
**FIRST LOVE AND SECOND LOVES:
REVISIONING A PARADIGM OF HOPE FOR PASTORS**

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Abstract: Unrealistic expectations that are placed on pastors often have a detrimental effect on the lives of these leaders. That effect can be exacerbated when pastors also expect responses from congregations that cannot be delivered. Often the pain that is borne by pastors is unprocessed grief resulting from ruptured relationships. The governmental and procedural systems employed by churches may sometimes serve to create life-draining environments for pastors. By embracing a relational paradigm that is grounded in the love of God rather than in the broken love of human beings, there is hope for renewal in the lives of pastors and the congregations they lead.

**First Love and Second Loves:
Revisoning a Paradigm of Hope for Pastors**

Gordon and Shelly¹ began attending a new small church that was closer to their home than the large, established church where they had been members for a number of years. Shelly immediately volunteered to assist with the children's ministry and was considered a valuable addition to the team of teachers. While Gordon was busy with his career and the demands of family life with four children, he was usually in attendance at services and appeared to be a strong supporter of the church.

Several families that were neighbors of Gordon and Shelly began attending the church. The pastor was thrilled to see how this couple enthusiastically invited people in their scope of influence to this new church. Reaching "unchurched" people was a primary goal of the church.

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¹ While this story is true, the names have been changed.

After a falling out with some close friends who ultimately left the new church, Gordon and Shelly felt very alone, since these former friends had been their most intimate confidants. Gordon saw the loss of his male comrade as tragic and desperate and was convinced that a replacement must be found. Gordon decided the pastor would be that replacement.

This decision was apparently known only to Gordon. When the pastor did not respond to Gordon's hints and suggestions about an exclusive friendship, the couple began to withdraw from involvement in the church. Finally, Gordon confronted the pastor with his dissatisfaction and confessed his feelings of betrayal that the pastor had not met Gordon's unspoken need for a new best friend.

In the weeks before their departure from the church, Gordon and Shelly made the rounds, explaining to people why they needed to leave. Soon, most of the people they had influenced to attend the church departed as well.

The story of Gordon and Shelly is true and not an uncommon occurrence in churches. These dramas are played out in a variety of ways even as churches recover from these losses and carry on their community life. The people providing pastoral leadership, however, do not always recover well.

Most pastors enter vocational ministry with a sense of joy and excitement. There is typically the expectation that there will be times of struggle and difficulty ahead (as in most vocations) but that expectation often gives way to the pastor's sense of calling into the ministry of Christ.

What pastors do not usually expect is the devastating effect of both discouragement and depression that are common to the life of pastoral ministry.

My own experience in pastoral ministry revealed that too many of my colleagues were depressed and struggling to keep both their lives and their churches together. I recently listened while two friends—both pastors—compared their anti-depressant medications. Both had churches that might be considered successful—raised up as church plants, growing in numbers, property, buildings, and busy programs. Both pastors were in deep pain.

Hoge and Wenger report that the stress of dealing with conflict is one of the two main reasons that clergy leave pastoral ministry.² Research has shown for a number of years that the majority of clergy suffer from discouragement or depression and the effects of unrealistic expectations from congregations and denominational leaders.³ In contrast, a recent TIME Magazine report claims that American clergy rank highest in a job satisfaction index.⁴ This paradox might be viewed as the tension pastors feel between a sense of calling (and being in the place where one believes God has called) and the painful realities of pastoral ministry. The contrast also may illustrate the complexity that exists in determining what is truly happening in the inner lives of clergy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “A parishioner must be able to sense that the pastor's words overflow out of the fullness of his heart. They can tell if our proclamation is a spiritual reality for us.”⁵

What if a pastor has no fullness of heart? How does a pastor give to others out of a center that is depleted? Eugene Peterson learned in his own life of pastoral ministry that the call to lead as a pastor was realized in an alternative reality:

I believe that the kingdoms of this world, American and Venezuelan and Chinese, will become the kingdom of our God and Christ, and I believe this new kingdom is already among us. That is why I'm a pastor, to introduce people to the real world and train them to live in it. I learned early that the methods of my work must correspond to the realities of the kingdom. The methods that make the

² The other reason cited was a desire to engage in a specialized ministry such as teaching at the college or seminary level. Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors In Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 76.

³ For example, The Davidson Clergy Center (www.davidsonclergycenter.org) lists seventy-nine books and articles dealing with the issue of clergy stress.

⁴ Nancy Gibbs, “One Day in America,” *TIME*, November 26, 2007, 42-43.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1985), 45.

kingdom of America strong—economic, military, technological, informational—are not suited to making the kingdom of God strong. I have had to learn a new methodology: truth-telling and love-making, prayer and parable. These are not methods very well adapted to raising the standard of living in suburbia or massaging the ego into a fashionable shape.⁶

Peterson's is a call to a life of deep devotion, contemplation, study, teaching, and pastoral care. It may be, however, that too many have lost their first love and now languish in a state of unprocessed grief. They continue to work in and even sustain dysfunctional church systems. In all of this pain there needs to be a death in pastors' lives, but there also must be a resurrection to something new.

Loss of the First Love

Henri Nouwen reflected on the need for understanding and embracing God's love as the first and prior love:

This unconditional and unlimited love is what the evangelist John calls God's first love. 'Let us love,' he says, 'because God loved us first' (1 John 4:19). The love that often leaves us doubtful, frustrated, angry, and resentful is the second love, that is to say, the affirmation, affection, sympathy, encouragement, and support that we receive from our parents, teachers, spouses, and friends. We all know how limited, broken, and very fragile that love is. Behind the many expressions of this second love there is always the chance of rejection, withdrawal, punishment, blackmail, violence, and even hatred.⁷

The primacy of God's love makes good theological sense. However, as Nouwen points out, we too often expect and even demand from others what they cannot deliver. In expecting the fullness of God's love from broken human

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 28.

⁷ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), 25-26.

beings, we inevitably find disappointment. The shattering of human relationships is often characterized by the confusion of first and second loves—particularly in the life of the church. While the love of God may be expressed through people, all human relationships remain second-love relationships. Even the most cherished and unblemished relationships will ultimately end in death. No human relationship is permanent and most will find fracturing and pain along the journey. To expect of people what can only come from God is to plant seeds of disillusionment and pain.

Yet people continue to force second-love human relationships into first-love expectations. In the end, disappointment and betrayal are not only possible but probable as human beings fail to achieve these expectations.

Clearly these expectations are put upon Christian leaders, particularly pastors. Pastors are expected to bring a quality of relationship that is unblemished. They are asked to become parents of the parentless and friends of the friendless and to present themselves as the ones who never stumble along that way. The pastor is expected to have an inner life that outdistances that of the average lay person and an outer life that brings timely and effective companionship and healing to others.

Of course, the pastor cannot do or be any of these things with any more effectiveness or consistency than anyone else. The pastor is often married and has a family. The pastor has to earn money and pay bills. The pastor suffers pain and has a heart that is subject to uncertainty and doubt. The pastor does exist for many reasons, but to become any person's first love is not one of them. When a second-love human is required to have first-love qualities, failure and rejection are inevitable. Such expectations are idolatrous and destructive and are likely contributing to the sad state of the lives of pastors.

The following true story illustrates how first-love expectations can bring pain to both the people in need and

to the pastoral leaders upon whom the expectations are projected. Susan and her husband Tom⁸ were leaders in a newly planted church. Their friendship seemed like a true gift for the pastor and his wife. In the midst of the strain and time demands of church planting, however, it became apparent that Susan was unhappy with the pastor's wife. Susan called for a meeting of the two couples.

The meeting took place in Susan and Tom's home. Susan said she wanted to discuss some issues regarding her friendship with the pastor's wife. Susan produced a spiral-bound notebook containing lists of times and dates chronicling when specific overtures by Susan were not acknowledged and when certain expectations were not met. When she finished her declarations, Tom announced that they would be leaving the church. It was two weeks before the new church's first Easter service.

The abrupt loss of Susan and Tom was not only a personal loss to the pastoral couple but also a loss of visible leadership to the church. The pastor's wife fell into a depression that lasted more than three months.

Such scenarios are not unusual and have probably been played out, in some form, in many churches. The church opens its doors to all people, and some of those people are broken and in pain. People very often look for the medication of their pain by projecting first-love expectations on people who can only, at best, offer second-love relationships.

At the same time, pastors are not innocent in confusing their loves. They too often expect behavior from their congregants that would be outside of what is normal for human beings. Pastors can be deeply hurt when the people of the church react negatively or leave. The sense of loss is not inappropriate, but allowing such behavior to diminish one's inner life is tragic.

Bonhoeffer cautioned the pastors of his day to guard against expecting something from their congregations that the people could not deliver:

⁸ The names in this story have been changed.

A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men. When a person becomes alienated from a Christian community in which he has been placed and begins to raise complaints about it, he had better examine himself first to see whether the trouble is not due to his wish dream that should be shattered by God; and if this be the case, let him thank God for leading him into this predicament. But if not, let him nevertheless guard against ever becoming an accuser of the congregation before God. Let him rather accuse himself for his unbelief.⁹

Our first love is the love of God, but this is not a love that we are required to initiate or even reciprocate in order for it to be offered. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God's love is first not only because of its priority in God's initiation but also because of its pure, unconditional nature. Human love is not pure nor is it unconditional. We typically put a number of conditions on our love for one another. Spousal love is conditioned by faithfulness. Faithlessness is often a condition for severing the ties of love. Human relationships usually demand mutual respect and dignity as conditions even in the healthiest of situations.

This is why all human, second-love relationships require intentional acts in order to be sustained.

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 29-30.

hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful (Col. 3:12-15).

When first-love expectations are placed upon a person, then the person is expected to act in the place of God. When the inevitable disappointment comes, the conclusion is too often made that, if the person is not God, then he or she must be the devil. Devils have no hope for redemption. There is no forgiveness possible for a devil. A villain can turn from evil and be restored. A demon will be offered no restoration.

When second-love relationships are expected to take the place of our first love, then actions such as forgiveness, tolerance, and patience are unacceptable because a first love is not allowed to fail. But when human relationships are seen for what they are—second loves—then these actions become the healing touches of Christ that allow people in community to demonstrate the alternative reality of the kingdom of God.

If people within communities of faith—including pastors—recognize the difference between our first and second loves, then we open the possibility for relationships of love and healing to come to life and may proclaim to the world that the Lord is with us. Without such recognition, pastors in particular run the risk of suffering through any number of painful, broken relationships that result in layers of grief that may never be processed in a healthy way.

Unprocessed Grief

I recently spoke with a woman who works as a grief counselor. She had been speaking to a group about the stages of grief through which people must go in order to grieve in a healthy way. She pointed out that while the intensity might change, the process applies not only to loss due to death but also to loss of jobs, homes, and friendships.

I asked her about the losses that pastors endure when people leave their churches. Since most churches in the U.S. are relatively small, it is likely that when people leave, the pastor is aware and affected. I asked her how a pastor properly grieves the loss of people for whom he cares

when they leave either *en masse*, in rapid succession, or over a period of time. She indicated that she saw this as a significant problem for many pastors and probably a factor in their high rates of depression. She said that this type of unresolved grief was not episodic in the lives of pastors, but an ongoing and even chronic situation.

The problem of storing layers of unresolved grief reminds me of the old Welsh practice of *sin eating*. The sin eater was usually a down-and-out member of the community who would earn money by attending a wake and eating a meal in the presence of the deceased, presumably consuming the dead person's sins along with the food. Over time, the sin eater would, in theory, carry the unforgiven sins of a number of the community members.

Pastors too often become *grief eaters*, taking loss into themselves as martyrs. People are willing to cooperate with such an assumption, thrusting the pastor again into a first-love expectation where the capacity for pain and loss is supposedly limitless. The pastor's emotional health erodes as grief compounds upon grief, opening up the door to intense guilt, resentment, and other demonic playgrounds.

Grief must be processed in order for health to return. My counselor friend suggested that pastors make lists of the significant relationships that have been lost to them by people leaving their churches. Next to each name they can write what it is they believe they have lost in the departures. As each loss is expressed in writing, forgiveness can be extended as first-love expectations are withdrawn and second-love realities are embraced.¹⁰

¹⁰ David Augsburger suggests that this process may be lengthy and refers to it as *forgrieving*. "In forgrieving we gradually forgo the anger at injury, the rage of betrayal, the resentment at duplicity, but without the aid of denial. Forgrieving refuses the shortcut to resolution that is offered by forgetting (the primary mechanism of denial) and intentionally remembers, returns to the loss, relives the event, retells the story as often as necessary until peace has been made at a level that permits the opening of the future." David Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 68

The framing of a pastor's role in a church as one who has a deep capacity for pain is not only a result of broken interpersonal relationships but also a result of ecclesiastical systems that may put pastors in emotional jeopardy. It may be that the Reformation value of the priesthood of believers has never fully taken root in the life of the church. Dysfunction in pastoral ministry may be as much systemic as it is relational.

Dysfunctional Systems

Recent studies are pointing to a mass exodus out of established churches.¹¹ This appears to be bad news for these institutions, but it also opens the possibility for good news in the dismantling of dysfunctional systems.

Martin Luther claimed that the priesthood, as he had come to experience it in the Roman Catholic Church, was destructive and unnecessary. He claimed that, with the exception of administering the sacraments, priests were no different from anyone else in the church. They were not gods nor did they hold spiritual superiority over others:

Some can be selected from the congregation who are officeholders and servants and are appointed to preach in the congregation and to administer the sacraments. But we are all priests before God if we are Christians. For since we have been laid on the Stone who is the Chief Priest before God, we also have everything He has.¹²

Those who minister in the Protestant world tend to see themselves as operating outside of a formal priesthood. Yet our systems allow pastors to be burdened with expectations that would characterize them as holding undue power over

¹¹ Hadaway and Marler offer startling research results on this issue. Their research suggests that the percentage of Americans who attend church with regularity is actually much lower than other studies have indicated. C. Kirk Hadaway and P. L. Marler, "Did You Really Go to Church this Week? Behind the Poll Data," Religion Online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=237>.

¹² Martin Luther, "Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter," in vol. 30 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 62.

people as well as having inner lives coated with spiritual Teflon—lives that can take constant pain without ever having it stick.

While pastors and leaders in Christian communities are rightfully expected to live in ways that reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit, that call can be extended to all who respond to the call to follow Jesus. Those who lead must be expected to fail and to need confession, repentance, and forgiveness right alongside those being led. To demand otherwise is to force second loves into idolatrous first loves and to set the stage for a dysfunctional and destructive system of interpersonal relationships.

Idolatry has always been a problem for human beings. Israel, even after experiencing the presence and power of God in their midst, turned to idols repeatedly. Both Peter and Paul were horrified as people sought to fall at their feet in worship. The human tendency to project the character of the invisible God onto that which is visible continues to pull us toward the worship of idols.

Attempting to endow people or objects with the attributes of God is to worship an idol. Scripture is not short on accounts of the devastating effects of idolatry in the life of Israel and the church. Isaiah 44 mocks the obvious foolishness of creating idols for the purpose of worship in the description of the religious craft of the woodworker.

Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it, and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!" (Isa. 44:15-17)

Casting first-love expectations onto pastors can become a form of idolatry. We bring candidates for ordination under the care of the church, we send them to seminary, and we ordain them, vote them into local churches, and then

expect them to relate to us in ways that can only be trusted to God.

Our present church systems are sometimes suited to the fostering of ill-health and dysfunction in the lives of their leaders. Pastors in particular must remove themselves, at least in perception, from the role of the priest who stands as mediator between God and people (according to 1 Tim. 2:5 there is only One who does that). When people want to put pastors in a first-love category and attempt a form of idol worship, the pastors must cry out with Peter, “Stand up; I am only a mortal” (Acts 10:26).

There is a strong call to the building of community in our Christian culture, even as that culture, in its modernist structures, continues to rapidly erode. As new communities of faith develop, only the realization that our first love is that which is initiated by God will allow us to cherish and nurture second-love relationships. This is not only an important area in which pastors and leaders must teach; it is vital for pastors and leaders to learn it for themselves.

When we allow people to live in the grace of second-love relationships, our grief at their departure does not need to be devastating or alienating. In recognizing these second loves, we who remain can extend love, forgiveness, and the possibly of resurrection relationships with those who feel they must move on.

Full-time, vocational ministry is being threatened by the departure of so many of the formerly faithful from established churches. But it is possible that the disruption of this ecclesiastical system might open the possibility for new relationships to emerge in the life of the church, where pastors and leaders are no longer superstars but only those who have been identified as people of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3) and who are chosen to lead by those willing to be led to the true, authentic first love that comes from God.

The theme of death and resurrection resonates throughout Scripture. The first humans die to their open, unhindered relationship to God and are rebirthed into a new relationship that, while less than the original, is offered graciously by God. The birth of Isaac is a story of life that

springs out of barrenness. The hopelessness of the exiles of both Israel and Judah is addressed, through the prophets, with messages of hope for a new, resurrection life. Jesus dies and appears lost to the barrenness of the grave. In Jesus' resurrection, God vindicates him and opens the possibility of new, resurrection life to all people.

One of the most dreaded phrases that a pastor hears is, "I'm leaving the church." It is sometimes spoken in anger, but other times in sorrow and confusion. For the people saying those words, the departure might be a relieving of pain or the hope for new life and opportunity. For the pastor (and for those friends left behind), the words too easily morph into "I don't want to be with you anymore." It is rare that these departing words are not taken personally. It may be difficult for these relationships to stay alive after people leave the church, even when all parties remain in the same geographical area, where continued contact might be possible. The challenge in maintaining such relationships comes not only because the most common place of connection—the church—is no longer shared, but also because the foundation of the relationship—life in a worshipping community—is no longer a reality.

As a pastor, I have to confess that I have too often felt abandoned and betrayed by people when they left my church. Pastors are still required to turn their attention to the people who have remained and try to engage the church in mission. So these people slip out of our lives, sometimes forever. For many, changing churches is tantamount to excommunication from the local church.

My daughter recently asked me why this has to happen in the life of the church (she and her sister have often thanked me for waiting to become a pastor until they were grown). She suggested that relationships in the Christian community should have deeper moorings than attendance at a local church. I agreed, but had no solution. She went on to offer the possibility that we pastors do not help people understand the death and resurrection nature of relationships. It could be, she claimed, that while the relationship of pastor/parishioner might now be dead, a

new relationship of friend, Christian companion, or neighbor might now come to life. She was insistent that relationships of enmity did not have to be the norm when people left their churches.

I think she is right. While the pain of no longer sharing life together in a worshipping community is real and should be properly grieved, it must be grieved as the loss of a specific second-love relationship rather than a first-love relationship that is the realm of God. At the same time, the possibility must be offered for a new, resurrection relationship that has a different life and character from the old one. Otherwise, all parties continue to live with a rotting corpse—their former relationship—that never finds the sleep of the grave. Without the grave, there will be no resurrection.

Recommendations

There is much about the modern church in the Western world that appears to be dying. God, however, is not dying. His Spirit continues to move in and through the lives of human beings. I believe that resurrection is coming, not only to bring new life to old, dead systems, but also new life to those answering God's call of leadership in the Christian community. Having responded to that call, those leaders must lead. The direction of that leadership is crucial to the survival of the leaders themselves and to the health and vitality of the groups being led.

The following are my own recommendations for reframing the role of the pastor in ways that might promote positive leadership and healthy inner lives. Each of them reflects a dying to an old way of pastoral leadership and allowing something new and unexpected to emerge:

1. Refocusing the role of the pastor. I suggest that leaders begin the process of critiquing the focus of their leadership. Is the leadership directed toward the sustaining of programs? Is it focused on providing experiences attractive enough to keep people in the congregation?

In this time of cultural shift and transition in the Western church, there needs to be more and better

leadership, not less or no leadership. But the focus of that leadership, I maintain, must be in introducing, training, and retraining people in the ways of the kingdom of God. This is not a task for the faint at heart, but it is, I believe, the only work that brings life.

Whether we like it or not, people want to associate with particular personalities. Rather than respond to that desire by crafting leaders and leadership styles that appeal to that demand, there must be theological reflection on the historical precedents that have shown that road to be a dangerous one.

The emergence of the monarchy in Israel gives us the basis for such reflection. After Samuel's leadership failure, the elders of Israel asked for a new kind of leadership, one that would mirror the larger culture: ". . . Appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like the other nations" (1 Sam. 8:5).

Samuel appeared to recognize the tragedy implied in that request, and we are offered God's subsequent response:

Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them (1 Sam. 8:7-9).

When the people of Israel took the path of governance outside of the reign of God, they chose to play an international game based on the rules of the larger culture. In the end, getting what they demanded led to their destruction. The translation of Psa. 106:15 in the Book of Common Prayer offers a chilling benediction: "He gave them what they asked, but sent leanness into their soul."

This reframing cannot be done in isolation. The pastor's role cannot be reframed without understanding and support from the local congregation. This requires a new kind of engagement with the people of the church. If

the congregation can begin to see their corporate life as a community of Jesus that lives out the realities of the kingdom of God rather than a religious organization that measures success only by quantitative results, then a new pastoral environment may be birthed.

2. Create a new culture of first- and second-love expectations. The biblical account of Israel's journey reveals the injection of first-love expectations into the life of the monarchy. The life of Israel becomes more identified with the life and succession of the kings than it does with the rule and reign of God. On the international scene, Israel was not equipped to be a strong political and/or military player; Israel had been birthed and empowered to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of God's reign on earth.

Jesus warns against this tendency when he tells his followers,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).

If leaders interpret this text of Scripture as a call to have their lives drained out by the first-love expectations of people, then the point may have been missed. The service that Jesus gave was first of all to God, to respond obediently to what God was doing in the world. Jesus gave all of himself to the world, taking within himself the ultimate evil that epitomized Israel's attempt to live out its destiny outside of the economy of God's kingdom. Jesus' life and ministry was, in itself, both a sign and a wonder. His life was a sign pointing to the reality of God's kingdom, and a wonder that the mystery of God's faithfulness would take such a risk with a broken world.

Creating such a culture in a church is a process of both teaching and demonstration. Pastors can use a variety of opportunities to help people see themselves as a

community of participants in the ministry of Christ rather than simply religious consumers who are served weekly by a pastor and the organizational structures of the church. Pastors can also demonstrate this culture by learning to be open and reasonably transparent about personal struggles and difficulties so that solidarity is created with the people of the church. When pastors refuse to open themselves up to others, they give the impression that the challenges of everyday life are not relevant to them. That can be the environment where idolatry emerges. It is important that we die to the role of spiritual superstar so that a new kind of relationship can be formed in the life of the church.

3. Adopt the spiritual discipline of forgiveness. The relational pain that seems inevitable in pastoral ministry often goes unaddressed. It is very likely that most pastors carry many layers of unprocessed grief resulting from loss of relationships and betrayal. Along with accessing formal counseling and interaction with trusted people, I recommend adopting forgiveness as a regular spiritual discipline.

As my counselor friend suggested, this might begin with keeping a list of people who have departed from our churches (assuming our church is of the size where such departures are noticeable) and writing next to their names what we believe we have lost as a result of the departures. The process of forgiveness helps us to see their brokenness and pain as being also present in our own lives, thereby creating solidarity with them regardless of their motives in leaving us. In forgiving we let them go, trusting them to the kindness and care of God. We can then write our own words of blessing as we release them to their next step in the life of faith.

While this process may take years for some situations, the spiritual discipline of forgiveness can free us from emotional prisons of anger, withdrawal, and even hatred. Rather than allowing relational pain to fester in denial or grief, we open up the possibility of God's forgiveness and healing. In this process we can allow God's first love to bring new life to our second-love relationships.

4. Build trusted relationships both inside and outside the local church. Conventional wisdom suggests that pastors should avoid friendships within the boundaries of the congregation. I suggest that such relationships should be built, recognizing that they are all second-love relationships and will be subject to weakness. Nevertheless, the pastor needs people within the church to share his burdens and concerns, to offer counsel, prayer, and support. Too often pastors have in the church only functional relationships that serve to accomplish the business and programming requirements of the church. Developing relationships that allow for honesty and vulnerability is crucial for the health of the pastor's inner life and for the church to learn about sharing in the church's ministry.

Pastors should also develop friendships outside the church. It is important to be able to share the stories of pastoral difficulties with people who care about us but also who have no personal stake in our churches. Finding that others share similar difficulties in ministry can help pastors to recognize that they are not alone in the challenges of their vocations.

Some denominations have also developed special pastoral retreat and counseling opportunities that help pastors to deal with discouragement and depression in pastoral ministry. This is an important step by insightful groups to help pastors find healing and health.

5. Reorder the daily and monthly calendar around spiritual formation. I entered pastoral ministry after fourteen years in the corporate world. I brought with me the energy of starting my work early and staying on task through my day and even my evening. I was perplexed by my own spiritual malaise until I learned from Eugene Peterson that the first work of pastoral ministry is prayer.¹³

¹³ Peterson wisely suggests that the priority of the calendar must focus on the essential nature of pastoral ministry. "The trick, of course, is to get to the calendar before anyone else does. I mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for the silence and solitude out of which creative work—prayer, preaching, and listening—can issue." In *The Contemplative Pastor*, 23.

For me, prayer was a flabby muscle. Over time I reordered my mornings. Rather than racing to breakfast meetings or jumping onto my computer to work on a sermon or program outline, I began my day with an hour and a half of Scripture and devotional reading, journaling, and prayer. Through the encouragement of a friend, I made monthly visits to a local Catholic retreat center for a day of silence. None of this was particularly easy for me in the beginning, but the practices became life-giving over time.

American pastors might struggle with this because we tend to be imprinted with a need for activities that are producing measurable results. We might wonder how someone like Martin Luther could look at a busy, demanding day and claim that he couldn't begin his activities without at least three hours of prayer. Yet, without some depth in our own inner lives, we cannot, as Bonhoeffer claimed, speak from a fullness of the heart.

How we order our lives in order to be formed by God's Spirit may be as varied as the circumstances and environments that shape local congregations. To neglect our own spiritual formation, however, should not be an option. To do so would be to run on our own steam, ultimately at our own peril. Again, sharing such practices with trusted people both inside and outside our churches gives us the opportunity to open our lives to the people around us.

6. Begin introducing ecclesiastical systems that are life-giving to the church. A popular, middle-aged pastor I knew was asked by a group of younger leaders how he was able to tolerate ongoing denominational politics. He responded by saying, "I go to the meetings, I take notes, I ask questions and make comments, and then I go home and pastor my church." We are all subject to larger systems of organization—both good and bad—but in the end we return to our local settings and people we serve.

It takes courage for a pastor to lead people away from the perceived comforts of a consumerist approach to church life to a shared life in which the people of the church see themselves as vital members of the body of Christ. In a consumer society, our churches may have a lot

to lose if we change the agenda. Our buildings and payrolls alone require a critical mass of people in order to be sustained. The way we measure our success as pastors has a great deal to do with how the organizational life of the church is kept afloat.

The death that must be embraced is the death of systemic structures that end up damaging both the health and inner lives of leaders. Organizational measures of success have too often demanded more of leaders than could be delivered. In striving less for quantitative measures and instead striving for life in the present reality of the kingdom of God (Jesus says this best in Matt. 6:25-34), the possibility for a new resurrection in leadership may come.

The scandal of such a recommendation is that it suggests that our focus on meeting the needs of people—a common organizational focus in American churches—may become damaging in a culture that is embedded in consumerism. Eugene Peterson recognizes and critiques this organizational paradigm:

It didn't take long for some of our Christian brothers and sisters to develop consumer congregations. If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most effective way to get them into our congregations is to identify what they want and offer it to them, satisfy their fantasies, promise them the moon, recast the Gospel in consumer terms: entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, problem-solving, whatever. This is the language we Americans grow up on, the language we understand. We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches?

Given the conditions prevailing in our culture, this is the best and most effective way that has ever been devised for gathering large and prosperous congregations. Americans lead the world in showing how to do it. There is only one thing wrong: this is not the way in which God brings us into conformity with the life of Jesus and sets us on the way of Jesus'

salvation. This is not the way in which we become less and Jesus becomes more. This is not the way in which our sacrificed lives become available to others in justice and service. The cultivation of consumer spirituality is the antithesis of a sacrificial, “deny yourself” congregation. A consumer church is an antichrist church.¹⁴

While the language of “anti-Christ” may be difficult for some, it forcefully challenges us to re-examine our ecclesiastical life and to consider new ways to provide our churches with leadership that points them to the way of Jesus rather than abandoning them (and ourselves) to the life-ravaging forces of consumerism.

I am not promoting the wholesale deconstruction of denominational systems of government and strategic planning, since whatever would replace those systems would surely be problematic as well. However, it is important to look within those systems for flaws that drain the life from people. If the church’s system of government puts unreasonable expectations on the pastor, then the local church needs to be challenged, within the bounds of that system, to develop new forms of leadership that allow the pastor to fulfill an appropriate and reasonable role while drawing the people of the church into participation in the community’s life. If the strategic planning of the church requires the pastor to be the creator and sustainer of religious consumerism, then a new strategic plan is needed—one that draws the entire community into the resurrection life of Jesus.

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 6.