

evening, and to our surprise the evening service took the form of a wedding service for an older couple - and afterwards we were all invited to a simple reception where the food on offer was cake and ice-cream!

Weddings do not have to be expensive. The last wedding I took was for a couple who had been living together for some time and then realized that if they were to be true to their Christian convictions they should get married. They have little money, so they decided to have the quietest of quiet weddings - there were just six of us: the happy couple, two witnesses, one of my lay leaders and myself. After the ceremony we opened a bottle of champagne - then the two witnesses took the happy couple out for a meal. It was a wonderfully moving occasion.

Another couple I married, who had little money, had the church wedding one year, and then a party the following year!

One way of saving money is to hold a reception in a church hall rather than in a dedicated wedding venue. Unfortunately, some church halls are grotty. My dream is to develop an affordable wedding venue here in Chelmsford. It should be possible to get married and then to party in nice surroundings without paying out a fortune.

Weddings should be happy affairs - but they should not cost an arm and a leg. So if churches want to encourage the institution of marriage, then we have to find an alternative way to party.

Primitive Leadership

By Ian Stackhouse

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Pastors are a strange breed. Of all the professions, so called, pastors are perhaps the most ill-disciplined. Many are recovering workaholics. Not a few I know think nothing of working seventy or eighty hours a week. They think nothing of going from one event, such as a funeral, to a counselling session, to a leaders meeting, and finally to preach, all in one afternoon and evening. Many of

the pastors I know - and I dare say others will say the same about me - so live and breathe the church that it soon becomes difficult for them to know where the church stops and their own life begins. Just about all of the men and women with whom I have worked closely over the years have so felt the mood of the church, that their own emotional life can be gauged, pretty much, by whether the church is up or down.

Any other professional will tell you - whether they are a nurse, a doctor, a lawyer, or even a footballer - that this kind of emotional dependency is not good. The golden rule of professionalism, almost by definition, is a measure of emotional detachment. Emotion must always be the servant of reason. 'Whether it's the way you conduct yourself in meetings, on the phone, or over email,' notes the 99% tip, 'a well-composed tone is a key component in the way others will perceive you. This is critical in situations involving potential and existing clients, collaborators, partners and financiers; your livelihood and business depend on it.'

Professionalism,' it goes on to say, 'becomes difficult in work fuelled by passion because passion is an emotion. Emotion generates energy, but it also impairs judgment.'¹⁰⁷ In which case, and according to which criterion, most of us pastors are decidedly unprofessional. However, the more I have reflected on my experience of working with those who tie their emotions so closely to the church, the more I have come to see that although it may not be a professional way of carrying on, it is at least biblical - apostolic even.

When Paul, for instance, describes his sadness about having to leave the church at Thessalonica, and his subsequent desire to see them again, his is not the cool composed language of the professional minister, but the raw passion of a lover, desperate to see his beloved. It is not enough for him to say that he longs to see them. It is more like a raw, primal craving. For as much as he was at once a gentle mother and an encouraging father to these raw fledging converts, he now sees himself as an orphan, cut off from his parents, and trying, again and again, to get back to them. Listen to how Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message: "Do you have any idea how very homesick we became for you, dear friends?"

¹⁰⁷ <http://the99percent.com/tips/5679/checkpoints-professionalism>

Even though it hadn't been that long and it was only our bodies that were separated from you, not our hearts, we tried our very best to get back to see you. You can't imagine how much we missed you! I, Paul, tried over and over to get back, but Satan stymied us each time.¹⁰⁸

If this love for the Christian community at Thessalonica seems to be at the expense of his compatriots in the synagogue, whom he speaks of in less than loving, almost anti-semitic, tones, even this is really only the flip side of the coin, since in Rom 9.2, lamenting their rejection of the crucified Messiah, he wishes that he was accursed, cut off, for the sake of his own countrymen - a verse which, incidentally, provoked the comment from one of Fred Craddock's students who was studying the text: how unprofessional!

Of course it is unprofessional, because the heart of leadership is not composed rationality, balanced arguments or clever oratory, but, like the gospel we proclaim, raw, womb-like love.¹⁰⁹ The images Paul uses for ministry rise above the dead metaphors of middle-management, with all their guarantees of control, and promote instead the surprisingly visceral images of a woman in labour, with all the implications of vulnerability.¹¹⁰ Contrary to so many popular perceptions of Paul the misogynist, the bigot, the perverter of the simple gospel, we see Paul, like Jesus, plundering these feminine images time and again, and by so doing leaving us with the overwhelming conclusion that leadership has little to do with professional clarity, and everything to do with passion - both for God and for his people.¹¹¹ A doctor may be able to do his work dispassionately, but for a minister of Christ it is sackable offence. When it comes to ministerial credentials, the thing that matters for Paul is not the all important letter of recommendation, so prized by the super-apostles of his day, with its attestation of rhetorical skill and strategic acumen. As far as Paul is concerned

¹⁰⁸ 1 Thess 3:17-18; *The Message*.

¹⁰⁹ D. Hansen, *The Power of Loving Your Church*, Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998, 67-81

¹¹⁰ See B. R. Gaventa, *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians*, John Knox, Louisville 1998), 31-34.

¹¹¹ See V. Herrick & Ivan Mann, *Jesus Wept: Reflections on Vulnerability in Leadership* (DLT, London 1998) 103-116, for a discussion on the limits of professionalism as related to pastoral care.

those things are boastful, and as worthless as a can of beans. Rather, the thing that matters for Paul - in fact the only thing that validates what he is doing - is the existence and sustenance of an actual letter, namely the church, containing the names and faces of all those who have been made alive in Christ. Not exactly sensational, for sure, but the only thing, nonetheless that bears witness to the power of the gospel. As Richard Neuhaus puts it: “if we have anything to hang on our walls, it is not our diplomas, but a simple crucifix. Because this is all we have to say for ourselves.”

112

Christian Conferences

That we don't go this way, and plump instead for the bright lights of celebrity Christianity and big name conferences is because this is so much the air that we breathe. That so many Christian leaders opt for church growth strategies and managerial models of leadership instead of immersing themselves in the life of their congregation is because it is easier to love a programme than it is to love people. At least programmes can't hurt you. Even so, whatever the reasons, and however much we might sympathize, it is vanity all the same: a theology of glory, to use Luther's phrase, and not the theology of the cross, because it seeks to root our identity in criteria that we can measure, in models of success, rather than the passion that must always accompany pastoral leadership of a community.

By no means does a commitment to this way of passion excuse unprofessional conduct, any more than it excuses pastoral inefficiency. We ought to expect high standards among those who are called to minister in Christ's name. But if we make professionalism the heart of what we do, and the source of what we pride ourselves on, it is likely we will miss a great deal of what God intended for us when we committed to follow Christ in the church and in the world. After all, Jesus crossed boundaries all the time. The incident with the woman at the well in John 4 breaks all the rules of professional conduct. As Herrick and Mann point out, the miracle of resurrection in John 11 is driven not by abstract notions of power and authority, but by friendship. Why Jesus wept is because that is what we do when we love. Therefore, when we also love, when we sit down at a well to listen to a woman's story,

¹¹² R. Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1979) 65.

or when we weep with the mourners at the graveside of an old man whom we have just buried, we are not violating the norms of professional conduct, nor are we an embarrassment to the denomination that ordained us. Instead we are subverting those norms, fulfilling what lies at the very heart of ordination, which is the willingness to risk all on the mercies of God.

At a time when ministerial formation in our seminaries and in our denominations is increasingly driven by the dictates of academic, managerial and professional conduct, my own conviction is that great courage as well as a sense of urgency is now needed to recover this kind of ministry for the church. The church requires leaders who spurn the latest technique for church growth in preference for a fascination with people; leaders who know about issues of health and safety, of course, but who are more interested in the actual communities for whom those policies were intended; and above all, leaders who are less bothered about vision statements and more taken up with ministry. As Viv Thomas reminds us, “vision from God does not come in neat packages. Confusion and emotion are acceptable parts of the human condition.”¹¹³ When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, contrary to what our vision gurus might suppose, he did not know immediately what to do. Clarity was not second nature to him. Instead, he wandered among the ruins. But it is precisely in this wandering and praying, weeping and wresting, ageing and failing, that real vision forms.

In this sense, we must insist, that a large part of leadership formation, both ordained and lay leadership, is thrashed out in the exigencies of the church rather than the artificial world of conferences. As Eugene Peterson says about conferences to his fictitious friend Gunner, who as a new Christian had started to go to some of these things: “high in fat, low in protein.”¹¹⁴ Barring a few exceptions, where serious reflection takes place on the practice of ministry and the mission of the church, most conferences perpetuate the lie that there is some key out there which will substitute for long term faithfulness. I increasingly see the world of conferencing like a simulated world, which in the end does more

¹¹³ V. Thomas, *Future Leader: Spirituality, Mentors, Context and Style for Leaders of the Future* (Paternoster, Carlisle 1999) 24.

¹¹⁴ E. Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1998) 33.

harm than good, for all the while that we are being thrown about - like those simulated airplanes - in the comfy chair of our conference seat, our parishes are crashing. Essential pastoral work gets neglected for what is called leadership development, when the best leadership development, as any other century apart from ours will testify, is done in the backyard of one's own parish.

My conviction is that we ought to call a moratorium on conferences, or at least be more circumspect in our selection of them, and learn instead the lessons that can only be learnt from working at the coal face. Otherwise, a bit like the way the nursing profession has developed its training in the last couple of decades, there is every danger that our pastors emerge from the world of Project Christianity knowing everything about management, but unable to give even a basic pastoral injection. We must insist that those who are called to shepherd the flock make those calls to the hospital; turn up at the nursing home; seek out those who have been away from the church for months. For it is there, among our parishioners, that our sermons recover their immediacy. Too many sermons are derived from a combination of internet searches and preacher illustration books. For a sermon to really live, and for it to have legitimacy among the congregation, it must eschew these cheap means of grace, and emerge instead from the grittiness of text, Spirit and pastoral realities. At least then it will be honest. By virtue of the sheer earthiness of the language of scripture, and the sheer messiness of lives, the language we then employ will at least be stripped clean of the platitudes that so often attaches to conference style Christianity, and come forth as raw, gutsy and gospel.

Conference Christianity trades in ultimacy. Like some versions of Christian counselling, it propagates the myth of the land of 'perpetual holiday.' Given the right techniques and dynamic leadership, this world - which is, oddly, always just over the horizon - can become a reality. Primitive leadership, on the other hand, rejects this anodyne world, preferring to do its work between the intersection of the old world and the new, which is where our congregations live.

Future Leader

That such a form of leadership might emerge in our churches is largely dependent on the kind of theology they inhabit. Churches

get the leaders they deserve. A church that seeks to be on the success curve, disdainful of the tension that is found in Paul for instance, will inevitably root around for a leader that is likewise uncomplicated: a rancher rather than a pastor, to use the current terminology. A church that wants to engage in gospel ministry, on the other hand, will wait for a leader who is suspicious of these grandiose plans, preferring instead to follow the often unpredictable and unscheduled ways of the Spirit.

The contrast is not either/or, of course. The pastoral instinct to shepherd a flock and the evangelistic impulse to gather a harvest of souls ought not to be mutually exclusive. Jesus was able to allow both metaphors of ministry to sit alongside each other. At the same time as Paul expressed a love for all the churches, he was actively engaged in the proclaiming the gospel all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum. Just because we want to see the gospel grow numerically does not mean we have sold out to Madison Avenue. But neither must we disdain, as so often happens when the church thrusts out evangelistically, or prophetically, the routine pastoral life of the church as somehow second best, less than radical. Once we strip away the effete, somewhat dainty images of the pastoral setting, defamiliarising ourselves of the lambs gamboling over the lush green hills, we discover that pastoral ministry is about as prophetic as it gets. In the messiness and the smell of the sheep pen, which is the world that real shepherds inhabit, the kind of situations pastors get caught up in, and the kind of judgments they are called upon to make, on a daily basis, have the potential to revolutionise the world. It's just that we don't recognise it as such.

In comparison to the bright lights of the conference platform, the primitive and intensely personal world of the shepherd seems obsolete. Alongside the new apostolic leaders, with their hectic schedules, the institutional life of the pastor cuts a very sorry figure indeed. But it is just here, in the routine maintenance of life, that the mission of God often finds its greatest growth. Counselling a woman through the issues of an abortion may not sound dynamic, any more than listening to someone come out about their sexual orientation. Often these conversations take place one to one, can be very exhausting, and rarely yield easy answers. But we do them nonetheless because, as Stanley Hauerwas points out, these pastoral conversations, which pastors

engage in on a routine basis, are nothing less than the building blocks of a new kingdom.¹¹⁵ Drawing alongside a young adolescent and listening to the particulars of their broken life may not be time-effective, nor contribute to successful youth work, but as Andrew Root points out, is congruent with the incarnate Christ, and hope for the future.

Youth work he goes on to say, is not about influencing young people for Jesus. That way lies manipulation, because more often than not it is predicated on the need of the church to have a thriving youth department. The heart of youth work is found in the midst of those long-term pastoral relationships, where even if it becomes clear that there is no obvious or immediate solution to whatever problem there is, it matters not, since there is something about the person themselves, the uniqueness of their life, that merits our time and attentiveness. Ministry is not so much about the 'how', but about the 'who': "about the person of Christ who meets the persons of the world as the incarnate, crucified and resurrected One."¹¹⁶ Short of this, all that ministry amounts to is nothing more than Christian behaviouralism, wrapped up as program participation or camp registration. And when young people fail respond to that, as so often they do, what happens, argues Root, is that the church feels justified in its neglect of a great many adolescents. He continues, "it may well be that the reason they don't trust our offer of friendship is that they intuitively know that we are not willing to see, hear and accompany them in their deepest suffering. We have offered them trips to Disneyland, silly games and 'cool' youth rooms, not companionship in their darkest nights, their scariest of hells."¹¹⁷

To use a phrase coined by James Olthius, we might describe this kind of incarnational ministry as "withing".¹¹⁸ In contrast to the

¹¹⁵ S. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between*, Grand Rapids: Brazos, 1998, 149-167

¹¹⁶ A. Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*, (IVP, Downers Grove 2007) 101. Root has problems with platitudinous Christianity. Youth work, he argues, is replete with phrases like "Take it to God," or "Just keep praying". In effect such comments are often used to avoid sharing in the pain and suffering of an adolescent's situation.

¹¹⁷ Root, 96

¹¹⁸ See J. Olthius, *The Beautiful Risk*, (Zondrvan, Grand Rapids 2001).

clinical, often impersonal, designations of counselor/counselee, with all the attendant pressures of fixing lives, or in contrast to the managerial models of ministry, where people exist for the sake of the vision, Christian ministry is the simple thing of “withing”: an immersion into the messiness of life. To minister in Christ’s name is to abandon the pristine world of success-driven suburbia, and instead to discern the contours of grace in the most unlikely people; it is to jettison the controlled, and often cliché-ridden world of performance-related work, and instead to take risks; and finally, lest ministry is reduced to nothing more than a series of truisms, ministering in Christ’s name is to relinquish the need for recognition, and embrace instead the obscurity of the cross. For even Christ, as Paul says, did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited, but made himself nothing.¹¹⁹ Rejecting the lure of relevance, power and sensationalism, he charted the way of prayer, trust and obedience.¹²⁰ It is counter-intuitive, to be sure. It sounds like resignation. Like the cross itself, it appears to be a mess. But what Easter Sunday confirms, in surprising and unexpected ways, is that this is the way of God.

Reliability in Ministry

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Reliability - the word

‘To rely’ on or upon means to depend upon with confidence, to trust or to count on, often on the basis of past experience. You need to prove your reliability. The word comes from Latin *re-ligare*, to bind or tie together and so hold fast and thus to be safe.

It may be that I find that the 6.34am train is always on time. My trust may grow if the experience continues to be good and the 6.34 continues to get me in on the dot each day, or it may be dented if something goes wrong and the 6.34 is cancelled. If I rely on the

¹¹⁹ Phil 2:5-11.

¹²⁰ H. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (DLT, London 1989).