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Tools for Supporting the Pastor as Stewardship Leader

Winter can be the loneliest time of year for the parish pastor. Christmas and Easter have their own frantic rhythms. And summer provides its unique forms of escape. But it's in the winter that melancholia strikes again as the annual realization dawns that many congregations are budget driven, bottom line oriented components of large religious bureaucracies. The pastoral urge must often be sublimated to the demands of the season's administrative agenda. And that's depressing.

How to encourage the practice of good stewardship within that climate and how to provide an environment of support for the pastor as steward and theologian is a major challenge for denominational executives who themselves face inordinate pressures to meet the ultimatum of the bottom line. "All we need to make this year's budget is to come up with a thousand tithers."

It's All About Community

Good stewardship is all about community. For the parish pastor, that declaration of grace means that she or he is not alone but is rather the leading participant (the participant who leads) within the gathered body of Christ in responding to the gift of life. A sense of community is essential for life.

Thus, providing basic pastoral care in a congregational setting is as much a part of an effective stewardship program as are those parish and denominational activities whose primary focus is fund raising. Quality in preaching and teaching, coupled with skills in visiting, listening, and counseling are attributes of the steward who leads.

And denominations ought to support and encourage those kinds of educational events and workshops that strengthen the competence, skills, and confidence of stewards who desire to lead. Being current in theology, sociology, economics, history, literature, and film is as important for stewardship as are the techniques for seeking major gifts and increasing congregational giving.

Excellence in preparing stewards who lead derives from the gospel and the gathered community. The purpose of that leadership is to support, uplift, and affirm the communities in which we live. This kind of ministry is not an accounting function, but a function of the proclamation of the gospel that frees the believer from the auditing character of sin and the law.

Assessing the Needs

Despite Plato, and the inscription from the temple at Delphi, it's not enough to "know thyself". It is equally important to be sensitive to the nuances of the community in which one lives and serves and to be open to the opportunities for "...random acts of kindness and senseless beauty." ¹

In Robert Wuthnow's sensitive study of volunteers and charity, *Acts of Compassion*,² he describes the enduring symbol of the compassionate human being as that of the Good Samaritan. "The Good Samaritan is the legendary figure who helps someone else along the road. The story is one of those ancient myths that embodies the deepest meaning in our culture."³

The Good Samaritan is the exemplary biblical image of a Good Steward. The steward who leads is the steward who is thoroughly prepared, and whose primary focus is openness to the human needs of the community as these needs present themselves, often in a random fashion. It is stewardship that is not calculating but natural.

Adequate preparation for the stewardship role is a matter of education, not programming. It is a style of life and not a technique of management. It is learning whose nucleus is mind opening and mind expanding. One cannot teach compassion. But one can educate persons to be open to the compassionate moment as it appears.

Acquiring the Tools

In spite of the negative images about bureaucracies in our society, bureaucratic organizations – including church bureaucracies – are not intrinsically evil. Rather, such forms of organizing human beings are logical and essential in modern times.

Bureaucracies, however, have innate characteristics that are in tension with the needs of human community. They tend to suppress and diminish innovation and spontaneity. Inevitably as they grow, they have a propensity for creating distance from the constituency. These characteristics of all bureaucracies are at odds with the organizational style of the community of believers whom pastors are called to serve.

Ordination is a function of the church bureaucracy, and with that function comes pressure for loyalty to the system. The pastoral call is a function of the congregation, and with that call comes a requirement for loyalty to the calling community. These bipolar demands foster in the pastor a stress that is endemic to the ministerial profession.

The essential tool for living within the strain of this professional existence is to learn the denominational bureaucracy so well that it can be worked and used for the needs of other people. This is what the sociologist and theologian Peter Berger calls "sociological Machiavellianism",⁴ which is learning to use the system for the needs of others and not for the needs of one's self. This places stewardship in its ethical perspective as a response to God's action that is rooted in community and not just another program of the bureaucratic system.

Denominational systems will continue to produce programs with measurable goals and consequent mandates to succeed. Such programs will usually be technique oriented and, in many cases, they may even provide a convenient framework upon which the creative pastor will build and adapt.

Educating clergy for that kind of resourceful stewardship leadership in building and adapting is the continuing challenge for denominational executives.

Notes

1. Attributed to Anne Herbert, a Californian, who is reported to have coined the phrase in 1983.
2. Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
3. *Ibid.*, pp 160-161.
4. Berger, Peter L., *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1962, 151ff

Richard Husfloen passed away in September 2003. At the time of his death, he served as President of Augustana University College in Camrose, Alberta. Richard was an active participant in Ecumenical Stewardship Centre (ESC) with a focus on the teaching of stewardship within the theological colleges of Canada and the United States. This article first appeared in the Journal of Stewardship, a publication of the (ESC). For stewardship resources, please visit the ESC website at www.stewardshipresources.org.

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