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# IV

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## OVERVIEWS

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## 13. The Practice of Ministry

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The practice of ministry is more than any of the various approaches that have been separately presented, and more than all of them combined. Like law and medicine, professional leadership in ministry demands the artistic interweaving of learned perceptions and unconscious responses to constantly changing situations. The social sciences, along with theology and the personal spiritual disciplines of the pastor, are essential to the resources used by the Holy Spirit to shape and strengthen church leadership. The approaches in this book examine the mundane life of the church as a means of revealing the more subtle forces at work. A sensitive pastor already feels much of what has been said.

The strength of these chapters lies in the way they separate and examine the threads of various perspectives woven and matted into the fabric of every congregation—almost lost to consciousness. Mature practice of ministry does not need to examine the assumptions in every step. Such narcissistic behavior would cripple any ministry. But there are times when we need to engage in self-conscious reflection as a means to more effective service.

Conflict is one situation in which this book should prove especially helpful. When conflict is the result of different understandings of the church, the approaches in this book may provide the basis for understanding diversity and developing a stronger congregation. These approaches are useful generally—not only in crisis—to discover the unique character of a congregation found in the routine activities that carry the life and faith of the church. And they are most insightful as a way of examining the patterns of essential church programs, discovering inherent limits in present practices, and offering new options for program effectiveness.

## CONFLICT

Wiltshire Church had both strength and problems, and each contributed to our understanding of the congregation. In the previous chapters, sociologists considered the problems in light of the larger social context; psychologists moved from social context to personal relationships; those with an anthropological orientation moved toward an understanding of the corporate character of the congregation; theologians grounded their interpretation in the values commitments of the membership, variously understood; and organizational development specialists utilized several disciplines, with an emphasis on communication and decision making. All of their approaches provided valid interpretations of the conflict in Wiltshire Church. The contributors did not agree with each other, not because they did not understand, but because they saw the situation differently.

Some conflict in the congregation can be relieved by improved communication. Here, however, the conflict between perspectives is based, not on misunderstandings, but on clear differences in the perception of human dynamics. In the practice of ministry, we must differentiate between those who need improved communication and those who perceive events differently.

The perspectives of this book reflect the various viewpoints often found in church conflict situations. In most basic decisions facing a congregation, some people look to community conditions, saying, for example, "What can you expect in such an affluent community?" Others point to the congregation's relationship with the pastor, suggesting that the solution lies in a change in leadership. Still others explore the history and story of the congregation, the depth of commitment to its theological beliefs, or the way in which it is organized and makes decisions. All of the chapters of this book would be represented in a typical church argument. A parish may not need better communication, but appreciation for the differences its members represent. This book helps to identify the sources of pluralism that enliven the controversies of every congregation.

For example, the typical seminary student has a preliminary understanding of the church from the disciplines of theology and

sociology and often feels the sharp differences between the demands of the gospel and the behavior of a particular church. Imagine a young seminarian entering the pulpit for a post-Christmas opportunity to preach. The young cleric might preach a prophetic sermon, suggesting to an affluent congregation that its celebration of Christmas is an anemic expression of faith, offensive to the poor and a desecration of the baby Jesus. Some members might respond that their religious culture had been unfairly attacked by someone who did not understand them—and perhaps did not understand the gospel as they did. The conflict might be processed, or ignored. But as long as the young preacher and the irate members remain within their separate approaches, the conflict cannot be understood by either, and each can more easily blame the other. The application of several disciplines, required to show the pluralism of perspectives, enriches the ministry of a congregation.

The use of several approaches may not remove the issues to be reconciled. But it can enrich the congregation with a much wider understanding of the way God is at work in their midst and provide a basis for dialogue to accept their differences and to discover a larger sense of ministry together.

### CONGREGATIONAL UNIQUENESS

In the practice of ministry, we discover that congregations have a different feel about them, that they develop a quality and character distinctively their own. Recognition of congregational uniqueness is essential for the pastor who expects to relocate. Two congregations may be demographic twins but opposites in character and commitment to ministry. An awareness of the unique personality of each congregation gives the bishop or denominational executive direct access to the congregation and gives the pastor or consultant the appropriate handles to help the congregation mobilize in ministry.

Many factors contribute to the individuality of a congregation, including the community context and the attitude of the church toward it; the denomination as family and as polity; the history, narrative, and traditions of the congregation; the size, organization, and decision-making patterns of the congregation; the culture, world view, and social worlds of the congregation; the tenure

and leadership style of the pastor; and the theology, biblical authority, and commitment of the members to the mission and ministry of the church. Congregations develop unique profiles in the conflict between institution and environment, between current leadership and historical forces, between stated beliefs and cultural commitments, between internal ministry and public witness, between private experience and corporate consciousness. Out of these tensions churches form an identifiable but elusive character.

Without trying to summarize the many insights offered in each approach, let me suggest the ways in which I have found these approaches complementary, and how that complementarity aids congregations in a self-awareness that is the building block of more effective ministry. My comments should be taken as encouragement, not prescription, for congregations and those who work with congregations to discover new ways of expanding their horizons and appreciating the uniqueness of each congregation.

The social context of Chapter 6 provides the framework for understanding the values and lifestyles of the members of a congregation. Since the authors of that chapter take a comprehensive approach, the chapter includes information on the demographic character of the area, changing community values, and the internal structure of the congregation. Perhaps because the authors are most sensitive to the "determinative power of social context," they make a strong appeal for the church to transcend its situation.

The hard empirical data of the sociologists is particularly comforting as a frame of reference for the local church; they describe trends for the area as a whole and provide the basis for long-range decisions. Typically, however, sociology has little to say about the uniqueness of particular congregations within the larger social context. In responding to Wiltshire Church, the sociologists tend to take material from the background statement and from independent sources of community data. They do not find much use for the crisis in Alan Hyatt's narrative, nor do they offer much help in what to say to Alan as he hangs up the phone. Without sociologists we would be floating in space, but the uniqueness of the church remains uninterpreted.

Cultural anthropology (Chapter 4) perceives the congregation as a culture, a subsystem of the larger society. The freshness and

apparent immediacy of ethnographic categories has recently attracted increased attention in religious research. Church members enjoy talking about the history and activities of the church, about significant events, leading figures, internal tensions, and sacred space. Like theology, ethnography takes the "sacred" seriously. Ethnography offers new tools for disciplined listening, especially across cultural differences.

Ethnography is so effective in developing the uniqueness of each congregation that the results are difficult to employ for comparisons of one congregation with others. In fact, some researchers are even cautious about anticipating the future of the congregation being studied, providing only a report of the patterns thus far.

The literary symbolism approach of Chapter 5 combines ethnographic analysis with literary exposition in an effort to develop a basis for comparison among congregations, and to interpret their stories as predictable behavior. As a frontier of congregational studies, this approach stimulated the other approaches that are developed in this volume. In its search for the structure of imagination through a synthesis of anthropological technique and literary symbols, this approach brings together diverse disciplines in a way that makes the congregation the central focus of inquiry.

Systems psychology as used by the Grubb Institute (Chapter 3) provides a means to uncover the congregation's primary task, that is, its normative function in the community. Using a broad-based analysis—from psychoanalytic theory to demographic data—this approach seeks to identify the uniqueness of the congregation in its dynamic interaction within the community. When we discover the historical and current role of the church in the community, we understand the appeal of the pastor, the tension of the gospel, and the potential future for this particular church.

Theological ethics (Chapter 7) demonstrates how to find the unique and operative theology of each congregation by looking at the documents of the church and the behavior of its people. The procedure reveals a profile of faith that could provide a basis for discussion in many suburban communities. The chapter demonstrates the weaving of Scripture and theological tradition into an image of the ideal prophetic church, which is then applied to Wiltshire Church with gentle pastoral grace. In its synthesis of

social science insights and theological norms, the chapter offers a working example of insights and problems that emerge when general theological norms are brought to focus on a specific congregation.

Philosophical theology (Chapter 8) suggests another function of theological inquiry, that of challenging the class and cultural foundations for assuming the validity of basic concepts about decision making, professional leadership, and the sovereignty of God. It sets Wiltshire Church in a larger context in which metaphors appear to have lost the authority of meaning, interprets the pastor as victim in the breakdown of cultural assumptions, and suggests that Wiltshire Church might find its uniqueness in an unusual willingness to be open to an unpredictable and unmanageable moment of theophany.

Policy planning (Chapter 10) is most pragmatic in the issues raised, and practical in the advice tendered. The questions are sensitive to eliciting the uniqueness of each situation in the complex interweaving of many disciplines. The goal of the consultant is specific: to build stronger congregational organizations through disciplined planning and intentional process. Although assumptions are stated as axioms and complex issues are avoided in the clarity of a chosen goal, the uniqueness of the congregation is protected in the relationship between consultant and congregation.

Organizational development (Chapter 11) defines the history of its approach and consciously selects one dimension (leadership) to serve as an example of the process. Typical of the approach is selecting one area of the client's need and tailoring a response to meet that need. The organizational development approach is not as interested in the conceptual identity of the congregation as it is in enabling the congregation to find identity in action.

The approach of ministry development (Chapter 12) finds the identity of the congregation in the interaction of several elements: leadership, context, organization, and primary task. The immediate crisis of the congregation is an opportunity for rediscovering the need to make decisions openly and finding the unique mission of the congregation in the context of contemporary possibilities.

As a means of discovering congregational identity and uniqueness, the case study itself provides one additional resource. Al-

though many of the other approaches anticipate a third-party participant in the process of self-discovery, when using a case study the learners themselves become third-party observers of the problems in the case. It may be easier for some people to consider the problems of their own congregation when they find those problems happening in another congregation. Case studies provide an arena that gives distance and objectivity to concerns that may be personal and immediate.

Wiltshire Church may have similarities to many other congregations, but it is also unique and cannot be duplicated. The community provides a generally affluent framework, but Reverend Sid Carlson is a particular kind of leader at a vulnerable age. The Methodist setting provides a general example of church polity and connectional ties, but the peculiar conditions of population shift and housing demand give this situation its own individual flavor. The profile of this congregation is enriched by each discipline in turn, whether it focuses on conflicting theologies or the retelling of the stories of the gods. In one sense, Wiltshire Church reflects the crisis in faith of every mainline congregation in affluent America. In another sense, there is no other congregation like it. Together the approaches show in bold relief the generalizations that can be made about, as well as the uniqueness of, this particular group of believers.

### **PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

The everyday life of the congregation is not subject to being constantly reflected upon but grows out of the unselfconscious affirmations of belonging together. When we apply the approaches in this volume to the activities of our congregations, we often discover that our programs are grounded in only one or two of them. Using a fuller range of perspectives offers a critique of what we are doing and often provides new options and additional resources for accomplishing the same ends.

*Evangelism*, for example, is usually represented by a strong theological rationale and organized with a heavy institutional emphasis. Typically committees will use a sociological analysis to identify prospective members. But the effective appeal to new prospects should include the insights about human need offered by



psychology and the promises of God offered in the theological notes. If prospective members are to be assimilated, the insights of cultural anthropology and the literary symbolism approach must be applied in developing programs, and the structures discussed by organizational development must be implemented in practice. As an outreach that demands the fullest explanation and organizational support, evangelism demands the sensitive application of all these approaches.

*Adult education* as spiritual growth in the congregation is another area about which almost all of the contributors must be consulted. The social worlds of the sociologists, the spiritual communitas of anthropology, the human needs of psychologists, and even the narrative of literary symbolism are vehicles for values that have shaped the congregation. Grist for spiritual growth in small groups is offered in the theologians' discussion of the body of Christ for the congregation and the breakdown of compelling metaphor. Each discipline seems to be begging for mature and unhurried reflection, as if the conversation should have specialists steeped in each approach, or time should be provided when the board is not overwhelmed with planning program details.

*Leadership development* is another area in which each approach can make a contribution to an enriched understanding of church program. From the LIFO exercise by Malony to the idolized authority in Anderson's review, from the collusion suggested by Evans and Reed to the mythic Zeus described by Hopewell, from the corporate leader described by Williams to the victim of cultural collapse suggested by Pacini: everyone cares about the pivotal figure of Sid Carlson and the way he interacts with church, community, and his own convictions.

*Worship* suggests yet another area of church program in which the various disciplines could expand present practices with their rich new insights. Worship is a showcase of relationships between pastor and people and a moment of enacting the plot and characterization that the congregation carries from its history. Worship allows values to find expression in preaching and prayers, in liturgy and loaded symbols, in spiritual renewal and management processes.

*Pastoral placement* receives rough treatment by implication

from the perspective of the combined approaches. Many denominations use placement procedures that take no account of the pairing of pastor and people that is suggested by systems psychology. In the interim between pastors, many denominations require congregations to survey the social context and establish institutional goals. But the approaches in this volume are almost unanimous in observing that pastoral effectiveness is more dependent upon internal emotional factors (such as culture, story, psychological bonding, and leadership style) than upon the more objective factors of social trends or organizational goals. Perhaps these objective projects provide therapeutic activity for working through congregational grief, but they seem to offer little aid to the appropriate matching of restless pastors and empty pulpits.

*Social action* is a program concern at the heart of Wiltshire Church that finds its way into almost every approach. The sociologists make clear the economic privilege of Wiltshire and describe the values that support a sense of separateness. Psychologists distinguish between people with "needs" and people "in need." A theologian urged the "divine human community" to identify with the poor. In fact the Wiltshire congregation had several programs to increase membership participation in social concerns, and the multidisciplinary approaches offered further ways to mobilize the congregation. But the various disciplines also suggested the limited involvement of the congregation. It was part of the creed but not included in the culture; it was an organizational activity but found no place in the mythic structure. The approaches combine to show the strengths and limitations of various programs. Those who seek to establish the congregation's identity with the poor must first change its perception of itself. Change does not happen when the planners propose it, but when the ethnographers discover it.

The various approaches see different realities, and see the same reality differently. They make different contributions to the ministry of the church and are mutually dependent to show the wholeness of the church. They help us critique the congregation, but they do not explain its mystery. They point beyond our knowledge to the manifold ways the Holy Spirit is at work in the church. For building effective ministry we need them all.