

## 15. Sustaining the Pastoral Life

*Earl F. Palmer*

### Getting Ready

When I graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, the call that began my ordained ministry as a Presbyterian pastor was that of minister to students at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. I served in that ministry with high school and university students for eight years. Afterwards, I served as solo pastor in an expatriate English-language church in the Philippines, the Union Church of Manila. After six years in Manila, I was called to serve as senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, California, where I stayed for twenty-one years. In 1991, University Presbyterian Church in Seattle called me again, this time to my current position as senior pastor.

I begin this essay by reflecting on two things. The first centers on what Princeton Seminary gave me that helped me most to get ready, and actually to make it, in ministry. The second pertains to what it was that I discovered about ministry, which happened by being in the congregation of real people in a real place as their pastor.

My Princeton list begins with the friendships I made during three years as a student, friendships which continue to this day. I was in a support/prayer group during my Princeton years with fellow students. We were also involved in ministry opportunities together, primarily with Princeton University students. These friends were a source of encouragement for me and together we provided a healthy “check and balance” for each other, an arrangement that made us interpersonally responsible. As most of us left seminary to respond to our pastoral calling and one went on for advanced

schooling, we did not move on as loners. I think this atmosphere of interpersonal accountability was a stabilizing safety net for me. It also set up in me an expectation that I would always need to be in such a group.

I also owe to Princeton Seminary what happened intellectually and spiritually within me. Princeton provided me a mind-expanding theological framework from which ministry could happen. I was a young Christian when I arrived at seminary, and the whole world of theological study took me in and opened me up. I discovered intellectual mentors, both in person and in books, who would have a permanent impact on my outlook and my vision. I discovered Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C. S. Lewis. Each one became my guide toward biblical faith. Each pointed me to Jesus Christ as the faithful and grand center, as Lord and as friend. Added to this, I had the chance to watch the gospel make sense in practical experiences I had with students in the Princeton University small groups I was associated with. I left Princeton Seminary with confidence in the relevance of the gospel of Christ.

I learned strategy there, too. Those small groups of university students in weekly Bible study groups that I was a part of taught me how to be patient and to wait it out for those who begin as skeptics but over time experience their own journey toward faith. I discovered that the gospel of Christ would authenticate itself if given time. This made a very big difference for me when I started out as a youth pastor in Seattle. Also, I learned specific skills. Particularly useful were two speech classes I took, which I believe were so effective because my instructors chose to work with each individual student's natural speaking style, rather than try to impress a diverse group of speakers into a single mold. I was also deeply impacted by the thoughtful models of ministry and preaching that I saw in several of the great professors, particularly John A. Mackay, the president, and George Hendry, who taught theology.

All of these inputs, when added together, gave to me a beginner's confidence in the validity of the Christian message. In addition, two summer internships at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, where I had attended church as an undergraduate, gave me a sense of optimism about the church as an institution. I was not unaware of some of the problems of the Christian fellowship as an institution planted in a place with an address, but as I entered the profession of ministry I had not been burned by the church as institution; and for that optimism at the beginning I have always been grateful. I expected good things to happen, and they did

## Keeping the Rhythm

Of course, I had much still to learn when I left seminary and entered the parish. I remember the senior class dinner at Princeton Seminary the year I graduated. The speaker was George Buttrick, who at that time was pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He challenged our class, and its future pastors, in two ways. First, he urged us to be *with* our people, to be listeners in the marketplace in order to understand *where* people are and *what* they are thinking and feeling. His second word of counsel seemed to contradict the first: “When you are at Coney Island, don’t tell the people of the concessions on the boardwalk, about which they know. Tell them of the mystery of the sea, about which they do not know.” He went on: “Don’t read only what your people are reading . . . read what your people are not reading.”

Throughout my career, I have tried to follow Buttrick’s advice, and three concerns have come forward as a practical result of that attempt: (1) How is it possible to find time to read about the mystery of the sea when I have so many urgent responsibilities among the concessions? (2) When I have found the time, what should I read as a pastor in today’s world? (3) How do I remember what I read?

Most pastors have been given what I call the *gift of time*; that is, the privilege of organizing time with more flexibility than those in most other professions. As each of us knows, however, this gift of time has its own snares, particularly for those who are not self-starters, or who allow the hours of the week to confuse themselves into a random jumble of low-quality segments. This means that the first challenge that confronts the pastor who wants to study and read seriously is to have a clear system of weekly time management. I have found that for my own life the key to having quality time for my family, for spiritual formation, for reading, for ministry to people, for writing, and for recreation is to have a life rhythm. This means that I primarily think of time in terms of a week rather than in terms of a year, month, or day. It’s no mistake, it seems to me, that the seven-day week is the biblical yardstick for measuring life in the Ten Commandments. My goal is to divide each week into a rhythm of work, rest, worship, and play. Accordingly, I work with people, but I also work alone. I worship with my faith community, but I also worship by myself. Similarly, I discuss various things with others, but I also spend time reflecting on them alone. A person is able to take in stride a high intensity

of demands if there is also built into life the opportunity for an easing up of demands. I am able to enjoy rest if time allotted to rest follows real work. I am talking about a rhythm that includes fast/slow, many/few, rich/lean, exterior/interior.

I divide my own week into two major parts: I place into the first part Sunday morning through Wednesday evening, the large group meetings and worship services, also the counseling, small study group meetings and teaching sessions, and finally the church administration and staff obligations that fall to me. Thursday and Friday are days for private study, reflection, writing and reading. Friday evening through Saturday evening is family recreation time — a time for a total change of pace. My study goal each week is to have completed by Thursday at noon the sermon for the coming Sunday. When this goal is met, it means that Thursday afternoon and Friday are available for long-term study, reading, and writing objectives. I find that if the immediate teaching-preaching preparation is not completed by Thursday, then that unfinished task tends to threaten and intimidate Friday and Saturday. With this rhythm, my week is more intense at the beginning and eases up toward the end. One's time at both sides of the week is of a better quality, it seems to me, when there is such a rhythm.

## **The Mind Alive**

Having scheduled the time, we come to Buttrick's second question: What shall I read? I believe that the rhythm principle is sound in relation to content as well as to form. I want to read intensively and also extensively, light and heavy, theologically and geologically, and so forth. As a pastor my first intensive reading-research challenge centers on the main book of my life, the Bible. For me this means first of all having effective access to the major translations of the Bible now available. It also means having access to a working library of historical background and technical books.

In order to keep myself intellectually involved in theological dialogue, I have pursued two particular reading goals. First, in regard to major theological writers, I have found that there are two ways into a heavy weight theological book: through the front door or by the window — that is, from the first page onward or through its topical or biblical reference in dex. Both are valid entrances into theological books. Often I find that the window route has coaxed me into reading the whole book. A second way

to keep engaged with current theological discussion is through journals and magazines.

There are several authors with whom I have developed a special sort of friendship; they do not know me, but I know them. I am trying to read all that they have written. These are authors with whom I especially resonate, and it is my goal to have in my own library a complete collection of their works. These writers have become permanent friends. They are not masters of my mind, because I may not always agree with all they write; they are more like guides and companions who especially challenge me and who continue to encourage my own pilgrimage as a Christian. I feel that I understand how they think and how they approach the serious questions. I not only read these writers; I reread them.

We come now to Buttrick's final question: How am I to keep track of what I read and remember what needs to be remembered? The answer to this question begins with a way in which a pastor sees the study-reading task of ministry. Is the pastor a collector, an assembler of the conclusions of others, or is the pastor a researcher-scholar whose goal is making a creative contribution? I believe the second model is harder, but far more rewarding. All of my reading is a vital part of the total research task that goes into writing a sermon or a special teaching study. Holding on to my discoveries is vitally important.

My own method is not complicated. I have found that in order to remember what I have read, I must read carefully. Therefore, I read slowly. I take notes in my daily journal or on a separate review page, or make coded marks on the margins of the book. When I have found an unusually impressive book, I offer a small group seminar or discussion on the book. This is another way to study a significant book creatively, as well as to see it through the eyes of other people.

When it comes right down to it, a book is itself a friend, and it is best remembered when we have a sense of respect for it. When I quote from authors in a sermon, my own approach is to quote few but long — that is, to make use of only a few quotations in a given sermon, but to show respect for whatever is quoted. This means allowing the quotation to speak from its own setting; it means reading enough of the quotation that the author is really heard, and not simply used to focus upon what I am saying. This approach involves more work for the preacher homiletically in establishing the context for the quotation, but it also has the benefit of encouraging listeners to want to read that author for themselves. I have made for myself

two rules for using quotations: I do not quote from a book I have not read, and I do not quote from a typed card. I either quote from memory or read from the book itself, present and visible. In this way the book is honored, and also, I believe, endorsed to the listeners. It seems to me an insult to a great book like *The Brothers Karamazov* to read selections from its great and moving chapters, now impertinently removed to utilitarian index cards. Such a great book deserves respect, not exploitation.

As pastors in the Christian church, we stand in a long and good tradition of learning and of concern for truth. Books have their unique part to play in this lifelong obedience to truth, to which every Christian is committed. I am aware that electronic media, TV, and films play an increasingly influential part in communication within the human family, but I still maintain that when it comes to the image-building of that greatest of all collectors of dreams and ideas — the human mind — there is still nothing to match a book read aloud, and especially to a child. Listen to how C. S. Lewis describes Jill's encounter with the lion Aslan: “. . . the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way.”<sup>1</sup> No TV or film version of the *Chronicles of Narnia* will be able to capture or highlight the vast features of that golden lion quite so wonderfully as the human imagination itself set in motion by the words of a book. *The Book* and *books* make it possible for us to describe the mystery of the sea.

Of course, different pastors will have their own lists of favorite writers and of books that have made a difference in their intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage. My own list would look something like this, and I offer it in hopes that it may offer some of my readers some suggestions for truly enriching reading:

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. This work conveys the sheer excitement of a Christian mind alive to the relevance of Jesus Christ.
- John Calvin, *Institutes*. Calvin's impressive grasp of the large outline of the gospel's meaning makes his works exciting.
- Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*. These are as fresh and electric today as in the sixteenth century.
- Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. I deeply appreciate Barth's bold-

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 16.

ness and his serious intention to really hear and obey the biblical text. He is the theologian's theologian.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer called out to me to decide once and for all about what matters the most in my life.
- C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I owe so much to C. S. Lewis, especially his wonderful mixture of surprise and the goodness of God.
- G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. I love Chesterton's humor and ability to stir up my own imagination.
- J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*. How can anyone miss out on the journey of Frodo and Sam?
- Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began*. I learned about preaching from Thielicke.
- Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Boris Pasternak, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Victor Hugo. These writers have stirred me emotionally and spiritually more than all other novelists.
- T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost. These poets have given me a deep respect for words and imagery.
- Mark Twain, Pat McManus, Robert Benchley. They have given me their rich humor and insight into personality.
- Paul Tournier. He demonstrates psychological wisdom and evenhandedness.
- I think the three greatest novels I have ever read would be Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.
- The most helpful book about the Christian faith for me has been Karl Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*.
- The most persuasive case for the Christian life has been C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*.

## People in Power: Making the Church Happen

“Are you a pastor?” “No, I’m just a layman.”

From time to time in my ministerial career I have heard exchanges such as this, and I think it is time to think about what is going through our minds when we say, “I’m a pastor” or “I’m just a layman.” The word “laity”

itself comes from the ancient Greek *laos*, which simply means “people,” and therefore it includes us all. All Christians are a part of the people of God, the *laos* of God. Some of us are specially ordained for teaching and pastoral tasks, but most of the *laos* will make the work of the church happen as teachers, servers, and leaders — as the volunteers who make the fellowship of Christ’s people real and definite.

Lay volunteers, the ones we typically mean when we use the word “laity” or “layperson,” make the church happen. They feed youth groups. They free the church financially to carry on ministry. They make up committees that hire and fire church workers and set policy goals for the congregation. They teach Sunday school classes, lead home Bible studies, and reach out to neighborhoods to share the gospel. They grow in personal faith. They love and encourage the ordained workers and pastors. And they worship Christ and give his church its concrete public expression in the world.

Of course, the *laos* of God also grow tired, sometimes slow down, occasionally panic, and even wear out. Even so, in spite of all of the challenges in ministry, the laity is just as much the church of Jesus Christ as are the pastors and paid staff. The laity is the group who volunteers their time and gifts to the ministry of Christ in the world. In fact, most of those who make up the Christian advance team throughout the world are lay volunteers, the people of God in ministry.

Tom Gillespie, former president of Princeton Theological Seminary, said at a meeting I attended recently, “Every institution has a spirit about it.” The question for pastors, then, is this: Where do we find that “spirit” of a fellowship group or church? The spirit of a church, I believe, is more accurately seen among its volunteers than in the pages of its fund drive’s full-color brochure. In fact, what happens in the lives of the lay Christian member of a fellowship is a more accurate measure of the character of a congregation or fellowship group than any other combination of spiritual life indicators. It is the bottom line.

Take a work crew at a Young Life camp. They work together through several weeks in the summer. The campers come and are involved in a one-week program designed for them. Nevertheless, what happens to the camp’s work crew may be of more crucial, long-term significance for the total strategy of the kingdom of God than what happens with the campers. Why? The campers, like churchgoers, may experience the “spirit of the institution,” but the work crew is the labor force which, by its discipleship



and attitudes, shapes that spirit. If this is accurate, then we who mobilize lay volunteers need to think carefully about how to encourage these folks so that they don't burn out. In this regard, I believe that four principles apply equally to the professional Christian servant and the lay volunteer, and so I will end this essay by describing these principles, what I call "realistic expectations," "the tyranny of tiny strings," "beware of power," and "a serious and happy task."

### *Realistic Expectations*

In the Book of Acts, the church is first described as those repentant believers who received God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ and then were united in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. Note that this definition does not exclude or excuse any members of the church from these three criteria. We are all *inadequate* individuals who repent and receive grace. We are all being *taught* so that we may grow in the content of the gospel. And we all need *fellowship* with one another.

The essential truth here is that we are either volunteers or special "apostles" (that is, "ones sent out") *not* because of our adequacy on a leadership flowchart, but because of grace. This is not to downgrade the need to develop our talents, but, talents notwithstanding, we have all become Christians by grace. Thus, the most that anyone can expect from those of us in church work is *trust* in Christ, *growth* in Christ, and *fellowship* with Christ and with other people.

Many of us, laypeople as well as pastors, suffer because we create for ourselves unhelpful expectations. We embrace an idealistic myth of what a leader is supposed to be, and then we hold ourselves up to it. And while such myths are impressive and inspiring on paper, they are usually devoid of realism and grace. For that reason, we should test every occasion in our Christian community where volunteers are involved to see if these three criteria are being met: trust in Christ, growth in faith, and fellowship with Christ's people.

I once spent a week at Laity Lodge in Texas, a Christian ministry sponsored by the H. E. Butt Foundation. On the first evening, the director, Howard Hovde, introduced each member of the lodge "family" to those of us who were guests for the week. Everyone was presented, including the maids, student summer workers, dishwashers, volunteers from town, and cook. As he introduced each one, they told about their families, their local

church involvement, and their ministries. Then they conveyed their interest in our week together, and also their hopes that we, like they, would have a growing experience at Laity Lodge. Consequently, that evening we all were bound together by a common gospel objective and a common fellowship. Burnout occurs much less frequently when those New Testament bonds are part of both paid employees' and volunteers' shared experience.

### *The Tyranny of Tiny Strings*

A second principle holds that we each need the authority to move and flex and do what needs to be done without what I call "the tyranny of tiny strings." In 1985 my family and I took a three-week train trip across the Soviet Union. We came away from that experience with the impression that Soviet citizens didn't so much live in fear of the KGB, as many Americans imagined they did, as they lived under the tyranny of a thousand tight strings which managed even the most ordinary day-to-day movement, thereby restraining natural human flexibility, freedom, and initiative. Every decision, whether it had to do with an individual's housing, vacation, or education, had to be decided by a committee or by a workgroup leader. As a result, every move was slowed down by the bureaucratic wet cement of delayed decisions and endless procedures for approval.

Christian fellowships, too, can lose their ability to move decisively and flexibly because of the tight little strings of endless committee processes, needlessly deferred decisions, and "management-by-objective" committees which freeze action in the here and now while we wait for long-range planning surveys to come in. In every living fellowship, both large and small, there must be a creative balance which enables people to understand the larger policy goals and, at the same time, to act decisively and flexibly to meet situations without the hindrance of unnecessary institutional roadblocks.

Most of us know how refreshing it is to meet someone who is able to make a clear and definite decision without the need to check with others. Of course, every fellowship needs checks and balances in policymaking; but the "spirit of the institution" should be one of goodwill, trust, and adventure, so that the experimenters and innovators are not squeezed out but rather liberated to do concrete things under the guidance of the gospel and in the dynamic network of the fellowship. This balance happens in direct proportion to the sense of shared consensus within fellowship

about what is major and what is minor. Such a consensus comes from healthy doctrines experienced in the community of faith by people who care about each other because they have felt God's care. Christian care keeps us mellow enough to roll with the mistakes we inevitably make and yet able to act without unnecessary delay.

### *Beware of Power*

This third principle is a necessary companion to the second. For just as we must shun the tendency to avoid making decisions, so we must, both lay volunteers and Christian professionals alike, guard against the temptation to abuse power — to be the ones who tie those strings on people and programs so that any movement requires our agreement. When we give in to that temptation, we ourselves become the oppressors of initiative and creativity, and those who work with us must either obey us, humor us, or deceive us in order to remain our coworkers. When we become preoccupied with power, our coworkers are eventually used up, one by one. Worse yet, they may resort to various games of deception in order to cope with a leader who has become intoxicated by power.

Notice the two nonproductive results. On the one hand, an abusive leadership style may reap a collection of noncreative, non-risk-taking leader-pleasers who impair a Christian fellowship's ability to meet challenges. On the other hand, overly controlling leaders may find themselves surrounded by dishonest power brokers.

How can we avoid succumbing to this temptation? We must begin with a healthy doctrine of power. In the New Testament authentic power is seen in Christ's concrete victory over sin, the devil, and death; it is the life-giving and redeeming power of Jesus. For us as Christian leaders, therefore, authentic power is not the power we are able to exercise over other people, but rather our confidence in the power of Christ. It is the authority that Christ himself has over all other powers. He is the one who by his death and resurrection has won the victory over the powers of sin and death and the evil one.

The greatest strength that we can ever know is our assurance of the permanent truth of this threefold victory and authority of Jesus Christ. We stand under his authority at all times, and therefore whatever authority is entrusted to us is itself under the constant check and balance of the law and the gospel. Such a confidence is not oppressive toward others. On the

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contrary, it is freeing and contagious. The great continuity of the Christian church throughout history lies not in its institutional discipline nor in its ordained pastoral authority, but rather in the gospel.

### *A Serious and Happy Task*

The fourth and final principle applies to professionals as well as to volunteers. The key to a good ministry experience lies in recognizing that our work is both a serious task because of God's greatness and a happy task because of his companionship with us through his people. It can be enjoyment as much as a task to drive teenagers to a retreat, to wash dishes after the morning prayer breakfast, to tutor a youth who is struggling with math, or to work in a community food distribution program. The joy comes from knowing that we want to be where Christ is — serving his people, even serving strangers in his name. It is that joy of working with other Christians in service to Christ that keeps us refreshed.

Perhaps that's what the ancient psalmist meant when he said, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10).