

WRITING CASES IN LEADERSHIP: AN OCCASION FOR PASTORAL REFLECTION

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Case studies have been a staple of the theological curriculum for over half a century. Books, articles, and institutes provide cases as well as resources for interpreting and teaching with them. Particularly in arts of ministry courses or in programs of supervised ministry, case studies are key elements in the syllabus.¹

The courses in administration and leadership that I have been teaching for over fifteen years have always included case studies. But a few years ago I grew weary of the cases I had at hand. I decided to ask some pastors to write cases fresh from their current experience that I could use in class. The process of generating these cases has greatly enriched my understanding of what reflection on pastoral leadership can be.

A BRIEF WORD ABOUT CONTEXT

My course in church administration and leadership is one of the introductory arts of ministry courses in the M.Div. curriculum. All students are required to take the introductory preaching course; they also must choose at least three introductory courses from six other practice of ministry fields (church and community, administration, education, evangelism, pastoral care, and worship). Typically a little over half of the M.Div. students take administration, which is offered in three sections a year, of which I teach either one or two.

Like other introductory courses, mine surveys the broad range of issues in its field, touching on many topics but

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¹ See the work of the Association for Case Teaching (ACT), for example, through the *Journal for Case Teaching*, the collection of case studies at the library of Yale Divinity School (http://www.yale.edu/divinity/case_teaching), and the institutes for case teaching offered regularly by ACT (now housed in the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University).

lacking time to explore any one in much depth. In my syllabus I place most specific matters of practice in the last forty percent of the course: money, personnel (paid and volunteer), facilities, and legal issues. In the first forty percent I try to establish four basic frameworks for interpreting churches as organizations, exploring the insights and liabilities of each for understanding the dynamics of administration: church or church organization as culture, as relational system, as productivity unit, and as political body.

In the middle twenty percent of the syllabus, I invite the class to consider the term “leadership” and how its meaning and use are shaped by gender, culture, and power relations. We examine the distinct dimensions of leadership that emerge from each of the four frames for understanding churches as organizations. My intention is that students will reach the specific matters of practice that conclude the course with the beginnings of a useable vocabulary and interpretive frameworks for approaching them.

In a typical class I have about twenty-five students, usually about equal numbers of men and women, ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty. One semester I had a majority of African American students, my first experience of teaching a class mainly of persons of a race different from my own, and thankfully I have always had enough African American students in our predominantly white institution to make a critical mass for discussion and interaction. A few Korean and African students also are enrolled in a typical class. While usually more than half of the students are United Methodist (that being my school’s affiliation), the remainder comes from as many as ten different Protestant denominations or independent congregations.

Many students come to class with significant work experience in church organizations, and about a third of them have worked for businesses or corporations. I always have several students who are in management positions while in school, or have recently resigned in order to enter school. While the issues we discuss are fresh to them and to students currently serving as pastors, many other students have yet to experience any form of management responsibility. They have never proposed an agenda, formed a committee, hired anyone, signed an organizational check, or locked up a building.

This diversity of background and experience, combined with the variety of intellectual and academic abilities represented in any classroom, constitutes my teaching challenge. Getting all these people on the same page for discussion, much less for learning, is a daunting task. My pedagogical aim is to help them adopt and use a common vocabulary of analysis and interpretation, most immediately so that they can talk with each other in class, and in the longer term so that they have means for critical and constructive reflection on the organizations they serve.

THE CASE STUDY METHOD

I have always used written case studies to provide situations in which students could try out the terms and approaches of the four organizational frameworks for understanding churches. A written case gives the class a common text that can be used for plenary discussions, small group analysis, or examinations. I have found a few video clips that help raise issues, but the most useable format remains the written text with all its attendant problems of hermeneutics and perspectives.

Since a case study text describes the dynamics of an actual situation, every reader brings to it her or his own imagination based on life experience. No text can provide every detail of a scene (any more than a map has a one-to-one correlation with the terrain it depicts), which leaves even more range for imaginative constructions. One can certainly argue that the resulting diversity of perspectives on a descriptive text is analogous to the diversity of views on any actual life situation and therefore makes a good practice field for learning. Some practical theologians have gone so far as to assert that texts are the most apt analogy for interpreting human subjects and that the same hermeneutic methods can apply to both.² But in my view, a text is never more than a lesser alternative to being there - no written account can quite capture the unfolding dynamic of a situation, how it keeps moving on and will not stand still for analysis.

When I first started teaching, I dug out of my files some

² Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

old copies of church-related case studies that my teachers had used in my seminary classes. These were written in the crisp Harvard Business School style and format. Many were listed in the index of the Case Study Institute, founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1971 in the heady days of discovering and expanding the case study method for non-profit organizations like churches. I found several cases of this type in the now out-of-print text of Doug Lewis's *Resolving Church Conflicts*.³ All these cases were carefully written with attention to whatever details would be necessary for consistency and for useful discussion. They were dramatic, beginning with a main character's knotty question and leaving major issues unresolved at the end. (For the model, see any current issue of *The Harvard Business Review*.)

With continuing use in my classes, though, these "classic" case studies became set pieces for me, too static to capture the complex experience of a situation. While I wouldn't hesitate to use them again (and occasionally do), they seemed too neat. They fit too closely the now much-criticized business school pedagogy in which cases are used to demonstrate management principles. Many scholars of organizations and management argue that this method encourages M.B.A. students to approach situations with rationalized formulas and solutions rather than with attentiveness and intuitive flexibility. No actual organizational situation, they insist, ever just fits a theory or is amenable to a "fix."⁴

For awhile I tried my hand at composing my own cases, based on my ten years as a pastor and much swapping of stories at pastors' meetings. But these began to seem fine fictions; I enjoyed writing them, but could not settle on how much detail to provide, in particular how much I should invent. I admired Scott Cormode's handiwork in creating an entire church and community to explore in a series of "soap

³ G. Douglass Lewis, *Resolving Church Conflicts: A Case Study Approach for Local Congregations* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), included some of the case work by Alice Frazer Evans and Robert A. Evans of ACT; Garth Rosell, *Cases in Theological Education: 1981 Bibliography* (Case Study Institute and Association of Theological Schools, 1981), recorded 300 abstracts of cases written in the late 1970s - many of them useful in teaching administration and leadership.

⁴ For example: "M.B.A. graduates often stop short of getting to a problem's root causes because they define those causes in the same way they were defined in a case study they covered in school." Joyce Doria, Horacio Rozanski, and Ed Cohen, "What Business Needs from Business Schools," *Strategy + Business* 32 (Fall 2003): 39-45.

opera” episodes of the on-line Almond Springs Church, but was not prepared to tackle the issues of character, consistency, and identity that inevitably ensue from an extended case.⁵ I decided to try persuading some pastors to write cases from their current ministries.

WHAT PASTORS BRING TO THE CASE STUDY PROCESS

Over the past three years I have invited nineteen pastors to write case studies for my course. The first year I contacted five United Methodist alumni, four senior pastors from the Atlanta area and one associate pastor from the region. They included two white men, one African American man, one white woman and one African American woman. Their churches ranged from 150 to 6,000 members, and from the inner city to the suburbs to small towns. All accepted and followed through with a written case.

The second year I decided to cast a wider net. I invited five senior pastors of large or growing congregations in Atlanta, none of them alumni or United Methodist. They included two African American men, one African American woman, one white woman, and one white man. Three of the churches had over 5,000 members, and the other two about 1,000 but with a broad public reputation for community ministries. Two pastors, one African American male and one white male, agreed to participate but did not write a case. The other three completed the process.

In the third year I decided to look farther afield geographically, and contacted nine United Methodist pastors (eight of them alumni) from the South Georgia region. Five accepted, three declined, and one did not respond. The five participants included three white male senior pastors, one white male associate, and one white female senior pastor.

Each year I asked the authors to meet with me as a group to get acquainted and oriented to the task. At this first meeting we discussed my pedagogical goals and possible topics on which they would be interested in writing. About two months later we had a second meeting, to which each author brought a draft for discussion and suggestions. The

⁵ The Almond Springs case may be found at <http://www.christianleaders.org>

authors then sent me a final draft, which I edited for clarity and formatting. I arranged for each author to visit my class on the day that a student panel would be discussing his or her case, with time set aside for questions, comments, and reflections by the pastor.

I now have thirteen case studies for use in my class, all drawn from current pastoral experience. Topics range from an associate's dilemma over whether to stay or go during a change of senior pastors, to disputes over use of church property, to knotty personnel problems, to tensions between generational cohorts in a congregation. Students have thrived on working through the cases, and most have carried through with the assigned task of exploring various interpretive frameworks for understanding the issues presented. Many of the student panel presentations have been stimulating, and the discussions with the pastors have often been provocative. I consider the project as a whole a success.

But I have also had many *unanticipated learnings* from the case study process itself. I have been struck, *to begin with*, by *how honored pastors have been to be asked to participate*. Most have been eager, and those who declined were disappointed not to be able to join because of other obligations. There has been an element beyond eagerness, though, a sense of being recognized not for exceptional work but just for being a committed pastor. And the recognition was coming from a theological school, in many pastors' eyes a place of distinctive erudition, reflection, and conversation. It was as though participants were saying, "Out of all the pastors around here, I am being given the opportunity to present a situation from my own work for analysis and discussion."

The "wow" in this was not, again, a feeling of "I'm something special" but a sense of rare and signal opportunity. This has been *a second learning*, really a fresh realization echoing my own pastoral experience, that *occasions for structured communal reflection on pastoral situations and actions come very seldom for most pastors*. Most work alone in their churches or church organizations, without professional peers. Connections with peers come mainly through denominational structures, which feed jealousy and competition as well as mutual support, or from personal friendships. And discussion of many pastoral or

congregational situations with lay members can lead to more problems.

I have been amazed to find that my pastor/author groups have been the occasion for pastors to get acquainted with each other. I don't assume that all pastors know each other. But I was startled to discover that pastors of the same region and denomination are often only names to each other or bios in the conference journal. And I have watched slack-jawed as independent megachurch pastors of regional or national renown who have heard about each other and followed each other's growth in the same metro area met for the first time around our conference table. My fears that this lack of familiarity would breed lack of trust have never panned out. The pastors have been ready and willing to work with each other from the start.

Case study authors seemed to get an incredible rush out of having their situations discussed, certainly in a class of 25 students but more especially in a group of experienced peers. They were usually nervous about reading aloud through their drafts, alert and attentive to comments and discussion about their pastoral actions, and gratified to receive other perspectives on their congregational situations. The authors sat through student presentations that were sometimes too direct for my taste, including blunt comments about a pastor/author's handling of a sexual harassment case or seeming absence from a burgeoning conflict. The authors were good sports; they were also hungry to hear even the most forthright perceptions of their work.

After a particularly good discussion of a case, I found myself asking, if this is so great, why don't pastors do this more often? My working hypothesis - *a third learning* for me - is that they need *a catalyst for breaking away from the daily press of activities* and connecting with each other around a special project. The authority and reputation of a theological school can be one such catalyst, tipping a pastor's choice toward this activity as opposed to another. Writing case studies also has the appeal of being something different, but one still has to choose it from an endless cafeteria line of possibilities for spending one's pastoral time. I have come to think of this less as an issue of how busy a pastor is, since a pastor can always be busy, and more a question of how a

pastor decides to use the time, energies, and possibilities that each day brings.

CASE WRITING AND THE NATURE OF REFLECTION

Fourth, the case study process has called into question common understandings of the nature of pastoral theological reflection. No term is used more often and in more ways in theological education than “reflection.” “Reflection” has been my foremost invitation in discussing the cases, especially in class but in the small groups of authors/pastors as well. I also held a small conference to which I invited all authors as well as a few other pastors and Ph.D. students, at which four cases were on the table for analysis and “reflection.”

I have learned from our process, though, that theological educators (and other educators in professional fields) tend to overstate what reflection is. By opposing it to action, we suggest that the most thoughtful moments occur outside the flow of events or on the periphery of situations. We assume that our classrooms are above the fray, pools of sanity to which we can bring case studies (or verbatims or critical incidents) for calm and considered analysis. Some of us try to shrink this polarity, but given our assumptions, our attempts to reconcile the terms as somehow a single activity through hybrid forms like “action-reflection” or “reflective practitioner” only heighten the tension between them. Such combinations bring to my mind an ellipse with two foci, except the ellipse is a pinball machine with the ball (pastor) ricocheting around the surface bouncing off the pins of action and reflection without being able to linger or connect anywhere.

Written case studies work not because they are reflective in the sense of stepping outside of action, but because they are deliberate. The author writes a narrative remembering what she experienced in the immediacy of a situation. In the act of writing she has to develop a timeline, name and describe events and persons, and put in words the relationships between people, actions, and outcomes. This is itself an action, and it is hard work. I think of the last time I was involved in a fender-bender, trying to tell a cop what happened, the sequence and relationship of events. Some of my pastoral authors struggled with this. They could not settle on what to include, how to order their descriptions, or what

someone who was not there would have to know in order to follow.

I have chosen not to give the authors a format or outline, and have been struck by the fact that none have asked for one. They seem to like the open-ended freedom to develop the case their own way without a standard style sheet. My initial request to them has been to choose a situation that raises issues of administration and leadership in a congregation, however they understand those terms. I have given them verbal suggestions, such as bringing the situation right to the point that continues to raise questions for them as pastors, omitting any resolution or explanation for what transpired (not that situations ever offer a final solution). I have urged them to change names or other details that might reveal the identity of the church or the persons in the situation. I have asked their written permission to use their cases without their names as authors affixed to them. While we put this confidentiality at risk in their coming to class, they have done a thorough enough job of masking that no student (so far) has recognized any situation or person involved.

I have also introduced writing a case as a task of describing a situation as it unfolds. I have told the authors that we have plenty of books that assess the churches and offer sweeping generalizations or typologies. A case is not an aerial view attempting to appraise the whole landscape. It is more a description of what it was like to navigate the roads as they unfolded in front of the author. Our discussion of drafts in the small groups of authors helped most in constructing this kind of narrative. Each author realized more of what he knew about the situation by responding to queries from the group. Writing it out not just for his own pleasure but to explain it to others pushed the author to recall more details and write them more plainly. Some of our most searching discussions focused on why a particular action was remembered or forgotten, or how the sequence of events worked out one way and not another.

Similar author-reader dynamics became apparent in class discussions of the cases. On several occasions the authors responded to questions from the class in what I can only call *inspired discourse*. In the same way athletes talk about going into a “zone” of elevated performance, these pastors would

take off into flights of astonishing insight that I don't think they even knew they had. The students gave them an audience, to be sure, listeners who are also prospective professional peers and thus a ready clay to be molded. But there was more to it than the seasoned pro giving a pep talk to the trainees. I think *the pastors were learning by talking*. They were discovering what they knew by having to explain a situation publicly to a group that was attending to every word.

"You were the founding pastor of your church fifteen years ago," a student asked. "Has the congregation changed as it has grown over the - "

"There have been four stages," the pastor began to reply even before the student's last words were spoken. She went on to lay out a sense of how churches can change from familial to corporate kinds of organizations that was as clear an explanation as I have ever seen in a book.

"But really, pastor, why didn't you just kick the council chair out of office?" the student insisted on knowing about another case. "You said yourself that your denominational book of order gives you that right."

"Because you have to use your judgment," he began immediately. "I may have the power to do something, but I have to make my best judgment about whether to use that power. I have had to learn - and this is not easy for me, friend, I like to get things done and move on - that sometimes it is better not to act."

In both instances, my classroom was quieter than it gets when I say "please take out a blank sheet of paper." These were inspired moments, set up only by a pastor's deliberate effort to say what happened in a situation.

This last pastor's aside marks another reason why such deliberation does not happen more often. Like most professionals, pastors may feel that they have work to do and it's time to move on from whatever the situation was and get to the tasks at hand. The deliberate review of a situation means not moving on just yet. It entails revisiting the awkwardness, ambiguity, incompleteness, or pain of a situation left hanging.

The students had finished their presentation on an especially complicated case in which a female pastor had to

confront a male part-time staff member who was also her protégé. Several male church members had complained of his unwanted sexual innuendoes. Should she handle the confrontation with her protégé as a manager, a care-giver, a mentor, or a friend? The students were definite that a firm managerial approach based on written sexual harassment policies and procedures was the only fitting way to proceed.

When her turn to comment came, the pastor stood and said, "I have to tell you, when I got up this morning, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to come here today. Part of me really did not want to go over this situation again. I've tried and tried to put it behind me and I get tired of thinking about it." She went on to tell us how hard she had worked to bring her protégé along from a tough background, and how much she was personally invested in the many young people she wanted to help. Her pain over the young man's angry departure from her church was unmistakable.

I was sitting in the back of the room struggling with the thought that maybe my request for case studies was itself out of line, perhaps frivolous given the many pastoral situations that I had always dreaded myself. Was I right even to ask a pastor to risk such deliberate examination of her actions? Meanwhile I think the students were rapidly putting aside any cynical assumptions that these pastors were just in cahoots with the professor to make more work for students. We were in the classroom of a school, but something big was at stake here and everyone was listening as if someone's life depended on it.

PERSPECTIVES AND DISCOURSES IN REFLECTION

Our case study writing process has shown "reflection" to be first and foremost the deliberate, disciplined (re)construction of a situation. The process has also provided me three further insights about the nature of reflection. *First*, I have become more certain that *meaningful consideration of a case has to be communal*. Repeatedly I have observed that people realize what they know by talking. Struggling for words, verbally working through the details and links between events in a case, and describing the context, the pastor/authors have discovered and clarified what they know.

Students have been stretched not only by trying on the course's four interpretive frameworks of interpretation but also by explaining their perspectives to others. Given that opportunities for this kind of discussion are so rare, the communal nature of reflection generates unexpected insights and revelations.

But it is hard work, for *secondly, reflection is complex*. Everyone brings to the interpretation of cases an astonishingly diverse mix of discourses, vocabularies, narratives, and metaphors. I have had to learn as instructor and organizer of the process to let it be, to hold back from prioritizing one discourse over another or eliminating a particular vocabulary as "out of bounds." A typical conversation begins with a comment that "all the people in this case need therapy" and proceeds into questions about this church's "market niche," then heats up around arguments over "power relations" with another voice insisting that nothing will change the situation without "repentance." I have taken my role as facilitator to mean encouraging everyone to hear these *varied discourses* and to realize their inherent assumptions and implications without privileging some over others.

I have also been interested to watch other members of the pastor/author groups or the small conference rise up to challenge anyone who laid out definite categories or taxonomies - including theological terms - as if they were the final answer. Most participants have been looking for a vocabulary of interpretation that will not easily reduce to categories. As one pastor stated it, reflection requires us to "fast" from reaching quick solutions that lead to immediate action. Case situations are not susceptible to fixes or formulas, and finding one is not the purpose.

Doesn't this admonition, though, throw us right back into the false dualism of action and reflection - action as simplistic and immediate, reflection as a step away from action toward thought and appraisal? I have learned from our process, *thirdly, that such a dichotomy is not true to life. When we have worked through cases together as groups, we have been acting*. We have been proposing, testing, arguing, resisting, accepting, and striving toward greater depth of understanding. We have had to face the huge test of weighing the commensurability of the very discourses we are using simultaneously in this work.

We all have diverse vocabularies of management, economics, psychology, social theory, and theology. How do they “talk” with each other either in our heads or in our communal effort at expression? This is no more straightforward in small group discussion than in the commotion of a church meeting.

So conversely, our process has affirmed that *action is also reflective, thoughtful, complex, and rich with discourses through which we understand the situations we are in*. We bring to every situation our own dispositions, experiences, vocabularies, and crafts that help us find our way through them. The situations with which we struggle most are the ones that seem to exceed the range of what we bring. How do I cope with situations that call for dispositions or skills I don’t have?

“Reflection” presents the occasion to see more clearly what we do bring, and by talking it out, learning what we know. But reflection cannot mean that we step out of the action to find resources for the situation that are untouched by ambiguity in ready-to-assemble formats for our use. We cannot assume that to reflect means to engage in analysis using terms and ideas with stable meanings affected but not determined by context.

Nor can reflection mean that the reflective pastor makes sense of the situation by uncovering a theological logic already inherent in it. Theologian Kathryn Tanner warns against making “too sharp a distinction” between “theoretical reflection and its material object or between second- and first-order theology.” Reflection itself is a contested social activity much too complex to be reduced to a “consistent whole,” and situations are always susceptible to multiple forces that have different dynamics in every case. The purpose of theological reflection in particular cannot be to project “onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation require - a coherent whole” - which in any case exists only as a hypothesis or proposal to be “formed and tested in community.”⁶

What has been fascinating about the case discussions is exactly the overlapping currents of multiple discourses that people do bring to situations, both as actors within them and

⁶ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 72-79.

as observers trying to understand them. While some participants want to bring order to this confusion of voices, most have thrived on hearing what all of them have to say. Not everyone is comfortable in such theological cocktail parties, but what bubbles up out of the profusion of discourse is often insightful and sometimes show-stopping - especially when the pastors/authors or the students realize what they are learning about the unique character of a congregation and the leadership challenges it presents.

CONGREGATIONS AS ORGANIZATIONS AND PASTORS AS ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

The case discussions have offered us at least one element of consistency and coherence. They have all occasioned reflection on a congregation as a whole. I have been amazed how, without instruction from me beyond a request to describe a situation that raises administrative and leadership issues, most pastors/authors know instinctively that "leadership" means addressing the congregation as a collective, corporate, or communal whole. The task of writing and discussing a case study has provoked insight into the history and development of the culture and contexts that make a congregation characteristically itself.

I am not sure how much pastors already knew about this before they wrote, but in the case process they seem to turn intuitively toward the "big picture" of their congregations. The writing task presents to them an occasion for attempting a kind of holistic grasp - not holistic in the sense of internal consistency, but holistic in the sense of the broadest range of dimensions of an organization. This range embraces not only the most apparent or dominant culture, but also the congregation's sub-cultures of resistance and pools of divisive memory. Understanding the whole means exploring these rifts and breaks, and a group of peers or professionals-in-training may seem an appropriate place to approach this sometimes uncomfortable work.

Students often bring to seminary an assumption that being a pastor is a series of skills or actions called for by particular programs with which they are familiar - worship, education, social service, hospital visitation, and so on. No insight is

more transformative than the realization that a congregation or church organization is a collective whole and that leading it is grounded in knowing the characteristics that make it particularly itself. The four interpretive frameworks provided in my course are ways of seeing that whole, but the cases are the clincher that such a whole exists, complex and elusive as it may be.

How a pastor administers or leads the organization, the cases have taught us, takes form in relationship with this culture. But grasping it more fully requires multiple perspectives and discourses. And since congregational life is always moving on, no single dip in the flow of unfolding situations can ever have a claim on the whole reality. The pastor lives and works in a continuously shape-shifting context of ambiguity.

The recent general literature on leadership of organizations affirms these perspectives on culture and ambiguity, but churches take them to another level.⁷ Churches by nature bear a rich cultural heritage of symbol and story. They are inherently ambiguous in their purposes of Christian witness and service in a changing world. Pastoral leadership does not aim at resolving the ambiguity. The pastor is observer, interpreter, cultivator, and guide in naming and marshaling a church's strengths and resources for addressing the situations it faces in a way that it understands to be faithful.

A brief overview of three of our cases will illustrate how our process of writing and discussion has taught us to reflect on churches as collective and organizational wholes and the resulting implications for pastoral leadership. *Case one* shows the multiple overlapping and often conflicting realities of congregational character and context. An African American pastor is driving toward his church building and passes the church cemetery. He sees a backhoe excavating, and realizes that a burial is underway without any attempt to notify him or the church office. He knows that this is not the first time, and

⁷ For discussion of literature on organizational culture and leadership ambiguity in relation to the churches, see Scott Cormode, "Multi-Layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1:2 (Fall 2002): 69-104. See also the critical review of leadership literature in my "The Discourse of Leadership and the Practice of Administration," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1:1 (Spring 2002): 7-30. *Journal of Religious Leadership* is also available at <http://www.christianleaders.org>.

that it is the work of a white mortician who continues to bury people here in the cemetery of this historically white church that only ten years ago became a predominantly African American congregation. How should his church respond to this aggravation?

The case presents numerous overlapping issues that can be distinguished but not separated. A legal issue of who owns the cemetery and the plots within it, in the absence of any cemetery map or plat, often comes up first in discussion. This connects to an economic issue of whether white families have invested in buying a plot and should be able to use their investment, how much the mortician is making off this business, and what burials are worth to the church. A larger economic class issue lurks in the background as well, since African Americans have moved into this rising middle class suburban area only recently after generations of poverty, while the white families who used to live around here have moved another rung up the class ladder.

But they still want to bury their people here. The cemetery is a symbolic link with the past, a place in the land outside the continuing flow of time and space, in which history is preserved and the presence of the past cannot be disrupted. The social issue it presents is the continuity of a community over time, even as people move their residences to other places.

Connected to all the others is a deep and painful racial issue. The failure of the white mortician and white families to communicate with the church, and the new congregation's lack of knowledge of the people who have gone before in this place scrapes over old wounds. The situation reveals how little people of different ethnicities know and trust each other, even or especially within communities of faith.

Certainly part of the pastoral leadership work in this case is to help the congregation sort through these multiple realities and the conflicts they represent. No one perspective can name everything most important about a church's situation, nor is a single course of action based on a dominant perspective immediately apparent or desirable. Student groups have sometimes pushed for a legal approach, believing that clear title and control of the cemetery will benefit the relatively new African American congregation. But others

argue that all the laws in the world will not help the church fulfill its purpose of reconciliation. Now there's a big theological word, others respond. What does it mean in a suburban region growing so fast that neighbors do not know neighbors? Maybe the most important act, one pastor suggested, is hospitality - creating some forum through which the church could host and make welcome the (white) families who used to live in the community. And hospitality may require leaving space for other issues - even legal ones - to remain unresolved.

Case two exhibits the consequences of "stuck" congregational behavior. A church is now in its fifteenth year of leasing much of the education building to a private school. Over the years the school has taken the liberty of repainting classrooms and hallways, putting up a new sign outside, and even stopping the mail for the holidays - including mail for the congregation. No group has reviewed the lease agreement for years and the pastor knows of very few conversations between school officials and church members. Suddenly the irritation of the school principal's untrained dog running free through the building catalyzes the congregation's resentment. The pastor puts lawyers on the church's board of trustees, who demand a meeting and a lengthy signed contract. The school staff and board, accustomed to being free in the untethered exercise of their idealism about children's self-development based on the arts, are astonished at the new process.

Many issues of organizational character, conduct, and boundaries arise in this case. The reactivity of the congregation is plain. What keeps them in a passive-aggressive position, unable to anticipate and respond to change proactively? Does this behavior express the congregation's sense of failure and loss from watching many of its members, including its most able leaders, leave this urban neighborhood for the suburbs? What has kept the pastor from acting more assertively even after five years here? Who, if anyone, is minding the store, and with what assumptions?

This case invites questions of congregational character. Reflection consists of wrestling with the behavioral and relational dynamics of the two organizations. How can the

pastor nurture and mentor lay leaders toward taking responsibility for the church's building and programs, thus un-sticking the congregation from its reactive posture? Can she encourage them without setting up the school as the "other" against which her church defines its identity?

Case three raises issues of how to belong to a congregation, but in a context of reversed assumptions. Instead of a conservative church reacting against outsiders becoming members and pushing for reform, this church is a bastion of liberal activism that cannot decide what to do with new members who are more conservative about a public political role for the church. When church picketers against the war in Iraq take up positions on the lawn at the major metropolitan intersection near the front door of the sanctuary, newer members are uneasy. They want to know who voted to take such a corporate stand against the war.

Meanwhile, the pastor is juggling diverse hopes and intentions. She is trying to help the new members get involved in congregational life; she wants the long-time liberal activist members to know that she supports their outlook; she hopes to use the pulpit and other roles to articulate a thoughtful Christian position on the war. Her denominational book of order gives her the power to keep anti-war demonstrations out of the worship service. But she has no authority to stop either the protesters or the anti-protest protestors from speaking or acting out in other ways.

In this case issues of congregational traditions are in the forefront. Accustomed symbols, roles, and practices are precious to older members and questionable to the newer. Is the task ahead to promote more effective assimilation of newer members into the established congregational traditions? Or is it to encourage reform in the long-held ways of doing things? Given the congregation's identity within its denomination as a flagship for social action, larger traditions and constituencies also influence the situation. But should the pastor carry the banner for the congregation's role in this larger public, or should she be helping newer members - the congregation's future base of participation and support - find a home here?

All three cases, like most of those generated in the last three years, have been written in a way that invites

consideration of the character and context of the congregation as an organizational whole. Reflection on the cases is the occasion for naming elements of the complex reality of the congregation. The vocabulary we have used in description is diverse and comes from many perspectives - economic, social, psychological, theological, and organizational. The exact fit of each discourse with the others and with the congregation is clarified but not foreclosed. Each language helps inform the intuitions and insights of the pastors and their discussants.

All of the cases or case discussions have encouraged the pastor to get as full a grasp of the congregation as possible before acting. This is not an invitation to passivity or avoidance - after all, action can avoid the crux of a situation just as much as inaction can. Cases cultivate a disposition of structured description and deliberate review of what one knows about a congregation. This is hard, disciplined work. But it produces a richer knowledge that can inform the way the pastor acts within this continuing community of faith.

CONCLUSION

Pastors, our case study process has shown, must have a high tolerance for ambiguity. But they are not adrift. Case writing itself offers them an occasion for deliberate description, for realizing and claiming what they know, for the conscious play of multiple discourses, and for seeing how situations look from the perspective of other observers in the community of discussion. Students get a taste of leadership ambiguity and a chance to grow in trusting their own informed intuitions about how to work in complex situations. The cases relieve everyone of the burden of believing that responsible pastors should just know what to do or should always be prepared to resolve an issue.

Being a pastor is a life, lived in communities of traditions, relationships, practices, and hopes. Cases let others live there in imagination, and in being there, even if vicariously, be companions with the pastor for a while. Such occasions are all too rare. Theological educators can be a catalyst for making them happen.

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