

Three Dimensions of Pastoral Ministry

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The call to pastoral ministry often times entails a multiplicity of pathways into the office. Some enter the pastoral office through formal training while others move up in ministry through their local churches and are then selected to serve as pastors. Still others are daring, and some may even say defiant enough to “break-away” and start churches. Whatever the pathway that lead us into the office of the pastorate, most would agree that pastoral ministry involves three dimensions; (A) The preaching role of the pastor; (B) The teaching role of the pastor; (C) and the therapeutic role of the pastor. In this article the author will engage each of these roles within the pastoral ministry. A concluding note will be made about the need for all three roles to be turned back on the pastor for the health and wholeness of the local church.

The Preaching Role of The Pastor

Robert Baxter articulated well the ultimate purpose of preaching and the preacher’s heart when he noted, “*I preach as though never sure to preach again and as a dying man to dying men.*” We are reminded of both the pitfalls and possibilities of preaching. Those who are called to preach the word of God are also called to accountability for what we preach. Ezekiel was admonished to raise the dead conscience of the Shepherds when he was instructed to tell them “*You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally*” (Ezekiel 34: 4). Isaiah (52:7) on the other hand said, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

The question of what to preach is predetermined in some faith communities as the lectionary is set years in advance. In other communities like ours, the question of what to preach is largely determined by the local pastor as the Spirit leads him or her. In the latter, it is not out of bounds to ask questions like; What moral, spiritual or contemporary matter have we not dealt with and why? There are benefits and pitfalls to having a lectionary and not having them. All preachers are storytellers. He reaches into the annals of history for stories to quicken the hearts and minds of the listeners. She recalls personal narratives and the narratives of those around her in an effort to show that God is still at work in this fractured world. The preaching role of the pastor is to tell the world again and again of the Christ child, the crucified Christ and the resurrected savior.

As a storyteller the pastor prophetically moves into the lives of the people and brings their pain to the surface. He, through the Spirit gives the congregation’s suffering a name, and then with passion and conviction like a barrister makes the case that God is able to answer and is the answer to their pain and suffering. He ends with a final call to the altar. “Today is the day of salvation!” Today can be the beginning of a life in Christ, come let us pray with you and for you.” He lowers his

voice and brings the sermon to a close today, as he did last week “Come let us pray for with you and for you.”

The Teaching Role of The Pastor

With or without a degree in education, all pastors are teachers. With or without a degree in curriculum and principles in teaching and learning, all pastors are teachers. Jesus instructed his disciples to fan out into the far reaches of the world and teach people to adhere to the word of God. While teaching and learning has been arrested and detained by the classroom we know that teaching and learning take place in and out of academia. In this case when people come to Christ, pastors have the task of helping them to unlearn old and sinful habits. We teach people how to pray and how to worship.

Part of this teaching creates an atmosphere within congregations where the business of transference of knowledge becomes a shared enterprise. I have long said the church does not need more preaching, what we need is more teaching. We have mastered the art of shouting, dancing and singing and so we should. But now more than ever we need sound doctrine, now more than ever we need a church that is educated in the things of Christ.

The Therapeutic Role of The Pastor

With or without a degree in pastoral counseling or social work all pastors dwell in the therapeutic space. We know instinctually that at any time we can be called to deal with issues of sickness, trauma and death. Our roles within the therapeutic space lead us to the hospital room and the funeral home. We are called to lead the prayer for healing and we are called to invoke the great and final “ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” And long after the last visitor leaves and the final call comes in to say “my condolences,” the pastor stays with the person and with the pain until dawn and a way forward breaks forth. We are required to find words to comfort those that mourn in Zion.

We are strategically placed to fight back our own tears so that we can be fully present with those whose tears flow freely. We offer tissue to couples dealing with divorce and advice to parents of teens whose choices have upended the family system. In an atmosphere of confidentiality with their pastors, congregants unburden themselves and break the silence of childhood traumas that have shaped their adult lives and worldviews. Where others have failed to listen, the pastor listens, where others have failed to keep confidentiality, the pastor honors the individual story of each member by talking to Jesus and Jesus alone about such stories. When he feels the issues are beyond the scope of his expertise to help he gently makes a referral for additional support.

What About the Pastor

Now, if pastors occupy all three spaces (teaching, preaching and the therapeutic) of the office, then it is worth noting that all three dimensions must be turned back on the pastor as a son or daughter of God if the church is going to be healthy. It's a well known secret that pastors are underfed while feeding the masses. Pastors are under-taught while teaching his congregation and yes pastors are under-nurtured while nurturing the congregation.

In my role as a teacher at a major university in New York, I constantly receive emails and invitations to up my game as a teacher. Whether it's how to use technology to improve my teaching techniques, reviewing a new edition of a publication, or signing up for yet another workshop on the latest theoretical development within the social sciences. The teacher is always being treated as a learner simultaneously.

Furthermore, in my role as a clinician, supervision for the therapist is critically important to improve practice and maintain appropriate boundaries with those we serve. The case is being made here that pastors for too long have been left to fend for ourselves, to work outside of our areas of expertise without the proper support - after all we are not moving papers around, we are dealing with the soul of God's people. As a profession much needs to be done to support pastors who serve their communities. This includes not only the things noted above but also things like a decent retirement plan, healthcare benefits, proper compensation as well as training and development.

Conclusion

It is said that very few other professions require a broader base knowledge to be effective as a pastor. Pastors are required to know a bit of psychology and a working knowledge of fields of human behavior to attend to the needs of the congregation. Pastors need to be administrators and experts in supervising an army of volunteers. They are also crisis managers and conflict mediators, community organizers and budget experts.

In fact, it has been said that on a given week a pastor might find him or herself conducting a funeral service on Saturday, preaching a mighty sermon on Sunday, Christening a baby on the same day before running to the office to meet with his board and treasury team to sign checks and figure out how to make up the shortfall in monetary intake just to name a few. The call to be a pastor is one of the greatest calls on earth. What is clear though is that we have quite some ways to go in supporting and ministering to pastors - including those who have lost their way and are in need of restoration.