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## 12. Crisis, Communication, and Courage

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### *A Ministry Development Approach*

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#### **UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGE**

As consultants we are not interested in merely studying the local congregation; we want to find ways to create change. Our interests do not stem from a detached intellectual inquiry. They are motivated by the need to provide help to the clergy and laity of local churches. Basic to this concern is the increase of the love of God and neighbor as it finds expression in the structures and processes of the local church. We focus on understanding the congregation so that change can occur in the direction of a more faithful Christian witness. This dual emphasis on understanding and change is central to all approaches to the local church that are rooted in the field of organization development.

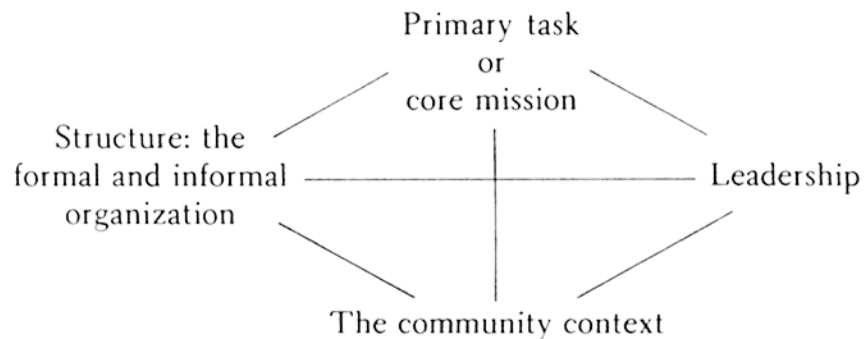
Organization development emerged in the late fifties and early sixties as an applied science dedicated to the process of planned change within organizations and institutions. The basic change mechanism is the involvement of the organization's members in applied research on the covert processes of institutional life. By exposing the gaps between the organization's policies and its actual operating mode, the change process is given energy and direction. Organization development has spawned a broad range of efforts to aid the local church.

Recently the church has evolved the field of congregational development, or better, ministry development, to the point that it has become an important, distinctive, and new discipline in the field of practical theology. The uniqueness of ministry development is its

capacity to provide an applied integrative focus for both belief and practice of ministry.

### A Model of Ministry

An attempt to understand the ministry of the local church must be comprehensive enough to consider four different perspectives of the church, as well as the relationship or degree of fit between them. Ezra Earl Jones and I made this a main point of *The Management of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), published in 1978, and intervening years have only strengthened our conviction. This model of ministry can be diagrammed as follows:



*Primary task* is significant because it allowed us to compare the ideal and the actual in addressing the mission of the church. The ongoing life of a church—its interaction with the community and interactions among the members—generates an identity or character that in turn shapes the character of its members. This identity transcends any rational planning scheme and will not be captured by a set of goals and objectives. To find the primary task we must observe many things a congregation sees and does to discern its connections by the way it lives. *Community context* is the sociopolitical area that is the mission environment of the congregation. Churches are a part of, and serve, the communities in which they are located. All too often churches lapse into defining themselves by their existing membership—as if they had a life apart from the community. The relationship or fit between primary task and environment is the best criterion for determining the structural forms and styles of leadership needed by the church. *Structure* refers to the formal explicit elements of congregational life such as

policies, buildings, creeds, curricula, boards, and committees as well as the hidden, informal structures of cliques, networks, norms, and roles. These invisible, covert structures often function at odds with the visible, formal structures of church life. For example, many congregations adopt official objectives encouraging discipleship in the world while their informal practices endorse only the maintenance of the institutional church. *Leadership* refers to both clergy and laity in the several dimensions of the influence process between leader and participant. Church leaders, both clergy and lay, have the multiple tasks of maintaining a healthy institution, continually re-forming the bonds of voluntary association, and acting as authentic spiritual mentors in the struggle of life.

One might turn to sociologists to consider the community context in depth. Systematic theologians can provide clarification of the normative task of the church. Educators, psychologists, and administrators can lend a helping hand on questions of leadership and structure. All four perspectives must be integrated in order to understand and shape the local church. The relationship between the perspectives or components of the ministry system are as crucial as each component. For instance, the structure of the local church must be suited to the nature of the community context in the light of the primary task of the church. A rapidly transient, highly diverse community requires a different structure from a stable, homogeneous community.

The integration, or linking, of these four perspectives in the local church is not simply a matter of building a composite by fitting the four components together. Each perspective is a view of the whole but from a particular stance, somewhat like four different witnesses to the same event. At the same time, this component creates views and contrasts that highlight decisive linkages and patterns of relationship. For example, the problem will look different if pursued solely from the community context than if investigated from the internal perspective of structure or leadership. Primary task perspective can give full rein to values and vision in a way that the social sciences have difficulty incorporating.

An actual experience of the church can be interpreted in many ways. A neighborhood meeting can be regarded as data telling us

of the community context, or as a structure of the church in action; it can be examined in terms of the various leadership processes in the meeting, or in the light of the purposive values being pursued; it can be seen in its relationship to other groups, levels, and processes of community and congregational life. The practice of ministry development provides church leaders with the ability to sort out this experience to achieve a more comprehensive picture of the church in action. When this becomes the congregation's self-understanding, rather than the views of an outside expert, new motivation for action is ensured. By using these four perspectives we believe that the congregation will at least have the option to choose directions that are theologically sound as well as organizationally effective. Our experience suggests that the American church has an entrepreneurial bias that causes an easy choice of methods solely directed toward organizational efficiency and numerical growth. Much of the initial church enthusiasm for methods rooted in organization development appears to stem from its ability to concentrate energy on the marketing problems currently being experienced by church leaders.

The hope for the field of ministry development rests in its increasing ability to help church leaders address the problems that are troubling them in ways that realistically unite parish practice with the standards of Scripture and theology. To understand the problems of a congregation we must feel ourselves to be present with them at the time. For example, we must try to "enter" Wiltshire Church.

## **WILTSHIRE CHURCH**

### **A Time of Promise**

Wiltshire Church seems to be in trouble. The past spirit of harmonious cooperation has evaporated. Financial reports are "depressing." Key leaders have withdrawn their support. A mixed chorus of complaints has swollen in volume. The minister, Sid Carlson, has become a source of concern, to himself and others. A surprising golden era of growth and recognition is ending in discord and confusion. Leaders and members believe that the congregation has fallen onto hard times. My own view is quite to

the contrary. For the moment at least, the placid veneer of domesticated fellowship and organizational growth has been broken. Normal assumptions, perceptions, and habitual ways of behaving as members of Wiltshire Church are being put to the test. Anger and anxiety have raised the possibility that the accustomed, seemingly successful modes of operating will be re-examined at a fresh and deeper level. The addiction to success under the controlled leadership of Sid Carlson is failing. In short, Wiltshire Church is face to face with the richest, fullest, best opportunity it has had in a decade to discern its call as a portion of the body of Christ.

All social systems have an inherent tendency to stay frozen and locked into the same patterns of belief and behavior. Like an aerialist on a high wire moving his balance pole in order to remain steady, much of the change in a social system occurs in order to keep basic patterns the same. To those who would help Wiltshire Church in its struggle to become a congregation faithful in its practice to the gospel of its Lord, the present time of inherent instability is welcome. It means that the possibility is present for change in the deep structures that shape and mold the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of Wiltshire's leaders and members. We can be reasonably certain that without help these deep structures will form even the present seemingly chaotic and disturbed scene—the movements of the balance pole—into stable equilibrium. Just as a canoeist can read the turbulent waves of a raging course of white water so as to “see” the boulders and logs beneath the surface, so the helpers of the Wiltshire Church should expect and must be able to “see” the deep, enduring structures that are asserting their formative power over the current fluid situation.

The town of Wiltshire is a community of managers and business executives. One of the highest compliments paid to the pastor is that he is competent enough to have made it in the business world. This prevalent and highly prized belief in managerial effectiveness and organizational control asserts itself in several fashions. Church troubles are likely to be regarded solely as problems to be solved. Categories such as personnel problem or planning problem are likely to be invoked as the means of understanding the present situation. Without aid, the human and spiritual possibilities of this time of testing and challenge will be overlooked.

However, the built-in receptivity to managerial problem solving does have the advantage of increasing the possible acceptance of outside "expert" consultants. When external consultants come on the scene they will begin to experience pressures to treat the issues of Wiltshire Church solely with rational, analytic approaches.

Subtle and unconscious pressures will be exerted to restore the Church to normalcy—to return to familiar processes that ensure harmony and the sense of well-being that derives from being able to shape and manage a good, successful operation. The consultant will experience the same bind that has enveloped Sid Carlson. Credibility and leverage to influence the congregation will flow from being a "good" problem solver and helping to get things back under control. Wiltshire Church is in a difficult but promising time. Given proper leadership and assistance the opportunity is present for the congregation to emerge from its identification with the cultural values of the community and begin to model a style of life more reflective of the Christian gospel.

### **Structures of Communication**

An examination of the underlying structures of life in Wiltshire Church reveals the patterns of relating regarded as acceptable. These structures or habitual patterns are especially clear, for instance, in the area of interpersonal communication. First, there are indicators that the expression of strong emotions—negative feelings in particular—are not valued in the usual practices of the membership. Thus, a lay leader cites as a reason for dropping the housing proposal that "the issue was too hot at the time." Administrative board minutes reveal a continued emphasis on smoothing disagreement and cooling down discussions by "avoiding direct questions." Member comments suggest that strong negative feelings are more likely to be expressed through phone calls after the board has adjourned than in open, public forums.

Second, indications from several quarters are that it is unusual for members to speak on an issue out of a personal, owned, deeply felt expression of personal perspective. The difference in intensity of feeling and sharpness of expression between private interviews and public comment is dramatic and pronounced. For a congregation that values pastoral responsiveness to its members, the board

retreat discussions of purpose are broad and general in character and reveal little of the actual day-to-day dilemmas of board members. Indeed, one can read the entire study and believe that, except for Sid Carlson and those to whom he has been a pastor, the inhabitants of Wiltshire are able to pull up the drawbridge and leave all of the woes of the world on the other side of the moat. In this instance what is not talked about is probably more important than what is. Even, or perhaps especially, in a town like Wiltshire, alcoholism, shattered marriages, adolescent tragedies, and the trauma of sudden death are elemental components of the fabric of life. This level of discussion and personal revelation is missing from the record.

A third important communication pattern is revealed by the realistic anxiety that interpersonal conflict will lead to punitive retribution through the betrayal of personal confidences. This threat has been reinforced by the public symbols of accusation and name calling. Violent, out-of-control verbal exchanges have been allowed to hang in the air—to be resolved, if at all, in private. The uncertainty of this situation can only result in the most cautious and controlled public utterance.

I doubt that any of these communication habits are new or situationally induced by the present crisis. They suggest long-standing normative practice within a congregation that values a warm, comfortable climate of belonging. They suggest habits and ways of relating that confuse caring with protectiveness, acceptance with doormat passivity. The deep structures are less visible when the stream is flowing with a gentle calm. An advantage of the present situation is that the outcomes of these communication habits are becoming more and more apparent. "We are meeting controversy with contempt," said one member, and the chairman of the board resigned with accusations about the pastor. The present lack of trust is quite real. Although this breach of trust is experienced as a loss, the evidence suggests that what has been shattered is the facade of tranquillity, the masks of some of the players in "the best show in town." One of the most hopeful possibilities in the Wiltshire Church situation is that the pain of the present time can lead to a deep level of trust based on a capacity to love where there are differences, to trust because both

relationships and faith have been tested, not sheltered.

The late Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopal priest instrumental in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous, said once that one of the things the church needs to learn from AA is the need for "definite personal dealing with people." The communication patterns of Wiltshire Church may express kindness and good advice, but as Shoemaker points out and AA exemplifies, this is not all that people need. Honest, forthright dealing with one another as we really are, as we are before God and beyond the level of polite appearance, is a necessity of Christian fellowship.

This is a promising time for Wiltshire Church because there is a recognition that it is a congregation being put to the test. Its customary numbing, comforting, soothing ways aren't working. Patterns and habits are beginning to unfreeze and slip out of place. It is a significant opportunity for change and growth in the everyday practices of talking and working together.

### **Organic Interdependence**

When one looks at the dominant task Wiltshire Church is performing, at the ways the organization has been structured, and at the nature of Sid Carlson's leadership, a consistent and self-reinforcing pattern emerges. Sid's leadership is congruent with the cultural values of the town and the congregation's habits of communication. His style should not be considered apart from an examination and clarification of the functional mission of Wiltshire Church.

Wiltshire's sense of task has been described by its minister as helping its members to better cope with the pressures of family and corporate life. The emphasis has been on the pastoral and the pragmatic. As described in a sermon illustration, the congregation is consoled with the thought that although they may not know what they are fighting for, they might at least "think we are winning."

Wiltshire Church has focused its primary energy on a particular kind of care and feeding of its membership and remains unaware of larger issues. Public announcement of the disesteem with which Methodist district affairs are regarded functions to uphold the strength of the closed, enveloping boundaries of the congrega-



tion. One suspects that the church maintains its sense of cohesion and strength by seeing itself as so much better than those around it.

Certainly, clear evidence exists to show that the functioning primary task of Wiltshire Church is to be a refuge, a sanctuary, a retreat for its members from the stress and anxiety of the world. The idolization of Sid Carlson, his rapid fall from glory, and the several-years' emphasis on a "one-man show" point to a group cohesiveness, a refuge built around dependency on and idolization of a central authority figure. It is as if the congregation were saying we are strong and secure because our leader is larger than life. His strength is our strength. Such groups have little room for understanding and forgiveness when the leader turns out to be as frail and fallible as the rest of us. Some members may have even wished, at an inarticulate level, to link with the assistant pastor, Stew Collins, to bring to birth a new emphasis to "save" the situation. Such actions would be congruent with the congregation's deepest patterns of life together.

Some members now see the pastor as a "devil personified." This is only the other side of the coin from a god personified in a congregation "built in the pastor's image." Sid's charismatic flair and worldly lifestyle have been charming, attractive, and a source of easy identification for the members. His challenging domination of the lay leadership brought respect, authority, and dependable growth. Undoubtedly this leadership style has contributed to the difficulty the administrative board has in making decisions. There may be, as suggested by Evans and Reed, a collusive quality in the relationship between Sid and the lay leadership.

Ironically, the most significant failure of leadership in Wiltshire Church has been the success of the leadership in building a congregation that, like the town of Wiltshire itself, is so dedicated to hiding from the sharp edges of life. Elsewhere in this volume, James Hopewell has pointed to the themes of joviality and ultimacy as characteristic of the Wiltshire Church ministry. The leadership strives to be warm, engaging, and responsive. They have given their selective attention to those aspects of church life that would seem to free life from temporality, failure, loss, death, and disappointment.

Both the formal and informal structures of Wiltshire Church seem strongly configured to support the leadership in this primary task. The building itself looks special. Worship and Christian education are well supported by staff and utilize large numbers of volunteers. The membership committee is routinely active and blandly concerns itself with gentle, undemanding incorporation of new members into Wiltshire Church. Conspicuously absent, despite their presence in formal Methodist organization, are any mechanics for realistic linkage with the district and with the community of the town of Wiltshire. Despite the fact that this district superintendent has a number of pungent observations to make about Wiltshire Church, the evidence suggests that these have been withheld and that the two-way pattern of communication is guarded and cautious. There are no signs of a recognition of interdependence between district and church or between church and community.

Congregation size does have an impact upon church structure and should affect the intentional design of the organization. Except for the minister, few of the members seem to know each other. Given the public image of the church and the transient nature of the town of Wiltshire, it is realistic to assume a meager understanding of denominational heritage among new members. Aside from the Christian education and music programs, the congregation exists as a large, undifferentiated group with a minimum structure for assimilation, education, continuing spiritual transformation, and peer relatedness. Sunday worship and occasional education programs are almost certain to be inadequate to the transforming and integrating tasks needed to move beyond the basic need for a safe haven toward a clear conviction about God's redemptive power.

Given the size of the congregation, the structure focuses the wishes, hopes, and fears of the congregation on the person of the pastor. Because Sid saw his role as one of building a community of consolation, and because he became the primary instrument through which consolation occurred, he was subject to enormous pressures. Potential relationships with the larger church and with the community could only arouse conflict from differing perspectives and hence detract from congregational cohesiveness.

### **The Courage to Be Different**

The challenge for a consultant working with Wiltshire Church will be to help them see themselves more clearly. The consultant must help them live in the pain of the present long enough to see their darker side, and to know even that can be redeemed. Most congregation members and leaders will expect the restoration of growth. Even those who are asking for adult education and spiritual growth are not likely to make the connection between the spiritual ill of trying always to control life and the patterns of success in the town of Wiltshire.

Whatever a consultant or outside researcher might think to be true of Wiltshire Church, what the congregation thinks and knows is the focus of the consultant's goals in contracting to be of help. The consultant will work within a diagnostic model that determines the focus and nature of the information collected and analyzed. In contracting with Wiltshire, the consultant's model for understanding the mission of the local church will be made explicit and then key leaders and groups helped to develop their own comprehensive model. They will participate and have a stake in their own processes of data collection and analysis. Like the congregation, most of the individuals in the network responsible for the direction and care of Wiltshire Church have been fragmented, unconnected, and unexamined.

Sid's wife and family are mentioned only briefly in this case—the note that they too live in a fishbowl because of the location of the parsonage. An honest, searching exploration of friendship, family, and other support systems within and without Wiltshire Church could be a giant step toward a community of love and trust. The modeling of Sid's relationship-to-his-work role versus his role as husband and father is an important part of the story, especially in a community where success and career achievement have as much primacy as they do in Wiltshire.

Questions of communication, emergent censorship, and minimal trust will be important. Key individuals and groups within the community, the district, and Sid's family should all have a part to play in what happens. As a consultant I believe that it is vital to explore and develop open relationships among the larger

network of people who affect the life of this congregation. Wiltshire Church has not been open, even about the refugelike character of the church and community. Since the church has played such a major part in preserving the ideals of Wiltshire, it is doubtful if any change is possible without the involvement of this wider network of individuals and groups.

Deep structures and old habits will re-assert themselves unless the changes are clearly seen and widely discussed. Then is change possible only when members are committed to it, and when the structures of the church embrace the change by a new way of doing business.

#### **FOUR KEY PRINCIPLES**

There are principles of ministry development that are important to understanding and helping local congregations. Here are four key elements essential in the task of helping a whole congregation understand itself and make constructive changes.

##### **A Disciplined Relationship**

Churches are complex, multifaceted institutions. No reader of this volume could think otherwise. Though the input of one-visit experts through reports, studies, and weekend conferences is helpful, it will not bring about the levels of self-understanding and self-management necessary for a congregation to fundamentally re-examine its ministry. An extended contract between consultant and congregation is a vital step in helping the leadership maintain a careful and continuing attention to the task of ministry development. The discipline of an ongoing process is self-examination, repentance, and reformation taking place at the organizational-systemic level.

A contract for a disciplined examination of ministry is *not* the equivalent of a contract to initiate an outsider's program of renewal. The focus must be on the work of the total ministry of the congregation. Activities and interventions initiated by the consultant are diverting when they suggest alternative focus to the ongoing life of the congregation. The purpose of a disciplined relationship between consultant and client is to help the congregation develop a more comprehensive, articulate model of its ministry

and to mobilize itself to live up to that image.

Episodic, short-term programs and consultation can be important in providing a particular array of knowledge and skill. The ministry development consultant, like the family physician, relies instead on a continuing relationship with the entirety of the congregational system. Note that the development of this relationship was prohibited in the instance of Wiltshire Church. The analysis presented earlier would be quite different if it had emerged from interaction with members of the client's church. From my point of view, the real study of Wiltshire Church is not possible without the benefit of this relationship.

### **The Congregation's Need for a Multiperspective Model**

Difficult and mysterious a process as it is, the ministry development consultant must try to help the congregation create a model for self-understanding that attempts to comprehend the levels of theology described in the chapter by Don Browning. Without this effort the congregation will work to resolve its most pressing concerns—usually having to do with the morale of its present membership or with survival issues tied to dollars and membership—and not really address the more fundamental questions of the mission in the light of community needs and gospel imperative. Each of the perspectives represented in this volume has valuable contributions to make toward a richer understanding of the church.

But church leaders need an intelligible map that is close enough to their reality to be reliable and trustworthy. The report of any outsider may be ingenious, detailed, and clear without moving the congregation toward change. Through the use of multiperspectives and continuing relationships with congregations, ministry development has attempted to offer a more adequate theological and intellectual road map for the use of church leaders.

### **The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts**

Early reference was made to structure, community, leadership, and primary task—four perspectives of ministry development. But it should be clear in responding to Wiltshire Church as presented

in the case study that I am more concerned with the way these elements related to one another in the function of the whole. Attention to the wholeness of life is one of the strengths of the anthropological approach discussed earlier in this book.

Ministry development is *not* a detached intellectual inquiry that dissects a congregation into its constituent parts. The disadvantage of a written report—like this chapter—is that the writer is tempted to operate only on a rational level. Actually knowing the congregation requires listening with the heart and seeing through the eyes of feelings. Imagination and intuition are requirements, not luxuries. Ministry development is an ideographic science that deals with the uniqueness of the human story of a particular people in an actual setting. As story and history, Wiltshire Church bears many of the marks of American Protestantism in general. But the real vitality and interest of Wiltshire Church will be found in the particularities of its story and in the uniqueness of its personality or character as a human community.

### **Methods Are Important**

The method of inquiry creates legitimacy for the issues it highlights and focuses energy in the directions illuminated. As a result the inquiry itself is a carrier of meaning and a teacher of theology and values.

We have learned, for instance, to be cautious about the use of survey feedback mechanisms for obtaining information on the local church. These questionnaire surveys have an unhappy tendency to suggest that mystery and excitement have no place in the institutional life of the church. An alternative is to train the congregation in skills of interview and participant observation. In a major project on the changing role of women, we found that we were able to train church members to conduct in-depth, reflective interviews. In ways that surprised us, the interview turned out to be an act of ministry in itself. It allowed the interviewee to see more clearly the patterns of meaning in transitional years and critical events. The interview was experienced by both interviewer and interviewee as a time of understanding, caring, and compassion. These interviews made possible the creation of composite

case studies that were then utilized in a program of education and change. This approach provides information that has spiritual depth and organizational clarity.

Ministry development is still a youthful enterprise. It is a practical theological discipline that attempts to relate the phenomena of stubborn, shortsighted church boards; the purity of theological ideals; the exciting vision of a charismatic leader; the tragedy of sudden death; the burden of escalating fuel bills and leaky roofs; the mystery of worship; the turbulence of a changing neighborhood. These and the many other untidy aspects of life may be brought within the scope of the intentional ministry of the church and its leaders. It is a way of understanding Wiltshire Church and of emerging with it in repentance and faithful service.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR RELATED READING

Anderson, James Desmond, and Jones, Ezra Earl. *The Management of Ministry*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978.

A comprehensive examination and integration of the critical components of ministry in the local church.

**Primary Task** (clarifying the nature of the actual work and mission of the local church):

Buechner, Frederick. *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977.

A book that is so slim and well written that you may underestimate its application to the nature and structure of congregational life. The question is the degree to which the patterns of parish life reveal the tragic, comic, and hopeful in the human condition.

Holmes, Urban T. *Turning to Christ*. New York: Seabury Press, 1981.

An Anglican book that offers help to anyone seeking a concrete definition of evangelism.

#### **Structure and Leadership:**

Anderson, James Desmond. *To Come Alive! Revitalizing the Local Church*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Ministers Paperback Library, 1979.

Explanation and example of the formal and informal aspects of the structure and dynamics of congregational life.

**Community:**

Almost every volume of the recently issued "Into Our Third Century Series" of the Abingdon Press is an examination of some aspect of the relationship of the United Methodist Church to our changing society. The insights are valuable for every denomination.

Dudley, Carl S. *Where Have All Our People Gone?* New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979.

Practical, concise guide to give you some lenses for seeing the community in the framework of the troubling questions of growth and survival.