

FIVE MOST PRESSING NEEDS OF PASTORS

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Fort Wayne, Indiana
December 2010

In my 38 years in full-time parish pastoral ministry (1971-2009) God saw fit to provide me with various opportunities to be involved in the lifelong process of pastoral formation. I served on the LCMS Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support for nine years (2001-2010) and as one of the original facilitators (1999-2001) in the PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support) initiative of the LCMS, working in a collegial support group with six pastors in their first three years of ministry. I served as a mentor pastor in the Pastoral Leadership Institute from 2001-2009. Over the years I had the opportunity to supervise ten vicars and two DCE interns. While in Fort Wayne, I supervised about 30 seminarians doing their field education during their first two years at the seminary.

At the request and direction of President Dean Wenthe of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, from February through April 2010 I had in-depth interactions – in person, on the telephone, and by email – with 55 persons (30 parish pastors, 14 district presidents, and 11 other persons with special knowledge and insight into the health and well-being of pastors). I asked the question, “What are the most pressing needs of LCMS pastors?” Five needs emerged as the highest priorities.

THE FIVE MOST PRESSING NEEDS OF PASTORS:

1. Safe places and people with whom a pastor can be transparent, express problems and needs, and find help and encouragement to carry on

Pastors need to know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness and illness, but strength and health. Pastors frequently feel isolated, inadequate, and insecure. We encourage others to ask for help, and often we are the ones to give it, but we are reluctant to ask for help ourselves. There is sometimes a critical and competitive spirit between and among pastors that makes it difficult to ask a brother pastor for help with personal problems and needs. Circuit counselors may or may not have the confidence of pastors in the circuit. District presidents acknowledge that they cannot provide a completely safe place from the pastor’s perspective, since they are supervisors of the pastor’s life and doctrine -- a fact that does not always promote transparency in communication of problems and needs.

Districts have ministerial health committees; therapists may be available through the district president; the Concordia Health Plan includes disability coverage and the Employee Assistance Program, all of which are good and helpful. But there is still a missing component in the synodical system: a true “pastor to the pastor.” Where there are no safe places and people for the pastor to go for help, he may develop a pattern of rationalization, making excuses, blaming, denial, and even deception – thus doing great harm to himself, his marriage, his family, his ministry, and those he serves. When pastors are able and willing to ask for help before a problem degenerates into a crisis, the lives of many are helped, blessed, and saved.

2. A faithful, disciplined personal life of prayer and devotion

You cannot give what you do not have. You can “run on fumes” for only so long before you come to a dead stop. Pastors can become so busy searching the Scriptures for their next sermon or Bible class that they do not have time to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to His teaching, simply for the sake of the relationship with Him, without any other agenda or task to be accomplished. Prayer life can become rushed and superficial until it becomes nearly nonexistent. In such a situation, there is a clear and present danger of spiritual burnout, when the pastor simply has nothing left.

There is the (perhaps greater) danger of worldly and carnal success, when the pastor is operating in the power of the flesh, not the strength of the Spirit, and things seem to be going well, but God is neither glorified nor pleased. In between lies the danger of the pastor’s own faith being in a consistently weakened condition, unable to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of ministry. On the other hand, when the pastor is taking care of his own faith and his personal relationship with the Lord, there is a resilience, a calmness, even a buoyancy to his ministry that cannot have its source in anyone but Christ.

3. Learning to lead by team-building, equipping, and mobilizing

“If you want a job done right, do it yourself!” This motto, while it may possess some truth, also contains the seeds of workaholicism, loneliness, and diminishing ministry. Many pastors equate working hard with working alone. Either because of the need to prove themselves worthy of their call (and salary), or because of a lack of trust of others, they try to do the work of ministry pretty much on their own, asking the people to watch and pray (if that) while they wrestle with the demons and demands that are always present in pastoral ministry. Such an attitude and approach contradict the clear wisdom and counsel of Scripture and the pattern of ministry of our Lord Himself. Jesus taught His disciples so that they could go and make disciples. On the mountain in Galilee when Jesus met the disciples after His resurrection, He did NOT say, “Since all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me, I will go and make disciples, and you will watch me work!”

When the pastor believes (sincerely and with good motives, to be sure) that the work of ministry rests squarely and exclusively on his shoulders, he unintentionally limits the amount of ministry to whatever is the maximum that he can do by himself. Team-building, equipping, and mobilizing are necessary not only in the larger, multi-staff congregation, but also in the smaller congregation in which the ministry team may consist of the pastor and various members of the congregation. When the properly equipped people of God are entrusted with the work of God appropriate to their gifts and spiritual maturity (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4), dynamic spiritual energy is released for the work of the Gospel.

4. Help in reaching our postmodern, post-churched culture with the gospel

Many of the people around us not only are apathetic to the work of the church, they actually resent the church and are hostile to those who proclaim the Word of God. They see the church, and pastors in particular, as irrelevant, narrow-minded, greedy, hypocritical, homophobic,

conflicted – and that’s just for starters. When they see us coming, they either put up their guard or run screaming in the opposite direction. It is difficult for pastors who have been prepared and equipped for ministry in the “churched” and “modern” culture to do ministry and mission in such a time as this. Pastors are accustomed to teaching and preaching, and in some cases defending the faith against attack, but we are not so proficient at the invitational style of communication that is most helpful and effective when we are in contact with the children of this world in the 21st century.

This does not mean watering down our preaching and teaching, but it does mean paying attention to interpersonal conversations and relationships in the daily business and commerce of everyday life. Pastors have much wisdom to share, and the great Good News of Christ to proclaim, but if no one is listening, no good is accomplished. We may speak in the tongues of men and angels, but if we are not motivated by love, we sound to the hearers like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. No one likes to listen to that sort of sound for very long. When people sense that we care, that we really have their best interests at heart, that we are willing to listen and clarify before responding, that we are willing to invest ourselves in them and their situation, that we will not stop loving and caring no matter what -- great things can happen, and there is joy in heaven over every lost sinner who repents and is saved.

5. Healthy marriage and family, and healthy balance and boundaries

Pastors’ marriages and families are under attack and assault. That fact is nothing new, but the attacks seem to be coming from a wider array of sources, not the least of which is the revolution in information technology. The children of pastors are subject to a barrage of images and information unimaginable to previous generations. Marriages are under stress as children act out and rebel. Internet addictions and obsessions, including (but not limited to) pornography, can infect and corrupt the heart of the pastor, his wife, and his children. The work of ministry is so wide-ranging and diverse that a pastor could be saying “yes” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and still be nowhere near getting the job done.

We need “knowledge and depth of insight to discern what is best” (Philippians 1), to decide what really matters and to focus our best efforts and energy on that. As someone has said, we need to schedule our priorities, not prioritize our schedule. Ministry is not ordinarily a choice between good and evil (thank God!) but making daily choices between good, better and best. There are few things more wonderful to behold, and to be, than a pastor who is concentrating his energy and attention on developing and using his best gifts to do his best work in the most important areas of the ministry in which God has placed him. And there are few things in this world that are more lovely and delightful than a pastor’s marriage and family marked by deep respect, authentic joy, and the love that comes as the fruit of the Spirit into a heart and home filled with faith in Christ.