

Pastoral excellence in an impatient age

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The late management expert Peter Drucker is widely quoted as having listed “pastor” as one of the four hardest jobs in America, alongside the President of the nation, a hospital CEO, and university president.¹ Today’s pastors face the huge challenge of establishing an authoritative ministerial voice while addressing an increasingly egalitarian culture which is, after all, partly the product of Christian values and practices. Do our churches recognize the changes in the social position of the pastoral profession and plan to support pastors in facing these challenges?

Survey evidence and observation of the CRC suggests we do not, not yet. Too few congregations supply pastors with the time, encouragement and financial means to sustain the quiet devotional life and deep expertise that the ministry requires. Denominational efforts to support pastors are admirable, but they will have limited effect until they convince congregations to recognize and take intentional steps to reinforce those efforts.

A changing environment for pastoral ministry

A pastor in our denomination (let’s call him “Steve Smith”) once described for me the remarkable change in titles he experienced over his decades of ministry. At the outset, church members called him “Domini” (a derivative of the Latin for “Lord”); after progressing through titles such as “Rev. Smith,” “Pastor Smith,” and “Pastor Steve,” at his last church, he was often just “Steve,” or, he joked, “Hey you.”

As a native of California and a huge fan of egalitarian informality, I don’t object to calling pastors by their first names or even just “Dude.” After all, “God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34 NIV), so why should we? (And “Dude” can be a fine expression of respect and admiration.) But the increase in social informality, though desirable for many good reasons, is just one of many indicators of the social changes that make being a pastor harder than ever.

When our confessions and catechisms were written, ministers of the Gospel in the Reformed tradition were members of a tiny, educated elite, to the point that some were the only educated person in their community. Respect for the “Domini” flowed easily from the gap in knowledge and related social status. Today, respect must flow from a respect for the pastor’s vocational role, not for his or her status or education. Rather than a general hierarchy, the contemporary pastor must be a leader in ministry and a faithful follower in other areas. Today’s typical CRC pastor is a graduate of a 3- to 4-year seminary program and may minister to dozens of congregants with similarly advanced degrees, including many who are more knowledgeable than pastors about areas of organizational management, science, technology and culture. Even in communities with relatively lower education levels, congregants can learn (or believe they can learn) almost anything just by surfing the Internet. As church pollster George Barna put it in 2001: “To appreciate the contribution made by pastors you have to understand their world and the challenges they face. Our studies show that church-goers expect their pastor to juggle an

¹ See, for example, Don Sweeting, “In Praise of Pastors,” October 20, 2012.

<http://donsweeting.wordpress.com/2012/10/20/in-praise-of-pastors-part-1-of-a-3-part-series-for-pastor-appreciation-month/> (accessed January 12, 2013).

average of 16 major tasks. That's a recipe for failure—nobody can handle the wide range of responsibilities that people expect pastors to master.”²

The growth of an information society, like the printing press, is partly a step toward a true “priesthood of all believers” where the whole church could truly become thoroughly knowledgeable about God’s ways and God’s world. In other respects, ever-increasing specialization means that, more than ever, we need ministers to immerse their lives deeply in Biblical and cultural knowledge and relate them to each other.

Surveys of pastors

Since 2004, I’ve had the privilege of working on four survey waves of Christian Reformed Church pastors and clerks of council for the CRCNA’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) team, a program that began its work through funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. When we first started, I was a newcomer both to the CRC and to surveying such a valuable and sensitive population of survey respondents. In the intervening eight years, I’ve:

- read a lot of survey responses from pastors,
- talked with pastors,
- read *The Banner*,
- served as an elder at Shawnee Park CRC in Grand Rapids,
- observed Synod and Ministry Leadership meetings,
- and noticed much about the precious and troubled vocations of pastors and other church leaders.

I’m still a generalist, very much a novice with few credentials in the study of clergy and churches. In retrospect, we could have done better surveys and better analysis; however, we do have a lot of relevant data, and my experiences have produced some strong beliefs about the church’s relationship to its shepherds. Much of this article is my informed opinion, but we do have some hard data as well.

About SPE and the surveys

The SPE project is intended to help pastors and churches by encouraging balance and support in pastors’ lives and preventing the looming problem of burnout.³ SPE has directly sponsored mentoring, peer learning groups, spousal support conferences, and continuing education opportunities. The SPE team has also been interested indirectly in pastoral Sabbaths and sabbaticals, devotional life, vacations and council support for pastors and their families. The survey design reflects these priorities.

Our staff and student team at the Calvin College Center for Social Research sent paired questionnaires to pastors and clerks of council in 2004-2005, 2007, 2009, and 2011. Relative to other populations we survey, pastor and clerk survey participation rates are very high, ranging from a high of 72 percent in 2007 to a low of 57 percent in 2011, while clerks’ rates range from 63 percent in 2007 to 48 percent in 2009. We have over 500 pastors per wave and over 400 clerks per wave. In 2011, 926 CRC churches had serving pastors on record.

² Barna Research Group, LTD, September 25, 2001. “A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of ‘Pastor Appreciation Month.’”

<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/59-a-profile-of-protestant-pastors-in-anticipation-of-pastor-appreciation-monthq> (accessed January 12, 2013).

³ For a helpful, readable summary of concerns about clergy burnout, see Paul Vitello, “Taking a break from the Lord’s work,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 2010,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html> (accessed November 12, 2012).

A general summary of the survey results is straightforward and consistent across the four waves and seven years of surveys. If what we observed in 2004-2005 was pastoral excellence, then that excellence is generally being sustained. The 2011 survey results revealed a recovery in a number of the survey measures that concerned us in 2009. On average, the CRCNA's pastors appear to be weathering hard times well—at least they tell us they are doing so! Satisfaction in ministry and other measures of pastoral health remain stable. For example, we asked pastors, “what is your level of satisfaction with your present pastorate?” On a scale from “1, very satisfied” to “5, not satisfied”, 73% of pastors answered “1” or “2”; another 19% answered “3,” leaving just 5% “4” and 3% “5.”⁴

The stable aggregate pattern of high levels of satisfaction obscures a lifecycle pattern that requires fresh faces to sustain it. Pastors who are younger or new to a congregation are more satisfied than those who've been in place a few years; it then takes a lengthy 8- to 12-year break-in period with a single congregation for satisfaction to rise again. The most satisfied pastors are the oldest and have served a single congregation for decades. We also observe that the 111 pastors who responded to all four waves became less and less satisfied over time, falling from 87% 1s and 2s in 2005 to 71% in 2011. Many of these repeat-respondent pastors are still in the “break-in” period with their current congregations.

From the aggregation of the data, it's also hard to see how long pastors can remain healthy as their livelihoods come under stress from shrinking congregations. Reported membership is declining at congregations of responding pastors, from an average of 303 members per congregation in 2005 to 248 in 2011, an 18% decline. Urban congregations have it worst, declining from 244 to 183 members, a 25% loss. If there are healthy, growing churches whose membership compensates for these losses, too few are participating in the survey, which may itself be a bad sign for our covenantal community.

We also continue to find a chronic, substantial lack of support for pastors from their congregations. A minority of pastors receives feedback on their sermons; just 38 percent perceive excellent or good quality joint reflection with their council on the pastoral role, 31 percent of clerks report no continuing education budget for pastors, and only 22 percent of pastors have been on a sabbatical in the last five years. Over a third of those sabbaticals were shorter than three months.

There are some relevant signs of hope—one in particular. The number of disciples that pastors are mentoring, a potentially powerful engine for organic growth modeled on Jesus' own ministry, has increased significantly, from 5.7 total disciples per pastor in 2005 to 7.6 per pastor in 2011.

Congregations need a stronger culture of pastoral support

I am not an expert in this field and happily expect my views to be qualified by others who are more deeply trained and informed, especially by denominational and seminary leaders. The analysis and recommendations that follow are largely personal opinions. However, I believe the analysis is broadly consistent with both orthodox perspectives on the role of the church and with research-based literature on trends in modern Western churches. The central purpose of this commentary is to illustrate some of the ways in which a congregation's view of the pastor's role can adversely affect the pastor and the mission of the church in unintended and unexpectedly paradoxical ways.

Changing foundational assumptions

The survey data includes comments from pastors, which are often extensive and sometimes very critical. One pastor remarked that support programs seem to fund personal growth as a sort of luxury vacation package for pastors, while lamenting that “I haven't seen anything about the relationship of [pastoral support programs] to growing churches.” This critic also recognizes the shrinking membership problem:

⁴ See Figure 15 on page 29 of the full 2011 report, found here: <http://www.calvin.edu/weblogs/csr/report-on-2011-spe-survey>

“I realize pastors need rest and support, but I also realize that if we don’t start having healthier and growing churches, they’ll have a lot of time to rest.” In other words, why spend critically needed budget on pampering pastors when these funds could be more effective elsewhere? The critic has a point: the denomination could seek ways to show how pastoral support work contributes to the overall growth of the church and not just to pastoral health.

The critic’s point of view, however, also exemplifies a mindset that accentuates the problem of pastoral burnout: pastors and pastoral support programs have the burden of proof to show the need for more support, as if evidence of stress and burnout were not plentiful. Pastors are expected to bring a “non-anxious presence” to the congregation, but most are caught in an anxiety-inducing vise of declining respect for their professional status and increased demand for managerial skills that ensure efficient delivery of services to members. Pastors are not receiving the resources they need to be effective leaders of growing churches. Too many pastors report that they receive relatively little support and encouragement from their councils and congregations for the kinds of spiritual retreats, life-balance, and educational activities that make it possible to be an effective pastor. Four survey waves and seven years of data suggest these are chronic problems.

How will churches grow if pastors are undernourished and distracted from their core duties of learning God’s Word and seeking His heart for the church and the world? It may be impossible for pastors to succeed if the assumption is that congregations and councils should be skeptical of pastoral support programs until they “prove themselves.” We have ample evidence that the opposite path is necessary: our skepticism needs to be inverted. We need to hear Jesus calling us to check for planks in our own eyes, to be skeptical of our own motivations and assumptions.

Before congregations can begin to grow, leaders and members have to value sabbaticals, retreats, peer groups, and so forth. These are not experimental means to an end for the church; they are necessary and indispensable parts of being a church that calls ministers to a divine vocation and provides them with the spiritual shelter and support to carry out that vocation. The first outcome to test is not the direct impact of such efforts on congregational growth, but rather improved coordination of the pastor’s role and of the mission and vision of the church with the priorities, beliefs, and behaviors of the congregation.

Sustaining pastoral excellence is not at root about budgets, church size, or church growth. Rather, it is a question of sustainability for individual pastors, who are called to be modern-day rabbis. Pastors are—figuratively speaking—homeless, itinerant strangers in a hostile world. They are called to make disciples and equip them for ministry, to visit the sick and encourage the downtrodden, and to do a variety of countercultural and difficult and unpopular things. As such, pastors require tenure stronger than that offered to professors and unconditional support greater than academic freedom. Doctrinal standards and professional requirements should be a safe place to operate, not an intelligence test to pass or a political labyrinth to navigate. Pastors cannot succeed in a stressful work environment focused on managing meager budgets or catering to major donors or putting on entertaining, ear-tickling Sunday morning shows.

Congregations should err on the side of compliance with pastoral leadership. Doctrinal supervision of pastors should be exerted lightly and through established denominational procedures of discipline, not through tightfisted control over pay raises, education budgets and so forth. This kind of backhanded discipline is demonstrably counterproductive in almost any workplace; it fosters grudges, a vice of smoldering anger. These are precisely the things we need to help pastors avoid, so they can model peace and grace for the rest of us. There is no virtue in provoking them to anger and self-defense! Indeed, if you believe your pastor is in the wrong, what better way to help him or her hear God’s voice than to send your pastor on a devotional retreat or to a conference to hear the wisdom of others?

The paradox of pastoral authority

One of the basic structural challenges and paradoxes of the postmodern Western church is that the pastor is too often *overemphasized* as the authority figure and driver of the local congregation. (The expiration of the “Domini” title is not a bad thing!) Sometimes this emphasis is explicit, as in those “apostolic” movements that are often simply baptized cults of personality. In the end, the overemphasis on pastors undermines the pastor’s position and authority. Postmoderns are constantly trained by their media-driven, scandal-sensitive culture to be skeptics, critics and cynics. They (well, we, let me admit it) do not—and cannot—accept statements as authoritative if the speaker has an apparent conflict of interest; authority is closely tied to objectivity and disinterestedness. Politics and cultures inspired by the Reformation have had a significant role in fostering this properly skeptical perspective on human nature.

Pastors thus cannot advocate authoritatively for their own proper care, education and life balance; any such advocacy would be incredible. Meanwhile, the cult of pastoral leadership undermines the authority of external voices that could bring such advocacy. SPE should work on identifying and strengthening remaining points of trusted authority outside the pastor’s office and crossing that bridge of trust with a message for the church. Congregants need to re-learn how to respect the role of the pastor, not by bowing obsequiously to his or her authority, but by giving the minister the time, space, respect and care he or she needs to get ahead of the culture and the congregation and to hear the voice of God.

In return, pastors must recognize that real church growth (in depth as well as breadth) is better achieved through delegation and discipling, not through growing the cult of pastoral authority that so many churchgoers unfortunately seem to hunger for.

Economic anachronisms

The challenge of sustainable pastoral vocation is partly a matter of anachronistic expectations about the total time and energy available to a contemporary pastor. We cannot reasonably expect the magnificent sermons of an 18th Century scholar and gentleman, with his manse and servants and authoritative bishops and elders, from the schedule and stress level of a 21st Century active parent and small business executive, with his or her broken photocopier, full schedule of hospital visits, and multiple inboxes full of email messages and book catalogs (and surveys from social researchers).

Our society is struggling with questions of how much work is enough and what kind of work is needed or valuable. How better to help heal our economy than by resetting our expectations for a sustainable vocation in the church? Why not place innovation and sustainability for pastors at the vanguard of social change, rather than far in the rear?

Why not substitute one anachronism for another? Let’s stop expecting our pastors to produce like 18th Century gentleman scholars, who after all often simply re-read the sermons of a very few eloquent writers). Instead, let’s start expecting them to produce like 1st Century rabbis. The survey data on growing numbers of disciples suggests the CRC can harness an existing movement by helping churches recognize pastors as disciple-makers and to protect pastors’ time and energy by focusing it on that core task.

Using data and action better to serve pastors and the church

Finally, better denominational data systems can improve programs and support for pastors.

Comprehensive data collection is controversial due to proper concerns about power and privacy. Data can serve good and bad purposes; censuses have been both commanded by God (Numbers 1) to serve justice and incited by Satan (I Chronicles 21) to encourage pride and misjudgment. But the church, of all places, should be able to create data systems that protect the weak, build trust and prevent abuses.

The vision and mission of the CRCNA in general would be served by gentle, careful, explicit and pervasive tracking and linking of records on pastoral careers, from seminary to retirement. Research shows that performance plummets for secondary school students who endure as few as two weak teachers in a row.⁵ Has the church ever sought to observe whether pastors who serve two difficult churches in a row (or just one!) are at much greater risk of burnout? If they are, do we have the means as a body to ensure their next assignment is not deadly to their vocations or to their very bodies? Can we identify the degree of stress a particular church is likely to place on its pastor(s) and advise the church how to set its expectations and support accordingly?

Prayer is surely an effective means to protect pastors from burnout and inspire them to excellence through the work of the Holy Spirit. But James urges us not to merely wish a blessing on those we could be blessing directly (James 1:16). Are we answering that call? In the end, the data is not the important thing; it's the reality the data helps us better understand. We do not need to start calling our pastors "Domini" again. We need to start giving them the means to be the servants of God and others that we called them to be.

SIDEBAR: What to do at your church

You and your council can help your pastor and your church through some of the following steps:

1. Practice respecting pastors on the basis of their divine vocation, not their charisma, managerial performance, education or social status. We call pastors to model Christian discipleship for us; it's more important to follow their example and heed their wisdom than to pay lip service with special titles and manners.
2. Don't tell the pastor "great sermon" if you don't intend to apply it to your own life! But do give systematic, regular sermon feedback—it's an important sign of healthy pastor-church relationships.
3. Institute a strong Sabbaths-and-sabbaticals policy that requires pastors to take time for their spiritual and educational growth, both for short periods in any given year and for long periods every five to seven years.
4. Provide a continuing education and conference budget sufficient to send the pastor (and perhaps their spouse, in rotating years) to at least one weeklong conference or workshop per year. In 2011, the average CRC congregation's continuing education budget would not cover transportation, hotel, meals and conference registration for even a typical 4-day academic conference.
5. Pastoral support must not be pitted against other ways of "doing ministry." Discourage fellow congregation members from muttering about salaries and vacations and sabbaticals, as if the pastoral job were strictly comparable to other salaried work and should be judged on efficiency or pay equity with congregants.
6. Church budgets may be tight, but the tension should not devolve into blaming the pastor's "perks." Those "perks" are like a mechanic's tools or a pilot's aircraft—take them away and there

⁵ Heather G. Peske and Kati Haycock. 2006. "Teaching inequality: how poor and minority students are shortchanged on teacher quality." Education Trust.
<http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/TQReportJune2006.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2013), pages 9-11.

is no job to do. The wisdom pastors accrue during study and renewal time is not self-indulgence, it is critical to the church's witness and growth.

7. Recognize pastors as knowledge managers with complex, difficult jobs, and pay and support them accordingly. Peter Drucker compares pastoral work to the difficulty of running a modern hospital, which he calls the most complex organization ever created by human beings. The median CEO at rural, non-profit, non-critical-access US hospitals makes \$323,900.⁶ We pay almost all of our pastors well under than a third of that amount; we certainly do not pay many of them too much!

⁶ Beckers Hospital Review. April 11, 2012. "20 Statistics on Non-Profit Hospital CEO Compensation by Community Type."
<http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/compensation-issues/20-statistics-on-non-profit-hospital-ceo-compensation-by-community-type.html> (accessed January 14, 2013)