend 1960, I received a phone call that changed everything. A friend called to say that he had heard there was a vacancy for the Assistant Chaplain of the Cadet Chapel at West Point. Soon I visited the Academy and met cadets and faculty. The work was to be primarily with cadets, and the setting was impressive—a massive Gothic chapel seating 1,500, the world's largest church organ, and 174 stained glass windows. More importantly, there was an established program—150 cadet teachers for the post-wide Sunday School, 55 acolytes, 6:15 a.m. daily informal service, and amazing attendance. There was a committee to recommend the new Assistant Chaplain, and I met

with them. There had not been a Lutheran since the Chaplaincy began in 1813; most clergy had been from the Episcopal Church. A few weeks later, General C. W. G. Rich, Commandant, offered me the job. I accepted.

For over 27 years I have done my ministry in public places. After three years as the Assistant at West Point I became the Senior Chaplain and stayed 15 more years. In 1979 I was

elected Chaplain of the U. S. House of Representatives by the Members of the House, and I have been reelected every two years.

Chaplains are clergy who minister to people in special places who are “on the go.” All chaplains live off the ministry of the parish churches. Only in the parish church do all the components of a church focus. The rest of us support part of that ministry.

It’s gratuitous for any of us, I suppose, to try to generalize from only one vantage about patterns, moods, and styles of ministry. But I shall set forth some perspectives on parish and public ministry in the following paragraphs.

*1. Other than in a few details, there is no difference between the task of pastors, either parish or chaplain.* The four chaplains on the staff of the Cadet Chapel were civilians; one was a uniformed commissioned officer selected from the Corps of Army Chaplains. The Senior Chaplain was appointed by the President for a period of four years, subject to reappointment.

When I got to West Point, I quickly learned what the Brass looked like—they had stars on their shoulders, or eagles. Everything was organized. One could tell from a cadet uniform the year the cadet would graduate, his rank and specific responsibility, and whether he was in the top ten percent of his class in academics. That information (and the way to the office and the gym) took about an hour to learn. Similarly, when I showed up that January in Washington for my responsibilities with Congress, the secretary gave me a key to my office in the Capitol (Henry Clay’s old office), and that was my orientation. I have not felt my training was inadequate at either institution because I already knew what a pastor does.

My view of public and parish ministry is that all ministers do the same thing—preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Nearly everything else is quickly learned over coffee and by “hanging around.”

*2. Chaplains are ombudsmen.* An ombudsman is one, who, though a part of an organization, moves among the structures of authority, correcting and judging. As Chaplain, I’m the “rank” of the person I’m talking with. At West Point my “rank” was that of a plebe, or a captain, or the Commandant. In Congress I’m occasionally a Member or a Page or staff. I don’t think any chaplain should have rank, at least not “rank” worn on a uniform like every other officer. A former Army Chief of Chaplains told me his two star rank helped him relate to others. I suggested, if that be true, he ought to be a Private, because we had so many more of them! The focus of public ministries is not showing stars or bars, but the stole placed upon us at ordination.

*3. Chaplains dare not fall in love with the chandeliers or the mud.* During my public ministry of 27 years, I’ve lived at some very spectacular spots and met lots of folks. During the West Point years I visited with distinguished leaders who came to the Point. I traveled over the world—from the bamboo and rice paddies of Vietnam to Europe and Asia—making my pastoral calls.

I spoke at a dinner in Heidelberg recently with over 800 graduates of the Academy and their spouses in attendance. The General introduced me and asked all those at whose weddings I had officiated to stand. Eighty people stood; few other pastors could have that experience! I then saw the first couple whose wedding I had witnessed and explained that I hadn’t really known back then what I was doing, and so I invited them then and there to join right hands and repeat after me!

“My” cadets have grown and now occupy strategic positions—the new Commandant at

West Point, a Brigadier General, sang in my choir. Another, Colin Kelly III, became an Episcopal minister and served with me as an assistant.

It wasn't difficult to enjoy the sights and grandeur of West Point. Our home on a hill overlooking the cadet area, and connected to the Cadet Chapel through a hidden door in a bookcase, was comfortable and convenient for entertaining cadets. At the end of the day I enjoyed walking from my office near the cadet barracks to the Chapel and home—138 steps up to the floodlit Chapel—while cadets would play the carillon high in the Chapel tower and the corps marched into the Mess Hall singing the Army songs.

Now in Washington there are opportunities to meet and greet the well known. A few weeks ago I took one of my four daughters to a ball at the White House; each year I have taken a different daughter (same wife!). Dancing under the chandeliers—of course, it's special. It's a different scene than my first parish; yet, for a pastor, it is exactly the same. The noise and sights of a chaplain's environment are special, but his people are the same.

Present for the Baccalaureate Service at West Point in 1965 was the graduating class and the anniversary class of 50 years before, the class of 1915, "the class the stars fell on." Dwight Eisenhower, former President, former General of the Army, former cadet Sunday School teacher, sat in the front row. During the announcements, I welcomed the two classes but did not specifically mention General Eisenhower. The community was properly dominated by rank and position, but God's House was the one place where total equality was celebrated.

For some chaplains, there are few chandeliers; it's mostly mud and bugs and occasionally bullets. We salute the chaplains who are away from families and whose environment is dust and dirt. But even then, the environment isn't the pastor's true concern, but Word and Sacrament. I spent only two months in Southeast Asia and saw enough of the miseries of that time and place. I officiated at too many funeral services during that war for former members of my West Point congregation. Some had taught Sunday School; some sang in our choirs. At an evening Bible study, a cadet was discussing the meaning of loving even one's enemy. Within the hour I had to tell him that his older brother, a former cadet, had been killed in the Tet offensive.

A cadet came to me desiring to be confirmed, and I gave the instruction. Later I officiated at his wedding, saw him at a service in the field in Vietnam, and administered Holy Communion. Within two weeks he was killed, and I led the service at the cemetery at West Point. A few months later, his wife had a baby girl, and I baptized the child he never knew.

Every pastor, parish or chaplain, comes to the awareness that what he or she does is to focus on the fundamentals of faith. We may spend much of our

time relating to the military or politics or to the university, but our relevance is Word and Sacrament. When people think of chaplains, they ought not to think of brave leaders, statesmen, or intellectuals, but think of the chaplain as shepherd.

I'm not arguing that we ought not take our environment seriously, but it's overdone, whether in the military, politics, or education. Chaplains are not junior officers, junior politicians, or junior professors. We don't get our status by competing with the crowd we seek to serve.

4. *The trinitarian creed has three parts.* A fuller understanding of the first article of the Creed has special application to public ministry. So much of public ministry deals with the gifts of creation, the secular order of things, relations between groups and nations. But that subject

isn't unique to chaplains; it's the domain of all.

The pastor attempts to be relevant to a secular society, and the congregation seeks to relate to its community, and all the prophets seek to speak the truth to all the forces of good and evil. How? Can the Christian person, thinking and acting in sacred and secular, living out a revealed truth, the gospel, yet do valid ministry with Word and world? Are there not areas of ministry at the level of creation, of our common bond as God's created community? We surely know our personal motivation and our own fulfillment relating to the second article, even as we discover new avenues of service in our shared experience of God's gift of creation.

In parish or public ministry, each pastor moves in the environs and demonstrates some witness, often called upon to speak or act for the entire community. The witness comes through a ministry of presence, of public prayer, speeches, or ceremonies.

While we may differ theologically with those to whom we minister, we yet already share a wondrous gift from our Creator, and we already have something to talk about, a basis of covenant, of celebration, of great responsibility. I've been invited to offer prayers with people in lands whose political system I dislike, whose faith is not measurable, but with whom a bond already existed.

Recently I gave a talk to an audience of different faiths and contrasted two symbols of stone: one, a small piece of stone I took from the Berlin Wall 31 years ago; the other, a leftover rock I found at the Wallenberg Statue in Budapest one year ago. Two pieces of stone, similar to each other—color, texture, weight—and yet in total contrast with each other because of the purpose for which the stones were used. The one is a symbol of separation and alienation; the other of rescue and sacrifice. Even with my different religious orientation, we still celebrated the bond that God had already given in creation.

The first ecumenical service in which I was involved was a Baccalaureate Service in my parish town. Held at the high school gym, there were few in the audience from the Lutheran Church. It was the first time I dealt with questions about appropriate texts, vestments, prayers, and music. Each church in town—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist (where Walter Mondale's father had been the minister)—had a church supper. The Roman Catholics had a huge basement, and it seemed like the whole town was crowded into it. The onset of the ecumenical movement in Ivanhoe, Minnesota, began that night when Father

Doby invited Marcy and me to sit with him at his table. He offered me one of his huge cigars, and though not much of a smoker, I did my best for ecumenicity!

There are daily public prayers in Congress and have been for 200 years. These are at the beginning of each session, and the business of the House follows. Occasionally people try to make a tie between prayers in Congress and prayers in public school: if in Congress, why not in school? They really are two issues and should not be joined. In Congress adults, not children, are present; in Congress attendance is voluntary; and in Congress prayers are written and given by representatives of living religious traditions. Each week Guest Chaplains are invited to give the prayer, and they represent the many traditions of our nation. One of our guests during my tenure was a rabbi from Virginia, and she gave an excellent prayer.

I write a letter of welcome to each guest and outline ideas. But I always begin with, "As you already know..." and most clergy do indeed already know what to do. Some few of my

brothers and sisters want to give grand prayers covering the first five books of Moses, the Sermon on the Mount, with a touch of the morning's news. The only objection I've received was from someone, never invited, who had seen my letter. He thought I was restrictive. I suspect he didn't know the difference between a prayer and a sermon!

Guests occasionally inquire whether to use a trinitarian ending to the public prayer. Of course, each individual makes that judgment. For my part, I follow the practice of Matthew 6. A public prayer is certainly not a statement, not a religious commentary on the headlines. It is communication with God, with all the feelings we have, our hopes and sorrows, our petitions and fears, and it ought to be done with deliberateness, clarity, and sensitivity. While sermons generally look out, prayers look up. Surely there may be references to events associated with the day, but the thrust of prayer is always on high. People can disagree on this. One of my colleagues at the Academy mentioned, in the pastoral prayer, the remembrance of the cadets facing exams that next Monday. After the service, I suggested to him that the only cadets praying were those who hadn't studied.

The breadth of our petitions can be specific, particularly if in private prayer. In high school I was a ski jumper, and I recall a Catholic friend crossing himself before he went down the jump. Being a good Protestant, I simply checked to see if my bindings were on tight!

During one difficult moment in my life, I struggled to find the right words for a prayer. I was in a 31-foot sailboat coming from Plymouth, England, and headed for New York. Unexpectedly my two friends and I ran into a Force Ten Hurricane north of the island of Madeira. The storm had been at us for nearly three days, and our small boat was tossed around by 70 knot winds and 35 foot seas. I was scared and wanted to pray to stop the storm. But I felt guilty about such a prayer, for storms happen in the ocean, and we had voluntarily set out for our Bicentennial crossing. Tired, angry, afraid, I said a proper prayer, "O God, I've had enough!" (Incidentally, that idea is from the Psalms!)

While it seems obvious that prayers have a certain style, there are those who write clever prayers, or who relish relevance or alliteration. Nearly all prayers by chaplains that I have seen in the public media have been acute

response to a secular event. The media does not deal with personal devotion, nor can it, I suppose. It may deal with the effects of religious acts, but the eyes and ears of faith best see the acts of faith. So with prayer.

All preachers try to write sermons and talks that are interesting, and are not averse to a good story or anecdote. "If the congregation is asleep, wake up the speaker" is partly true. But prayers are different. The impetus to pray comes from deep within a person, and it cannot be pushed or cajoled. Churches have rally days to count attendance; there are no prayer charts.

It was with apprehension that I approached those first public expressions of my ministry, but I learned to discover ways to do my work in a pluralistic setting. Presently, most of my time is with those who do not share my background. While the opening prayer and public ceremonies are the conspicuous aspects of my chaplaincy, the majority of my time is with individuals, hearing all the concerns any pastor hears. Even then, as in the public ceremonies, comes the question at what level to talk or what theological base is shared. This potential tension is not always solved, but a greater appreciation for the majesty and grandeur of God's work in creation brings the trust that allows us to communicate as one people.