



Current Thoughts

From Dwight's Corner

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Effective Leadership

Some have asked that I might more widely share my thoughts which were presented to the Women in Ministry dinner during the GRR Annual Meeting in Champaign. Good and bad, here are the things I see:

The culture of meanness.

Some have called it “incivility.” It affects how we function with one another in church, and affects church-pastor relationships. This is one of the ways we have been influenced by our culture. Certainly, this is one way in which we should be countercultural. This means ministerial leaders often work in a hostile environment. That takes a serious personal toll which means self-care cannot be neglected. It also means that ministerial leaders must deliberately practice and model what the New Testament means by a hospitable community that does not place individual rights, power, or economic gain at the top of its value list.

Latent anti-clericalism.

Sometimes our enthusiasm for “lay” ministry degenerates into anti-clericalism. Pastoral leadership is often misunderstood. Pastors are blamed for every fault and misstep of the church. At the other extreme, pastoral leadership is often dismissed as irrelevant. Even some of our own number make the mistaken claim that “our job is to work ourselves out of a job.” Further, the church is misunderstood. It is a story I tell so often that it becomes tiresome, but it is true. One lay leader told me: “The church is supposed to be a haven of rest for its members.” And, “the pastor’s job, is to make us happy.” This means that pastors must constantly teach (and practice) what church really is all about, and about the depth and breadth of “team” ministry, and about the expectations, and limits, of pastoral leadership.

Congregational structures that are ineffective and inefficient.

Usually, our structures are modeled on the American political and business experiment, not Scripture. The dominant structures built on mistrust, and tend to view the pastor as “hired hand.” They are not visionary, and often these structures incarnate values that are contrary to the New Testament. This is a difficult area, nearly as explosive as worship, but ministerial leaders would do well to help their church explore ways of organizing that empower vision and actually enable and encourage ministry.

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Failed discipleship.

This is as much a confession as anything. I have written before how most congregational educational systems do not produce disciples. Some years I baptized 20-25 persons. Yet, I mostly failed to produce disciples. This hurts to confess, because it is the fundamental commission that was given to us by Christ. The over-reliance on Sunday School is a major contributor. (Yes, I know this is hyperbole—but that is a preacher’s prerogative.) The New Testament model of disciple-making (not “soul-hunting”) seems to involve long-term, deliberate, mentoring. Many ministerial leaders are ill-equipped to do this, and most church structures do not contribute to it.

Dangerous financial practices.

We resist teaching financial stewardship, and in particular, tithing. Yet, our resistance results in a watered-down discipleship. We cannot teach the whole truth of discipleship without talking about stewardship in all its ramifications. We deny our potential disciples the full joy of living in Christ if we have not revealed to them the spiritual discipline of stewardship. Stewardship is part and parcel of moral living.

We ignore the reality of the “\$100,000 Threshold.” Somewhere, thereabouts, is the minimum gross income for a congregation to support a full-time minister, have effective programming, take reasonable care of a facility, and demonstrate a commitment to world-wide missions. When our pastoral leadership allows the giving to fall below this threshold, we are jeopardizing the ministry of our successor and the long-term health of the congregation. It is malpractice! Experience shows that congregations will “cheat” on salary and/or benefits to keep costs down. Or they will start down the slippery slope of reduced mission giving. Both are dangerous paths which almost never result in healthy congregations.

We seem oblivious to dangerous financial practices. Churches (and pastors) are not above the law. By legislation (not the Constitution) we belong in a special category when it comes to taxes and hiring practices. Violation of either can result in the loss of that privilege. Like any nonprofit, we may be required to give a financial accounting to anyone not just a member. Further, the law is clear about what is and what is not income for clergy. For example, just calling it a “gift” to the pastor does not mean it is not taxable income. Housing “gifts” must be reported as income, and interest-free “loans” are illegal. Good, generous intentions will not keep you out of jail.

Poor self-care.


Clergy depression is wide-spread. It has a negative impact on our effectiveness, as well as our spiritual lives and personal well-being. Ministerial leaders must be more deliberate about their own Spiritual lives, their own physical well-being, their own mental health. In addition, this continually shifting context for ministry demands that ministerial leaders be diligent about continuing education. We need to have a reading plan, and to participate in conferences and workshops that expand and sharpen our skills. If we

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have not gained new tools and insights for ministry in the last five years, then we are just as bound to the sin of status quo that we accuse our churches of committing.

This is not intended to be a guilt trip. Ministerial leadership is a great privilege. Mark 5:35-43 tells a marvelous story of healing behind closed doors. The beautiful part is that Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to be with him in that room when Jairus' daughter was healed. That is an important part of ministerial leadership. We are privileged to be invited into the room when Jesus does something special. It is not our doing, it is Jesus. It is not our "right" to be there, we have been invited.



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