
III

FROM THEORY
TO PARISH:
MULTIDISCIPLINARY
APPROACHES
TO EFFECTIVE
MINISTRY

9. Seeking Significant Intervention

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The transition from the primary disciplines—the basic building blocks of Part II—to the multidisciplinary approaches of Part III is more than a flip of the page. It requires a re-orientation of the mind, a change as dramatic as leaving seminary and entering the pastoral ministry.

In our Alban Institute studies of the boundary between seminary and parish, we found that graduates who were immersed in the culture of the seminary were often unprepared for the shock of entry into the relentless and multifaceted problems of the parish. During seminary the church had been defined by the clarity and consistency of issues that were distributed among the specialists of the seminary faculty: theology, biblical studies, history, preaching, pastoral care, and other elements of preparation. In the parish the problems were not separated into courses. Problems came in unexpected configurations. “Things happened all at once.”

In the first section on primary disciplines we took the scholar’s approach to working with congregations. Each chapter had a specific set of assumptions that could be clearly and consistently applied to reveal different dimensions of life within Wiltshire Church. It should be noted that these primary approaches are defined and sustained by professional societies and academies of seminary, college, and university. Although Christian in their commitments, and heavy contributors to the work of the institutional church, these scholars are professionally accountable to each other in the application of their methodology and the information that they share among themselves and with their students.

The multidisciplinary approaches place primary emphasis on

significant intervention. Their purpose is not insight but impact in the congregation. They utilize whatever resources are available to motivate whatever change seems appropriate. Because change is their goal, they tend to be eclectic and pragmatic. Their client is the institutional church—the local congregation or the denominational office—not the academy. As “employees” of congregations, they are forced to take local churches seriously, to listen to them carefully, to respect the depth and vision of faith that is found there.

I am not suggesting that the parish is more real than the seminary, or the pastor more Christian than the scholar—or that every congregation that says, “Lord, Lord,” is what it ought to be or, I pray, what it may become. But for those of us who have made a commitment to center our work in the life of congregations, the local church is “where the rubber meets the road.” We glean the insights of several disciplines as we work to help local churches. We live in the middle between the primary disciplines of the academy and the practical problems of the parish.

There are many people who inhabit the middle ground between theory and practice. The reflective pastor, who puts seminary education to the test, must continually reshape the tools once learned in classes. The sensitive layperson, who tries to understand the interweaving of faith and Christian living, discerns theological patterns as well as answers to particular problems. Others are even more intentional in their efforts to bridge theory and practice: the denominational staff person who provides experience in the clustering of congregations, the architect who helps the congregation shape its liturgy in renewal of the sanctuary, the Christian judge who serves as a lay member of the congregation’s committee for social action, and the independent consultant who works under contract to help a congregation to plan or to deal with a problem or conflict.

“Consultant” is the generic term that has come into common use for persons who inhabit the middle ground as professionals, trying to mediate new knowledge to the practice of ministry. Some consultants are on the payroll of the churches; some work for independent agencies or as individual contractors. Church executives, teachers, bishops, pastors, lay leaders, and entrepreneurs of

many sorts have all served as consultants to churches. Consulting has become something of a growth industry in religious systems, and deserves special attention.

A consultant tends to be (1) someone outside the decision-making system of the client; (2) someone with skill or insight needed by the client, offering either understanding about the problem faced or a process by which the client can reach a resolution of the problem; (3) someone who agrees to work on the client's agenda, not simply install the agenda of the consultant, bishop, or other outside authority; (4) someone whose continuing relationship is dependent on the client's choice; (5) someone who is trusted by the client.

These guidelines have many implications, but here we can highlight only two: power and relationship. Because of the power dynamics within denominations, it is difficult for administrators to consult within their own organization. For example, a bishop, or one with executive authority, can rarely serve as consultant to a congregation or pastor within his or her jurisdiction. Although he or she may understand the role of consultant, the authority of the office can never be ignored by the congregation or pastor. Under some carefully defined circumstances, staff persons may serve as consultants within their own systems. In general it is clearer if staff persons or executives hold to their regular roles, to better serve their congregations. Payment for services is important in the effective consultant contract. If the consultant is not paid by the client, then the client does not control the relationship. The client must have the power to say yes or no to the consultant. This is rarely possible if the judicatory provides the resource person or pays the fee.

From the consultant's perspective, the relationship between consultant and client is the key to effective consultation. The most critical knowledge for the consultant is knowledge of the helping relationship, the ability to work together in such a way that the client's needs are met.

There is no single source for consultants now working in religious systems. There is no commonly accepted method for training consultants, not even an agreement on definitions for the consultant's task. But the selection of the consultant is always in the

hands of the client—if it is a consulting relationship. It is wise to “check the record” of a potential consultant, through academic credentials or through people who have used his or her services previously. It may be important to discover if the person is flexible and can apply more than one set of skills, since most problems turn out to be something different from what is initially diagnosed or identified by the client. “By their fruits ye shall know them.”

In the multidiscipline approaches of Part III the three chapters are typical because they are so different. The authors each took different routes to their present vocational choice, and they use different principles in their consulting process. Typically, they did not set out to be consultants. One was a city planner, one a clinical psychologist, and one a local pastor. People like this are frequently among the resources of church membership—people trained in another field of knowledge and expertise whose way of working has led them to acquire the skills of consulting, with or without formal training. There are excellent consultants operating from various positions in denominational offices, in seminaries and universities, in social service agencies, and in other professions and businesses.

The brief history of professional consulting in the church may be seen in the way these three authors have journeyed to their present positions.

Sociological studies of urban issues provide one source for the preparation of many consultants. These studies emphasize, not the changing of individuals, but the training of people to change the organizations within which the individuals exist. The goal-oriented programs of urban causes were adapted for task groups within congregations, and for congregations as a whole. Insightful and charismatic leaders, like Lyle Schaller, have applied the learnings of planning to the needs of congregations.

Psychology provided a second source of consultants, when applied to the problems of the parish. In the previous section Barry Evans and Bruce Reed provide an example of a consistent psychological approach with solid research foundations applied to the problems of Wiltshire Church. As a multidimensional consultant, Newton Malony provides the rationale for a pragmatic combination of resources focused on a particular point of need, in this case

on leadership. Organizational psychology, as outlined by Malony, has provided a broad base for the development of consultants.

Perhaps the most influential source for multidimensional consultants is found in the social psychology movement that swept through the churches following World War II. This movement, grounded in interpersonal dynamics ("human relations" and "sensitivity training"), expanded to include the issues and dynamics of organizations ("planned change" and "organization development") and embraced a range of leadership training programs. Although it was frequently introduced through Christian education, the movement more recently has been claimed under the banner of church management and administration. James Anderson reflects a further development of this approach as he incorporates theology and social context into a paradigm that also includes leadership and organizational dynamics.

There are other streams that flow into the preparation of the growing number of consultants for religious systems, which include many wild cards and, unfortunately, a few charlatans. Perhaps the positive examples we offer will help in the selection of effective consultants for local church situations.

Beyond their differences in background and procedure, consultants have a common focus on the congregation as client. They may not agree in their concept of a model congregation, or their understanding of the change process. But their approach is significantly different from the authors of the earlier chapters, who look at Wiltshire through primary disciplines. The multidiscipline approaches are task oriented, seeking to make significant intervention. They are congregation-centered, using (and rejecting) theory to help the congregation deal with its problems.