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Called to Service and to Seminary

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How does it happen? On assignment day the whole world spread out before him . . . entering the ministry . . . his own group of people to shepherd . . . the heady challenge of a world needing both the courage of a prophet and the resounding proclamation of a gospel . . . the continuity of the holy Christian church. He was about to step into the procession of the *Te Deum*. His wife's hand squeezed his as his name was called. Not too many years later late at night he sits wondering. It hasn't turned out as he had dreamed. The opposition was more insidious, the apathy more deadening. Strangely, as time passed he had wondered more and more about himself — his own skills, his approaches. Maybe he just doesn't have it; perhaps the way the ministry is set up is all wrong. Maybe he should get out now while he is still relatively young. The situation seems intolerable. God, what had happened?

Among the many forces, two take a heavy toll:

1. Ministers are worn down with the public charges and private doubts about the irrelevance of their work. In spite of brave theological interpretations to the contrary, they feel that the church has been swept into a cultural backwash. They know how much energy and how many resources are being poured into institutional maintenance. Although efforts are made to break the pattern, they still feel cloistered.

They feel a tinge of being ill at ease in a group of men involved "in the world." They have discovered that the cloister seems to be in the calling itself, in the continued immersion in the private sphere, in the community — regardless of where it is located geographically.

2. They are emotionally and strategically locked into a position where they feel they can work only with those whose political, theological, and social postures are ideologically compatible with theirs. From hair styles to vocabulary they find themselves giving and receiving signals that spell "friend" or "enemy." They are perplexed — they are overwhelmed — to discover how many of the "enemy" are in their own church. For a while they try to convert these people to the way of truth. The opposition, the distrust, the cool aloofness more destructive than the open attack — all of this within the "body of Christ" is more than they can take. Every day presents fresh calls to the barricades. But both sides are calling them. The strong and the simpleminded face no problem. But the one who "hears" the fear and idealism, who senses why the "enemy" has fashioned this response to the challenge of faith and life — this man is slowly torn to pieces.

A call to service demands that we look realistically at these two problems as symptoms of many that currently are grinding up ministers and causing a growing number of ordained men to seek "ministries"

outside the church. What about the charge that ministers are cloistered? It can be read as a symptom of hope as readily as one of despair. In a period of vast cultural upheaval, every institution continues to find its structures and definition of priorities constantly out of date. Every institution in American society is virtually overwhelmed at the moment by a haunting sense of irrelevance, futility, and impotence before the enormity of emerging needs. As James Dittes has pointed out, instead of being overwhelmed by this awareness, we should thank God that He has placed us precisely in the crisis and futilities of the present moment, not as an aloof observer but as a full participant—and by His grace, as servant and prophet.

It is in such crisis situations that all sensitive men become distressed about isolation from the ever-shifting frontier of human needs that their roles in life impose. Have you talked recently to many who seem to be "in the world"? You discover the same sense of being cloistered, the same nagging doubts about ultimate relevance, the same problem of being stereotyped as to what a business executive is, or a shoe salesman, or a secretary, or a social worker. The ministry in this country needed rescue from the box that restricted it to the role of charming executive secretary of the ladies aid, educational consultant to the Sunday school, and chaplain to family units. But the pressures to restrict ministry to crisis situations and make these alone normative are equally faulty. One discovers that even crisis ministries suffer their own form of isolation and cloistering. Moreover, it has been suggested that the appeal of crisis ministries may not be too different from the appeal that monasticism

has exerted on dedicated and capable men through the centuries — the renunciation of humdrum conventionalities and bourgeois comforts for the sake of sharply focused, undistracted obedience to God-given tasks.

What of the second problem that arises from the fact that people are attracted to the church and to our Lord for a variety of conflicting reasons? The church is called on to perform simultaneously two tasks that involve an inevitable tension: to comfort (speaking the individual word of forgiveness, nurturing, healing, supporting) and to challenge (to speak the unpopular prophetic word, to upset the status quo, to become involved with actions as well as words in the social, economic, and political life of the whole community). The church is unique among institutions in seeking to carry out such diverse tasks. The pressures have become intense as each of these ministries seems to undermine the other. The task of comforting the "weak and heavy laden" seems incontrovertible until those involved in social action charge that by simply making suffering more bearable—rather than seeking to abolish socially fostered suffering—the church becomes an accomplice to the preservation of the injustices of society. Similarly those who are attracted by a consoling, comforting, soul-sustaining Gospel feel betrayed when the church becomes a disturber of the status quo by pushing them to become politically involved.

One part of this problem, I believe, reveals a structural or systemic difficulty within the church. One finds too few examples of churches anywhere that are able to embrace these divergent aspects of ministry within a single parish and with a sin-

gle pastor. But on the level of our concern here, it forces us to ask about the ability of the ordained minister. Can he aid a group in making more discriminating judgments as it seeks to conduct a personal ministry to those who are ill, bereaved, or suffering other loss — and yet seek to change structures and attitudes where the suffering results from an irrational deprivation based on skin color, sex, or the inequities of an economic system? It also asks about the man's own ability to work amid high levels of tension and conflict, and questions his skills in conflict management, for example. It demands the ability to work with a group without becoming enslaved to the ideologies or orthodoxies of that group, whether the orthodoxies be traditional or the most radical avant-garde.

But this, then, isn't too helpful; it begins to sound like one of those lists in the pastorals describing the qualifications of a bishop. In fact, it intensifies what already is the greatest cause of "ministerial dropouts," namely, a sense of personal and professional inadequacy. A recent study of ministers of the United Church of Christ who left pastorates for secular employment indicated clearly that there was no single overwhelming reason why men "leave the ministry." The main reason cited, however, was a sense of personal and professional inadequacy, which was also reflected in the incidence of personal illness or breakdown.

It is significant that the largest number of men are leaving ordained ministries not because they have lost their faith or feel too revolutionary for today's parishes, but because they feel inadequate. The reaction of these ex-pastors to their seminary education is important. Men who dropped out

of parishes, as well as those who currently are serving churches, were virtually unanimous in charging that their seminaries did not train them properly for the parish ministry. Their complaints fell into several categories:

1. Seminaries and local churches were out of phase. These men actually may have been challenged by their seminary education; but in the ministry they realized that many of their professors were not aware of where the people of the parish were and the pressures under which a pastor must exist. One ex-pastor said:

Were you aware of the fact that though we are trained for the 20th century (and possibly the 21st) that our parishes are not? Were you aware of the fact that though we were sensitized to the urgencies of contemporary history, our parishes are not so sensitized? They can still focus their concerns on whether their minister spends his time holding the hands of, and serving tea to, old maids and wealthy widows. Are you aware of the fact that young men, thus trained, die just a little each day in the midst of this? You trained us to serve and minister to the living and to celebrate the joy of living, but were you aware of the fact that we go out and find ourselves having to spend the great bulk of our time serving the dead?

My recommendations are that you change your curriculum to include a course on how to prostitute oneself gracefully, to sell one's soul with dignity, and to desensitize oneself with honor.

2. Another concern with seminary training lay in the awareness that seminaries had trained men cerebrally but had not given them sufficient help in self-encounter and in the skills for ministry needed in this day. While some of these men were hostile and personally scarred,

they still could express keen appreciation for some of the courses they had experienced and the dedication of their professors. They advised, therefore, a threefold thrust to pastoral preparation: (a) Emphasize current geographic, social, and economic trends. (b) Place emphasis on community and congregational behaviorisms. (c) Continue striving to lay theological foundations, but especially seek to relate these to the other two factors. Men who remained in ministries said virtually the same thing. They had strong feelings about the antiparish bias of most seminaries. They made a strong plea for additional training in the behavioral sciences and their derivative skills. They asked for more intensive training in handling conflict and in the use of creative conflict as an agent of change, more stress on tooling up for urban ministries, and aid in learning how to "theologize" using Biblical and historical theological perspectives.

These men who left pastoral ministries provided one other insight that we had begun to suspect: Pastors are too exclusively dependent on their wives as their chief reference and support person. In weighing those who serve as primary in their support system—serving as an anchor, providing a sense of belonging, reinforcing their values and beliefs, praising their work—both pastors and ex-pastors placed their wives in the most crucial spot. These men did not look to one another, to fellow pastors in their own denomination, or to neighboring pastors to confirm the value of their work. Thus the fact that the family is a crucial support structure for a minister and his most important reference group makes it obvious that his ministry and his decisions regarding areas of

service will be heavily dependent on his wife and greatly influenced by family relationships. It is obvious, then, that if a wife is dissatisfied either with a particular parish or with the ministry in general, or if the minister and his wife are experiencing marital conflicts, the man's personal and professional support system is severely damaged. If heavy pressures are exerted on him during these periods, he is a vulnerable man. It is equally important to note that while most men display these dependencies, they appear to be relatively unaware of them.*

Let's add a final element to this mix. Our evidence thus far points to a need for men who have emotional strength to stand in a difficult calling in a period of overwhelming cultural change, for men who can work creatively with those of sharply divergent worldviews, for men who can find support from beyond their immediate family, for men who will be able to sustain a vision of mission and ministry amid strong institutional pressures to the contrary, and ultimately for men who have been educated in a discipline of theological and spiritual formation that can sustain them through the pressure and change that accompany pastoral service today.

But at the very moment that we look to seminaries for creative and sustaining patterns of "spiritual formation," we find this sector of seminary life a shambles in most schools. During the period that he was studying Roman Catholic seminaries, Wal-

* "The evidence suggests that family welfare is the least prominent of the three patterns in career-change decisions, that wife's role dissatisfaction is the most common, and that marital crisis is the most compelling influence."

ter Wagoner sought to define spiritual formation:

"Spiritual formation" refers to that conscious and deliberate attempt, as a discipline of the entire seminary community, to open itself to the Means of Grace — to commune with God, to be enlivened by the Holy Spirit. It is the search for the impression of a form, the Mind of Christ, on the minds of the students. It is a zeal for prayer and the contemplation of divine matters so carried on as to form a harmonious and coherent style of life which includes the intellectual, pastoral, and moral dimensions.

Wagoner indicated that such a definition begins with a belief in a God who desires that men commune with Him and seek His presence; it proceeds from the conviction that God has disclosed Himself most completely in Jesus Christ. He then sought to ask how the historic acts of piety and worship might address the contemporary seminary community.

This definition raises many questions, as the author was aware. In a day that seeks to define mission in the world, it seemed to limit the work of the Holy Spirit to the ecclesiastical and sacramental spheres. It seemed to perpetuate a separation between the church and the world that reduced the "spiritual" to an artificial or severely reduced segment of life. Its very view of "formation" seemed to imply a mechanical or even Pavlovian or military interpretation of how men are "formed."

In spite of crash programs recently instituted, the basic pattern has not changed appreciably. Many in the seminary community are struggling with the question of God; forms of prayer life are not yet their major concerns. Chapel services are reduced in number; only a tiny remnant of

faculty and students bother to attend. They are not sure that this is the kind of "worship" that God desires. After years of experimentation, it is apparent that the answer does not lie in innovation that settles for moving the services from the chapel to dormitories, substituting guitars for organs, and folk songs for chorales.

I have no tidy solution for the enormity of this problem. Some answers may grow from the following convictions and hunches:

1. While both the process and content of spiritual formation will consciously draw on the great heritage of the Christian church, the methods and forms developed will take seriously the contemporary situation, for example, ministering in a society in which a belief in transcendence does not receive strong cultural support. The individual must learn to live, work, and worship consciously as part of a cognitive minority, while avoiding the danger of spiritual elitism.

2. Spiritual formation will resist pressures that would make it essentially archaic, aesthetic, humanistic, or activistic. It will not be an exercise in history, romanticism, or art forms. Nor will it serve as an ecclesiastical wrapping for programs that must be evaluated by other criteria.

3. While spiritual formation will involve the individual, the communal aspect will remain crucial. The focus will be less on the individual and his own personal growth for his sanctification; it will seek to strengthen him primarily for the community and the world.

4. While seeking to avoid rote formalisms, spiritual formation needs a discipline that will serve the individual during pe-

riods of spiritual apathy, crippling doubt, and extreme personal or professional pressures. This discipline might well be shared with a community with whom the particular forms can be devised and negotiated.

5. While remaining open to emerging felt needs (as for more celebration) and to new forms and settings (as group experiences in sensitivity or training groups), spiritual formation will not become so diffuse as to lose its uniquely Christian character as developed in the Scriptures and the experience of the Christian community in its historic life.

6. No man should be considered ready for ordination who has not wrestled as consistently with the realities of a "devotional

and spiritual" life as he has with the "cognitive-theological" and "servicing-ministering" aspects of the life of Christian leadership.

7. No single set of forms or methodologies can be looked to to serve as *the* model for a contemporary spiritual formation. Perhaps we have suffered from what the Anglican ascetical theologian, Martin Thornton, has termed "a certain light-hearted amateurism" in spiritual guidance. While looking to the expertise which may be available, the task of developing the forms and models of a contemporary spiritual formation arises as one of the crucial tasks confronting theological schools.

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