

The Together in Ministry project has abundantly confirmed that pastoral excellence is most effectively sustained through participation in collegial covenant groups.

There are countless ways to describe the marks of an excellent pastor. Numerous lists of desired pastoral attributes can be found in books, journals, websites, and elsewhere. Some are couched in the language of seminary-educated people, in abstract concepts that typically fail to result in action and concrete results. Others, especially those from congregations, are highly specific and typically focusing on skills such as preaching, worship leadership, visitation, administration, and stewardship. Still others—some of the most influential in fact—are not written down anywhere, but are contained in the minds of many churchgoers, mental templates of their ideal pastor. (In many Protestant denominations, that template is likely to be a 32-year-old married man, with 15 years' pastoral experience, a piano-playing, stay-at-home wife, 2.5 children and a desire to fit with the congregation just as it is yet at the same time bringing to it new life, members and pledges.)

One of the most useful descriptions of pastoral excellence can be found in paradoxes within the concept of *munus triplex*, the three-fold office of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king. As we seek to strengthen leaders for God's Church of tomorrow and work to sustain excellence among leaders of God's Church today, we fruitfully focus on the goodness, truth and beauty found in these three roles that were modeled by the One who calls. What are the

discernible attributes of a leader called to and capable of sustaining excellence in ministry?

Prophet

The truth is always that we have never been this way before — never more so than today, it seems. We are in a new land. Giants are before us. Who knows what more terrors tomorrow will bring? In times such as these, the prophet wrestles with current challenges in light of Scripture and tradition; connects what *is* with what *might be* and discerns a way forward; sees signs and portents and imagines a new thing.

Craig Dykstra of Lilly Endowment Inc. lifts up pastoral imagination as key to leadership for the Church's future. Ronald Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, focuses on adaptive capacity, the ability to face challenges that have no known answers and lead a body to discern and execute strategies that will lead beyond. Peter Senge, founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning, says that we are between stories because the ways Western culture has framed the world are failing, and we need a new story to serve a new community of thought, or at least new ways to frame the old story's power for a new world.

A prophet is one who is reflective and contemplative, has a rich inner life, ruminates constantly over life events and their meaning, and both can and will

take action. The dreamer must be a doer. Melissa Wiginton of the Fund for Theological Education describes the first paradox this way: “In this strange and difficult time the Church needs leaders who are superior in both efficiency and the mysteries of the hidden life” (*Who Should Be Our Pastors?* January 8, 2003, <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/wiginton.html>). To be a prophet one must engage in practices that are deeply internal and personal, while at the same time engaging externally with pastoral colleagues who are engaged in the same quest.

Priest

To be a priest to the body is to stand in the gap between what is and what ought to be, to bear all the pain of that place yet cast a hopeful vision of what shall surely someday be. To be a priest is to know in the depths of one’s being both truths of Revelation 12:12: “Woe to you earth and sea. The devil has come down in great wrath because he knows his time is short.”

To be a priest in the Church of postmodernity requires something new and something old. First the new: to stand in the gap means knowing where you are. Today, that requires an understanding that the worldview shaped by the Enlightenment project has failed. Whether or not one studies quantum physics and its implications for humanity, whether or not one has probed postmodern philosophy, one who would serve as priest understands that people come from different places with different perspectives that must be honored rather than

subsumed under one interpretative framework. The priest understands that the fundamental unit of reality is not the individual or the isolated particle but the web, the field, the relationship, and that human beings are connected by a relational web.

While this web of human relationships is imbued with great beauty, allowing us to effect great good in the world, it also has its negative side. As Walter Wink has pointed out, the “powers and principalities” come from within that same web of human relationships, from the collectivities where our lives are joined for God’s good purposes. While those collectivities are created good, they can also fall into a spirit that wreaks havoc. To be a priest in the Church of tomorrow, the pastoral leader must stand in the gap between what is and what ought to be, fully aware of the dynamics at work.

Standing in the gap, the priest also requires something old: the capacity to hear the groan of God in creation. In a sermon published in Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry, the incomparable Fred Craddock tells the story of a brilliant seminary student who could offer up the most exquisite Greek translations with ease but who had little insight or understanding into what those words were trying to convey. Once, Craddock asked the student what he thought of a particularly difficult passage in Romans 9, which the student had translated as “I could almost wish myself to be lost if it would save them.”

“It’s not professional to get that close to people,” the student replied. “Pretty soon their problems are your problems. You should keep your distance from people.”

“For a moment,” concludes Craddock, “I almost envied him. I don’t know if he went into ministry as a professional and is still doing it as a professional. But I felt heavy about it, because if he did he would miss that almost unbearable joy of almost hearing, every once in a while, the groan of God and trying with all your art and craft to do something about it” (Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry, Ed. by Ann M. Svennungsen and Melissa Wiginton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

Something there is in our age that wants a professionalism full of perks, rather than full of caring. The New York Times recently published an article entitled “The Falling Down Professions” about the toll on professionals exacted by the contemporary combination of expectation and demands: “Unquestionably, many doctors and lawyers still find the higher calling of their profession — helping people — as well as the prestige and money, worth the hard work. And the stars in either field are still that: commanding the handsome compensation and social cachet. But to others, the daily trudge serves as a constant reminder that the entrepreneur’s autonomy simply can’t be found in law or medicine” – or ministry (January 6, 2008).

Here is what we seek in a priest: one who comprehends what is at stake in the spiritual warfare that is our reality, is passionate about the work, and has a

characteristic that Jackson Carroll from Pulpit & Pew calls 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” (The Earnest Cadman Colwell Lecture at The Claremont School of Theology, September 12, 2002, p. 1).

This is the second paradox: the Church needs leaders who are soft enough to enter into the pain and tough enough to take it. It is nigh onto impossible for a pastoral leader who lives and moves and has her or his being in isolation to be simultaneously so soft and so tough. The gift of resilience is best developed in the company of caring colleagues.

King/Queen?: Leader of God’s Reign Realized

Clearly, the role of today’s pastoral leader is neither “king” nor “queen,” at least not in the way the world understands those terms in our struggle with monarchical language and gender categorization. Instead, Gabe Fackre’s description of the work of Christ traditionally understood as King: “The continuing work of reconciliation in this world is one in which Christ saves from evil and death and brings wholeness to the fractures of this world” (The Christian Story, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978, p. 142).

The person called to serve the Body of Christ is a leader who galvanizes the body to engage the work of the Kingdom, the reign of God realized. Therefore,

the pastoral leader is not a lone hero or heroine who makes all the decisions and makes everything happen. Theologically, the Church is a body, and, therefore, its ministry is a communal project. Practically, the leader acting alone cannot accomplish anywhere near what God's people can when their gifts are joined together and multiplied.

From this simple truth flow two implications concerning the nature of the called. First, the pastoral leader's primary goal is not to achieve "greatness" or "success" in ministry skills or to "make a name" but to build the body and empower the people for ministry. Second, the spirit of true pastoral leadership is collegial rather than "Lone Ranger."

As Jackson Carroll has noted, a major shift has taken place over the past generation or so, from a pastor-centered model of ministry to an ecclesial model that understands ministry to be the calling of the whole people of God. While the pastoral leader performs the same duties as before, i.e, preaching, leading worship, pastoral care and so forth, he or she now does so for the dramatically different aim of building up the Body of Christ, "teaching and empowering lay members to claim and use their spiritual gifts as part of a ministering community" (The Colwell Lecture, pp. 10-11).

Whether the paradigm is clerical or ecclesial, pastoral leadership requires the building of a relational web with persons outside the context of our ministry.

Pastors inherently exist within a web of human relationships, Barbara Brown Taylor contends. Parishioners, Taylor says, will watch everything a pastor does, whether it's running a meeting, holding a baby, driving a car or biting one's fingernails.

“They will do this because you are their parson — their representative person — who stands on the tipsy edge between God and God's people, having promised to be true to them both.” Taylor writes. “People will watch you to see what a life of faith really looks like. They will watch you because they want to see Jesus, or at least one of Jesus' best friends” (Awakened to a Calling: Reflections on the Vocation of Ministry, p. 52).

How ironic that the leader at the center of the body, the one placed at the heart of a web of relationships, may be without friends. In the hard work of building community, the pastoral leader can be lonely, indeed “some of the loneliest people in church,” as William Willimon has said.

In that space of loneliness lie the dangers of burnout and misconduct. They are the reason why so many religious organizations, including the Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches USA and the various other Lilly Sustaining Pastoral Excellence projects nationwide, are working to change clergy habits, helping us to stop “going it alone” and instead develop and nourish collegial relationships and take part in covenant support groups.

This is what we seek in leaders of God's reign realized: persons with an intention to build up the Body of Christ so that it may engage the work of the kingdom and strive toward the reign of God realized and a commitment to a body of friends whom one encourages and by whom one is encouraged. Here is the third paradox: the Church needs leaders who are complete enough to give away the glory of being the one and only hero or heroine at the center of it all, yet empty enough to need true friendship.

Collegial covenant group participation proves key to sustaining pastoral excellence through friendship. In turn, certain elements prove key to sustaining the life of a collegial covenant group. Analysis of these elements from the report of a site visit to the Mavericks in the Rochester area in New York State indicates how they function within the formation and functioning of groups.

Covenant The covenant developed by the participants themselves at the initiation of the collegial covenant group shows knowledge of group dynamics and interpersonal relations. The members adhere to the covenant, honoring their commitments. The covenant even provides for honorable separation from the group by outlining an appropriate closure process. The group included in its covenant a commitment that if any individual wanted to withdraw from the process, he/she would "make his/her intention known to the group and be present with the group at the next meeting to have closure." Only one person

has elected to resign from this group, and that person kept the commitment for a proper closure. Covenant is revisited periodically as a reminder of its requirements and as an opportunity for revision.

Facilitator The group facilitator is knowledgeable and qualified for his role as participant-facilitator. His extensive experience as a leadership coach brings the correct expertise to the focused topic, always a particular dynamic of excellence in pastoral leadership. The leadership coach identifies his role with the group as participant-facilitator and has been with the group throughout its first three years. The emphasis on his coaching for this current program year is to assist the members in pursuit of their goal to go deeper into learning about their own leadership styles and how to improve them so they can bring a “well rounded style” to the aim of bringing out the maximum in their respective congregations.

Convenor The convenor may be the facilitator or a peer member of the group. The role of this person is essential in the healthy functioning of the group. She or he is generally the person who initiated the proposal to form a group, extended invitations and made application for the grant. During the life of the group that individual is the glue to communicate with group members as well as with the project office. This person often embodies the soul of the group and is absolutely essential to its ongoing life. According to the convener of the Mavericks, the members have become very close and have gone deeper with their spiritual lives as they have matured as a group. She describes their journey together as a

process in which they “never look back,” only moving forward to a “greater spiritual direction in a process where people come together to assist one another in ongoing awareness of God in all life.”

Other necessary components were described by the Mavericks. When assessing best practices for Together in Ministry groups, members described mechanisms for accountability as important. Another key to the success of the group is the courage to bring in an outsider to “hold our feet to the fire.” Still another factor is the ability of group members to put themselves on the line; for example, the decision to go deeper into understanding of leadership styles by learning how family of origin issues impact ministry required ownership from the entire group. The group norm of working toward consensus on direction and activities was emphasized. Finally, creating a safe climate where one can be vulnerable was seen as a major factor of success.

What has not worked as well as anticipated:

First, the initial project assumption was that congregations would so value the work of their pastoral leaders in collegial covenant groups that they would support them financially. Unfortunately, in too many instances participation has been retained as a secret from congregations, sometimes as a cherished personal blessing perceived as possibly spoiled by sharing, often in the fear that lay leaders would not authorize the use of time let alone provide funding.

Pastoral leaders who participate in collegial covenant groups indicate the intention for their groups to continue even beyond the current grant funding. Use of personal funds and sponsorship of fund raisers are mentioned as ways to continue supporting the services of facilitators. Lay leaders who are supportive of participation by their pastoral leaders indicate that the congregations would no doubt offer financial assistance. The general sentiment of lay leaders who are aware of their pastoral leaders' participation in collegial covenant groups is that they want their churches to be viable with good leadership and they perceive the connection of group participation with that goal. One lay leader commented: "We can send clergy to conferences and seminars, but involvement in these groups is important. Participation in this kind of process can help prevent problems."

While ninety-seven percent of covenant group participants intend to continue in covenant groups without TIM funds, in 2006 only sixteen percent of the groups foresaw congregational funding as a source of the minimal funding required for sustainability. The fact that only sixteen percent anticipated congregational funding as a means of sustainability arises from a deeper reality, that the goals of pastoral excellence and the well-lived pastoral life require stronger mutuality among pastoral and lay leaders of congregations.

Second, Together in Ministry was originally based on the following premises: that individual pastoral leaders would taste and see the goodness of the Lord through the development of holy friendships where God becomes incarnate in their

covenant groups; that they would commit to models of relational ministry and evangelize for the practice through telling their stories; and that constituent Ministers Councils functioning as local guilds of professionals would be shaped around covenantal ministry and would bear that model into the future as belonging to them. They have done so remarkably, yet evaluation results from 2006, the project's penultimate year of original Sustaining Pastoral Excellence funding, revealed that while seventy-nine percent of groups perceived their constituent Ministers Councils as committed to the ideal of collegial covenant groups, only sixty-two percent believed that their constituent Ministers Councils were mobilized to sustain the practice by extending it to future participants.

Together in Ministry has changed in response to ongoing evaluation:

First, one means of working to enhance pastor-people relationships developed by Together in Ministry is a model for covenant group formation that includes both pastoral and lay leaders, focused specifically on Christian Practices. Through two year-long projects funded by Valparaiso *Practicing Our Faith* grants on the faith practices of honoring the body and testimony, the Valley Forge Ministers Council, comprised of both ordained and lay leaders who serve in various capacities in denominational staff positions, has experienced the potential for communal growth in Christ. Covenant groups that are communities of practice dedicated specifically to Christian Practices encourage a fruitful means for clergy-lay relational development through abiding in Christ and each other.

Second, sustainability requires more deeply embedding the covenant group ethos in constituent Councils, both motivating them and equipping them to persevere in formation of groups while simultaneously fostering congregational commitment to funding them. Capacity building of constituent Ministers Councils will strengthen those local professional associations or guild-like networks as bearers of the covenant group ethos beyond current participants.