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### **The Profession of Pastor**

The profession of ministry is often referred to as a “calling.” Many in ministry fondly remember a time when each felt the pull of God on the heart; the reassurance of being prepared for a special place among God’s people. It is a part of the minister’s story that most love to tell. The minister’s response to these instances of calling can resemble those recorded in scripture: the fortitude of Noah, the inexperience of Samuel, or the piety of Job, to name just a few. We all have a unique response to the call to serve God in this world.

When in seminary, I remember being told that I should only become a minister if I could not think of being anything else in this world. I understood the implication that ministry was not simply a job. I knew that serving a church, even serving a small church, required a great commitment. I did not understand the extent of the commitment or the sacrifices that I would make. I knew that over time, I would negotiate my wants and needs. Looking back, the idea of being employed as a minister, a pastor, or a preacher, seemed elusive. Therefore, I was not particularly concerned about the lifestyle of a person in the professional ministry of Christ’s Church. I was not concerned with pastoral care conflicting with self-care.

Even when I became an ordained minister, I could think of many things I could have done professionally. I concluded that those broad interests would serve me as well in ministry and I still carry this belief with me today. I never had the comfort of that tunnel vision or seeing myself doing nothing else. I thought that my varied interests and work experience would help me relate to people.

As I look back on my first five years of ministry, I paused to ask many questions of the call that I fill in a small church, part-time ministry. I have wondered the best way for those in ministry to continually prepare to be the hands and feet of Christ. Taken seriously, the role of the minister is a high stress position, not always in the sense of workload, but in responsibility. Most are tied to this commitment with body, mind, soul and strength. Does the inability to unplug from this ministry at times for rest, Sabbath-keeping, fun, family and various other life tasks help or hurt the ability to fill our call? **This paper will examine ministerial life in the age of technology, seeking to clarify if our constant connection through technological means enhances or hinders our work in the ministry of Christ.**

## **A Point of Reference in Scripture**

Are the tools of technology helping us to live authentically as Christ followers or are they adding an intolerable burden of ministerial life? It is important to look at what we are asked to do in scripture, in addition to the contracts that we fill as professional ministers. 1 Timothy provides some instruction to a young man leading a congregation and can give us a starting point for the many tasks of a minister:

*<sup>11</sup> Command and teach these things. <sup>12</sup> Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. <sup>13</sup> Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. <sup>14</sup> Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.*

*<sup>15</sup> Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. <sup>16</sup> Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

(1 Timothy 4:11-16, New International Version)

From this point, we can already see a great amount of pressure put on the leader of the community. The description of Timothy's role in the verses and chapters following only add to the concern and commitment that he must show. The point is clear that leaders of the congregation are required to be an example to others. To complicate the issues further, when a minister fails to set a good example, it has a potential hazard of spoiling the ministry of others.

## **Time Management & Constant Connectivity**

**People today understandably feel that their lives are out of balance, but they yearn for something totally *new*—a more equal distribution of work, family, and community time for both men and women, children and adults. (Coontz, 1997)**

Today we face issues of management that are different from the past. The connection between the pastoral leader and the congregation has great potential. Today's technology allows for constant connection. We connect through the additional means mobile phones, text messaging, emails, and social networks. This means that the concerns of the congregation *can* be more immediately addressed. This also means that the congregations concerns *must* be addressed immediately. The expectations have changed and an immediate response is expected. The days of being hidden in the study in prayer and preparation are over, that is, if they ever existed.

There is a constant battle within a minister between the sociability of regularly interacting with people and the quiet of intellectual study and preparation. Whether it is a burden or a welcomed relief, the social side of ministry has the potential to intrude on the task of study and prayer.

Whereas, a minister was once protected in solitude, today that quiet space seems to be elusive. Time set aside for writing, reflection and prayer is filled with returning emails or answering calls, because there is an open-ended connection with a veiled expectation of immediacy.

Our constant connection provides an additional tool for church leaders to be effective in pastoral care. From the point of view of the congregation, it can be reassuring to know that their pastor is available. On the side of the minister, it can be helpful to be informed and able to manage more than one crisis at a time. These devices provide a great amount of freedom, but at what price?

As stated earlier, a church leader who needs to answer every call and continue in preparation for worship and preaching could suffer internal conflict. When we look at the job description for church leaders in the New Testament, including the many points that are written in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, we see that there is no shortage of demands. According to the scripture above, we are required to *devote* ourselves to the teaching and study of scripture. But we are also to set an example for speech and conduct – this includes our interactions and courtesies on the phone, email, and other communication. Does this include a rule that emails and phone calls need to be returned within 24 hours?

It is important to develop trusting relationships with the people in the congregation, but it is also important to have time for personal reflection and family, since both are great sources of inspiration. There are already numerous cultural pressures on families that can pull them apart at the seams. From observations of the families in the congregations where I have worked, it seems that we have great opportunities to be in communication within the family unit, but the quality of communication has been lowered. For example, a parent and child may exchange short text messages or emails during the day. This contact is good, except that it might have replaced a phone call where the communication could have been expanded.

To say that families have suffered from the increased use of communication technology is a stretch. It is probably too soon to tell and we are too close to the cultural shift to give an honest analysis. However, in ministers' families, where the call is to always be 'on call,' the volume and variety of communication can increase the amount of stress on the entire family unit.

This stress can be carried over into other requirements of this post of congregational leader. The onslaught of communication can influence a pastor's ability to properly prepare to lead worship. This influx could take away a minister's ability to find prayerful solitude in a retreat. Most importantly, the ability for pastor and church to be in constant contact can easily encroach into one's ability to keep a Sabbath. Poor habits can lead to overwhelming exhaustion, burnout and family friction.

### **Just Say: "No"**

**The exercise of discipline is not only a demanding but also a complex task, requiring both flexibility and judgment. Courageous people must continually**

**push themselves to be completely honest, yet must also possess the capacity to withhold the whole truth when appropriate. To be free people we must assume total responsibility for ourselves, but in doing so must possess the capacity to reject responsibility that is not truly ours. (M. Scott Peck, 1978)**

In the midst of exhaustion, a leader can allow others to dictate his actions, running the risk of being labeled co-dependent or ineffective. If another is too helpful or too giving, she has boundary issues. There is an element of ministry that requires each leader to keep his or her life perfectly intact while trying to be a voice of reason, guidance and Christian principles in the lives of others. It can be a juggling act because we need the loving message and the comforting guidance that a healthy, faithful life in Christ can bring.

It is easy to hand over to others heart and soul when we have a mandate in our profession to represent the hands and feet of Christ. Being one of the many representatives of Christ and the Christian message, we would not want to say ‘no’ in an instance that Christ would have said ‘yes.’ We know intellectually that Christ does not have boundaries. Christ often pushed the boundaries of others to make a point or to draw in his followers.

Using ‘no’ could create a label that the leader is self-absorbed or unavailable. The minister is the person who diligently teaches through word and action, while also progressing in the gifts of his or her faith. The metaphors used to describe the task at hand vary: a life raft to a sinking ship; an empty vessel filled; a puppet to the puppeteer. Perhaps, we get carried away with the idea that our work is no longer our own and that when we rest we are not doing the work of God.

Jesus retreated into the wilderness, taking time to pray and be restored. It is important that boundaries are properly set, for the ministry in practice and for the ministers that will come in the future. This will require that the response to some requests will be ‘no’. This means that some things will be non-negotiable. Without boundaries, the leadership can quickly burn through their reserves of energy and begin running on empty. We are all needy people and even those leading a congregation have needs for independence and privacy.

Because we are in a culture where there is constant connectivity, it gets harder to say ‘no.’ It gets harder to tuck oneself away and focus on a project or family event. Being constantly available is a little like being followed on a regular basis. On one hand, it means that the emergencies *can* be dealt with immediately, on the other, emergencies *need* to be dealt with immediately. Therefore, it is important that leaders of congregations learn to take their ear away from the phone, and allowed to work or rest or play without interruption.

### **Only-ness (Loneliness)**

**“Human love lives by uncontrolled and uncontrollable dark desires; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by *truth*. Human love produces human subjection, dependence, constraint; spiritual love creates *freedom* of**

**the brethren under the Word. Human love breeds hothouse flowers; spiritual love creates the *fruits* that grow healthily in accord with God's good will in the rain and storm and sunshine of God's outdoors." (Bonhoeffer, 1954)**

In the Sufis description of theology, we are all fish getting together in schools trying to figure out if there is an ocean. Imagine being the leader of a school of fish trying to convince each fish as it darts around that it is in the ocean, that the ocean exists, and that they could not live outside of the ocean. Likewise we are trying to convince or sell our congregations on the idea that we are part of God's creation, God exists and we cannot live outside of this creation. This seems like a desperate task and I can understand why individuals, such as Jonah, fled from the call.

The pulpit can be a lonely place, especially when we feel that we are the only one with deep concern over the state of God's creation. Even though we are wired and connected through technology, our message is amplified and photocopied so everyone can see and hear, we may not be seen or heard. Even as we talk about the impasse of connectivity and communication, it is still a reality that the ministry can be a lonely place. This is due to the nature of the work and the place in the community, but there are also cultural considerations.

As a minister sitting alone on an airplane, do you cheerfully anticipate or dread your neighbor's question: "So, what do *you* do?" I thought that I would enjoy the look of shock on people's faces when I told them about my ministry, but I try not to look anymore. Instead of shock it is a grimace of confusion, discomfort and the platitude (as if I am a child who just finished a finger painting): "Isn't that wonderful." I can almost hear the tape playing in their head: *So young, so naïve, someday she will learn that the church is a den of fools*. There are a few times that people get overly excited because they know another woman who is a minister and perhaps we know each other. A gentle reminder that the ministerial and pastoral role is never separated from the individual. Even in the context of strangers we are still the hands and feet of God on this earth.

Technology and media adds a layer of vulnerability and responsibility in our dealing with strangers. In this age we have the Gospel of Christ and the Gospel of Google. Hopefully, our testimony in the pulpit aligns with our testimony online. People are icons comprised of a thumbnail picture and a brief bio on a social networking site that we manipulate to impress and influence others. Social media is a way to reach out, to connect and to make the pastor available to the congregation, but it also ministry that needs to be maintained prayerfully and with Christ in the center.

Our ministries might be the most vulnerable and look like Swiss cheese to those who are closest to us. Our family sees us at our best and worst. How does the profession of ministry impact how we relate to those closest to us? More than once I have been reprimanded by family members who corner me and remind me that based on my faith there are certain expectations of behavior. The need to have my 'church self' and my 'everyday self' completely aligned is now critical since we have a child and desire to model Christian behavior for her. I have been told that I could

not get angry or ‘bitch and moan’ about life. This would be unbearable pressure for any Christian, but it can suffocate a minister who has no emotional outlet or safe place to be imperfect.

We are given a false impression in social media that it is a safe place to be ourselves. People are also given the false impression that we have control over how others view us. A minister needs to have more control over how he or she is seen by others than most other professions. The expectation is that we are in control of life and constantly see the world through our desire to serve Christ. Much of the time this is true, but we are also imperfect. Too often the level of perfection expected can be a great deal to bear, and resemble more of a celebrity walking the red carpet or a politician walking a fine line than a servant walking in the path that God has poured out.

### **“A Cure for What Ails”**

**The dramatic change in the church’s situation in the Roman world opened the way for the significant additions to its worship. Like the edifices erected with imperial support and sanction, the liturgy too grew more elaborate and took on some of the pomp and ceremony of the imperial court. No longer the despised and persecuted minority fighting for their lives, Christians could speak about their “mysteries” in language that they formerly rejected as the language of the “world.” (Hinson, 1996)**

At this point, the lack of boundaries in communication technology and the intrusive nature of social media makes the age of technology a hindrance to the pastoral leader. However, instances where technology is used to enhance the communication of God’s word and the work of Christ in this world cannot be ignored. The liturgy of the church is expanding beyond the Sunday morning corporate worship and outside the space of the sanctuary—something the early church would have celebrated. The success of the Good News spreading through technology may be at the cost of the wellbeing of pastoral leaders in the congregation. Stress comes from the media not the message. Constant connectivity can be at the peril of the pastor who does not recognize that acting in service to Christ requires constant preparation.

In the world of media mixing with technology and constant connection, it is critical that ministers are in fellowship and association with each other. There is a practice in the Mormon church called “mutual recognition” and although it is hard to know from my standpoint what this really means in the context of the Mormon church, I appreciate the face-value initiative. In mutual recognition, there would be standard of compliance and a process that would determine that relevant standards and requirements are met by each member. The standards and requirements for each person could be different, but the mutual recognition would be the acknowledgment that such standard are met. It is a little like writing your own job description.

Such a method could help clarify the expectations of the minister. It could approach the difficult issues of being constantly connected and available to the congregation. An expectation could be created, or revived, that a pastor needs solitude for prayer and reflection. In our Congregational tradition, this could only happen in the context of fellowship.

In addition to the give-and-take of fellowship, all ministers need a context where investigation and exploration of ideas is welcome. In this context it should be acceptable to search for the presence and meaning of God. This will allow the leaders of the congregation to ask questions and not simply be a source of answers. This requires the discipline of constant learning and resourcefulness, and the challenges of continued education. All of these tasks are fueled by the technology we are blessed with, but we have to be mindful of the impression we create by trying to be all things to all people, indeed, only Christ can be that.

When we look at our task as followers of Christ, we can and should use all tools available to us. But the ultimate goal is still the same no matter what the context of our culture or our level of technology. Paul Tillich describes this longing and desire that serves as a reminder to us at the conclusion of the debate: “The concern of faith is identical with the desire of love: reunion with that to which one belongs and from which one is estranged. In the great commandment of the Old Testament, confirmed by Jesus, the object of *ultimate concern*, and the object of unconditional love, is God. From this is derived the love of what is God’s, represented by both neighbor and oneself. Therefore, it is the “*fear of God*” and the “*love of Christ*” which, in the whole biblical literature, determines the behavior toward the other human beings.” (Tillich, 1957)

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