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## SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY YEARS OF MINISTRY: REFLECTIONS FOR LEADERSHIP FORMATION IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** A denominational seminary, henceforth, Ekklesia Seminary or Ekklesia, desired to understand how graduates engaged in leadership in the first five years of ministry. The school wanted to expand its participation in leadership formation prior to, during, and after graduation. Ekklesia contracted a two-phase Success-Case Study to explore factors and practices that contribute to positive leadership experiences in the first years. The essay details the project and includes the set of six case narratives and practices of successful leadership. The second section of the essay includes graduates' appreciative reflections and suggestions for leadership formation in theological education.

### Introduction

In 2008, I was invited to work with a denominationally-owned seminary (we will call it *Ekklesia Seminary*) assessing their graduates during the first five years of ministry. Ekklesia and its affiliated denomination were interested in exploring leadership practices in pursuit of understanding how best to participate prior to and during the first ten years of ministry. The project was designed as part of ongoing inquiry on the preparation of missional leadership in pursuit of developing missional congregations alongside a missional denomination.

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The research methodology is borrowed from Brinkerhoff's success-case method.<sup>1</sup> Success-case research continues to grow as a practice for efficiently, yet thoughtfully, understanding what works and what does not. This assessment-based method is inexpensive and asset-based in approach. Success-case method seeks to "discover stories of success worthy of the telling."<sup>2</sup>

The project was a success-case study in two phases. The first phase was a quantitative study gathering data on the underlying assumptions and competencies of denominational pastors across the country. Phase one was conducted by an outside agency, consisting of 157 phone surveys (65% response rate, N=250) with recent graduates serving denominational congregations that had graduated from *any* ATS-accredited seminary in the last five years. The analysis and results of phase one were used to create the qualitative instrument for phase two.

The second phase included graduates from Ekklesia Seminary only. The project included ninety-minute phone interviews with twelve successful pastors serving in the first five years. The second phase drilled deeply into the processes of leadership formation and practice, including the pastors' experiences in seminary, first call, and continuing education. The research hoped to gather a composite picture of successful<sup>3</sup> pastors in their first call as well as develop resources and action steps for the seminary and denomination in preparing and stewarding pastors into and through the first ten years of ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert O. Brinkerhoff, *The Success Case Method: Find Out Quickly What's Working and What's Not* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Brinkerhoff, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Success, in this study, was defined by the graduates' self-described ability to lead a congregation or ministry organization that is faithful to the traditions and expectations of the communities they were leading. The result of success was a fortified commitment between the congregation and leader to continue living and learning together. This notion of success is inverse to the first-call literature that focused on non-success, or why first-call pastors left pastoral ministry.

The primary research questions engaged environment for leadership, leadership practices, theological resources for leading, and the formation of leaders within theological education.

### *Primary Research Questions*

1. What are the emergent and institutional leadership practices of pastors in their first years of ministry that contribute to positive ministry experiences?
2. What *theological* resources do pastors recognize within their understanding and practices of leadership?
3. How do pastors understand, communicate, and evaluate processes of change within their ministry settings?
4. What are the intersections between the seminary's current leadership competencies and pastors' self-assessments? How has the Master of Divinity curriculum prepared them for leadership in their ministry contexts? And what do pastors believe would further aid them in their understanding and practice of leadership, especially when ecclesial leadership is a difficult vocation?

### *Common Ground—Towards a Theologically Imagined Leadership Formation*

There was agreement within Ekklesia Seminary and its affiliated denomination, as well as within the utilized literatures, that pastoral leadership is not first a set of skills to be learned and applied. Pastoral leadership is a gift, given by God through the church to persons called and equipped to lead congregations as apostles. Unfortunately, amidst this agreement, there was also ambivalence to define and shape pastoral leadership *theologically*, relying instead on educational and social science disciplines, which are necessary, but incomplete in themselves.

Ekklesia believed that a missional hermeneutic, or imagination, is advantageous in thinking theologically about the social practice of leadership. A missional imagination would seek a leadership disposition to

integrate multiple disciplines (theologically and otherwise) through discernment with others in diverse and variegated local congregations for the sake of God's world. The considered literatures understood that a significant aspect of pastoral leadership is culture creation that needs a thicker theological imagination. This is what Bonhoeffer called a move to theology in the concrete, not simply theology in phraseology.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

Ekklesia Seminary desired that any assessment of leadership take into consideration national norms and recent literatures on *first call* and *pastoral formation*. Also, Ekklesia was invested in the implications of a *missional hermeneutic* for *theological education*. The framework, then, for the study included the intersection of several literatures, including Jackson W. Carroll's Pulpit and Pew Study, *God's Potters*; Stanley Wood's study on "Extraordinary Leadership in New Church Developers"; Transition into Ministry work by David Wood; the first-years literature from Dean Hoge and others; missional ecclesiology, and the theological education literature beginning with Edward Farley and David Kelsey.<sup>5</sup>

Jackson Carroll's five marks of leadership became the primary lens for the phase one system-wide survey of leadership practices in the first five years of ministry, and the additional literatures further informed the instruments, methodology, and analysis.

These backgrounds and frameworks were expanded and contextualized using Ekklesia Seminary's internally-developed leadership competencies. The intersection of frameworks and competencies was for deeper understanding of how the seminary curriculum was impacting leadership practices in the first years of

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Ed. and trans. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A - Engaging the First Call and Transition into Ministry Literature. Located on ARL-JRL website.

ministry in relationship to national norms.<sup>6</sup> Together, Ekklesia's competencies in conjunction with the literatures were used to analyze the phase one surveys. The phase one analysis yielded two constructs. The first was that pastoral leadership is expected (institutional) and dynamic (emergent). The second construct identified six scenarios that pastoral leaders navigate on a regular basis. These six scenarios were the basis of the second in-depth exploration phase. The analysis of the second-phase in-depth exploration sought to make recommendations to Ekklesia Seminary's curricular, structural, and pedagogical practices around resourcing and forming leadership prior to degree-completion and during the first years of ministry.

### *Institutional and Emergent Practices for Pastoral Leadership*

When a new pastor or church leader arrives to a local congregation or ministry, he or she arrives with layers of leadership expectations already defined. Kevin Armstrong and Jackson Carroll attribute most of these expectations to the *office* and *profession* of the pastoral life.<sup>7</sup> Most commonly pastors in the U.S.-American Protestant tradition are to preach, administer word and sacrament, and exercise leadership throughout the ministries of the church.

These professional and official tasks of pastoral leadership interact with less formalized and more fluid competencies rooted in one's *calling*. The competencies include spiritual gifts and skills, experiences, and additional capacities that unique persons bring with them into a ministry setting. Office, Profession, and Calling, as Armstrong and Carroll propose, are the parchments, cloak, and sandals for the godspeed needed in pastoral leadership (2 Tim. 4).

Another way to depict the three-tiered pastoral vocation is through institutional and emergent threads of

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix B – Locating Competencies. Located on ARL-JRL website.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory L. Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2006).

leadership. *Institutional* threads of successful pastoral leadership are rooted in the office of Word and Sacrament and historical ecclesial life. The following narratives uncovered four institutional threads: (1) communication via social networks, (2) lay empowerment and leadership development, (3) intellectual competence (curiosity and discipline), and (4) a creative grasp of Scripture. *Emergent* threads of pastoral leadership are practices pastors need, but they take form in a variety of ways. The narratives uncovered two emergent practices: (1) implicit trust and love for the people in the community resulting in incarnating their values and (2) *charismata*—a balance between positional and apostolic authority. Together institutional and emergent threads pattern a tapestry for successful pastoral leadership in congregations and Christian ministries. The pastoral life has a multitude of expectations that can divert attention away from these primary tasks and responsibilities, yet the successful leadership interviewees were aware of these discovered six priorities as the central practices for pastoral leadership.

## Six Scenarios for Exploring Leadership Success

The six priorities for pastoral leadership were discovered through an exploration into six ecclesial situations. These six scenarios were discovered in listening to a broad range of pastors in the first phase. Then, these scenarios were considered within Ekklesia's theological hermeneutic and leadership competencies.

Ekklesia's missional hermeneutic valued partnerships between God, local churches, and civil society. Pastors are apostolic leaders who view the world through the dynamic horizons of Scripture and tradition *and* the future in-breaking Reign of God. These powerful and dynamic horizons create situations of ongoing change that naturally produces conflict. At the same time, God's Reign is a movement of reconciling the world back to God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. To this end, God

is calling, forming (resourcing), and sending out encouraged and empowered leaders to steward God's people in public and ecclesial action that participates in God's reconciling Reign for the sake of the world. This hermeneutic, in relationship to engaging pastors in phase one, yielded the following six scenarios for further exploration.

- **Organizational Leadership:** Able to develop congregational culture through vision casting, strategic planning, and enacting concrete steps to implement change in a congregation or ministry.
- **Public Leadership:** Able to interact with, speak to, and provide leadership in the broader, non-congregational community.
- **Collaborative and Connected Leadership:** Encourage, empower, and mobilize laity to cultivate congregations committed to God's work in the world. Connected with peers and mentors for personal support, pastoral guidance, and multi-church partnerships.
- **Reconciling Leadership:** Successful at long-standing engagements to resolve conflict and reconcile conflicting parties.
- **Resourced Leadership:** Fluent with the practice of integrating Scripture, church history and tradition, local history, and personal stories with organizational theory and best practices in local church conflict, ongoing change dynamics, and strategic planning processes.
- **Learning (Encouraged/Prepared) Leadership:** Persistent in ongoing formal and informal learning through reading, writing, and reflection that guides and directs leadership in situations of change and conflict. Capable of self-awareness and feedback from congregants and other social networks for greater discipleship and faithfulness.

These six scenarios formed the basis for the qualitative engagement with the selected success-case interviewees in phase two. Each successful leader was engaged around at

least three of these scenarios. Practices of successful leadership were discovered during the ninety-minute interviews. Six cases were selected to summarize findings through narratives and adjacent reflections on theological education.

The following narratives invite further leadership reflections and investigation, but were initially developed for two purposes: (1) sharing stories of success for pastoral leaders in their first five years of ministry; and (2) evaluating Ekklesia Seminary's practices of leadership formation for the sake of furthering missional leadership formation across the curriculum and structures of the school. In terms of additional reflection and investigation, these six cases have been used in pastoral leadership courses around pastoral practices for faithful leading. Students read the cases before class and select one to investigate in groups through identifying environmental factors and personal practices for faithful leadership.

## Six Cases of Faithful Pastoral Leadership

### *Case 1: Resourceful and Empowering Leadership for Student Ministry*

I am a minister to students in a large academic setting. I serve part-time to students for the sake of faith exploration, vocational discernment, and theological integration. I am something between a programmatic pastor and spiritual director. Being part-time gives me the opportunity to read, to spend time with my family, and to continue other personal and professional interests, including occasional teaching. I wouldn't say pastors have to work part-time, but it has been a rewarding thing for me. I love my job, and I feel it a tremendous privilege to watch what God is doing amidst the lives of young Christians. It is a privilege to hear struggles and questions and to walk with students in faith.

I am equally a mother and wife as well as a pastor. I have college-aged students, and they have been a foundation for understanding the development of young people; my husband has also been a sounding board for

ideas, concerns, and ministry questions. I have a deep love for my work that matches my love for my family. Love through conversation is at the center of how I understand ministry.

As a pastor to students, I do not passively wait for students to come to my office; I am too excited for the possibility of encountering the living God to wait; I create opportunities and seek out conversations with students. I have a deep respect for the personhood of college-aged students; they are eager to ask questions and unashamed to offer their own opinions. They constantly resource me with literature and media that I would never discover on my own. Their passion to participate matches my philosophy to empower and encourage.

My primary leadership movements are team-building, gifts identification, and leadership mobilization. I personally love to ask questions, and I have found that this is the best way to identify personal passions and spiritual gifts in students. Sometimes I ask indirect questions, sometimes direct—in the same ways that I have always engaged my children. The purpose, as Frederick Buechner proposes, is to discern with students where their greatest passions and the world's greatest needs intersect.<sup>8</sup> Once we begin to identify gifts and passions, I encourage students to do things that invite discomfort. I trust them enough to lead in ministry, and most often there is additional discovery, both for the person and for the ongoing ministry. I am fortunate in that there is always more ministry than we have people; so whoever wants to participate is welcome. This has required some risk, especially some uncomfortable faith explorations and reflections for me, personally.

Obviously, I rarely work alone. First, my colleagues are available for conversation and collaboration. Second, and what is more important, the students are resources, and they teach me quite a bit. Third, I have a coach. She is something between a mentor and a spiritual director.

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Buechner, “Vocation” in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973) 95.

I knew her before our formal coaching relationship, and she has been a gift for working through ministry stuff. Finally, I live near a seminary. The access to faculty, a library, and ongoing theological inquiry resonates with my deep personal desire to learn.

Beyond people, I love books. I read theology, especially emerging church literature (because it is the culture of my students), but I also try to read biography, classic novels, and intra-religious texts—I just read the Book of Mormon. Again, my students supply me with literature, and I try to read everything they give me both for my own sake, and also for understanding how to do ministry with a generation other than my own.

Seminary Reflections from an Organizational and Equipping Leader: I have said several times that I love to learn. Seminary for me was a “spiritual hot house.” Everything I read, heard, and wrote connected with my past personal and ministry experiences. I took five years to complete a three-year program, so I did not feel pressured, but had ample time to digest and reflect. I simply couldn’t get enough information—all of which I deemed “good formation.” My learning was not simply contained to the curriculum. Much of what I learned about ministry was from watching seminary professors. I watched them deal with and respond to students with compassion, humility, and grace. We all knew that the [Ekklesia Seminary] professors loved us, the students.

One professor in particular assisted me, and as I continue in ministry his emphasis on theology and family systems is central. The *chaordic* reality of systems theory resonates with my current ministry setting. I often reflect back on the content, professors, and students in the seminary classroom, and though I miss Ekklesia Seminary, those moments offer encouragement and hope to accomplish the ministry to which I am called.

#### *Case 2: Traditional Pastor, Public Presence*

I am a part-time associate interim minister in an established congregation. Part-time, for me, means more about pay and benefits than it does about time and

commitment, but it also means more flexibility. I am by-no-means young, but I entered the ministry with the same passion and zeal as my young ministry colleagues in seminary. I primarily work with small groups, and I do some preaching and teaching.

I don't like to say this, but my congregation thinks of me as a mover and a shaker. I exist to put people of similar interests together for the sake of doing ministry within the church and beyond its walls. This means one thing: as a pastor and leader, I must know the people of the church and the neighboring community. How else can we get people together to serve? Aligning gifts for ministry may seem like an administrative task, but when the real work is completed, it is social networking, and not administration. The social/relational work makes public ministry possible. Too much administration does the opposite.

Ministry for me is real, live Facebook because social networking is simply an awareness of and listening to the people around you. I listen to hallway conversations, meetings, and coffee-time chats to find out what is going on.... I know them, and I take advantage of all listening opportunities, whether small groups, teaching sessions, or one-on-one conversations (the latter is the easiest for me).

My intent is that I listen well enough and empower people freely enough that once a ministry gets going, I am simply called upon every-once-in-awhile. If people's passions and gifts are aligned with meaningful ministry, they will work hard. I simply become John the Baptist or the prophet Micah, who points the way for people to love Jesus and do justice in the world. I am not the ministry, but I am the facilitator to help make ministry happen. I want to get out of the way, and let the people work.

Too often mobilizing and empowering people for ministry is about church maintenance. My family background, marriage relationship, and personal experience have never focused solely on ministry *within* the church. My experience says ministry is always seeking broader connections between the local church, social

justice, and the neighboring community. I grew up and married during times when it was clear that race and class barriers restricted freedom. My Christian faith urges me toward reconciling these dilemmas. We need healthcare and basic needs; the church has a stake and theological voice and rationale for believing this! So ministry with people in the church is always to push us outside ourselves and into the world. I learned early on that pastors, especially young ones, should overcome the status quo and not stay within the church. They should get to know others in the community. I experienced that knowing outsiders made me a better resource to my congregation and church.

I have intentionally networked, not simply with regional ministerial associations, but equally as important with neighboring associations. I found that if the church wants to accomplish great reconciling ministry then partnering with the local Rotary, education boards, emergency professionals, and politicians will help you get it done; in other words, when the larger community works together it is very hard to stop something. I have seen the neighboring community grow and transform in multigenerational ways just by trying this. Partnering with the neighborhood redirects the too-common maintenance of the church and moves toward loving a world that God deeply loves.

Seminary Reflections from a Reconciling and Public Leader: Social justice is my thing. The Prophets class was really helpful, and it made me think through the leadership questions in the public realm. Beyond this specific class and a couple of others, the readings, in-class discussions, and interactions with the faculty were most helpful. The interactions with students different from me pushed me beyond my comfort zones and taught me to think differently.

Now that I am outside of seminary, I miss the guided readings and reflections. I really like education. I enjoyed having a course of study that forced me to go into depth with both reading and discussion. I miss getting into the amount of reading with greater depth. Once I entered

ministry, reading has become more difficult, and most reading is more surface-level in order to accomplish a task than it is to explore theology for God's people. The practical reality of ministry overtakes the reflective reading and thinking that I learned to love in seminary.

### *Case 3: The Process-Leading Pastor*

Leadership is a political act, and credibility is the political economy that leaders accumulate, invest, spend, and lose. The earning and spending of credibility chips is an artistic act requiring time, humility, wisdom, and discernment. Leading a congregation requires that pastors earn the right to lead God's people; positional authority has very little weight in today's ecclesial climate. "Do I trust you?" and "Do you trust me?" are the more pertinent questions pastors need to answer. Trust comes through believing that a pastor is a believing and faithful person who reads Scripture, prays diligently, rests regularly, learns continually, and cares for family and friends.

I earn leadership capital because I love my people and God's people also love me. I visit every person having surgery; I invite my consistory into my home for meals and celebrations (at my own expense), and we have newcomers meals, often. This latter practice keeps me on the edge for leadership identification and development. My wife and I make ourselves available, and we listen to people's opinions with grace. The incarnation expects nothing less.

Listening is hard work. I have needed to listen to all sorts of opinions and judgments, even when I thought they were unfair, off-track, and angering. However, to hear the stories and opinions that are favorable, generous, and helpful, I listen to everyone. Sometimes I have had to follow up and let people know that I cannot move forward with a specific opinion, but my discerned response is for the sake of the church.

After five years here, I am finally able to lead sustainable, frame-breaking change. I think the years of listening and preaching faithfully have finally cultivated

enough credibility to enact adaptive ideas. I continue to communicate through words, but only after I have engaged in deep and active listening. I explain how transition benefits the people, and I always try to incorporate the message of change in the pulpit, in newsletters and publications, and in every meeting. I go away annually to reflect on how to order worship to best communicate the overall direction of the church. In a pursuit to engage the neighboring community, the benediction is not simply encouragement, but a sending of people into their local worlds. Communication is the key to change, and storytelling (personal and otherwise) is a primary practice that invites participation.

However, listening, speaking, and telling stories contribute to process-development. I am a process leader, and leading process is developing trust *with* and *for* others. People will follow diligent process when leadership believes it's possible; vision is a heart thing. We, as a congregation, are trying to grow collectively into a heart-shaped vision. Passion and vision without attention to process are overzealousness and often lack respect for persons, yet attending to process without passion is also vain pursuit.

Natural Church Development (NCD) has been the primary process within this congregation. NCD is not perfect, but it has resonated with the congregational personality and my leadership style. The process becomes the subject and focus of change, not me. Attending and leading process has built credibility and clout, while also giving the church measurable goals and concrete action. We make changes because the NCD process told us to do it. NCD minimized the potential for personal and positional authority, and instead placed it in the process and within the congregation.

The key to leading process, for me, has been persistence to maintain momentum amidst what appear to be the maintenance and mundane tasks of ministry (because these are important in themselves for leadership). I have needed to become a cheerleader,

instigator, facilitator, and encourager, all at the same time.

Seminary Reflections from a Process Leader: Not much of my practical or skills-based training from seminary translates to the church, but the disciplined practice of reading and studying is germane to my current work. I don't use the methods taught, but I lean on the discipline and rigor of study expected of me in seminary.

I am increasingly reflective on whether leadership can be taught in seminary. The leadership stuff taught in seminary has needed significant translation, and the abstraction of leadership theory taught by non-pastors leaves much of the curriculum untouched in my files. For example, the church saw a marked difference in my preaching when I moved away from seminary texts and notes and began to preach out of my own skin and the disposition of the congregation. To be kind, the seminary curriculum raised the important issues, but teaching methodology for preaching and other practical disciplines has not been as useful as I had hoped.

The best thing the seminary has done is focus on the importance of social networks and coaching for ministry success. The formation of the denominational-based groups has been key for succeeding. I am part of a self-selected regional group, and we now meet monthly to work over current church issues. We have recently begun collectively designing worship for our five churches. It is amazing what God has done—we have five pastors who write sermons and collectively create publications. We spend our time together brainstorming the whole idea, and we brand the whole thing together. We use each other's ideas. Talk about synergy—the power of collective imagination is wonderful.

The one thing the seminary did that was unhelpful was the hard divisions between family and church. Also, they spoke often on the necessity to keep your personal life out of the pulpit. This is hogwash, and it doesn't work. Congregations want to know about the passions and trials of the pastor. Life is excitement and it drives us

to make things happen. I share my new knowledge and passion with my people.

*Case 4: Leading from Mistakes*

I am a young, newbie pastor, whose greatest leadership success comes from daily and weekly leadership mistakes. I am in the pastorate for one reason: I love the Word of God. I am serving in a quasi-suburban church that was declining due to difficult pastoral transitions and false hopes for being a mega-church. The lack of unity and cohesion was significant for the church, and my first months of being pastor deepened the problem, but also brought hope that something new was possible.

If I had listened more deeply upon arrival, I could have discovered the significant divisive issues in healthier ways. Instead I arrived with the Scriptures in one hand and my seminary degree in the other, like some kind of pseudo-Moses with two tablets. I had a vision, a passion, and a theological brilliance. Equipped with these tools, I boldly memorized Scripture and proclaimed God's good news to the church. For the first three months, the church accepted me as prophet, priest, and king. In many ways there was no need for Jesus because I was here. I rarely listened to them because I was too busy having all of them listen to me.

**Mistake 1:** I was so passionate about delivering God's word that I began to rearrange the worship space to make my proclamation of the Word central. I replaced the pulpit with an artist's/bar stool. Several younger, less traditional folks loved it. The long-standing Reformed folks hated it. Not only had I not listened, but my actions further divided the church over a ridiculous issue (for which I was solely responsible). My passion eclipsed all sensibility for systems theory, organizational change, etc. I did everything wrong—I didn't communicate, I had no credibility, I was impatient.

I quickly moved the pulpit back, but in doing so, the more progressive people thought I was caving in. This divide was difficult for me to navigate. I finally sought

outside partnership, and my coach recommended that I not apologize, *per se*, but that I make a public three-sentence statement acknowledging I had made a hasty and unhelpful decision. I said very simply: 1) everything I do is because of my love for Scripture and my desire to proclaim God's word. 2) My passion, however, ignored you—God's people, and 3) I heard your feedback and I want to restore our relationship. We picked up momentum amidst my mistakes and confession. I showed my humanity, came clean, and stepped out from under the sacred pastoral veil. I was real with them. It took several weeks for the anger to fully dissipate, yet the public confession was key for my ongoing leadership recovery in the church. Had I not done this, I would not still be here, and the church would be in a deeper mess.

Mistake 2: When I arrived, not only was I memorizing God's word for my job, but I did everything. Again, who needed Jesus, when they had me? My self-assurance (a necessary leadership gift) lacked humility (another necessary leadership gift), and I became my own dog-and-pony show. I didn't delegate at all. Not only was this organizationally ignorant, but it was contrary to Scripture. I wanted it to be about me. I was singing in the choir, playing the piano, teaching Bible study, and leading meetings. Narcissism was not my intention, yet I was spending little time equipping and empowering key leaders. I am continually learning to delegate, and now half of my job is empowering key lay leaders.

The blessing of my mistakes and admission is that I now have one hundred percent consistory support. This came from one-on-one conversations. I didn't do that well for the first six months. Saying, "I need you," was a threat to my identity. This is now my key phrase, and because of my interdependence with the congregation, the church's ministry is turning around. I will forever remember that I cannot change the church and I cannot change his people—only God can. I understood this cognitively, but not in practice. I couldn't relax in meetings, worship, or counseling because I was always about controlling and fixing others.

Mistake 3: Jesus had underlings, but he didn't have a network, so I didn't think I needed one either. Seminary pressed that a network was key to ministry, and now I agree. However, I only went to people after I was so far down in a hole. In my own infinite puny wisdom, I just decided to lead on my own. I didn't consult with anybody. After the fact, I sought help. I am now involved with a network, but I worked with them only after I screwed up. It was here, in failing to join a social network, that I screwed up the most.

Second, amidst not having a network, I also kept my wife out of the mess. The seminary does great things, but they too often divide home and the church. Embodying this division led to a strain on my family because I would not tell my wife anything. It was driving a wedge between my wife and me. I am still trying to recover from that division between work and home, and I am now involving my wife in all the joys and the frustrations. She is growing as critical of me as she was of the church, but at least I have a sounding board who knows me intimately. Whether I want it to or not, my stress as a minister affects my family, my body, my mind, my spirit, and my son.

Seminary Reflections from a Newbie Leader: The most helpful aspect of seminary was the freedom to explore questions without ever needing the answers finally worked out. Studying Scripture released my self-assurance and relocated assurance in faith. The least helpful was the lack of space to make mistakes in seminary (which could have been a safe place) and to reflect, learn, and grow from these mistakes. I was free to ask difficult questions in seminary, but I never experienced failure in my seminary academic experience.

In terms of the curriculum around leadership questions, the “Pastor as Person” class was most helpful. The genogram and family history were helpful for self-awareness. It was helpful to realize my own hurts, skeletons, and dysfunctions, especially my needs to please others and draw attention to myself. The genogram became very disclosive even if I didn't know the exact

implications until my first months of the pastorate. I am continually coming to find my security in Christ and nowhere else.

Second, beyond self-reflection, leadership and organizational studies were sorely lacking. Several faculty touched on this, but there was no one person dedicated to this conversation, and this isn't the job for adjuncts, alone. If the seminary were to hire someone to teach organization and leadership, a doctorate is only necessary if it is undergirded by pastoral experience. I want this person to know the pressures of sitting in the pastor's desk and feeling the pastoral pressures.

#### *Case 5: Leading Publicly toward Reconciled Diversity*

I never thought I would be in a position of leading a historic Anglo Reformed Church into an age of multiethnic, Kingdom-centered reconciled worshipping community. However, I have been part of this church for many years, and they recently called me back to be their first non-White, non-male lead pastor. My success is largely that the traditional and historic members of this church were willing to risk for the future. My success is because the congregation was willing to say yes to the Kingdom of God. Because of their risk and imagination, I have learned things here that I thought impossible. I have learned that multicultural worship is possible; holding the past and future is not only possible but energizing. I am also learning that multicultural leadership cannot be taught, forced, or organized; it is a leadership lifestyle that very few people have, regardless of race.

When I arrived here as pastor, I was in a place I had never been before. Even though I had spent several years in the church in a variety of capacities, being the lead pastor was a new space. No matter how well I thought I knew things, I had never been *here* before, and I needed to learn to listen, again. Being a new pastor requires ongoing suspension of judgment.

The biggest part of suspending judgment was listening with patience. I would sit and hear stories and

want to act, but I had learned as an associate pastor elsewhere that timing is everything. If people have a desire, an opinion, or even a frustration, pastors and church leaders need space and grace to breathe and reflect on what is coming at us. If we are to be contextual theologians, then listening is not merely voice-to-voice, but also in the spaces between the conversations; this is where the Holy Spirit speaks. So I wait and listen with expectation.

The hardest and most important leadership practices came in leading a multicultural reconciling community. Being a multicultural community is hard work, and it cannot be forced, but emerges only through persons with a whole-life commitment in which speech, hearing, and economics come together in multicultural practices. We are constantly asking one another: Is your neighborhood mono-cultural? Is your iPod filled with monophonal music? Do your Facebook friends mostly share your skin tone? Multicultural leadership cannot be monocultural in any way. Multicultural ministry emerges only when a congregation recognizes that reconciled diversity is foremost about power and structures.

I have been able to lead a multiethnic community because I have prior experiences in multiethnic communities with multiethnic leadership. For example, my elementary principle was a black woman, so I knew it was possible to be a leader early on. I have lived on both sides of the Mason-Dixon, and I have experienced explicit and implicit racism and sexism throughout my life. These experiences remove naiveté, and my rich understanding of power and structures makes me a prophetic advocate for healing wounds and giving voice for the least and the lost.

Our multiethnic and multicultural population is not first about being multicultural but about being a reconciling community. I have extended my pastoral leadership beyond the walls of the church building for this very reason. I learned that the world formed me for reconciliation, so as I lead a church I go into the world to discover how best to preach and resource my people. I

visit local banks and grocery stores to find the most hospitable ways to cash a check. Again, multicultural is always about powers and structures, and most often it is about gaining access. So I would never send a Latina or African-American woman to the bank down the street because they don't welcome me, but only to the local grocery store manager, Beth, who treats me with dignity and respect. I explore and engage my neighborhood to find out where justice reigns.

Seminary Reflections from a Multicultural Leader:

The seminary has a mandatory cross-cultural curricular requirement. I am a woman, and I am not white; therefore, requiring a cross-cultural experience for me was laughable. I wake up every morning into a cross-cultural experience. However, my arrogance was confronted when I finally agreed to submit to the cross-culture curricular requirement. I arrived to the foreign context only to realize that what I knew about in/justice was limited. We visited an electronics factory, and I met a woman there who was piecing together lapel microphones. She was making pennies on the dollar for an electronic device I use on a weekly basis. The working conditions were horrible, and she was not making a living wage—this was sinful and I was culpable. The pervasiveness of sin was everywhere in my life. Every Sunday when I put the microphone on my lapel I think of her and confess my sins of commission. I realized that everything we eat, use, and wear is embedded in sin, and we must live by the grace of God.

The second thing I appreciated was the seminary's stewardship of my pastoral gifts. A professor reminded me often of my preaching gifts, and he also reminded me that giftedness could become arrogance if we forgot to steward and cultivate our gifts. The interpersonal relationships at Ekklesia Seminary enhanced the curriculum; what was practiced and communicated in the classroom always had larger conversations outside of the classroom. I enjoyed this level of integration.

Finally, the one thing that I think my colleagues and I left with was an inability to empower lay leadership. We graduate from seminary with degrees, assurance, and promise, but I think the most important leadership practice is recognizing leadership gifts in others. I don't know how a seminary could teach empowering others, but leaders need reminding on delegation so they can use their gifts and get out of the way for others. Lay empowerment is a practice of trusting your congregation.

#### *Case 6: Second-Career Lessons for First-Career Pastors*

My adult career began in product sales and then personnel training. Seminary was a mid-life interruption, and I entered the church as a pastor following a decade-long, part-time completion of seminary. This is my fifth year in a suburban and highly educated congregation. The church was formed in the 1970s as a fellowship focused on evangelism in the neighborhood, but now we are currently in a period of revitalization.

My leadership success is mostly attributed to my experiences outside the church. My corporate training and experience prepared me in several ways to lead effectively in the church. First, I know what it means to be a lay leader in the church amidst family and work commitments beyond the church. Second, I am an administrator trained in business management, conflict management, and financial planning through annual corporate training exercises. Third, I have organizational networks beyond the ministry world to continually connect with and gain resources from.

It is simply impossible for a seminary to give students everything they need. The business world understands this. When new business leaders enter a business organization they receive ample training regardless of rank. Degrees are great, but the business world recognizes that you are missing the skills to apply the knowledge. Most companies have a three-year training program, beyond the MBA, that is used to identify and raise up-and-coming leaders. There is little to none of

this in the church. The church expects that you already know everything—even how to manage a balance sheet.

The social networks I have built are equally contributive to my success. Without social networks, there are bound to be problems. When I came to the church I made a covenant with the leadership to hold me accountable to social networks. My first network is my wife. She is a Stephen's Minister, and she has made me her primary care receiver. We have a strong marriage, and she was the one who encouraged me to attend seminary and enter the pastorate. Second, I am part of a grant-funded national pastors' network that meets semi-annually. The group also has regional clusters that meet monthly. Third, and most importantly, I meet with three men from my congregation. They hold me accountable to my local situation without the distance of the others. Their names are written in my letter of call. Without these three groups collectively, there would be failure. No *one* group could independently accomplish the needed support.

Finally, I have hobbies, and I enjoy playing amidst creation. I spend time alone hiking, fishing, and snow skiing. I also spend time with my young adult children. These outlets energize me for ministry.

Seminary Reflections from a Second-Career Leader: Reading and writing are not hobbies, and I would rather not read and write. However, these are central practices for the pastoral life, so I do them as a discipline. This was the key thing seminary offered me. The incubator of Ekklesia Seminary forced me to read what I needed to survive within the pastorate. I am realizing that the pastoral life is too busy to afford time to read everything I need to as a reflective theologian, but I try nonetheless.

The two most helpful experiences within the rigor and discipline of academic theology were independent studies and relationships with professors. Because of my part-time status and extended completion period, I took advantage of designing my curriculum through independent studies. I did one class on pastoral discernment and spiritual formation. I explored how

consistories could become leadership circles of spiritual discernment. This work was very important to my corporate work, but also to my current pastoral vocation.

Second, the professors invested in me personally. It seemed that each student had one or two professors with whom they really connected. For me, I stay connected to two professors who had formerly served as pastors. I appreciate their ongoing ability to speak from the intellectual-practical standpoint, without favoring one over the other.

As I think about leadership in the seminary, I think the commissioning process offers more to pastors leading congregations. The work they do lacks the rigor and discipline of residential education, and this is the downside, but the curriculum for commissioning is helpful for leading communities. Also, a well-known church consultant continues to be of assistance to me. He has the corporate training piece that is missing in the curriculum, but he has a love for the church that makes him a great candidate to form seminarians for leadership in the church. He works out of competency-based leadership formation.

## Discovering Leadership Practices

The above six narratives share several leadership practices, and each story contributes unique practices that deserve additional attention. The following nine leadership practices surfaced across the narratives as significant to successful leadership in the first years of ministry.

*Trusting God's People:* Pastoral leaders must trust—appreciate, respect, and love—their congregations. The congregation cannot be assumed in the archetypical view of sheep and shepherd with notions of ignorance or inability. Instead, the congregation is the people of God, who are called, gifted, and sent as theologians to act on behalf of God in the world. Successful pastors appreciatively steward and lead the church as a theological resource.

*Social Networks Expand Ecclesial Appreciation:* There were three primary networks that successful pastors have, and each pastor had all three. These networks expanded capacity to speak appreciatively of the church, while recognizing the church's and leader's limitations. The first social connection was a spouse or close friend who was both their biggest critic and greatest fan. Successful pastors had a healthy understanding of what to share and how to receive truthful criticism from this friend. Second was a coach or mentor. Most had formal coaching relationships offered by the denomination. One unique aspect of the relationship was that successful pastors personally requested a coach, not because the denomination required it. Third, successful pastors had a small accountability peer group. Some peer groups consisted of pastors only, and others had peer groups including laity from their own congregations. Successful pastors who had these relationships stated that social networks were central to their sustainability and success in ministry. They also mentioned that their time in seminary was necessary to begin cultivating these relationships.

*Communication Is Leadership:* Successful pastors acknowledged that active and deep listening was central to leadership practice. Both successful and unsuccessful pastors said they earned credibility once they stopped talking and started to actively listen. Vision, discernment, and planning require a *grounded* listening, where ideas and actions for ministry were appreciatively discovered *within* the congregation.

*Morphed by Our Biblical Metaphors:* Research on pastoral leadership pointed toward exploring the use of Scripture as a leadership resource. However, Scripture was not a utilitarian or instrumental object for examination, but a symbolic and internalized presence. These leaders did not quote Scripture as an aside to explain their practice, but biblical metaphors emerged amidst the conversation. Scripture was sensemaking, and successful leaders, often unaware, spoke Scripture as a framework for comprehending, redressing surprise, and constructing

meaning for their own pastoral identity, and for the church's identity.

*Balance between Positional Authority and Apostolic Authority:* No longer does the title *pastor* or the Master of Divinity degree guarantee (if it ever did) authority or credibility. Today's successful pastor walks the balance of traditional and positional authority with gift-based, charismatic authority. Successful leaders navigate the terrain of the pastoral *office* and *calling*.

*It's Not What You Read; It's That You Read:* Reading was a central practice for successful leaders, even for those who dislike reading. Successful leaders were able to articulate a current reading list. Several leaders loved to read, and a couple said they read out of necessity for leadership competence. Reading lists included classical theology and history and current church trends literature, as well as biographies, popular and classic novels, online news, and internet articles and blogs. Some engaged current organizational and leadership literature, but largely on the popular level.

*Incarnate the Cultures of God's People:* Whether middle-class, economically diverse, or multicultural, successful pastors embody the cultures and values of the local community. Most often, cultural incarnation preceded participation in a congregation. For example, multiethnic leadership requires a multiethnic lifestyle. One cannot enter as a leader in a multiethnic setting if one has never experienced the complexities of multicultural life. It might appear hip and theologically correct to lead multicultural congregations, but it takes specific life practices to lead into reconciled diversity. The same would be true for suburban and rural settings.

*Empowering Laity Hurts but Works:* Seminary graduates learned the hard way how to empower people. Women interviewees were more astute on how and why empowering others happens, and the male interviewees were growing into this practice. Both genders reflected how difficult and consuming it is to delegate, but how much more fruitful and faithful ministry is when empowerment occurs. Empowerment is high risk and

high reward. One difficulty in executing empowerment was that pastors have few models of empowerment. Childhood and young adult experiences in congregations offered few opportunities to observe or participate in the art and skills of delegation. Seminary also had few intentional empowerment or collaborative experiences. Very few public activities occur to model the way for empowerment, delegation, and collaboration.

*Seminary Cannot Do It All:* There were multiple comments and questions around the limits of a seminary curriculum, including whether leadership is gift or learned behavior, and how much must be relegated to on-the-job-training. In other professions and careers, academic degrees are not the end but the beginning and middle of learning. Other careers require continuing education, (often at the expense of the business or organization) that focuses on the more technical and skills applications of a specific job. Businesses invest anywhere from \$5,000-\$50,000+ for leadership employees in their first years. The lack of financial investment for seminary-educated pastors by their congregations leaves some young pastors frustrated that seminary didn't (or couldn't) teach them everything needed to be a successful pastor.

### **Alumni Reflections on Leadership Formation**

The purpose of the study was two-fold. The first purpose was to explore the successful traits of pastoral leadership in the first years of ministry. The second purpose was to evaluate Ekklesia Seminary's curricular, structural, and pedagogical practices of leadership formation from the perspective of recent graduates successfully serving in denominational ministries. The following seven reflections on Ekklesia's leadership formation practices and processes were shared by the above narratives.

1. The biblical and theological fields develop an intellectual rigor that is appreciated by successful leaders.

2. The three-year curriculum is quick, and successful leaders who took additional years found the extra time of benefit for their success in leadership.
3. Academic routine and discipline are missed by new pastors upon graduation. Newly installed pastors desire the curricular expectations and practices of guided and disciplined reading and writing that one has as a formal student.
4. Faculty mentoring and relationships beyond the classroom assist in competence development and ministry assurance. It is important to note that faculty mentoring is not advising; the key distinction is the *accidental* creation of relationships between certain students with certain faculty.
5. The professional boundary standards of the twentieth century professional pastor are eroding in favor of a more holistic and socially-engaged posture. The professional standards have failed to be re-conceived theologically amid a post-professional understanding of pastoral ministry.
6. The focus on developing social networks begins in seminary. Without the networks there, pastors enter the church alone and remain alone, especially during times of conflict and change.
7. Geographical proximity and time since graduation have some correlation with how pastors believe the seminary can benefit them in continuing education.

### **Alumni Recommendations for Leadership Formation**

**1. Institute a Pastor-Professor who is from, with, and for the Church:** The issue of leadership formation needs greater attention at Ekklesia Seminary. This does not necessarily result in a full-time professor of leadership, yet it might require a lead steward dedicated to the conversation and practice of leadership formation. There are two important factors regarding the appointment of resources: a) The person(s) need the incarnate connection with local church ministry. Students want to know that a teacher has recently stood in the

pulpit, experienced church dynamics, and sweated blood over the difficulties of leading a church. The doctorate is secondary; b) The most important factor for leadership formation, according to interviewees, was to continue the biblical and theological rigor and discipline expected in the current curriculum, but to develop the intersections of the classical disciplines with organizational and leadership discourses.

**2. Contextual Theology: The Church in Time and Space:** Successful leadership formation does not mean the cultivation of a particular kind of church, whether it be a mega-church or a multicultural church. Successful leadership barely mentioned numbers, yet most did mention evidence of attendance and spiritual growth. Also, the current hype around multicultural congregations is well and fine, but many knew that their external neighborhoods lacked the demographics to accomplish this desire. The purpose is to form contextual leadership that has the capacities, skills, and gifts to live amidst a community as incarnate friend.

**3. Appreciative Inquiry as Methodology for Ecclesiology:** The key factor for success was love and appreciation for God's people in specific space and time. This is an appreciative practice that some successful pastors intuitively understand. However, research methods, such as Appreciative Inquiry, can teach the skills and dispositions (*habitus*) to engage communities with appreciation and trust.<sup>9</sup> Developing successful leaders will require appreciative methodologies that are theologically framed.

**4. Loving God by Engaging and Empowering God's People:** The desire to empower and mobilize laity lacks specific models of democratic practices throughout society. The seminary, as a school for adult learners, has structural capacity for creating democratic (empowering, collaborative, and mobilizing) classrooms. Team-teaching, critical discourse, and collaborative

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

conversation are natural to formal learning environments,<sup>10</sup> and as the leadership formation structures unfold, democratic practices of empowerment, collaboration, and mobilization need to continue to be pedagogical foci.

**5. Resourcing Beyond Graduation: Partnership between Denomination and Ekklesia:** The practice of life-long learning requires stewardship and attention. Journey is one program that affords opportunities for this type of learning, yet more could be done in partnership with the denomination to strengthen training programs during the first years of ministry. Currently, the denomination has several consultants that could serve as trainers for newly graduated pastors. More positively, Ekklesia Seminary should continue its emphasis and partnership with the denomination around developing pastors' networks and coaching resources.

**6. Ongoing Assessment for Pastoral Leadership Development:** The practice of leadership development is not necessary only for laity in congregations, but also for pastors serving church bodies. The seminary is poised to construct leadership cohorts for those pastors identified with leadership gifts. This will require sophisticated assessment strategies (qualitative and quantitative) to identify gifts with the purpose of inviting leaders into Doctor of Ministry programs at Ekklesia Seminary.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Brookfield, and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999). See also, Stephen Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> The funding of such programs is potentially a major concern. The best practices of non-ecclesial organizations strongly encourage financial resources allocated at the organization's expense for the training and development of leaders within an organization or company. Grant funding is essential, but internal (congregational and denominational) resources will be necessary to increase system-wide confidence and participation in the development of pastoral leaders beyond seminary graduation.