

Late in August, after school started but before Idlewild had moved away from the summer Sunday schedule, my husband and I began the task of bringing our third and last child, Abigail, through the ritual of staying through “big” church. For this child, - our Abigail, who was nestled in the womb at my ordination; swaddled in the sanctuary by wise widows from my first call; nurtured on the sanctuary steps watching baptisms as a toddler – she was now destined to take her place in a ministry of presence and participation in worship. We began her Olympic worship training with a series of playbook “what nots” using a series of “what-not” statements to drive home our lessons.

Around the kitchen table and a bowl of Cheerios we said to her, “Abigail, what’s not going to happen is that you won’t leave the sanctuary and go to Children’s Church Continued with Miss Katie and her hugs.” Snapping the seatbelt of her booster seat, we said, “Abigail, after Ms. Elizabeth’s message and baptisms, what’s not going to happen is you crashing out of the sanctuary doors, running up the ramp away from “big church” and going over into the Jones’ building.” As we were walking into the church, we said, “Abigail, what’s not going to happen is you eating goldfish; drinking apple juice and building block towers to crash with Gentry, Jamie and Georgia.”

So that first time, that summer Sunday, right before the eleven o’clock hour, worship was about to begin with Abigail neatly squeezed between us with her stiff plastic envelope full up with crayons, index cards and a children’s bulletin. With the contents of her envelope spilling out over her lap, onto the cushioned pew, and down to the floor, I put my arm around her and leaned in to her – pointing at the appropriate place on the bulletin. I whispered, “This is what we are going to do. Pastor Margaret will “call us to worship.” Using the best of my parental and pastoral authority I said, “Sweetie, put the crayons aside and pay attention.” Looking up at me out of the corner of her eyes, Abigail responded, “I know, Mom. The *teacher* leads us *then we do our part*.” Abigail, framed in worship, intimately knew at six years of age, where pastoral authority resides, in “Pastor Margaret” *the teacher who leads us and helps us to do our part*.

The Reforming Ministry, Faculty Initiative, a portion of a Lilly grant, began when a group of about eighteen folks accepted invitations from a gentle spoken and humble servant newly called into the Office of Theology and Worship. We marked our agendas for travel twice a year; we looked to see who we knew on the roster; and we wondered what we’d do as a group. We agreed to meet twice a year and gathered the first year at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and in North Carolina at Davidson College. Wading into the waters of being reformers had a slow start – it took the first year to solidify our roster; to begin to grow to trust one another; and to parse through our Re-Forming Ministry, Faculty Initiative responsibilities.

It was a challenge to put our arms, heads and hearts around our amorphous objective. We were charged to think theologically about the church – not to craft individual bricks to fortify Pharaoh’s church<sup>1</sup>; that is we were called to reflect on the preparation of pastors for a life of service and leadership within God’s good church – not to edify our own objectives as theologians, middle governing body officials and pastors. Together we were commissioned to listen, to serve and to worship with one another remembering our common baptismal calling as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggeman, National Pastor’s Sabbath named the times when pastors get caught up in administration, not in Word centered obedience, “building bricks for Pharaoh’s church.”

A pattern emerged for our work together – individually we would read and think about our assigned topics. We would engage in a binge of electronic communication prior to our meeting times. Then, we’d gather together, share papers, write and discuss long sentences, and challenge and question one another. This work was rooted in the disciplined life of morning, noon-day and evening prayers and prayerful checking in times, which always went longer than the agenda allowed, as the shards of our ministries and lives were gathered in prayer. Mid-stream, we intentionally moved away from our traditional meeting process and engaged with a congregation for a short time – for both worship and table fellowship. Our lives were consistently nurtured by hearty table fellowship whether in institutional cafeterias, church fellowship halls, local restaurants or family dining rooms.

My task is to share with you the experience of our musings around pastoral authority arising from this process. My task is to describe what emerged in our group on the authority that a pastor has that allows a child to look up from the pew and know and respond that the pastor is the teacher, - a teacher who has “established an authoritative teaching ministry that is not authoritarian<sup>2</sup>” – but instead one who gathers and leads the people guided by the centrality of the Word in a particular context. Whether presenting papers from topics as diverse as *Federal Calvinism* to the role of the *Daughters of Zelophehad* – the topic of pastoral authority hung around like the remnants of households that dangled in the leafless trees which stood like signposts after hurricane Katrina.

So why is it that pastoral authority hung around – and which pieces were important to pull down from the branches and evaluate? Several questions that we were asked by our leaders served as a catalyst for identifying those pieces - our faculty initiative work began with a series of questions around identity and intimacy; service and suspicion. “Remind us who you are and where you have come from? Share some particulars of how you serve and describe some of your fears?” These questions led us to examine pastoral authority in four areas: pastoral authority as a balance between the roles of office, profession and calling; pastoral authority as rooted in the Reformation notes and traditionally understood; pastoral authority as rooted in the *munus triplex* – a gift from God of ministerial and declarative authority; and pastoral authority which is ascribed versus earned.

### **Pastoral Authority as Balance**

In those initial questions, we responded candidly whether admitting that menopausal women and emerging adolescents don’t belong in the same household or identifying frustrations with discerning calls, church members and colleagues in ministry. My fears came out of my service in the presbytery where conflict was more common than confession- conflict when pastors understood authority as authoritarian – not as a balance between roles of leadership.

In his book, *God’s Potters*, Jackson Carroll, provided a helpful insight to us as he argued that pastoral ministry is best characterized as a balance between understandings of pastoral leadership as an office, a profession and a calling and the necessity for keeping a tension between all three because the role of pastor involves all three.

First, he suggests that ministers are ordained to an office in the church and that an office is a “formal position in the church with specified ‘official’ duties and recognized

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<sup>2</sup> Osmer, Richard Robert. *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church*. p 5.

by ordination, either by a congregation or a denomination.”<sup>3</sup> Presbyteries ordain candidates to the office to preach the Word, administer the sacraments and help in the preservation and nurture of discipline. Such tasks in the office are more than empty rituals uttered by a breathing individual behind the table or near the font – they are important responsibilities that come with the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament.

#### **Pastoral Authority as Profession**

Secondly, ministers are ordained to a profession in the church. This position requires the Masters of Divinity, or similar, degree that gives ministers the authority to take certain roles in the church as stewards of the “knowledge and practice” of ministry. Our group knows without exception that a degree into the profession of ministry of Word and Sacrament is not the conferment of pastoral authority – the degree does not make the pastor. The irony though, is that the degree is necessary for ordination into the office – and confers a certain authority to the profession of ministry. However, and we heard it in Kim’s testimony - churches and the people God calls together make pastors together.

#### **Pastoral Authority as Calling**

Thirdly, in addition to being ordained to an office and a profession, ministers are called and ordained out of God’s calling to ministry of Word and Sacrament. There are three parts to this call; an inner-call, the confirmation of the church, and the call of a particular church and all three need be present in sufficient measure for the presbytery to ordain a candidate.

Pastoral authority resides in keeping a healthy balance or tension between the roles of service into an office, into a profession of a particular vocational calling.

#### **Pastoral authority as rooted in the Reformation notes**

The Reformation notes of the church are the true preaching of the word of God, the right administration of the sacraments and the ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered. Traditionally understood, pastoral authority is the authority ministers have to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and participate in church discipline.

My pastoral authority is directly tied to my duties as one who preaches the Word, administers the sacraments, and participates in prayer, teaching, and the fellowshiping life of the church. The Reformation notes of the church make the presbyters of the church the trustees and guardians of everything that makes the church, the church – and not just another country club.

#### **Pastoral authority as rooted in the *munus triplex* – a Gift from God**

The ministry of the church is properly patterned after the ministry of Christ. For many, the *munus triplex*, the anointed offices in the Old Testament of prophet, priest and king, remain foundational for thinking about the church’s ministry in the world. Christ’s demonstration of the three-fold office provides the pattern for ministry. As our Redeemer, Christ is the prophet, priest and king without parallel. Christ delegates and gives those of us who are ministers of Word and Sacrament the gift of authority for the purpose of service as prophets, priests and kings.

The “Historic Principles of Church Order” of 1789, prominently situated in the first chapter of our Form of Government, emphatically state that “Church power is only ministerial and declarative.” The gift of authority is ministerial, or pastoral, in that it is obedient to service to the Word. It is declarative because as such it is expressed in

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership in the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp.16-17.

preaching the gospel and administration of the sacraments announcing the accomplished fact of reconciliation, the *already* but the *not yet*.

Drawing upon Calvin, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Westminster Standards our group found a clear consensus that a minister's authority extends to the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and a role in the preservation of church discipline. Located in these confessional standards, this authority is delegated by Christ, and is given expressly for the purpose of building up the church.

Pastoral authority is delegated by God – delegated authority which comes from Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit who sends me – Christ whom I proclaim. A pastor living with the gift of God's authority intimately knows and speaks from the Bible on the pulpit; and moves between the table set with fruit of the vine and the bread of life; and the font flowing with living waters. These elements and moving among them are foundational for pastoral authority.

We found as a group that our pastoral authority is in large part dependant upon our ability to view the world theologically and to speak the gospel gently and reverently before a hurting and broken world. The poet Billy Collins is a practiced observer. He says it is the task of the poet to stand at the window and to observe. Our group would say that the task of the pastor is to stand still long enough in one's daily service in Christ's model of prophet, priest and king - to know that God is God and to observe God at work in the ordinary unfolding of each day. Practiced observation helps the pastor know the gift of pastoral authority and to move from pulpit, to table and font proclaiming gospel, telling the story inside the church and sent outside the church living, translating and testifying to the gospel story.<sup>4</sup>

Our group clearly identified that pastoral authority known and exercised well is a gift of God, in the position in which we serve. But our group also recognized our ability however humble, however self-emptying - that occasionally we need to be regarded as the one with authority.

This desire led us to conversations of the importance of confession –when we turn our authority from authority rooted in a gift from God to an authority driven by fear and ego – our desire to be omni-competent. When we shift into power language and into accomplishing ministry products we tend to shift into a language of success, and in turn we make the Reformation notes into the “To Do” list of the pastor and not the work of the pastor and the community.

By extension we would say that pastoral authority extends into every corner of human life – though pastoral authority is not about rote exercise of unexamined earthly powers. In the Reformed tradition, ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament is not intended to institute a hierarchy of clergy over elders and non-ordained ministers – though it seems that is often the perception – in the graced infirmity of the church.<sup>5</sup>

Too often elders and non-ordained members remain silent, self-negate, and defer to the pastors in the room when issues come before committees, when called upon to lead prayer, when pushed to live into the parity intended between laity and clergy. Ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament is also not intended to institute a hierarchy of

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<sup>4</sup> A reflection from conversations with Darrell Guder on the Missional Church.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Plantinga Pauw, “*The Graced Infirmity of the Church*”, *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics.*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 189-203.

clergy; climbing church success ladders through chaplaincies to associate positions finally reaching tall steeples as “Senior Pastor.”

Saying “Senior Pastor” in our group discussions created heated energy in the room about how such language is an anathema and an outright abuse of authority in a damaging way. We would say among ourselves, about our own ministries when self-absorption snuck in, when we failed to see our authority as a gift from God, that sometimes we allow the tyranny of the urgent to decay God’s good providence.

### **Pastoral authority as ascribed versus earned**

Mid-stream, we intentionally moved away from our traditional meeting format and engaged with a particular congregation for a short time – for both worship and table fellowship. We visited with the Korean Community Presbyterian Church in Duluth, Georgia. As Junior explained in her introduction this morning, this was a pivotal meeting for us for while there we recognized a different understanding of pastoral authority that few of us had experienced. It was authority which was ascribed to the pastor by the office merely by the formal title of Pastor. Pastoral formation is contextual.

We quickly decided that in our discussions we had not addressed that the particularities of a context for ministry definitively shapes pastoral authority. At that point in our conversation, Ike Kennerly shared with us the experience of his first call in the late 1950’s. Ike testified that when he came out of seminary, he was green behind the ears, exceptionally young and not certain about what it meant to be pastor – but because he held the *office* of Pastor, that because he was “*the pastor*” in “*the church*”, with “*the education*”, that he was, “*the one with authority*” – that copious amounts of respect and authority were yielded to him by those in his congregation. This was pastoral authority which was *ascribed* to the office within his particular context, yet not earned by Ike.

Authority which is *earned* as a pastor serves in the office as she serves preaching, administering the sacraments and nurturing of disciplines is different. I know I am saying this again, but churches and the people God calls together make pastors together. In my first call, one of the most humbling experiences I had was when I had to go on bed rest on a Sunday morning during a pregnancy. The worship chairwoman responded, “That’s ok – we’ve got it under control.” And not much later, a knock on the door and the elders stood at the front door, asked to gather around me in bed, then laid their hands on and began to pray from the Psalms, “Oh, bless the life that is within me.” These elders taught me about trusting and believing in the healing power of biblical prayer that morning – a way of prayer that I could have never learned in a classroom. Over our years together, through various assignments with one another, we experienced how pastoral authority is earned.

Julie Hodges, serving in Desert Springs, California, recounted her gathering of a group of women who studied the book, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* by Ruth Haley Barton. From Barton the group discovered the importance of nurturing spiritual disciplines. For Julie, using a new teaching paradigm, using ancient practices, she creating a space in which her authority was earned in the manner in which together these women and their leader delved into the study of the Word and practices engaging in the Word.

Drawing on the work of author, Wendell Berry, Douglass Key, pastor in Clover, SC, shared a series of newsletter articles that he wrote in which his pastoral authority was growing as he sought to help his congregation vision their future together in changing

cultural times. Douglass described the absolute anguish of being church when the church comes to that point when she no longer knows what to do.

Quoting Berry, Douglass identified that it is in precisely those moments that we need not fear, for this is the point in which we find our real work. Douglass worked on earning his pastoral authority as he gave his congregants, through a newsletter, the permission to not be afraid because “being church” is different that it was in the historical memory of many congregants.

Douglass also shared important advice he’d received from a seminary professor who molded his understanding of pastoral authority. “Remember.” The seminary professor said, “They were Christians before you got there. Don’t walk in with the saddle. You don’t have the plans for their future.”

Sarah Marsh, pastor in Louisville, KY, brought worship liturgies for us to use, that focused on the intentional discipline of returning to repentance and the transformation of a confessional life together. When a pastor participates and leads with a people who turn and confess authority is earned, slowly and over time.

We sometimes saw this need to trust in the slow work of God, with a confessional attitude among ourselves when we gathered. Sometimes we took to our task so intensely that we began to sow the seeds of personal agendas and began to talk past one another. Group member, Jim Gunn who was raised in a farming family, would step away, summarize our collective meanderings and call us back to task which was to drive combine through the fields of the faculty initiative of Reforming Ministry. At one point Jim reflected with us and called us back reminding us that it is God’s authority that sends us, even in the work of ReForming Ministry, as he drew upon Ray Anderson’s, *The Soul of Ministry*.

“The role of a pastor starts with a calling that is shared among all Christians, that of a disciple who allows God to be Lord in one’s life. Only in this way will pastors not only be leaders who are *servant*-leaders, but will be servants of *God’s call* rather than servants of the unquenchable master that serving “the needs of the people” can become.”<sup>6</sup>

At our last meeting in December to put a ritual to end our process, Martha Moore Keish and Junior McGarrahan led us in asking one last question to close out our time together, to complete our Lilly grant work. This time, it was a simple question – focused on health, “Share with us what has been life-giving about the ReForming Ministry, Faculty Initiative process?” As we went around the table, there was consensus as we affirmed together the significance the work we had done together as colleagues.

In our time thinking about forming pastors for ministry we often heard the echo of David Bosch’s prophetic words, “we are wagering on a future that present experience seems to belie.”<sup>7</sup> But, ReForming Ministry gave eighteen pastors a healthy place to intentionally work through and live together what it means to be pastor and to be in the church.

The message traveling around the table at our closing meeting was that our gatherings had helped to preserve our life and service in Christ together. Based on my place at the table, I was to be the last one to respond. The closer it came to being my turn, the more my soul was disquieted, the more the stoic in me disappeared and tears drew

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<sup>6</sup> Ray Anderson. *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God’s People*.

<sup>7</sup> David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Mary Knoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1991.

nearer to the surface – and when it came time, I responded, “I don’t think this process has been life-giving, but instead, I’d say life-sapping.”

What Abigail had said in church that August morning echoed our group’s emphasis on the role of pastor as one who lives before God – immersed in the Word, sharing the Word, living before God – calling the congregation to *do their part*.

For now, the work I do – or the way I serve as an unpaid Parish Associate – writing worship liturgy, teaching regularly, preaching annually, leading worship quarterly, and praying regularly – while choosing to parent three children for a time is indeed a way of holding the Word before the people so they can do their part. However, my work of holding the Word before the people is not being recognized and named for what it is – and in many ways, my tears that last day were about recognizing a crisis of pastoral authority which emerged from our groups early questions of identity and intimacy, service and suspicion.

So, I believe – So, I pray.