

Ministry as More Than a Helping Profession

By Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon

Parish clergy and seminarians today seem content to have ministry numbered among the "helping professions." After all, most professing Christians, from the liberals to the

5 fundamentalists, remain practical atheists. They think the church is sustained by the services it provides or the amount of fellowship and good feeling in the congregation. This form of sentimentality has become the most detrimental corruption of the church and the ministry.

Sentimentality is that attitude of being always ready to understand but not to judge. Without God, without the one whose death on the cross challenges all our good feelings, who stands

10 beyond and over against our human anxieties, all we have left is sentiment, a saccharine residue of theism in demise. Sentimentality is the way our unbelief is lived out.

If the ministry is reduced to being primarily a helping profession, then parish clergy will also be destroyed by the presumption that all sincerely felt needs are legitimate needs. Ministry will be trivialized into the service of needs.

15 This problem is compounded by the fact that ministers are often people who need to help people. They like to be liked and need to be needed. Their personal needs become the basis for their ministry. Underestimating how terribly deep other people's needs can be, they enter ministry with an insufficient sense of personal boundaries, and are devoured by the voracious appetites of people in need. One day they may awake to find that they have sacrificed family, 20 self-esteem, health and happiness for a bunch of selfish people who have eaten them alive. Pastors then come to despise what they are and to hate the community that made them that way. The pastor realizes that people's needs are virtually limitless, particularly in an affluent society in which there is an ever-rising threshold of desire (which we define as "need"). With no clear job description, no clear sense of purpose other than the meeting of people's needs, 25 there is no possible way for the pastor to limit what people ask of the pastor.

Some say the clergy should develop more self-esteem, be more assertive, learn to say No, demand a day off--in brief, become as self-centered as many of the people in their congregations. Our society tends to respond to the problem of lack of meaning and purpose by telling people that they will feel better if they more fully develop their egos. Go more deeply 30 within for the solution rather than look outside yourself for help. In a godless society, where there really is not much outside ourselves but our own self-projections, this is probably the best advice one could expect.

But that is not how we find our meaning and purpose as Christians. What needs to happen among the clergy has to do with the church. When the church lacks confidence in what it is, 35 clergy have no idea what they should be doing. Appropriate, realistic, interesting expectations for the clergy are derived from the purpose of the church.

Meaning in ministry originates in baptism, understood as a communal undertaking. This insight was revealed to one new pastor when, thinking that he had at last won enough of his congregation's trust to push through one of his programs, he suggested opening a day-care center. The Christian education committee met to discuss the proposal.

40 Gladys butted in, "Why is the church in the day-care business? How would this be a part of the ministry of the church?"

The young pastor patiently went over his reasons: it was a good use of the building, it would attract young families, it was another source of income, and the Baptists down 45 the street already had a day-care center.

"And besides, Gladys," said Henry Smith, "you know that it's getting harder every day to put food on the table. Both husband and wife must have full-time jobs."

5 "That's not true," said Gladys. "You know it's not true. It is not hard for anyone in this church, for anyone in this neighborhood, to put food on the table. There are people in this town for whom putting food on the table is quite a challenge, but I haven't heard any talk about them. If we are talking about ministry to them, then I'm in favor of the idea. No, what we're talking about, is, ministry to those for whom it has become harder every day to have two cars, a VCR, a place at the lake or a motor home. I just hate to see the church telling these young couples that somehow their marriage will be better or their family life more fulfilling if they can only get some other piece of junk. The church ought to be courageous enough to say, 'That's a lie. Things don't make a marriage or a family.' "

10 The young pastor had been conditioned to assume that real ministry was about "helping people." Of course, Jesus helped people and commissioned us to do the same. The trouble begins when we assume that we already know what "helping people" looks like.

15 Gladys led the church to the task of interpretation. She did not tell the congregation what to do. Rather, she invited the pastor to make his case in such a way that the church had the opportunity to interpret itself in light of who God is. Because Gladys understood her baptismally mandated ministry to live in the world in the light of the gospel rather than by 20 conventional social wisdom, she gave her pastor an opportunity to understand his ordained ministry: namely, to equip the congregation to live in the light of the gospel.

25 In questioning the church's worldview, she drove the church back to the communal and ecclesial question that is fundamental to the church's staying the church: what sort of community would we have to be in order to be the sort of people who live by our convictions?

30 25 One answer lies in the first real crisis to hit the young Jerusalem church at one of its meetings.

35 A man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostle's feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ... You have not lied to people but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died.... The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and died.... And great fear came upon the whole church . . . [Acts 5: 1 -11].

40 In ending the stark account of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke uses the word "church" for the first time in Acts. Here, in struggling to be truthful about possessions, the church experienced itself as a disciplined community of truthfulness. Peter accuses Ananias and Sapphira not of greed, but of lying. Their lies are quite natural, like the way we rationalize and excuse our own greed: "It's getting harder to put food on the table." But their lies are confronted in the church, in the person of Peter. To our ears, Luke tells the story in a harsh, uncompromising tone, and the image of Peter in Acts 5 clashes with our conventional pictures of the good pastor. Peter 45 should have dealt more gently with Ananias and Sapphira. With a good course in pastoral counseling, Peter would have been able to see that, while Ananias and Sapphira may have been affluent, they had their own problems. Why didn't Peter enable them to find more

meaningful and productive lives rather than confront them in such a way as to shock them to death?

Forsaking the socially acceptable vocation of helping people live just a bit less miserably, Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira with a radical vision of the sort of church God had called them to be part of. Luke tells this story to hold up the manner of life God intends for us. We are therefore not to ask such diversionary questions as, How could a thing like this happen? Rather we should ask, What sort of community would we need to enable this sort of church (a church of truthful commonality) to exist?

We might say that we tolerate Ananias and Sapphira because we are called to a ministry of service and compassion, even when people are wealthy liars. In other words, we have more love than Peter had in Acts. We deceive ourselves. We do not believe in Ananias and Sapphira as much as Peter believed in them. We cannot imagine any means of breaking out of our materialism, so we dare not risk the truth-telling of Acts 5.

As pastors, letting ourselves off the hook by appealing to our sympathy for people's fragility and limits robs us of some of our most rewarding opportunities to confirm our ministry in a church that really looks like a church rather than a social club. Pastors too eagerly forsake the gospel story, a story that Gladys was not willing to forget. Pastors should insist that people linger long enough with the story to be thrown in the dilemma to which the church is the necessary response.

When they are being faithful to their vocation, pastors orient the church toward God. As Acts 5 shows, this is a terrifying task. The congregation may burst forth in exuberant spirit (Acts 2) or they may drop dead of fear (Acts 5). Through Peter's pastoral care, the church lost two of its more prominent members. Yet, at the same time, the church first experienced itself as church, first used the word *ecclesia* to describe what it was. In Luke's wonderfully laconic, almost humorous verdict, "And great fear came upon the whole church." It is a fearful thing to realize how petty our definitions of "pastoral care" are when placed next to Acts 5.

Not long ago, in a Bible study for pastors on Luke-Acts, one of us told the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Some of the pastors laughed at the absurdity of people dropping dead and being carried out. Others were horrified that anyone could believe that God approves of killing people. The group was asked, "Has anybody here ever had to kill someone to save the church?"

"Yes--in a way," answered someone in the back. "I preached on the race issue in a little southern town. The schools were integrating. It was tense. I was warned by the board to tone down my preaching on the issue. When I didn't, five families left the church. Four of them never became members of any church again. My husband asked me, 'Is it worth alienating people from the church forever over one issue?' Good question. Is it worth provoking a coronary in a couple over a little thing like a piece of real estate?"

Pastors too often learn to pacify rather than preach to their Ananiases and Sapphiras. We say we do it out of love. Usually we do it as a means of keeping everyone as distant from everyone else as possible. This accounts for why, to many people, church seems superficial. Everybody agrees to talk about everything here except what matters. The loneliness and detachment of modern life, the way we are all made strangers, infects the church too. The church is frighteningly dependent upon leaders like Gladys who enable the church to look toward God.

The church at worship continues to be the acid test for all parish ministry. In our worship, we retell and are held accountable to the story about what God is doing with us in Christ. All

ministry can be evaluated by essentially liturgical criteria: How well does this act of ministry enable people to be with God?

Almost everything a pastor does can be an opportunity to orient people toward God. Visiting the sick can be much more than empathetic sharing (after all, anybody can do that, even

5 people who don't believe in God) if seen as an occasion for orienting someone to God. Pastors would do well to examine their schedules and ruthlessly delete any activity that doesn't help people do that which they do in worship.

Our church lives in a buyer's market where the customer is king. What the customer wants the customer should get. With half a notion of the gospel, pastors who get caught up in this web 10 of buying and selling in a self-fulfillment economy will one day wake up and hate themselves for it. We will lose some of our (potentially) best pastors to an early grave of cynicism and self-hate.

Pastors who determine to speak the truth--to reprove, correct, witness, interpret, remember 15 God's story--can expect to be lonely occasionally. But it would be a loneliness evoked by being faithful rather than a loneliness produced by merely being overly accessible. To the extent that the church and its leaders are willing to be held accountable to the story which is the gospel, ministry can help to create a people worthy to tell the story and to live it.

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20 Source: *The Christian Century*, March 15, 1989, pp. 282-284.