

“THE MORE THINGS CHANGE. . .” : PASTORAL LEADERSHIP FOR THE 21ST CENTURY*

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Let me begin by saying how honored I am to be here today and to be invited to give the Ernest Cadman Colwell Lecture at the start of your new academic year. I am also especially pleased to be here with my friend and former student, your president, Philip Amerson, and his wife, Elaine. The Amersons and I not only go back quite a few years, but our relationship continues in the present as President Amerson serves on an advisory committee for *Pulpit & Pew*, the research project on pastoral leadership that I am currently directing. You are truly fortunate in having them here, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you. President Amerson stands in a tradition at Claremont of excellent leadership in theological education, beginning with your first president, Ernest Cadman Colwell, for whom this lecture is named.

Today, I want to speak about pastoral leadership at the beginning of the 21st century, drawing on some of the insights that we are gaining from *Pulpit & Pew*. The project is a multifaceted research effort, funded by the Lilly Endowment, which aims at answering three broad sets of questions:

- What is the state of pastoral leadership at the new century=s beginning, and what do current trends portend for the next generation?
- What is “good” or excellent ministry? Can we describe it? How does it come into being?
- What can be done to enable excellent ministry to come into being more frequently, and how can it be nurtured and supported more directly?

To answer these questions, we've sponsored a number of larger and smaller research projects that are being done for us by historians, theologians, and social scientists. We've also commissioned a telephone survey of a national random sample of approximately 900 pastoral leaders. The survey, done for us by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, is not the largest clergy survey ever done, but it is arguably the most inclusive. Some eighty denominations and faith traditions are represented. Soon we will begin a series of focus groups with clergy, laity, and denominational officials in various parts of the nation to explore further ideas about excellent ministry. All of these efforts are intended to provide answers to our major questions. My lecture today draws on some of what we are learning from these various efforts.

If there is a text for the lecture, or at least an epigram, it is the saying, attributed to a French novelist and journalist, Alphonse Karr: “*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*” “The more things change, the more they remain the same.” As applied to

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pastoral leadership the saying has both a positive and negative connotation. First the positive:

Widespread Consensus About the Role of Clergy

Despite the considerable social, cultural, and religious change of recent years, our survey of clergy shows widespread consensus about the clergy role, a consensus that seems, at least on the surface, to have changed very little over time. Let me illustrate what I mean.

For example, to gain a sense of the work life of clergy, we asked in our survey how clergy spend their time at work. We gave them a list of roles and practices related to pastoral ministry and asked them to report how much time they spend on each in an average week. The top five, those in which clergy reported spending most time, were remarkably similar whether one was Catholic, mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, or a pastor in one of the historic Black denominations. The time averages were also similar regardless of church size. Preaching, worship leadership, administration, teaching, and pastoral counseling topped almost all lists. When we asked pastors what are the three pastoral tasks that they do best, 80 percent or more chose preaching, followed by worship leadership, and teaching people about the faith. When we asked about the three tasks most needing improvement, there was also remarkable consensus: Several tasks relating to administration topped the list, followed by training others for ministry, and pastoral care and counseling. Evangelism ran a close fourth for all groups. All this is to say that, despite considerable differences in denominational tradition and size of congregation, clergy of all denominational stripes gave surprisingly similar answers about how they spend their time and what they consider their strengths and weaknesses.

Now, turn back the clock almost 50 years to 1956. That was the year that my mentor in graduate school, the late Samuel Blizzard of Princeton Seminary, conducted a pioneering study of Protestant clergy. Although the way he asked his questions about clergy roles was somewhat different from ours, his overall findings were remarkably similar. Preaching, worship leadership, administration, teaching, and pastoral care were the top five tasks occupying the majority of the clergy's time. Blizzard did not ask what they did best or needed most to improve. He did, however, ask clergy to rank the roles in order of their enjoyment of them and how important from a normative perspective that considered each role to be. Preaching and pastoral care were ranked highest both for enjoyment and normative importance. In contrast, administrative roles, which took the largest amount of their time, were not only viewed as least enjoyable but also as being the least important. Recall that in our study, various aspects of administration are the tasks most needing improvement. At least now clergy judge these tasks important enough to say they need to improve in carrying them out!

Although the two studies are not precisely comparable, they are sufficiently similar to make my point: The more things change, the more they remain the same! There is not only a widespread consensus about the key elements of the clergy role; this consensus has remained fairly constant over the years.

I doubt that this comes as much of a surprise, nor should it. Religion at its best helps us to deal with what some have called the problems of meaning and belonging. In an essay on “Religion as a Cultural System, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz maintains that “there are at least three points where chaos—a tumult of events which lack, not just interpretations, but *interpretability*—threatens to break in. . .” and render human life meaningless. These three points are at the limits of our knowledge, the limits of our endurance, and the limits of our moral insight. Put differently, they are the problems of ignorance, suffering, and evil. If any of these three becomes intense enough or is sustained long enough, it offers a radical challenge to one’s conviction that life is meaningful. “Any religion,” Geertz says,, “however ‘primitive,’ which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope with these challenges.”

The role of religion and especially the religious leader—prophet, priest, or pastor—is centrally concerned with addressing these challenges, whether through liturgies and other ritual practices, pastoral care, proclamation and interpretation, or helping to build communities where people find comfort, support, and empowerment in the face of chaos. In these roles, clergy are called to be *theotokoi*, “God bearers,” representing God to the people to God and the people to God. This is why it is not at all surprising that preaching, worship leadership, teaching, and pastoral counseling—central interpretative and community building roles—are enduring aspects of what clergy do, whether at the present time, or in times past, or into the foreseeable future.

We hardly need to remind ourselves of this as we stand just a year removed from what is perhaps the clearest experience of chaos that most of us have ever known. September 11th not only revealed the limits of our knowledge about global terrorism, but it has brought untold suffering to thousands of those who perished that day and to their loved ones who have had to endure life without them. Moreover, it was a dramatic encounter with the problem of evil, made even more incomprehensible because it was done in the name of God as a religious act. In a moving PBS program on “Frontline” last week, survivors of 9/11 gave voice to both the faith and doubt that the events engendered. As one anguished soul put it bluntly: ”Religion drove those planes into the building. If there was ever a reason not to believe in God, this is it!” But others speaking in the aftermath of the tragedy saw also the positive face of religion—the indispensable sustenance and support that religious faith and religious leaders and religious communities offer at such times. A clergyman, Father Mychael Judge, who lost his life at Ground Zero, has joined firefighters and policemen as a central symbol of God’s presence, of grace and hope in the face of evil, suffering, and death. Many other unsung clergy also performed heroic acts of pastoral care and compassion to victims and their families in congregations in and around New York City. Others across the nation helped those who flocked to their congregations or came for counseling to find solace and gain perspective on the tragic events. In the aftermath of September 11th, clergy and the congregations they served have been important symbolic reminders that chaos is not the last word, that God is sovereign, that God is just, and that nothing can separate us from His love.

But it is not on in tragic moments that clergy play important roles. They are also invited into people's lives at moments of great joy and sorrow—weddings and anniversaries, the birth of a baby, recovery from illness, and other joyous occasions, while also standing with the sick, suffering, or dying, and with those on the margins of life. Here too they are “God bearers,” representing God at moments when human life is most joyous as well as when it is most fully challenged.

There are, therefore, indispensable and enduring dimensions of the role that religion and religious leaders play in daily life that have changed little over time and about which there is considerable consensus. I believe that this helps to explain why so many clergy in our study said that being a pastor is a deeply fulfilling and satisfying vocation. Not only did a large majority from all faiths express a high degree of satisfaction with their ministry, but also very few said that they have ever seriously doubted their calling. These responses surprised many, myself included, especially having listened to clergy “bitch and moan” sessions and heard numerous reports of low clergy morale. To be sure, being a pastor is not easy; clergy face numerous problems as they go about their work. Yet, for the most part, these problems do not outweigh the intrinsic rewards that come from the enduring aspects of the clergy role: pointing to God's presence in the face of all that threatens to make life meaningless; helping people connect with each other in supportive communities; helping them to reach out to others in their need.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The more things change, the more these enduring aspects of the clergy role are essential. This I take to be the positive meaning of this saying as it applies to the clergy role.

Things have Changed While the Clergy Role Has Lagged Behind

But the saying also has a negative connotation. Things have changed—dramatically so in recent years—yet, in many instances, clergy and their congregations have resisted adapting to these changes, even when faithfulness to the Gospel requires it. September 11th and the threat of global terrorism is only one of these changes.

- We live in a society that is becoming increasingly privatized, where people self-author their religious identity, leading to a consumerist approach to religious involvement.
- Dramatic changes in our view of sexuality have taken place that continue to challenge traditional views of sexual practices and sexual identity.
- An erosion of trust in institutions and their leaders has occurred—especially recently as a result of the tragic pedophilia crisis that has plagued the Catholic Church and the moral and financial collapse of the Enrons of our society.
- Although I hardly need to remind you who live in southern California, we are increasingly a multi-ethnic, multi-faith society, with enormous implications for theology and practice.

- We live now in a truly global village, but now one in which the majority of our Christian brothers and sisters live in the South—in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where a somewhat different kind of Christianity is flourishing.

This is a very different world from the one into which I was ordained as a pastor in the late 1950s. Yet, rather than attempting to adapt to these changes in faithfulness to the Gospel, many clergy and their congregations have continued following well-worn paths that they have trod in the past, even when these paths lead to dead ends. The seven last words heard most often in many churches are not those of Jesus from Calvary. Instead, they are, “But we’ve always done it this way.” The more things change, the more they have remained the same.

Some of you may be familiar with another Lilly Endowment project that was recently undertaken by the writer, Paul Wilkes. Wilkes, an active Catholic layman, set out to identify and analyze excellent Protestant and Catholic congregations and parishes. He reported his findings last year in two books, one profiling excellent Protestant congregations, the other excellent Catholic parishes. In an op-ed piece for the *Boston Sunday Globe*, Wilkes reflected on his visits to these many churches across the country as he gathered data for his study. In the *Globe* article, he maintained that “in too many of our parishes, we have [clergy] who are sadly ordinary, . . . who had they ended up in any other field would be seen as second-rate practitioners.”

Sounding a similar note, even if it borders on caricature, Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, had this to say about some congregations and their leaders: “Preaching is insipid and unrelated to daily life. Fellowship means little more than superficial conversations in the church lobby after a service. Communion is an autopilot ritual, and prayer a formality. Surprises—in terms of programs or sermons or policies or life transformations--seldom occur, and a sense of the miraculous is an outdated notion. The >haves= give little thought and even less help to the >have nots@ The church operates as an isolated island of subculture, wondering why it is ignored and unappreciated by the community at large.” Whether one believes that Willow Creek has overcome these failings or not, I have to acknowledge that Hybels’ jeremiad is not too far off the mark.

For both Wilkes and Hybels, the more things change, the more things seem to have remained the same for many pastors and their congregations. Their well-worn paths may have served them well in the past, but they are maladaptive in the kind of world in which we live today. These pastors and congregations are “sadly ordinary,” “insipid and unrelated to daily life.”

Yet, as Wilkes discovered in his visits to scores of Protestant and Catholic congregations, there are also parishes and clergy with what he calls a “lust for excellence.” “They had an ‘edge,’” he wrote, “tempered by constant self-analysis, and were open to both the workings of the Holy Spirit and ideals that bubbled up from. . .the people of God.” They “had a savvy recognition of the siren calls of postmodern culture and a set of well-honed tools with which they hope to build another kind of culture.”

Wilkes drew profiles of a number of these congregations and parishes in his books. Similarly, I've had the pleasure of encountering many such congregations and clergy over the years, and especially since I've been engaged in *Pulpit & Pew*.

Most of Wilkes' focus was on the characteristics of congregations and parishes, large and small, rural, suburban, and urban, that he and his team judged as exhibiting excellence in their ministry. But excellent congregational ministry does not occur in a vacuum. It takes excellent leadership—both lay and clergy—for it to happen. The more things change, the more critical it is that we call forth and nurture excellent pastoral leaders who can, in turn, help to equip and empower their congregations to respond faithfully to the social, cultural, and religious changes going on around us. What might this mean? I want to use the remainder of my time to sketch out at least a partial answer, continuing to draw on insights from our project..

Excellence and Christian Ministry?

I start with a question: Is “excellence” the right word for describing Christian ministry and pastoral leadership? We've argued about this quite a bit in our Project advisory committee and in a theological colloquium that is especially focusing on the question of excellence. Not only does the word “excellent” appear only minimally in scripture, but many believe that it has been too much co-opted by the business world with implications that run contrary to biblical and theological perspectives on church and ministry.

Probably the best-known advocates of excellence in the corporate world are Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, whose 1988 bestseller was called *In Search of Excellence*. Their basic assumption was that “only excellent organizations will survive,” and they described a number of businesses and corporations that they considered to exhibit qualities of excellence. What were some of the qualities they singled out? In no particular order, let me list several that they highlight:

- Organizations designed with one thing in mind: listening to and satisfying the customer;
- Having a clear focus: a vision of what one wants to accomplish;
- Paying attention to the smallest details;
- Instilling in all employees the values of the company (for congregations, substitute other staff and members);
- Providing staff and leaders with the training needed to do their jobs well;
- Listening to participants and valuing their input;
- Establishing a clear vision that sets direction and boundaries, but giving participants a free rein and necessary support to pursue the vision.

These qualities, Peters and Waterman say, are at the heart of excellent business organizations and, by implication, they are practices exhibited by excellent leaders.

Some of these qualities obviously are applicable to congregations and pastoral leadership. Translated into terms appropriate for the church, Peters and Waterman's perspective emphasizes having a clear focus, a vision of what one is about. It involves helping others in the congregation catch that vision and the values it represents and become committed to their realization. Peters and Waterman also stress the importance of doing things well, including the little things. Someone recently gave me an article that spoke of "the mundanity of excellence" which makes a similar point about doing well the little day-to-day things that often seem mundane. Also applicable to pastoral leadership is the emphasis on providing effective training for other staff and lay leaders—equipping them for their ministries. Additionally, they emphasize listening and the importance of effective communication. All of these are important qualities for anyone aiming to lead a congregation. Who among us wants to be part of a congregation that does its ministry poorly, without vision or direction, with poorly trained staff and lay leadership, with little or no communication with others in the congregation? I'm reminded of a play by Nigel Dennis, *Cards of Identity*, which has an alcoholic priest as one of its characters. The priest finds his identity by daily kneeling before the Cross and confessing, "I stink; therefore I am!" Surely no congregation or pastor would want to claim its identity this way, though I sometimes think they do so by default, by not caring whether they do things well or not!

This said, however, there are serious problems with the business model of excellence when it is applied to ministry uncritically and without some serious qualification. At its heart, this model privileges market values—success, hard work, efficiency, strength, and avoidance of appearing weak or vulnerable—as among its principal attributes. It also encourages what the historian Douglas Macgregor described as "transactional leadership," a style of leadership in which the leader's primary aim is to satisfy the expressed needs of his or her followers, whether they be customers, clients, or members. In exchange followers give their approbation, cooperation, and support.

Unfortunately, many churches, desperate to attract contemporary seekers, have all-too-readily and uncritically adopted this transactional, market-driven approach, making their ministry into a commodity, a service to be purchased. Such congregations, as Bishop Kenneth Carder recently lamented, "see themselves as consumers of ministry and the pastor as the dispenser of the religious wares Laity choose churches on the basis of need fulfillment rather than as a context for being in ministry. Failure to fulfill the [laity's] needs will result in a request for a new pastor, or a shopping trip to a nearby religious outlet In a market-shaped church, all activities are optional and depend on 'what the market will bear.'"

Transactional leadership and the market values that undergird it may be appropriate for excellent business leadership, but there are serious limitations when applied to churches and pastors. Thus, although some aspects of the emphasis on corporate excellence are applicable to the church's ministry and to pastoral leadership, we have to look elsewhere for a Christianly apt understanding of excellence.

Christine Pohl, who teaches Christian ethics at Asbury Seminary, is a member of our project's theological colloquium. Let me quote from a reflection on the meaning of excellence in ministry that she prepared for the colloquium:

Within faithful Christian communities . . . understandings of excellence and practices of excellent ministry will often be complex and somewhat ambiguous given at least the following factors: First, at the center of our proclamation and our hope is a crucified Savior Second, the Kingdom of God privileges “the poor, crippled, lame, and blind,” and faithful followers of Christ have a distinctive call to welcome “the least” to our tables and into our congregations Third, while pursuing holiness (or excellence), Christians recognize the persistent reality of human sinfulness. We all depend on God's forgiveness and healing, as our struggles with sin or its consequences are part of daily congregational life. And finally, our own motives and efforts in ministry are often a strange mixture of sin and grace, skill and frailty.

The four factors that Pohl lifts up are at the heart of the Christian gospel. They express core values that are radically different from an understanding of excellence based primarily on market values. Rather than efficiency and success, or power, status, and strength, they reflect instead what we have come to call “cruciform excellence.” Cruciform excellence is grounded in the bedrock conviction that God's power—God's excellence—is most visible in the broken figure of Jesus of Nazareth hanging from the cross. In this supreme act of obedience, self-emptying, and self-giving for the sake of others, we witness the fullness of God's love, a love that reaches out to all, but especially to the least and lowest, those are at the margins of society. This is the vision that is at the heart of Christian ministry—lay as well as ordained—and it stands in sharp relief from much that is celebrated in the business model of excellence. The business model is not without its virtues, but “cruciform excellence” gives Christian ministry a perspective on reality that radically alters our vision, placing it within the horizon of God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

Paul's letter to the Philippians makes this point vividly. Philippi, a city heavily populated with retired Roman soldiers, would have had a view of excellence shaped by military virtues, much as ours is shaped by those of the market. Paul holds up to the Philippians a different standard of excellence, one completely transformed by the knowledge of Christ whose self-emptying, self-giving excellence they are called to imitate.

Cruciform excellence is not, however, applicable only to individual Christians. It also shapes our view of Christian community. Let me quote Christine Pohl again:

Excellence is, in many ways, a communal project. . . . In [I Corinthians 12] Paul describes the right functioning of the church as the body of Christ in which there are many parts but one body, and all parts are important. “To each,” Paul says, “is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good.” In this same chapter, [he] recognizes weakness in the midst of a rightly functioning body and

notes that, within the community of the church, when one suffers, all suffer together. [Then] at the end of his description of the right functioning of the body, Paul writes, “And I will show you a still more excellent way” This. . . way is the way of love [that Paul describes in those memorable words of Chapter 13]. Later he asks, “What should be done, then, my friends?” And he answers, “Let all things be done for building up [the Body].

Excellent ministry, therefore, is not only what an individual does, whether as pastor or layperson. It is deeply communal; it is shaped by love; and it is focused on building up and strengthening the whole body, which itself is called to be an agent of reconciliation in the world. As Pohl says, “Excellent ministry] is less about exceptionally gifted individuals and more about a community that recognizes and depends on each person’s contributions and bears one another’s burdens.” Likewise excellence in ministry calls us “to be more excellent at love or laying down our lives for one another.” Thus it is in the community, as we participate in its practices, that we are shaped by the virtues of cruciform excellence.

Cruciform excellence does not condone careless, unimaginative, uncreative pastoral leadership—the kind of sadly ordinary pastoring that Paul Wilkes lamented. Neither does it excuse sloppiness, half-hearted effort, or doing nothing at all. Instead, a vision of cruciform excellence can invigorate pastoral leadership and give direction to a congregation’s mission. It provides a lens through which a pastor can shape a personal vision for her or his ministry practice and through which a congregation, whether large or small, urban, suburban or rural, can find its particular vision and calling. Instead of transactional leadership, with its *quid pro quo* exchange, cruciform excellence involves transformational leadership that encourages personal and institutional change in light of the vision and values of the Gospel.

Clearly there is much more that one needs to explore in scripture and in the church’s tradition as we try grasp what cruciform excellence might mean for ministry practice by pastors and congregations in the world of the 21st century. I hope that we will be able to say more about these matters as we complete our research. For now, however, let me conclude by suggesting several implications of this perspective for pastoral leadership, expanding in part on some ideas I put forward in an article in the United Methodist *Circuit Rider* (July-August 2002). If, in a time when things change rapidly about us, pastors and their congregations need also to change, then how might cruciform excellence shape our adaptation?

From Lone Ranger to the People of God

First, I believe we must take with utmost seriousness Christine Pohl’s emphasis that *excellence in ministry is a communal project*. It involves a shift from a “lone ranger” understanding of ministry to an understanding of ministry as the work of the People of God.

This is a major shift from the model of ministry that I was taught and that I practiced when I was in parish ministry. On the surface of things, what I did in the parish does not seem too different from what is required today. I led in the worship and preached each Sunday morning and evening. I taught; I visited and provided pastoral care; I presided over weddings and funerals; and I attended meetings and did the necessary administrative tasks of the church. This was what my lay members and denominational officials expected of me. It was, however, a very pastor-centered model of the church, and it was essentially the model of ministry that I was taught in seminary.

Don't misunderstand me. I count myself to have received an excellent theological education. Yet, like the expectations I encountered in the parish, I was taught an essentially pastor-centered model of ministry—what Edward Farley has called “the clerical paradigm.”

As I think back, I don't think I'm wrong in saying that the primary ecclesiology that we were taught at the time focused on the contrast between the visible and the invisible church, with the invisible side coming off the winner. Or, if not this, then it was the idea of a “church within the church,” a “true” church within a larger, mostly inauthentic body. Not much positive was said about the visible church or the larger body of members; nothing much that helped me to understand ministry as the work of the congregation as a whole rather than of the pastor; nothing much that taught me how to help lay members discover their spiritual gifts or empower them to use their gifts in ministry; nothing about the importance of understanding a congregation's distinctive culture and context; nothing either about how to help a congregation reflexively shape a vision for its ministry that is faithful to the gospel while, at the same time, appropriate to its particular circumstances. And I was taught nothing at all about how to deal with the conflicts that inevitably are experienced in congregational life. In retrospect, the pastor-centered model was inadequate, especially given the challenges that the church faced in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. Its weak ecclesiology was a large part of the reason that many of us left parish ministry during that time. It led us to a disdain for congregations as unfaithful, noisy, irrelevant, solemn assemblies, far removed from where the real action was.

If this pastor-centered model of theological education and ministry practice was the wrong one then, it is the wrong one today. What is needed instead—if we are to practice cruciform excellence, is an ecclesial model that understands ministry to be the calling of the whole people of God; that views the pastor as the leader of a ministering community; that understands that every congregation, however small or large, is called to be a present sign of God's promised reign in its gathered and scattered life. In this paradigm, pastors may look as if they are doing the same things that I did. They may seem, as I noted earlier, to be doing the same things that clergy did in the 1950s, when Samuel Blizzard did his research. They will continue to preside over the worshipping community; they will still preach; they will teach and give pastoral care; they will continue to have administrative responsibilities; but all these tasks will be aimed at building up the Body of Christ for its cruciform ministry, and teaching and empowering lay members to claim and use their spiritual gifts as part of a ministering community. The

community itself becomes the agent of ministry, confronting threats of chaos, helping people find support and meaning, being an agent of reconciliation, seeing all of life through the lens of Christ's redemptive love.

In an important recent book on the changing face of the Catholic priesthood, Donald Cozens describes this paradigm shift with reference to the role of the post-Vatican II priest. In most respects Protestants need only to substitute pastor for priest for Cozens' description to fit. The role of the priest, he says, has shifted from a cultic model to one of servant leadership in a community; from being on a pedestal to participation as a leader-companion with his people; from being a preacher teaching the truths of the faith and morally correct behavior to one who bears the mystery of God and leads the people into a more intimate contact with that mystery; from a lone ranger with unique sacramental powers to a collaborative ministry that focuses on the gifts of the parish as a whole; from a monastic spirituality that sets the priest apart from the people to a secular spirituality that is nourished by the rhythms of parish life; from saving souls from the world to liberating God's people to live fully in the world.

Such a shift of models has not been easy for older priests who were formed in the cultic model of ministry, or for lay Catholics raised in a pre-Vatican II church. Nor is the shift from a clerical to an ecclesial paradigm an easy one for Protestants to make, whether in reshaping theological education or reorienting the practices of pastors, congregations, and denominations. Yet, I believe that this paradigm shift is absolutely essential if the church today is going to be able to meet the challenges of the post-modern, post-Christian context in which we live.

Resiliency and the Life of the Spirit

Let me note a second implication of cruciform excellence. The practice of cruciform excellence—an excellence that follows Jesus in his path of suffering love—can be costly. It must often rub against the grain of things, challenging the status quo in light of an eschatological vision. Such costly ministry requires that pastors and congregations develop what I called in a recent article the quality of *resiliency*—a toughness combined with elasticity that enables one to endure without breaking when one is facing the tough challenges and difficult tasks that constitute pastoral ministry today. I once heard someone describe a really resilient person as being “like a black gum tree against thunder.” The tree bends in the storm, but it does not break. “Black gum against thunder” is an apt description of the resiliency needed in practicing cruciform excellence.

We follow a Savior whose path to resurrection passed through Gethsemane and Golgotha. His was the preeminent example of a ministry misaligned with the powers and spirits of this world. It was a fragile ministry, but it was also a resilient ministry—one grounded in deep and abiding confidence in the goodness of God and of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. It was that confidence that enabled Jesus to be resilient in the face of the powers of evil. And if, as his body, we are to continue his servant ministry in the world, then we will need resiliency. Like him, we can endure without breaking in so far as we ground our ministry in God's grace.

Developing resiliency is a fruit of engaging in regular spiritual disciplines, corporate and personal, disciplines in which we proactively put ourselves in position to be overwhelmed by God's grace. In them we find the nourishment and strength that make help us to endure whatever we may face. We asked clergy in our survey how satisfied they were with their spiritual life. Interestingly, those who expressed the most dissatisfaction were also the ones much more likely to doubt their call to ministry, to have seriously considered dropping out, to complain about the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel today, and to report feeling drained in fulfilling their functions in their congregation.

Agility

Closely related to resiliency is another characteristic necessary for practicing cruciform excellence in a rapidly changing society. In our project discussions, we have called it *agility*. Elsewhere I have described it as *reflective leadership* or simply *reflexivity*. Reflective leadership involves an agility that enables one to respond both faithfully, innovatively, and appropriately (all three adverbs are important!) in the face of a constantly changing world, a world sometimes experienced as being like "white water." Such a world confronts congregations and clergy with an ongoing need to adapt to new challenges, often to improvise, or be bypassed.

Agility is contrary to what many clergy and lay Christians prefer. Many of us prefer following a manual, a blue print of explicit instructions that tells us how to behave as Christians or how to carry out this or that ministry. This is how some fundamentalists treat the Bible. Having a manual would relieve us from having to make decisions, from having to think about what it might mean for us to act "in a manner worthy of the Gospel," as Paul told the Philippians to do. But agility demands thinking that is often "outside the box" as we adapt to the changes taking place about us in faithfulness to Christ.

Adaptation is not the same as accommodation. It is not simply giving in to a difficult situation. Rather it involves holding in creative tension the goods of the Christian faith, both scripture and tradition, *and* the challenges of the present situation. In so doing each informs the other in an ongoing dialogue or argument. In this reflexive process, scripture and tradition remain living resources that are newly interpreted in the encounter with present challenges as we seek ways of responding in faithfulness to the Gospel. As the philosopher Alasdair McIntyre has said in his book, *After Virtue*, living traditions always involve a continuous argument about what it means to live by them. In the same process, however, one's response to present challenges avoids simple accommodation. It is not a "knee jerk" reaction but rather an effort to respond to the new challenges faithfully, informed and guided by one's engagement with scripture and tradition and with the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Let me give an example of what I mean. In 1990, Mike Cordle was appointed pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church in downtown Atlanta. St. Mark has a proud heritage as a once thriving, progressive congregation. At the time of Cordle's

appointment, however, he was told that he was to help make an assessment as to whether the church should be closed. It had lost many members to suburban congregations and those who had stayed were increasingly elderly. The large sanctuary was typically three-quarters empty on Sunday mornings.

One Saturday afternoon during his first year at the church, Mike heard a commotion outside. He discovered that Atlanta's annual "Gay Pride" parade was passing in front of the church building. Down the street, a few members of Atlanta's fundamentalist First Baptist Church held a counter demonstration on the church ground; publicizing their conviction that homosexuality was sinful.

For a long while Mike, a conservative in style and belief, pondered what he had seen. Eventually he initiated conversations with his administrative board with the suggestion that St. Mark offer refreshments for the next year's marchers along with a banner that would read: "Welcome to St. Mark." Needless to say, not everyone was enthusiastic. For several meetings the board considered the proposal and together they engaged in serious Bible study of passages generally considered to condemn same-sex relations, along with other passages about hospitality to the stranger. They also consulted the United Methodist *Discipline* which, though forbidding ordination of homosexuals or same sex marriages, nonetheless declares that the church's ministry extends to all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

At length the leaders agreed, and Mike's proposal was put into action at the next Gay Pride parade. The response was remarkable. Many marchers applauded as they passed; a few cried; and a small number turned up the following Sunday for worship. Finding a welcome, they passed the word to others, and the membership roll began to move upward. Today the church flourishes with large numbers of gay and lesbian members alongside the still aging remaining congregants. The church has also developed a strong program of outreach to the needy in downtown Atlanta.*

This is a rather striking example of agility and reflective leadership in which the pastor and lay leaders engaged in a reflective conversation with the church's traditions and made an adaptive response to the new situation in which they found themselves. What had been a dying congregation has found new life as it practiced hospitality to a group whom some would treat as pariahs.

This kind of reflective leadership is possible in almost any ministry setting. Although such leadership is never easy, the pastor's example suggests that one does not have to be a "rocket scientist" to make the kind of agile response that he made. Nonetheless, just as with developing spiritual disciplines, reflective leadership must be taught and proactively cultivated and nourished as a style of excellent ministry, one especially suited for facing the challenges that this new century has already brought and will surely continue to bring.

* I am indebted to Professor Brooks Holifield of Emory University for this story.

Staying Connected

Let me highlight a fourth characteristic essential for facing the challenges of pastoral ministry today and practicing cruciform excellence: It is the *willingness to stay connected*, to avoid the isolation that leads to burning out and dropping out. In one sense, this is simply a further application of my first point—the need to avoid a lone ranger style of ministry. But staying connected, cultivating and maintaining friendships, is so important for healthy and excellent ministry that I want to give it special emphasis.

In discussions that we have had with numerous pastors and denominational leaders about pastoral ministry and in our national survey, the issue of clergy friendships has emerged as of signal importance for sustaining ministry in challenging times. In one study done for our project, researchers interviewed ex-Catholic priests who had dropped out of the priesthood within five years of being ordained. Isolation and the lack of close friendships were second only to celibacy as the most important reason for dropping out. Protestants are not immune from such isolation. Many clergy and their families feel lonely and isolated, hungering for deep friendships, whether with lay members of their congregation or with other clergy.

Lillian Daniel, a dynamic United Church of Christ pastor in New Haven, Connecticut and a member of one of the project's theological colloquium, describes the difficulty she experiences in developing friendships within her congregation. "I know that I have friends in my church," she wrote in a reflection piece for one of our meetings. "I am also aware that there are limits to those friendships, ways in which we are set apart from one another. The major focus of my life—my ministry—is a topic that is, for the most part, off limits [to friends from within the congregation]. I must find other friends with whom to vent about the frustrations of work, from staff conflicts to various vocational vacuums." She then went on to describe a deep friendship she established with two other clergywomen her age. "Together we have been through two ordinations, three births, two job changes, one wedding, and a coming out story. . . . We disagree politically and theologically. We have radically different understandings of our calls. Yet nothing could have prepared me . . . for the way in which God has used our friendship for both holy encouragement and prophetic correction." She also expressed deep appreciation for a group of mostly older clergymen who have befriended and mentored her in important ways.

In the same paper, Lillian told of serving on her denomination's Committee on Ministry and having to deal with issues of pastoral misconduct. "As we heard case after case of sexual misconduct, a common theme came through. They generally told stories of loneliness and isolation from their peers."

Staying connected, being proactive in establishing appropriate friendships both within one's congregation and especially with fellow clergy are powerful resources for a pastor to take on the journey of pastoral ministry.

Career Stages and the Need to Grow

Let me make one final point about the practice of excellence. If one is to exhibit excellence in ministry, one will need regularly to ask *what further intellectual and practical resources do I need to nourish my calling and face new challenges that come over the course of my career? What new things do I need to learn?* I know that thinking in terms of careers and career planning is distasteful to some clergy. Some even consider it to be downright idolatrous. In his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson writes that “The idolatry to which pastors are conspicuously liable is not personal but vocational, the idolatry of a religious career that we can take charge of and manage. The opposite of a ministerial career, for Peterson, is what he calls Avocational holiness: a God-called, God-shaped life work”—another way perhaps of describing excellence in ministry. Peterson’s words are a quite helpful warning against a kind of perverse careerism—making idols of status and success, typically measured by church size and salary. He reminds us of the way that such idolatry can deafen one to God’s continuing call to cruciform excellence.

I am not, however, advocating the kind of career “management” to which Peterson so strongly objects, but rather I am speaking of growth that is necessary for doing well what God calls us to do at different stages in one’s journey through ministry. No one is adequately prepared upon leaving seminary for the many-faceted roles that a pastor must play, or for the surprises that await a pastor when he or she changes congregations and encounters a different culture and different expectations for the pastoral role. Nor are we prepared for the challenges that come from the rapid social and cultural changes characteristic of the world in which we live today. Throughout one’s career, one who practices excellence in ministry will be regularly growing, deepening one’s knowledge of scripture and theology, expanding one’s understanding of the world in which we live and the changes taking place around us, and developing new skills of communicating, teaching, counseling, and leading. The more things change, the more pastoral leaders and their congregations must change—growing and adapting to the new realities and challenges that they face.

Unfortunately for some pastors, resistance to career development is not a matter of fear of the idolatry of career-management. It is rather a matter of laziness. Learning seems to have stopped when they crossed the stage at graduation and received their diploma. Someone said recently that in his experience, some pastors who have been in the ministry for twenty years don’t really have twenty years of experience. They have one year of experience that they repeat twenty times. Similarly a judicatory executive once described some pastors as having a “four year bag of tricks.” They move on to a new congregation at least every four years, recycle their bag of tricks once again, and move on. These are stereotypes, of course, but sadly there is a lot of truth in them. For whatever reason, some clergy’s personal and professional growth is badly stunted and they end, to use Paul Wilkes’ words, as “sadly ordinary.”

So, this last point is an exhortation to those of you who are students and those of you who have completed your academic work: tend your career with care. Nurture and

nourish it—not for the sake of professional advancement, though that may be part of your motivation, but because excellent ministry demands it as a way of keeping one’s call fresh and alive and being able to sing the Lord’s song in a strange, often alien land. The more things change, the less we can afford to stay the same.

Well, I’ve gone on quite long enough. Let me simply stop here and invite reflection on what I’ve said. As I do, I remind you once more that excellent ministry is at its heart cruciform in character. It is a witness to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who in his weakness manifests the power and excellence of God. He calls us individually and as Christian communities to participate in this cross-shaped ministry. In doing so, we discover that it is a shared ministry of the whole people of God; it is a resilient ministry, grounded in deep and abiding confidence in God’s goodness and of the ultimate triumph of good over evil; it is a ministry that exhibits agility and reflexivity in the face of new and changing circumstances; it is a ministry that is nourished by connections—friendships within and outside one’s congregation; and it is a growing ministry, tending to personal and professional needs in light of changing circumstances and new challenges throughout one’s career.

This is clearly not all that excellent ministry entails, but it is a start in that direction. The more things change, the more, I pray, we shape our ministry by the standard of cruciform excellence.