

# *A View of the Pastoral Office*

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**T**HERE is much confusion today among the laity and clergy alike concerning the work of the minister. This confusion is due to several factors such as the conflicting views of the ministry in the minds of the pastor and people, changing roles in the ministry which unsettle the more traditional pastoral routines, hierarchical intransigence which tends to discourage creativity, and a lack of clear understanding concerning the minister's work and the authority by which he carries out his various tasks. The resulting confusion accounts for an "identity crisis" in the ministry which gives rise to acute mental stress for the minister and no small amount of bewilderment among the lay leadership of a church.

It may help us in dealing with this problem to give some thought to the pastoral office and how it is conceived and executed in a local church. Although there are new patterns of ministry emerging today in response to new fields of mission, we direct our attention here to the more conventional or "parochial" aspects of the pastoral ministry since this is still the predominant type of ministry for which men and women are trained and to which most of their energies are directed.

In order to clarify understanding concerning the work of a pastor, it is necessary to focus attention on two things: first, the nature of the pastoral office itself and secondly, the purpose of the church as it relates to the character of a specific parish.

## **I.**

The work of the pastor of a church is part of a shared ministry which grows out of the fact that he and the

people are called to be the Church of Jesus Christ. For that reason his work is that of one who is responsible in specific ways for the direction and administration of a local church. At the same time his work is both a reflection of and a pattern for the work of the whole congregation. His office gives the pastor charge over certain duties in order that the life of the church may be continued and strengthened, its program structured, and its mission in the world carried forward. The pastor is given clearly defined authority to direct the work of the local church in common witness with the people who have come into this particular community of faith, hope, and love.

When a person is ordained to the ministry in the Methodist Church he is commissioned to do two things: to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Holy Sacraments in the congregation (*Discipline*, 1964, p. 605). At his ordination, in the presence of the faithful gathered, and after prayers for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the "apostolic authority" of the Church is conferred by the imposition of the hands of the Bishop and other ordained elders, and the minister is thus "set aside" to do these two things. As traditionally understood, the minister is ordained to be a preacher and a priest; as direct corollaries of these he is also the leader of public worship and a pastor. Preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments are both indispensable elements of Christian worship. And it is inconceivable that anyone could either preach or administer the Sacraments adequately or meaningfully without knowing his sheep and without the sheep knowing their shepherd (see Mark 6:34 and John 10:14).

In addition to these primary responsibilities, however, there are others which have accrued to the office of the pastor

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through the centuries. In Methodism, for example, there are listed 28 duties of the pastor (*Discipline*, 1964, pp. 155 ff.). After his ordained functions they include the instruction of candidates for membership in the Church, organizing and maintaining the church school, preparing youth for Christian marriage, explaining and interpreting the programs of the denomination with reference to benevolences and missions, keeping adequate membership records, and making reports to the Quarterly and Annual Conferences on the state of the local church.

Because the "job description" of the Pastor is so varied it is necessary to interpret his work so that there is an understanding as to how his time is spent, in order that he himself may be able to put his efforts to the wisest possible use. As I consider my own work, commitments of time are made in the following order, from the greatest to the least: (1) preparation for and conducting public worship, preaching, and administering the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion; (2) pastoral visitation of the sick and elderly, house to house calling, visiting newcomers, and pastoral counseling; (3) oversight of the affairs and activities of the church, meetings with boards and commissions and committees; (4) teaching, study groups, Confirmation classes, preparation for marriage; (5) responsibilities in and beyond the community, e.g., clergy associations, United Fund agencies, civil rights and political activities, etc.; (6) denominational responsibilities. This time assessment is based, of course, on an over-all view of the work whereas the time given each of these may vary in the course of a particular day or week.

In his well-known study of the American church and the roles of the minister, Richard Niebuhr speaks of the "pastoral director" of a parish and provides us with a helpful description of the work of the present-day minister:

In his work the pastoral director car-

ries on all the traditional functions of the ministry—preaching, leading the worshipping community, administering the sacraments, caring for souls, presiding over the church. But as the preacher and priest organized these traditional functions in special ways so does the pastoral director. His first function is that of building or "edifying" the church; he is concerned in everything that he does to bring into being a people of God who as a Church will serve the purpose of the Church in the local community and the world. Preaching does not become less important for him than it was for the preacher but its aim is somewhat different. It is now pastoral preaching directed toward the instruction, the persuasion, the counseling of persons who are to become members of the body of Christ and who are carrying on the mission of the Church. It is therefore at its best more inclusively Biblical rather than evangelical only; it is directed indeed to sinful men who need to be reconciled to God but also to men who need in all things to grow up into mature manhood in the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ and who are to interpret to others the meaning of Christian faith. Leading the "royal priesthood" of the whole Church in worship becomes more important for this pastoral director than it had been for the preacher; this worship is not simply the accompaniment of the preaching of the gospel but the effort of the Church to demonstrate its love of God, whose love of man is being proclaimed in the gospel. The activity of the Church as a priesthood making intercession for all men, offering thanks and praise on behalf of all, now requires the minister's devoted leadership in a particular way. The activity on behalf of individuals is for this pastoral director not only a matter of pastoral rule or of the pastoral cure of souls, though it will include both, but it best designated as pastoral counseling, a counseling that has them in mind as needing reconciliation to God but also to men, yet knows that reconciliation is not automatically productive of wisdom. It is a counseling, moreover, that calls into service the aid of many other men and agencies able to help a person in need, and, very frequently, it is a counseling of counselors. So also as teacher, the pastoral director becomes the teacher of teachers, the head of all educational organization which he cannot simply manage but must lead

as a competent Christian educator. These and other less central activities of the ministry of all periods are carried on by the pastoral director, but the work that lays the greatest claim to his time and thought is the care of a church, the administration of a community that is directed toward the whole purpose of the Church, namely, the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor; for the Church is becoming the minister and its "minister" is its servant, directing it in its service.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's book was written in the mid fifties and for that reason does not reflect more recently emerging shapes of the ministry. If we may agree, however, that the central purpose of the Church is the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor, then the newer patterns of ministry and mission in the Church are implicit in what he says. Taking his position we would find no reason to apologize for clerical involvement in activities related to the civil rights movement, the concern for world peace, the war on poverty, or the reform and renewal of the Church itself. Nor would the minister, taking Niebuhr's position, be able to avoid laying these and other concerns on the minds and hearts of his people.

The very fact that a church needs a Pastor indicates that there is much more to the nature and work of the Church than either the office or the person of the minister. When the author of I Peter writes "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own," he was speaking directly to all of those who count themselves members of the Church, in his day and in ours. And when the Apostle Paul wrote his letters using the image of the body, he was expressing an organic or unified functional view of the Church. Just as the body has many different members which perform unique functions, yet are joined together to func-

tion as a body, "so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5). That we are **one** body as pastor and people indicates the way in which we should function as a church with commissions, committees, Woman's Society, MYF's, choirs, and so on. That we are one body in **Christ** indicates **whose** work we are doing and in large measure how we are to go about doing it.

## II.

We see, then, that the work of the minister is an integral part of the work of the whole Church. For that reason we must focus attention on the purpose of the Church itself. One reason that ministers and churches find themselves in difficulty is that they do not take the time and effort necessary to clarify and to understand the essential nature of the Church and the ways in which they are related to it and thereby to one another.

It must be apparent to most of us that the Church today is undergoing severe stresses and strains. In some places it is suppressed and persecuted; in other places it struggles against conditions of poverty, ignorance and superstition; in still other places it proclaims the Word (Way, Truth, Life) in the midst of a social order which packages life's meaning in parcels of prosperity and abundance. It would be difficult to say where the struggle of the church is the most trying or where the problems of being a Christian are the most difficult. We do know that Jesus himself foresaw persecution and suffering and struggle for his followers. He regarded this as cause for rejoicing rather than despair (Matthew 5:11, 12).

If the Church is indeed the body of Christ, and if as members of his body we are together a "royal priesthood," and if the task of the Church is to increase among men the love of God and neighbor (see Mark 12:28-34), then our existence as Christians in the Church must be seen in this light. This per-

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 82-83.

spective helps us put everything in its place and give it due emphasis. It enables us to evaluate our duties as individuals and as groups within the Church. Applying these criteria to everything we do as a church (and what other criteria are there if these are not valid?) will require us to put down certain things we have been fond of doing and pick up other things we hadn't thought of doing. The Christmas Bazaar may give way to volunteer service in a mental health clinic; driving students to a tutorial program for culturally deprived children may take the place of a rummage sale; the laymen's retreat may shift emphasis from inspirational to vocational purposes giving men an opportunity to discuss seriously the problems and opportunities of Christian witness in secular professions. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Discipleship is costly and rewarding at the same time.

At its meeting in Pittsburgh in 1964 the General Conference put forth its Quadrennial Program 1964-68. Under the title "One Witness in One World" it suggested a four-year period of self-study in the local church. Each congregation is being asked to engage in an analysis and evaluation of its witness and mission in the light of its Christian vocation. Hopefully, local churches will continue to scrutinize their work without being told to do so by the General Conference, but at least the admonition of our highest policy making body may tend to spur action in this direction. In the course of such study questions like these arise:

1. To what extent does our church exhibit the Lordship of Jesus Christ in its worship, its organizational life, and in its community involvements?
2. What steps are we taking to promote Christian unity?
3. In what ways can the witness of

our church, through the pastor and people, be improved?

4. What is our church doing to further the large mission of the church in the world?

Our answers to questions like these must be more than attempts to find a little evidence here and there of our faithfulness. Even asking such questions shows that we have indeed "followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts."

The real hope of the church is that it is not under our management alone, but under the continual guidance and renewing power of the Holy Spirit, "the Lord and giver of life." I have a good friend—an Episcopal priest—who insists that one can tell when entering a church, even though there are no people present, whether or not there is any genuine worship and prayer going on in the life of that parish. If there is real worship in the church on the corner of Main and Elm, and if our prayers give common expression to our attitudes of devotion and praise, thanksgiving and confession, supplication and intercession, and if we are responsive to the movements and directions of the Spirit in our own time, then we shall see our churches as vital centers of concern and responsibility.

### III.

Every local church is a mission station in the world whether it is here or in Korea or Africa or Latin America. As such our churches must exhibit basic characteristics of Christian concern and responsibility.

In the first place, every church is a community of faith in which we worship God, hear the Scriptures read and interpreted, receive the sacraments, and come together in sundry ways to pray, study, work and plan. If worship is central, then whatever else we do, whether tending to the more temporal affairs of the church or considering some aspect of our purpose or admonishing and instructing one another, will

be done under the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I think it is a serious error, for example, that so many new church buildings are begun with the church school in mind as the first or most important consideration. Christian worship is the primary dimension of Christian education, and by worship I mean the common liturgical action of the entire congregation. Children from first grade on up gain much more from participation in the worship of the Church than we sometimes realize. Far too often, however, the actions of worship and study in a church on Sunday morning exist side by side, as it were, without vital intercourse between the two. This condition debilitates the life of the church in the present and is one of its most serious liabilities for the future. If worship is in fact the heart of church life, and if all aspects of Christian life and witness flow from this vital center, then we ought to build our churches accordingly.

Secondly, if the local church is to be a center of concern and responsibility, then it must be a community of hope. Christian hope is not exhausted by our schemes and plans for the future. It is based on God's own creation and creativity, his faithfulness "to our fathers in distress," his present and active relation to us through Jesus Christ, and his promise that he will not leave us or forsake us. Our hope now and in the future is that spoken by the prophet: Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name,  
you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters  
I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall  
not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall  
not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
(Isaiah 43:1-3)

This must be a community of faith, hope, and love if the church is to be a vital center of concern and responsibility. Christian love is distinctive. Its

pattern and style are found in the Christ. "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). His love stands between, above and beyond us and the people and the things we love. In our church, the cross rises up from the altar and to a height which makes it appear as if it carries the weight of the whole structure, and it stands between the worshipper and his view of the world from which he has come and into which he must return. It is a vivid reminder not only of the **kind** of love, but also **how** that love exists in relationships between the Christian believer and his world.

As a church, and as individual members, we strive to be responsive to the will of God, even as we pray "thy will be done on earth." Karl Barth has suggested that on the basis of the will of God, "we have to think of **every human being**, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption."<sup>2</sup> Even though this statement does not spell out precisely the ways in which we relate to others, it does provide a foundation or "cornerstone" for our relationships inside and outside the church. Every local church contains elements of bitterness and senseless hostility and division because we have not put ourselves under the control of this kind of love. Furthermore, our fears and hatreds of others "out there" often rule our conduct to a far greater extent than does the love of Christ.

#### IV.

May I summarize what has been said about the work of the Pastor and the purpose of the church itself by paraphrasing what someone else has said about the same problem. Jesus Christ does not give special gifts only to the men and women who are full-time employees of the church. All the people

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 53.

of God share Christ's ministry in and to the world. The work on the front lines belongs especially to the laymen, the front-line soldiers, who spend most of their waking hours at those stations in the world where the battles of faith are fought—in the factory and office and at home; in schools, in political forums and community affairs; at social gatherings and in places of recreation. The pastor has a particular responsibility to nourish, equip, teach, help and

sustain the laity for their ministry in the world.<sup>3</sup>

If clergy and laity alike would deepen their understanding of the "theological" nature of the Church, and intensify their understanding through personal witness, then much of our confusion of roles and the resulting problems and conflicts could be more readily clarified and resolved.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Ruedi-Weber, *Salty Christians* (New York: Seabury Press, 1965), p. 33.

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