



The Theological Task of Organizational Leadership Bishops Conclave

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Introduction

The monograph “Leadership Under Constraints,” prepared for the January 2006 gathering of the TMF Bishops Conclave, explored the idea of the United Methodist denomination as a “managerial episcopacy”.ⁱ The theological and sacerdotal roles of the bishop (and by extension the role of the district superintendent) were not emphasized in that paper since a managerial system expects the function of manager to dominate and shape the role placed upon leaders. The 2001 study of denominational politics by Edward Leroy Long contrasts the United Methodist “managerial episcopacy” with the Roman Catholic “monarchical episcopacy” and the Episcopal “pastoral episcopacy,” both of which elevate the teaching and priestly function of episcopal leadership.ⁱⁱ In such other denominational systems it can be said that the role of teacher and priest is more highly emphasized and respected than in the United Methodist tradition where episcopal addresses and writings are seen as occasions for motivation rather than for spiritual leadership.

The perspective of the earlier “Leadership Under Constraints” monograph was also driven by a focus on systems theory and organizational sciences. Again, as in the earlier monograph, the limit of such a focused perspective needs to be acknowledged.

Despite the managerial constraints of the leader and the organizational constraints of the focus of this paper, the need for addressing the theological task of the leader is still strong since organizations and organizational roles are often the tools given to do holy work. The idea of a congregation being described with the metaphor of the “body” of Christ and the idea that community decision-making within a conference is accomplished when the “body” is ready to move suggests an appropriate link between the conference and its members as a body of faith lived out as an organizational body. What we do to influence and direct the body – its use of resources as well as its purpose and outcomes - is spiritual leadership. Organizational life is a context and a form of the currency of our theology and our response to God. The purpose of this

paper is to explore a connection between the organizational and the theological tasks of episcopal leadership in a managerial institution.

Shaping the hopes and the fears of the people

The corporate body of Christ is a tool given to episcopal leaders to do the work of the Spirit. It is said that Walter Brueggemann described the work of leadership as shaping the hopes and the fears of the people. The hopes and the fears are the positive and the negative energy flows that surge through people and organizations in times of great change. The task of the leader is to harness and direct the energy so that it flows with purpose and meaning. Energy, whether positive (hope) or negative (fear), is necessary. I often quote a consultant friend who states that “you can’t steer a parked car.” If there is no energy – either positive or negative – then there is no movement. It is the task of the leader to engage and use both forms of energy for missional purpose.

Organizationally we are helping shape *hope* when we are visioning with conferences and congregations, when we are inviting people to risk. An ongoing question for anyone working with or leading congregations is whether we are helping the people dream *big enough*. When we help people ask questions about mission and purpose over questions of membership and viability we are helping to shape people’s hopes. Helping people to see their congregation as a resource for ministry rather than as an end in itself that is satisfied when the congregation is sufficiently financed and facilitated is to help people hope.

Hope involves risk. To hope for more means that people need to risk what they have. In a recent conversation the topic of *entrepreneurial leadership* came up. Consulting the dictionary, the group discovered that risk is central to entrepreneurship – an entrepreneur is one who organizes and manages an undertaking in such a way that risk is accepted and assumed for the sake of the goal. When leaders help people hold their congregational “treasures in earthen vessels” loosely enough to risk them for greater good then hope has been shaped. It is when congregations are held too tightly by their members that the organization is eventually strangled by a death grip. In order to shape hope it matters what episcopal leaders ask about when holding congregations and their leaders accountable for ministry. If, focused on our worries, we ask about viability – membership, finances, facilities – then risk is negatively rewarded and hope is held small enough to allow us to think that we can control it and small enough so that there is little change. If we ask about mission, purpose, and faithfulness, challenging congregations to risk shaping their own paths toward these treasures, then hope is held large. While all of the mission may not be accomplished, great movement will be experienced nonetheless.

Organizationally we are helping to shape *fears* when we listen to people. “People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss.”ⁱⁱⁱ writes Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky in their book *Leadership on the Line* which recognizes the danger of leadership. Resistance is the voice of fear. Dealing with resistance requires listening above talking. People resist as a means of

protecting themselves against perceived losses. In fact, to respond to resistance by speaking with greater clarity and persuasion about what the goal should be increases resistance as people dig in even deeper, perceiving the threat of loss to have increased. Increased resistance is the natural reaction to threat and loss. The natural reaction of a healthy living system is to resist moving away from a well-established equilibrium. Whenever a living system is pushed toward an upper or lower limit of change, the natural response is to seek protection and perceived health by staying closely aligned with the previously established equilibrium. For the leader to become more persuasive when resistance is encountered increases the clinging to past equilibrium. Instead, when the leader listens to the fears of what people feel will be lost by moving away from past learned comforts – and then reflects back what is heard about the fear –the negative energy of resistance is released to permit and to produce new levels of change. *Listening leadership* is a very deep shift for most leaders. “We typically seek first to be understood.” writes Stephen Covey. “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”^{iv} Paraphrased, this suggests that most leaders have been trained to listen only long enough to figure out what to say next. Listening does not come easily as a leadership skill.

It is well within the power of episcopal leadership, even when managerially defined, to set the theological stage for conversations that will invite and welcome purposeful change. One of the greatest powers of the leader is the *power of agenda*. The power of agenda is the power to focus attention. It is the power of being able to say what people will attend to and where they will focus their energies. When the local congregation is drawn to worry over its *deficit budget* it is the power of the leader to ask for agenda time to also be given to the congregation’s *deficit vision* that is too small to be faithful.

In the current moment of change, there are two movements needed to set the theological stage for conversations about mission and missional outcomes. The first movement is normalizing the experience and empowering the sense of individual agency in the leaders of our congregations and conferences. The second movement is to help people tell a better story of their congregation or conference that will lead to risk.

Normalizing experience and empowering agency

Much has been said and written about the disestablishment of mainline Protestantism in the last century. The changing American democracy, the growth of global community, and the explosive advance of technology combined to change the American religious landscape and to remove mainline Protestantism from the dominant cultural position of spokesperson in the public square on issues of individual behavior and public policy. The shifting of the landscape quickened following the Second World War and has resulted in four decades of attention given to diminishing memberships, finances, and influence within mainline denominations. As a people we have become quite practiced at measuring our demise.

A fundamental principle of systems is that when a system is not able to identify *what* went wrong, the system shifts the question to ask *who* went wrong. The search for an explanation of pain is quickly and naturally personalized. The result over the past decades has been two generations of leaders who have accepted blame and have felt powerless to change their congregational, conference, and denominational systems to reverse losses in numbers, dollars, and spirit. The impact has been the development of a sense of “surplus powerlessness,” a concept described by social theorist and practicing psychotherapist Michael Lerner as “the set of feelings and beliefs that make people think of themselves as even more powerless than the actual power situation requires, and then leads them to act in ways that actually confirm them in their powerlessness.”^v Lerner was an activist in the political and social change movements of the 1960s where he first observed people who had a deep emotional investment in losing, feeling isolated and remaining powerless. “Tactics and strategies often were shaped by an underlying assumption that no one would ever really listen or take them seriously.”^{vi} The result was great cadres of people committed to working hard while convinced it would make no difference. Past decades have seen this hard working sense of futility replicated in many mainline congregations and denominations.

A gift that history gives is a perspective that allows one to see and reflect back on the powerful cultural drivers of past years that are difficult to perceive and measure while being experienced. There is increasing evidence that along with the great social change of past decades there have been quiet but unstoppable demographic shifts that have powerfully altered the reality of the mainline experience. While much has been said and accepted about what is wrong with the theology and practice of the mainline church that would cause it to lose market share to the evangelical and fundamental expressions of Christianity in the United States there is growing evidence that demographics have been more at the heart of the changes. The general causes of mainline decline are not theological or organizational, asserts Anthony Healy, president of Visions-Decisions, Inc.^{vii} Instead Healy points to the changes in fertility and marriage among mainline adherents. The level of education among mainline adherents compared to evangelical adherents has traditionally been higher resulting in later marriages and fewer children. This fundamental difference and its significant impact are confirmed in sociological research. According to sociologists Hout, Greely and Wilde, evidence from the General Social Survey indicates that higher fertility and earlier childbearing among women from conservative denominations explains 76% of the observed trend for cohorts born between 1903 and 1973: conservative denominations have grown their own. Mainline decline would have slowed in recent cohorts, but a drop in conversions from conservative to mainline denominations prolonged the decline. A recent rise in apostasy added a few percentage points to mainline decline. Conversions from mainline to conservative denominations have not changed, so they played no role in the restructuring.^{viii}

If major national trends of levels of education, marriage, and fertility account for a large portion of the change within the mainline church, local demographics of shifting populations have produced a compounding effect. Researcher Roger Stump gives evidence to the influence of migrating populations surrounding mainline congregations which generally were founded in an earlier time and are more often situated in areas that have undergone the greatest, if not most continuous and disruptive demographic change.^{ix} For example, in eastern Pennsylvania every incorporated town and city has been losing population over past decades while every surrounding township has been gaining. The United Methodist Church has been long established in this area of the Mid-Atlantic States with congregations historically located in the prime town and city areas from which people are now moving away. In some areas the people leaving are not being replaced, resulting in the impoverishment of towns and cities. In some areas the people leaving are being replaced in smaller numbers by immigrant populations with different practices and expressions of faith. These large and exceptionally powerful demographic drivers are repeated in nuanced versions throughout the United States producing changes over which mainline congregational and denominational leaders have no influence.

It can be argued that living in the midst of such powerful cultural changes that are difficult to perceive and impossible to influence can lead to feelings of surplus powerlessness. This is not meant to minimize the need for the leaders of long-established congregations and denominations to be accountable for their own reticence and recalcitrance to change or lead change. The feeling of surplus powerlessness, however, removes any sense of agency from leaders who have come to believe that they have failed and that they are helpless to change in ways that will make a difference. The power of the episcopal office is to reshape the agenda to normalize and depersonalize the experience of so many of our congregations and leaders and then to shape the theological conversation about God's purpose in such a situation. Not being held responsible for overpowering forces over which they have no control frees leaders from the sense of failure over the past and powerlessness over the present. The theological task is to set leaders free to face risk in areas where they do have influence and control. Without a sense of personal, congregational, and denominational agency set free from self blame there is no hope of fruitful experimentation.

Telling a better story

A great number of congregations and some middle judicatories tell their stories from a point of weakness. One large Presbyterian Church with which I recently worked had a rich and remarkable history that stretched over 150 years and coincided with the founding and development of the city and the university which surrounded it. The congregation from the beginning lived continuously in alignment with their founding principles:

- worship of the highest order
- an educated and liberal approach to faith

- passion about social issues and community involvement, and
- a place of theological and denominational refuge for people “on the edge.”

Clearly articulated and consistently practiced over the years, these principles were still firmly in place. However, this congregation could only talk to me about its most recent discomfort which centered on conflict with their senior clergy, competing fiefdoms between pastoral and music staff, generational tensions leading to competition over leadership, and a significant financial deficit hidden by earlier leaders who disguised the drain by redirecting assets from an exceptionally generous endowment. This congregation found itself locked into a story about good vs. bad and the hunt for who was right and who was wrong. The congregation needed help to see that they were experiencing their pain from holding on to old assumptions and practices for too long, and that their new story was to be a congregation called to a time of risk and creativity in which the challenge was to find strategies to make their foundational principles come alive for the next generation of Christians for whom this would be a church home. This was a church with the leadership and resources to meet the challenge. However, they needed a better story about themselves that could redirect their energy and spirit.

Similarly, I worked with one of the larger and stronger United Church of Christ middle judicatory conferences on issues of planning and reinvention. Again I was working with exceptional leaders who saw the need for change and willingly risked downsizing, staff and structure reconfiguration, and reprioritizing programs and initiatives. However, when they told their story they rehearsed their scarcity and weakness. They initiated their planning work with a document that measured their losses over the previous 30 years which included:

- a 48% loss in membership
- a 74% loss in Sunday School enrollment
- a decrease in the number of congregations of membership over 1000
- ...and so on.

While all of this was in fact, true it was also an experience replicated by all mainline middle judicatories in the Northeast quadrant of the United States during that 30 year period and was driven by the unchangeable demographic forces noted earlier in this paper. The planning task force of this judicatory was actually filled with people willing to get clear about their purpose and outcomes in the present moment and to search for a way to downsize - not with the purpose of meeting economic pressures - but to seek organizational agility that would help them to respond to their changing culture. However, they had set the stage for their work as if the purpose was to overcome a failed past. Good and creative leaders, they needed help in telling a better story which did not focus on retrenchments but focused on missional risk of a faithful people. These were people in New England who once met the new world as part of the arrival of the Pilgrims and now were being asked to meet the new world forming around them with the same sense of adventure.

In his work on leadership, Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education identified a central task of leadership as helping people tell a better story about themselves that will prompt and promote growth or change. Gardner offers a continuum of leadership (and examples of leaders) in terms of the innovativeness of the stories they help shape:

- the *ordinary leader*, by definition the most common one, simply relates the traditional story of his or her group as effectively as possible. (Gerald Ford, Georges Pompidou, or Roger Smith)
- the *innovative leader* takes a story that has been latent in the population and brings new attention or a fresh twist to that story. (Margaret Thatcher, Charles de Gaulle, or Ronald Reagan)
- the *visionary leader*, by far the rarest, is not content to relate a current story or to reactivate a story drawn from a remote or recent past, but actually creates a new story. (Moses, Jesus, Gandhi)^x

By telling the better story, the leader is, in fact, enabling people to build something new. Physicist and one of the foremost thinkers of this century David Bohm identifies *dialogue* as the means to create something new. Consider Bohm's description of dialogue:

...when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only *similar* and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies the first person sees a *difference* between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant to both his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, i.e., creating something new together.^{xi}

The theological task is not for the leader to create a new story and deliver it to the people but to engage the people in dialogue that will take leader and people both from what is known and move toward what could not at first be conceived.

Giving careful attention to the development of dialogue William Isaacs notes that there are four fields of conversation that leaders must negotiate with people in order to arrive at the better story.

1. politeness – the stage in which we learn the current story together and share a common monologue about what is.
2. breakdown – the stage in which the leader challenges the fullness or effectiveness of the present story through controlled discussion or skillful conversation and challenges the people to see more.

3. inquiry – the stage of reflective dialogue in which the leader and people together learn more about the reality and the potential of their story.
4. flow – the stage of generative dialogue in which a new story is first shaped and then lived.^{xii}

Far from political spin, this telling of the new story is not for personal gain or constituency building. The new telling is the tool of building new meaning and identity. It is ancient formulation that can be seen in words as familiar as: “You have heard it said of old but I say to you...” It is as ancient as the leadership of simile in which Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is like..., and the new image would spark new behavior. Ours is a moment that calls for leadership where attention is not lured away in pursuit of solutions to conditions that are not problems but which is able to shape a better story with the people that will empower and encourage risk.

The theological task of leadership is to shape the hopes and the fears of the people. The tools for this theological work in a managerial system are common: ideas, conversation, dialogue, and stories. To set the theological stage for conversation, leaders need first to normalize experience and empower agency in the people of the congregations and judicatories and then help shape a better story for the people to live. All of this work is to be set in the organizational life of congregations and conferences and is to be initiated through the organizational roles and limited authority given. How are leaders now learning to address this challenge?

Hopes: claiming and clarifying

There is growing evidence that mainline leaders are intentionally searching for ways to claim and to clarify in order to shape the hopes of the people – to claim identity and value and to clarify purpose and outcomes.

Once silenced (or at least shushed) by a cultural disestablishment, the mainline church lost its position of cultural prominence and power. Established powers do not need to articulate and claim their identity since it is assumed and ascribed by their position. Once disestablished the formerly prominent authorities often are bereft since they are not practiced in claiming an identity and purpose.

In a somewhat similar and very familiar fashion this loss of identity and purpose can be seen when a congregation is split and in the schism one faction sets off to found their own separate congregation with an identity “against” the mother church from which they split. The experience in such situations is that the new congregation which split from the mother church often does well immediately, usually experiencing growth and moving quickly in a well focused ministry. Needing to stand against the mother church in the schism, the new church finds itself with a well formed identity and purpose – even if framed negatively. The experience of the mother church is quite the opposite often marked by depression and feeling diminished as people

feel abandoned by former friends. Plagued by questions of “what is wrong with us that friends would want to leave?” and marked by anger over what has been lost, the mother church frequently flounders for a period of three to seven years. Interestingly, this period of loss, anger, and depression often forces the mother church to visit questions of identity and purpose – who are we and what has God now called us to do? As the mother church raises and wrestles with these questions new clarity emerges and the mother church regains strength, sometimes outgrowing the separated “daughter” who initially began her departure with such strength.

On a much larger scale, national identities have been experiencing similar splits, consolidations, and twists. In the most recent decade the United States has experienced a strengthening union between fundamental politics and fundamental religion which has gained strength by “standing against” a formerly (if unofficially) established mainline church and mainline national values. Writing from a theological perspective, Cornel West describes an “imperialism” aided by an alliance of the plutocratic elites and the Christian Right.^{xiii} Writing from a political as well as evangelical Christian perspective, former President Jimmy Carter offers a similar argument that fundamentalists have become increasingly influential in both religion and government bridging a formerly respected separation of church and state.^{xiv} Writing from a sociological perspective, William Lindsey and Mark Silk offer further support of this argument in which religion and public life in southern and south central states have experienced an evangelical Protestantism that exercises both religious and socio-political dominance unchallenged and has gone from producing “denominational controversialists to culture warriors.”^{xv}

The purpose of noting these writings in this current paper is not to argue for or against their shared analysis but to more simply point out that these creative writers, each working from a different discipline, describe a strikingly similar phenomenon. In all three analyses those who stand against previously established authorities now have a much clearer identity and certainty of purpose. In contrast, those who once held positions of legal or cultural prominence, however informal, now find themselves without clear identity – more often experiencing internal shadings of diffuse multiple identities.

Returning our discussion to the mainline church, there is evidence of growing efforts to describe what the mainline church now stands for rather than what it was once assumed to represent. There is a new claiming of mainline identity that is beginning to show up as leaders shape “case statements” for mainline expressions of faith. Richard Hamm, retired General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) offers an example of such an effort by identifying five reasons why the core values of mainline denominations are especially important today:

- First, in a time when fundamentalism is sweeping all the religions in the world, it is valuable to have traditions that seek to *hold faith and reason together*.

- Second, and related, the colleges, seminaries, and universities that are rooted in the mainline denominations are *engaged in education rather than in indoctrination*.
- Third, the mainline denomination represents a worldview that *analyzes reality in terms of individuals and systems* (a corrective to an American ethos of radical individualism).
- Fourth, it is mainline theology and biblical interpretation that has *made it possible for women, people of color, and other historically marginalized people to participate more fully in the church and in the wider community* (certainly a work in progress).
- Fifth, the mainline church *exemplifies overseas involvements that are marked by partnerships with indigenous people rather than by colonialism*.^{xvi}

Organizationally, the more the leader is able to shape and claim a clear identity for the body the more hope is focused and experienced by participants and leaders alike.

If claiming identity increases the measure of hope, clarifying purpose and outcomes undergirds hope even further. To know why one “is” is formative. To know what one “is to do” is empowering because it brings purpose and meaning to one’s efforts. In the earlier paper, *Leadership Under Constraints*, I argue that most judicatories (as well as many congregations and denominations) are not clear about what they produce. Are conferences to produce vital and vibrant churches, or produce protection and support that allows “all” congregations to survive, if not thrive? The difference of priority and resource allocation of these two similar but different outcomes is immeasurable. Setting clear outcomes is a major task beset by resistance that is founded on the fears of what individuals and congregations believe they will lose if priorities change and outcomes become clear.

The task of shaping hope by becoming clear about purpose and outcomes is centered on the work of simplifying a complex setting. In the earlier paper I addressed this practice of clarifying using the work of Edwards Deming who introduced the concept of the core process, the simplest transaction of a system through which all other parts of the system are brought into alignment.^{xvii} In his popular work on organizational leadership, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins uses the concept of a *hedgehog principle* to similar effect. Collins contrasts foxes and hedgehogs:

- Foxes pursue many ends at the same time and see the world in all its complexity. They are scattered or diffused, moving on many levels. They endlessly invent changing strategies to outfox the hedgehog.
- Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything. They understand that whatever the fox tries, their essential nature requires them to respond by rolling up and exposing their quills. They engage and negotiate change by remaining true to their nature.^{xviii}

Collins asserts that this is a moment for hedgehogs – for leaders who can locate and claim the central principle or mission that will organize a diffuse and unproductive complexity. The promise of getting clear about purpose and outcomes is not gained by oversimplifying an

increasingly complex and technological world in Luddite response to progress. Rather it is the work of looking into complexity to find and use the central idea or purpose which will guide behavior and direct attention and resources.

This search for clarity of purpose and outcomes is a conversation ripe within United Methodist conferences as bishops and cabinets are struggling to get clear on what should be different (the outcome) within one to three years because of the work of the conference. Conferences are struggling with what roles the bishop and district superintendent need to assume in order to produce the intended outcome. The hedgehog concept closely follows the systems principle that *once a paradigm shifts everything goes back to zero*.^{xix} The “zero” is the single organizing idea, the basic principle or concept that will provide direction and purpose to every level of the organization.

It is well recognized that long established and mature institutions and organizations increasingly develop an internal focus that takes them further and further from their stated purpose or mission. Managerial orderliness overcomes passion and purpose. Risk is replaced with neatness. To work back toward zero and to get closer to the hedgehog basic principle requires movement back to foundational organizational purpose statements. Such conversations about going back to zero are now active across the United Methodist connection. For example in working with one conference, the question focused on the purpose of the annual charge conference, a required practice that consumes a large portion of district superintendents’ and congregational leaders’ time and attention and which is often felt to be unproductive or even unnecessary. Going back to zero at a time when the paradigm is shifting means rediscovering the purpose for the charge conference:

“The Charge Conference shall be the connecting link between the local church and the general church and shall have general oversight of the Administrative Council(s) or Board(s).” (The Book of Discipline P248)

Following that purpose statement in the *Discipline* is a rather lengthy managerial description of what could or should be a part of the content and responsibility of every charge conference.

What if conference leaders focused on the purpose statement (the “zero”) rather than the managerial description that followed? If the charge conference is a connecting link consider the difference if leaders ask what kind of connecting link a congregation actually needs. It might suggest different kinds of links for different congregations such as:

- particular attention to “tipping point” congregations (those with average attendance under 50 and those with average attendance over 500);
- individual congregations for whom a dash of reality or the encouragement of hope would make a significant difference;
- those congregations that have historically demonstrated recalcitrance to transformation and might be invited to “phone in” their charge conference or have none at all;

- those that need to feel connected to other congregations and the superintendency by the simple sharing of stories about their ministry over the past year;
- those facing a difficult or significant leadership change in the coming year that need clear guidance.

By being willing to ask the question of purpose based on the zero-based concept of what is needed there is freedom for leaders to align their own efforts and resources to the places where the actual outcome of ministry can be optimized.

A similar question that is being asked in many conferences is about the role of district superintendent. The role and function of superintending which is shared by bishop and district superintendents are central to the changes being explored by most conferences. One seminary leader was noted to say that until the superintendents come to terms with their managerial focus on making appointments little else will change within the conference system. Here again it may be helpful to go back to “zero” statements.

What is the purpose of the church as understood within United Methodism? *“The Mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ” (The Book of Discipline, P 401)*

What is the purpose of the local church? *“Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.” (The Book of Discipline, P201).*

What is the purpose of superintending within the United Methodist Church? *“The purpose of superintending is to equip the Church in its disciple-making ministry. Those who superintend carry primary responsibility for ordering the life of the Church.” (The Book of Discipline, P.401)*

Following the “zero” statements of purpose it becomes clearer that the foundational purpose of superintending is to equip the Church – its congregations, laity and clergy – to make disciples. In order to stay clearly aligned to that purpose for which the outcome is disciples, there is a rather full array of responsibilities, roles, and activities that superintendents need to contend with that may or may not support the essential outcome of congregations, laity, and clergy equipped to make disciples. In paragraphs 419 through 425 of *The Book of Discipline* there is a full exposition of the specific responsibilities of the district superintendent which have accumulated over the years for proper managerial reasons. Counting the lines in the Discipline given to describe the responsibilities of the district superintendent and the points of responsibility outlined, a summary of the description is as follows:

<u>AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY</u>	<u>LINES OF TEXT</u>	<u>POINTS OF RESPONSIBILITY</u>
• Spiritual and Pastoral	10	3
• Supervision	13	5
• Personnel	12	4
• Administrative	38	14
• Program	10	5
• Study and Reflection	4	1

In an established managerial system the accretion of responsibilities grows and overshadows, if not hides, the “zero” purpose statement needed to focus on mission. What if conference leaders worked to get clear about the “zero” purpose statements and then essentially “stopped reading” so that the following descriptions of managerial responsibilities that have gathered over the years did not cloud the needed clarity? Rather, beginning with the “zero” purpose statements what if leaders invented again the priorities of responsibilities, roles, and behaviors that now best suit the needs of the church to make disciples? Historic statements of managerial responsibilities would only be read with an eye to whether they did or did not support the essential purpose of the role in true hedgehog fashion.

To be clear about the purpose and outcome of superintending roles, leaders must sort through accumulated roles and responsibilities but they also must escape the “tyranny of the all.” One district superintendent when asked what he understood the outcome of his role to be (“What will be different 1 to 3 years from now because of your work?”) answered that “all congregations on his district will be more faithful in mission and better at making disciples,” and that “all leaders will have an expanding vision of what they are called to do.” “All” congregations and “all” leaders include those who are not gifted in making disciples and those not willing, indeed perhaps even recalcitrant, to face into changes needed to making disciples. To assume responsibility for “all” is to cloud the hedgehog clarity of the “zero” purpose statements of mission and to scatter passion, attention, and resources in uncritical and unproductive ways. The Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 offers the example of seeds scattered that fall everywhere but only grew to full harvest when they fell to good earth. When the disciples asked Jesus why he told such stories the response was that the stories were to help the disciples look for places of readiness where the Word and their work would make a difference. The contemporary paraphrase of this Bible story by Eugene Peterson in *The Message* makes this clear.

The Disciples came up and asked, “Why do you tell stories?”

He replied, “You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness.

Jesus acknowledged that not “all” were ready and not “all” can help. He continued in his response to the disciples:

I don't want Isaiah's forecast repeated all over again:
 Your ears are open but you don't hear a thing.
 Your eyes are awake but you don't see a thing.
 The people are blockheads!
 They stick their fingers in their ears
 so they won't have to listen;
 They screw their eyes shut
 so they won't have to look,
 so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face
 and let me heal them.^{xx}

There is yet much work to do to find the clarity that will organize complexity. The conversations about claiming mainline identity is just beginning as theological case statements are shaped and as denominational advertising campaigns (United Methodist: “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open doors.” United Church of Christ: “God is still Speaking.”) seek to give people language for the difference that can be found within a particular denomination. The hard work of shaping clarity is also just beginning as conferences redefine purpose, responsibilities, and roles. It is the work of *shaping hope*. Organizational in form but spiritual in function it is part of the theological task of episcopal leadership.

Fears: confronting the losses and barriers

The fears of the people are shaped by leaders when the losses and barriers that stop people from moving ahead are identified and openly addressed. Fears have immeasurably more power when hidden or allowed to go unspoken. Fears are real and they are the product of real losses facing any or all of us in the denominational changes that lie ahead. No wilderness experience is without loss. Even a future of freedom, milk and honey did not keep the Israelites from feeling the loss of comfort that they possessed in Egypt despite it being comfort limited by their lot as slaves. Fears are commonly expressed as complaints and resistance both of which can, in fact, be used as tools of change.

After crossing the Red Sea the Israelites set out together into the wilderness of Sin between Elim and Sinai. “On the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt...” – that is, 45 days into a forty year journey - they began their complaints.

“The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Exodus 16: 1-3.

What is not to be missed is that there is energy in complaining. It brings people together. It seeks action from the leader. It is energy that can be used much like the energy of mistakes and failures. There is a North American Indian saying that stumbling is moving ahead faster. No one chooses to stumble, but when it happens we are moved. Storms galvanize people. We don't often choose to go out in storms but once caught in a storm we are moved to action. Caught in a boat during a huge storm the disciples were moved to wake a sleeping Jesus and miracles happened.

A part of the theological task of leadership is to get increasingly comfortable with and understanding of people's fears and complaints. As noted above, we have been trained as leaders to be persuasive. Our natural response to fear is to persuade people that "it will be all right" and that "the goal is worth the journey." We try to talk people through their fears. There is, however, a fundamental disconnect in this exchange. In expressing fear people are talking about *feelings*. When leaders respond to fears with persuasive statements about goals and visions it is a response about *ideas*. When the people talk about (or act out) their *feelings* and leaders respond with *ideas* the relationship between leader and people is broken. The spiritual task of the leader is not to remove the discomfort so that people do not feel loss. Leaders are not to talk people out of their feelings of loss. The task of the leader is to listen closely enough to the fears of the people so that they can be seen, be talked about, and be used.

Resistance

As noted above, one of the most common expressions of loss is resistance. From the perspective of systems theory resistance is not opposition. It is information. It is a "negative feedback loop" which in any healthy system carries a message for the system to slow down. All living systems have two internal paths of information – positive feedback loops and negative feedback loops. Positive and negative in this usage does not suggest an evaluative valance of good or bad. Positive feedback loops simply carry the message that the system is to move ahead and to speed up. Negative feedback loops carry the message for the system to slow down or to stop. A simple mechanical example is a heating system that has a thermostat that supplies positive feedback information to start the furnace up when the heat drops below a comfortable level and sends negative feedback information to turn the furnace off when the heat has risen to a maximum set level. These messages have the dispassionate purpose of keeping the system functioning appropriately.

The leader in an organization such as a congregation or conference is subject to such feedback loop messages and is often left feeling bewildered, perhaps even betrayed, when the negative feedback loops of resistance begin to be expressed by the very people who positively encouraged the change at the beginning. This can be the experience of the planning team of a local church which was encouraged to learn and dream and bring new hope to the congregation through their planning work. Called to this task, the planning team may feel betrayed when the

very leaders who asked them to take up the work of dreaming hear the team's report and show no enthusiasm for the changes needed to address the dream. We should feel warned by the observation of Niccolo Machiavelli, 16th century advisor to the Medici family who wrote, "It must be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institutions and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new ones."^{xxi}

It is helpful to understand that there are essentially three stages to all transitions as identified by William Bridges: 1- Endings, 2- The Neutral Zone, and 3- Making a Beginning.^{xxii} Bridges points out that when faced with change people always wishfully choose to begin the transition by starting at stage 3, making the new beginning. Consider the example of a pastor named to a new appointment two months before the transition was to occur at the following June annual conference. When the outgoing pastor shared information about the church the newly appointed pastor had few questions. However, the outgoing pastor received a call about a week later with the one question that was on the new pastor's mind: where is a good place to get a haircut? Deeply frustrating at the time, it was an understandable question nonetheless. The new pastor was wondering about getting his haircut because, in his mind, he was already living in the new parsonage weeks before actual moving. He was already deciding how he would lead, what he would preach. He was deeply into stage 3.

Bridges points out that this is natural because the work of stage 1, the stage of endings, is painful and people want to avoid it. Stage 2, the neutral zone, is a very confusing place where chaos reigns. The old is gone, the new is bewilderingly unknown. A confusing and anxious place, people tend to deny that this stage exists.

The dilemma is that the stages of transition are in some sense epigenetic. Full movement into later stages requires addressing the issues of the stage or stages that precede. People can grasp the power and the passion of a transition and even be advocates for the need and the mission of the congregational, conference, or denominational changes. This power and passion is indeed real and authentic. But it may also be the voice within ourselves or heard from others who are in stage 3 in their minds. When the undone work of stages 1 and 2 catch up the passion takes on the expression of apathy. Resistance is a negative feedback loop in the system telling the leader to slow down. A loss or potential loss is being felt.

While there may be occasional moments of confrontation, it is more common for resistance to show up as hesitancy or diversion. People who initially understand the need for change walk up to the door but can't quite seem to step through. Resistance is often described as "work avoidance" which has patterns of organizational behavior. Below is an overview by Donna Markham of seven types of behaviors of resistance both internal within the organization and also in the public arena.^{xxiii} Note how common these behaviors are and how they function to slow forward movement.

	INTRAORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR	PUBLIC BEHAVIOR
ISOLATION	-- little departmental exchange -- cliques -- little consultation	-- self-sufficiency -- disinterest in collaboration -- adamant "stand-alone" style
PROJECTION	-- atmosphere of criticism --blame other leaders, committees, authority	--blame external factors for operational problems
SPLITTING	-- over aggrandizement or hostile devaluation of individuals or groups -- coalition building, covert strategizing prior to meetings	-- public devaluation of competitors
DOING / UNDOING	-- obsessive concern about and fear of making a mistake -- inability to bring agenda items to closure -- criticism of processes used to arrive at decisions	-- waffling on decisions relative to realignments, partnerships, mergers
DENIAL	-- Pollyannaish worldview -- oblivious to problems in the organization -- inability to manage discord	-- lack of attention to or awareness of reality of environment -- incognizant of emergent needs
RIGIDITY	-- preoccupation with policies and procedures -- resort to legalism --self-righteousness -- dogmatism	-- heavy emphasis on tradition and history -- unwillingness to modify strategies, policies in order to collaborate with others
DEPRESSION	-- absenteeism --attrition of leaders -- lethargy at meetings -- silence, lack of initiative, enthusiasm -- low energy level	-- public invisibility -- poor growth record

The task of the leader is to shape the fears of the people – to bring them to action. When left unidentified or unspoken the behaviors of resistance have full power to slow a system down or bring it to full stop. It is when the leader is able to help people identify and talk about the resistance that the fears can be released through the conversation and the released energy provides forward movement. In her work on "Spiritlinking Leadership," Markham suggests a

four-fold dialogic process for managing resistance. It is a four stage conversation that is guided by the leader who invites people to consider their own behavior, motives and feelings – and invites people to move from resistance to action. The four stages each have a question to guide the conversation.

The MODE:	What is going on here?
The MOTIVE:	Why might this be happening now?
IMPLICATIONS:	What are the likely consequences if this behavior continues?
The ACTION:	What are we willing to do? ^{xxiv}

Rather than resort to persuasion which invites deeper resistance, the leader simply guides people into conversation about their own behavior, their own motives, and the implications if it continues. The fears are invited into the open and are given words. It is the first step of Bridges' stage of "endings" which requires people to let go of the old in order to enter into the confusion of what is not yet.

Rewards

To shape the fears of the people, leaders need to identify and empower people to talk about behaviors that are based on fear and which surface as resistance. A similar task is to acknowledge and address the barriers to change. In the case of a congregational and denominational system that is dependent upon clergy – who themselves are dependent upon the system – one barrier that needs to be addressed is the assumed reward system in which people believe themselves to be living. As in all good mysteries and all bad politics it is important to "follow the money" (the rewards). Rewards direct behavior much like gravity directs the flow of water.

United Methodists need to examine the ways in which the appointment process is a perceived reward system. North American Protestantism has always been a small church phenomenon and remains so even in the current day when large and very large congregations hold sway in public attention. Drawing on the 1998 National Congregations Study, a systematic study of American congregations led by Mark Chaves, Professor of Sociology at the University of Arizona, it is clear that congregations are still overwhelmingly small.^{xxv} Fifty-nine percent of the approximately 350,000 congregations in the U.S. have fewer than 100 regular participants, counting both adults and children. The figure jumps to 71 percent of all congregations having fewer than 100 participants if only adults are counted. Together 50 percent of all congregations in the U.S. involve only 11 percent of all people participating in congregations. Conversely, the 10 percent of the largest congregations involve approximately 40 percent of all people who participate in congregations. While Protestantism has historically been experienced in small congregations the current picture today is that the average congregation has an average worship attendance of 75 people but the average participant in a congregation worships in a congregation with average attendance of 400 people.

To put this disparity of size into context for the United Methodist Church in the U.S., the 200 largest United Methodist Churches make up only .5% - 1/2 of 1 percent – of all United Methodist congregations in the U.S. However, this .5% of churches holds 9.5% of the national membership of the denomination in the U.S. The percentage of United Methodist membership in our largest churches is a measure exactly duplicated by the largest ELCA congregations in the U.S.^{xxvi} It is a part of a cultural trend in which larger congregations live more easily in the present culture.

While our largest congregations are experienced as “culturally comfortable” and have provided leadership to help Christianity learn to speak to new generations of Americans, our smallest churches are vulnerable. According to a report prepared for the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits 81% of the United Methodist churches that closed during the twenty year period beginning in 1985 had attendance of worship that did not exceed 50 (attendance of less than 100 accounts for 96% of all churches closed in the same period).^{xxvii}

The assumed reward system that is still alive suggests that ability, faithfulness and tenure among clergy is rewarded by an appointment system that will provide congregations of increasingly larger size with concomitantly larger salaries as a measure of success. As Jackson Carrol notes, “the distribution of Protestant churches by size is like a pyramid, with the number of congregations narrowing dramatically as size increases. As a result, a large majority of Protestant clergy will almost inevitably spend their entire ministry in small or medium-sized congregations. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, what makes it an issue is the penchant among clergy, denominational officials, and laity for equating career success with climbing ever higher up the pyramid, serving ever-larger congregations.”^{xxviii} As one United Methodist bishop stated the case rather succinctly, “I only have forty plums among my churches and everybody thinks they deserve to be appointed to them.”

There is an obvious collision of values in the present situation. At the simplest level, clergy expect to be able to “climb” to ever larger congregations with increasingly larger salaries. At a deeper level it is more than a personal expectation. There are significant market drivers at work. The majority of congregations and participants in the United Methodist denomination in the U.S. can be identified as middle class. In a report from the Pulpit and Pew research project powerful economic realities were identified, noting that clergy must continually strive to serve larger congregations simply to have the semblance of a middle class lifestyle that is in any way commensurate with the people whom they serve.^{xxix} This is not so much an issue of competitive consumption that pushes clergy to want to live like others. It is as basic as wanting to be able to provide the opportunity of a college education for their children or to have reasonable resources for retirement.

It is important to note that clergy are under pressure to move to larger congregations or to emphasize membership growth in the church they presently serve even if they highly value and are skilled at serving healthy small congregations which tend to focus on developing community,

ministries of nurture and care, and missions. Similarly congregations live with a market-driven pressure to pursue membership growth even when it is not their spiritual gift or sense of call to mission. The pressure comes from needing more people with more resources to support ever-growing clergy compensation packages or to attract what is assumed to be more skilled or experienced clergy leadership in subsequent appointments. From a management perspective lay leaders feel pressure to attract more people simply to protect and care for the congregation which is an important institution in their lives. It is not an issue of evangelical fervor but the actions of due diligence by responsible managers.

Bishops and district superintendents tend to respond to the expectations of moving to ever larger congregations and to claims for guaranteed appointments by emphasizing missional values of sacrifice and by emphasizing expectations of performance. On the one hand this is both a faithful and appropriate response. On the other hand such a response still does not recognize or honor the pinch clergy feel in wanting to be faithful but also wanting to provide for themselves and their families in a market economy culture. This will continue to be a growing issue in the recruitment and appointment of younger generations of clergy whose cultural values have been shaped by an expanding economy and unlimited choice. The response of sacrifice also does not help laity whose anxiety about the viability or the mission of their congregation rests, appropriately or not, on their dependence upon the performance of their clergy.

Still to be explored are discussions about changing the actual reward system that drives our congregations and conferences. As long as “plum appointments” are seen as the reward for clergy and the appointment of the “best of the best” clergy seen as the reward for congregations, the pinch of competing values will not go away.

Recently the Gallup organization conducted the largest study of its kind focused on over 80,000 managers in more than 400 companies. One of the questions that they pursued in the study was, “how do you measure the strength of the workplace?” Another way to ask that question is, “what does a worker most value in their place of employment?” Twelve core elements surfaced in the analysis.

- 1 Do I know what is expected of me at work?
 - 2 Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
 - 3 At work do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
 - 4 In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
 - 5 Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?
 - 6 Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
-
- 7 At work, do my opinions seem to count?
 - 8 Do the mission / purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?
 - 9 Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?

- 10 Do I have a best friend at work?
- 11 In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?
- 12 This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?^{xxx}

Of these twelve core issues, the top six above the double line are the most powerful of the drivers and should receive the most attention.

First, note that money is nowhere on the final list. Human resource and organizational research has long recognized that salaries and benefits are not effective rewards or motivators. An increase in salary or benefits is appreciated when received but then quickly becomes the new baseline of expectations by the worker who then is interested in what will be received next year when salaries and benefits are reviewed again. Buckingham and Coffman note in their study that pay, benefits, senior management, and organizational structure did surface in the responses they received but disappeared during analysis of the data. It is not that they are unimportant, it is just that they are “equally important to every employee, good, bad, and mediocre. Yes, if you are paying 20 percent below market average, you may have difficulty attracting people. But bringing your pay and benefit package up to market levels, while a sensible first step, will not take you very far. These kinds of issues are like tickets to the ballpark – they get you into the game, but they can’t help you win.”^{xxxi}

Suitable salaries and the market economy will continue to challenge both clergy and congregations. These powerful drivers will produce changes in our current assumptions about the pastor – parish relationship. But salaries and appointments do not need to be the sole elements of a reward system when so many other values of meaning, purpose and relationship are core to a person’s work. Bishops and district superintendents can learn new ways to motivate and reward clergy performance and congregational faithfulness. What are needed are new and creative discussions about shifting the reward system which can, in part, be influenced by the middle judicatory. Since the appointment process is seen as the denominational reward process the appointment cabinet is seen as central to validation and morale. Consider the difference in morale if the cabinet gave attention to helping people get clear about what is expected of them, to demonstrating awareness and care of persons and congregations individually, and recognizing people’s work.

Working in health care, which is an industry fraught with complaints and perceived limits, Quint Studer, CEO of several hospitals, intentionally set out to change the culture of his hospitals by shifting focus from monocular vision on bottom line issues (the financials) to give attention to clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction, and employee satisfaction.^{xxxii} Convinced that changing morale and improving performance is much more than attitudinal, Studer sought ways to “hardwire” – to implant daily and regular practices – that would make a difference. In a hospital this hardwiring may mean establishing practices of giving clear and formal reviews of new employees after the first 90 days of employment to be sure that their job is clear, that

resources needed are available to them, and that their arrival is recognized. In a hospital this hardwiring may mean establishing daily “employee rounds” where senior staff walk the halls to say hello and to engage individuals in quick but intentional personal conversations in order to address both personal and organizational issues. In a hospital this hardwiring may mean finding ways to tell staff the stories of lives changed by the hospital that senior staff tend to hear from thankful discharged patients but need to be shared back with the actual service providers. The key to this reward system is that it is designed to be intentional and implemented through clear behaviors practiced by leaders. Discovering ways to hardwire new rewards into the United Methodist system in order to change the current culture is important work that has not yet begun.

Senior leaders will need to look for ways to implement behavioral practices that will address the real core values of the work of clergy and congregations. Consider an actual situation in which a United Methodist bishop found himself under criticism from a pastor of a large congregation who was moved during a recent appointment season. The pastor was upset because he had only a few years until retirement and had planned to “ride out” those years in the congregation in which he had worked hard to bring it to a place of comfortable mission. The pastor was also disappointed because in the process of his unwanted new appointment he was not offered a larger “plum” congregation that would have given recognition to his past “success.” Instead he was appointed to a church which was facing issues that would need some attention and energy. While privately supportive when meeting with the bishop face-to-face, this pastor was publicly critical of the new appointment, talking openly about unfairness and lack of recognition of his gifts. Assuming the current reward system which focuses on valuing a person’s work by the size of appointment, the bishop was, in fact, constrained in challenging the pastor’s sense of being wronged. The bishop would be left to talk to this pastor only about the need to sacrifice in an appointment system based on missional appointments. While this is both right and appropriate, it does not address the real needs and feelings of the pastor.

However, when attention can be given to other core elements of a reward system as noted above in the work of Buckingham and Coffman the bishop can look for ways to offer recognition, appreciation, and motivation directly. The bishop might have the option of meeting with the pastor to first tell him that his public complaints did not go unnoticed (an important step in making people responsible for their own actions) and then to offer any of several messages that are responsive to what people value in their work. These may be messages such as: “You are better than these complaints and have more to offer than riding out a comfortable appointment,” or, “You don’t need to serve as senior pastor of our largest church because they don’t need your skills and experience as much as the church you are appointed to,” or, “Because you have the skills in leading larger churches such as the one that needs your leadership right now I want to talk with you about mentoring one or two other younger pastors who have the potential to lead large churches in the future but still have some things to learn.” Responses aligned with what people actually value about their work are, in fact, rewards. While a market-driven economy that

imposes financial realities on all leaders and all congregations is beyond our control, there are multiple values about work, mission, and meaning that are well within our influence. To shape hopes and fears, we need to give attention to where we do have influence in order to escape captivity to the arenas where we are without influence.

Conclusion

The corporate body of Christ is a tool given to episcopal leaders to do the work of the Spirit. Well beyond the limited task of managing the concerns of an institution, this is a time when leadership depends upon shaping the hopes and fears of the people. People beset by their own sense of powerlessness need to be set free. In a memorable prayer from his time as senior minister at Riverside Church, William Sloan Coffin first gave thanks for our simple blessings such as health, food and sleep. He then turned attention to give thanks for the more complicated blessings:

“...our failures, which teach us so much more than success; our lack of money, which points to the only truly renewable resources, the resources of the spirit; our lack of health, yea, even the knowledge of death, for until we learn that life is limitation, we are surely as formless and as shallow as a stream without its banks.”^{xxxiii}

The courage of faithful leadership in this time of change is to stand in the midst of perceived limits and to help people tell a story of possibility, to speak of real hopes and to help people use their fears to claim that hope.

Notes

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ⁱⁱⁱ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) 11.

^{iv} Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York, Simon & Schuster) 239.

^v Michael Lerner, *Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday Life and the Psychology of Individual and Social Transformation* (Oakland, CA: The Institute for Labor and Mental Health, 1986) ii.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, i.

^{vii} Anthony Healy, *The Postmodern Promise* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2005) 102.

^{viii} Michal Hout, Andrew Greely, and Melissa Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States.” *American Sociological Review* 107 (September 2001) 468-500.

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^{xi} David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996) 2.

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- xxiii Donna Markham, *Spiritlinking Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press 1999) 42.
- xxiv Ibid. 46.
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- xxviii Jackson Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006) 64.
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