

The Gifted Pastor

Every follower of Jesus Christ has a spiritual gift.

This core truth is a corrective to many of our false assumptions about gifts, about ministry, about life. Some of us believe that only a few persons are ministers and the rest are recipients of services, or spectators. If we count ourselves among the ministers, we over function, overextending ourselves; and we even grow resentful or burn out. If we sense that we do not have a ministry, we become passive (waiting to receive the ministry from someone else) or critical (sensing that our role is to evaluate others in ministry).

Some of us live in ways that deny our true gifts, our natural abilities and passions. We reenact the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. We disparage any accomplishments in our past, we lower our expectations in the present, and we question further possibilities. At times, we are also unaware of the gifts of others. We find it difficult to trust persons around us to be competent or compassionate, and we are skeptical about their motivations and intentions.

Do we believe that every follower of Jesus Christ has a spiritual gift? Do we believe that we as pastors have been given spiritual gifts?

As we struggle with these questions we must acknowledge three important issues. First, we may be called to give up control, or at least the *illusion* of being in control. Second, we progress in the spiritual life as we see people in their uniqueness. And third, we take steps toward the discovery

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of our own gifts, for we as pastors are also among the followers of Jesus!

Out of Control

When we begin to call forth gifts in others, we begin to lose control, or the illusion of being in control. Gifts are shaped by God's call, the needs of God's mission, the sufferings of individuals and communities. Gifts do not fit neatly into our plans and schemes for ministry. Gifts flow from individuals who have been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26).

Gifts cannot be coerced or controlled, managed or manipulated.

While this may seem a negative consequence of spiritual gifts, it actually helps us to lose our *illusion* of being in control.

The loss of this illusion reminds us of a liberating truth: that God is in control. Our functional atheism ("I am at the center of this ministry or mission") is counter to a conviction that God is in control. A belief that God is in control, in turn, shapes our practice of sabbath, grounds our understanding of stewardship, and speaks a word of judgment against our tendency to *over function*. As Edwin Friedman, the family systems theorist often noted, our tendency to over function usually leads others to under function. Theologically, our trust in the God who is in control leads to the practical reality that others will share their

gifts, if given the opportunity.

For a number of years I have participated in Cursillo and Walk to Emmaus retreats. Aside from being wonderful experiences of grace, the weekends remind me again and again about the gifts of the laity. The retreats also teach me something about control: If a layperson can direct a Walk to Emmaus, he or she can also manage a church. And if the laity will manage or lead the church, pastors can serve as spiritual directors! If I am willing to give up some degree of control, or the *illusion* of control, I can practice in my own area of giftedness.

Like most pastors, I am sometimes prone to "*do it myself*." My experiences in these areas are sometimes chaotic and surprising. But life is chaotic and surprising, and so is ministry.

Seeing People in Their Uniqueness

To see others in their uniqueness is a contemplative act. To see others in their uniqueness is to search for another's potential for holiness. To see others contemplatively is a difficult spiritual discipline for pastors. We develop, over time, a capacity to see people in more *functional* ways: she would be a great Sunday school teacher, he would be an excellent trustee (and yes, we do tend to stereotype people!). We begin with a role that needs to be filled, with a task that awaits completion.

Consider two images for serving in ministry with others: skimming the surface of a body of water or climbing a mountain. At

times we have linked person and task, individual and role; but the relationship has been a shallow one: The gift is not a match with the mission, a passion is not present, a depth is missing.

The alternative is to see persons as sacred texts, to know their histories as well as we know the texts that we teach and preach.

Individuals, of course, are diverse in nature and interest, in temperament and calling. I have caught myself leaving a parish, entering into a new one, and carrying along some plan or program that flourished in the last place. More often than not, my scheme when transplanted into

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the new setting, no matter how clever or well intentioned, does not fit the new congregation. I have not taken the time to see individuals in their uniqueness, or to become acquainted with the culture in which these persons live.

To take time to be a contemplative pastor is to *listen*. To hear the stories of our people is to pastor in a contemplative way. In the Scriptures, the gifts of the spirit are always connected to call (see especially Eph. 4). The call of God is to search for the uniqueness of the Spirit at work in the lives of God's people.

To contemplate the unique gifts of others requires that we step away, at times, from our own agendas. I once knew a woman who was a gifted therapist. Our congregation was in the formative stages of beginning a lay care giving ministry that required mature leaders gifted in areas like listening, bereavement, and spiritual growth. I asked her to consider a leadership role, and she thoughtfully declined. "I am a therapist all week," she responded; "I love working with Girl Scouts. That is where God wants me to be." My initial disappointment gave way, in time, to an appreciative acceptance. In the balance of her life she had found her way to serve through her daily vocation and in the church.

The Discovery of Our Own Gifts

As pastors, we live in the tension between the need for self-definition and the need to learn from others. It is absolutely essential that the pastor have a clear sense of where she or he is headed. In the theological tradition this is often defined as *authority*; in literature on church growth it is called *visioning* or *vision-casting*; in the language of family systems it is *self-differentiation*. The effective pastor has a growing range of authority. The effective pastor has an increasingly sharpened sense of vision. The effective pastor is able to define herself while remaining connected to the congregation. The effective pastor knows who she is. The effective pastor

must learn from others, but clearly takes responsibility for his own identity.

Here the issue of spiritual gifts takes on crucial importance for the pastor. If the pastor is not aware of her own gifts for ministry, she will be tempted to strive for the gifts of others. *Much of the literature on ministry in our culture is written by individuals who have the gift of leadership*. Their prescription for all that afflicts the church is more effective leadership. I want to suggest that there is an error in the diagnosis and in the prescription: *not every problem can be solved by more effective leadership, and not every pastor has the gift of leadership*.

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Instead, there are a variety of gifts (1 Cor.12), and the presence or absence of those gifts create particular congregational cultures. It could be that a congregation suffers from a lack of shepherding, or from inadequate teaching, or from a failure to evangelize, or from an excessive emphasis on tongues.

Our responses to others will always flow out of our gifts. The first step is to discover what those gifts are!

Do you sense a particular area of ministry or a set of tasks that seem to fit who you are and why you are drawn to this way of life? Is an inner call to give focused attention to the task of preaching met with a response that your preaching is helpful to individuals and faithful to the text? Is an inner call to visit with particular persons often connected to an outer call of gratitude?

Could our frustrations in ministry, indeed our propensity to burn out, be the result of our inability to hear the inner call to ministry? I once served four churches in a beautiful rural setting, where I followed a very popular and beloved pastor. He left that assignment to enter into full-time evangelism. In my first two years, I tried to become an evangelist to those congregations, but I could not see much visible fruit. Instead, I was exhausted. I was trying to function outside of my gift. In attempting to offer a gift that I did not possess, I was not sharing what in fact I could give to the congregation.

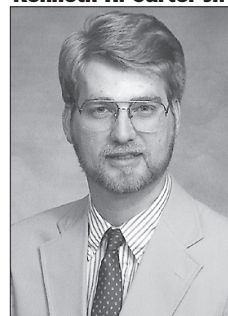
I had a love for teaching and study. The people had a desire to learn more about the Scriptures. And so I began to invest time in teaching multiple Bible studies, some short-term, others long-term, some in the mornings, and others in the evening, some surveys of the Bible itself, others closer examinations of particular books of the Bible. I found that people were growing spiritually. I sensed that I was enjoying myself. And, over time, I knew that I was giving the people in these churches my own unique gift. If there was some deficiency, and surely there was, God would compensate over time, as other faithful men and women were sent to serve that parish.

In your ministry you will find yourself in a variety of roles: administrator, pastor, celebrant, preacher, teacher, and evangelist are a few. There is no "typical" week, but think for a moment about a couple of recent ones. You no doubt spent time in each of these roles. As you reflect, which days and weeks leave you feeling tired and fatigued? And which times periods were energizing and gratifying? When we discover our spiritual gifts and operate within them, our energy levels increase. We sense an organic relationship to others in the church who are also gifted.

We did not enter into ministry in order to be in control, or to *run* churches. We have found ourselves in institutions that reward our over functioning. We have ignored the gifts that God has laced in others. We have buried our own talents. We have lost touch with the call to share our own gifts.

Being more effective will not help. Patterning ourselves after someone who seems to be successful is not the answer. The New Testament teaches us a new language, a language of spiritual gifts. Remember: *Every follower of Jesus Christ has a spiritual gift*. To reach the mountain peak we will need every gift that is available. □

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