

From Maintaining to Building Communities of Faith

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The model of beliefs and values set by tradition and authority structures, administered by clergy and disseminated by domestic and overseas missionaries, no longer fits a new, open “world come of age”—a world of highly educated lay members, diverse cultures and beliefs, and new risks to the human future. Questions of mission—of the aims of Christian effort and of *leadership* (who will find paths for our journey into a human future?)—are central for North American Christians. The research project “Toward a Higher Quality of Christian Ministry” (THQ) identified congregations and leaders that are responding effectively to the challenges of our time in particular places throughout the United States, whose ministry engages the wider local community, who expand the capacity of members to embody the mission of God and take joy in it. This article will review what we have learned about mission and leadership from those teachers.¹

Toward a Higher Quality of Christian Ministry

The THQ project identified “effective” clergy who stimulate the vitality of their congregations and “struggling” clergy whose congregations are marked by stagnation or decline. Clergy nominated as effective and as struggling were chosen from all regions of the country, and were representative of the proportions of national Episcopal clergy by

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¹ John Dreibelbis and David Gortner, “Beyond Wish-Lists for Pastoral Leadership: Assessing Clergy Behavior and Congregational Outcomes to Guide Seminary Curriculum,” *Theological Education* 40 (2005): 25–49. Also see John Dreibelbis and David T. Gortner, *Markers of Strong and Effective Clergy Leadership*, research report (Evanston, Ill.: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 2000); John Dreibelbis and David T. Gortner, *Talented but Tenuous: A Profile of Clergy Temperaments and Leadership Skills*, research report (Evanston, Ill.: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 2002).

gender and race. They were interviewed in their parish locations by trained interviewers, who asked about the search process leading to the present position, decisions that went well and that did not go well, conflict and collaboration, theology as it guides ministry, creativity, mentor and protégé relationships, and the overall pattern of communication in the congregation and in the local community. Supplementary interviews were conducted with one parish member, one staff person, and one community person not a parish member. This was Phase One of the project.²

After analysis of the interviews and background information, THQ staff, advised by effective clergy, university researchers, and Episcopal faculty, constructed a survey which was sent to fifteen hundred Episcopal vicars and rectors. The survey took one and a half hours to complete and was returned by 30.4 percent. The sample matched characteristics of Episcopal clergy nationwide. This was Phase Two of the project.

When interviewers turned in the tapes of interviews, they were handed a list of 36 adjectives with the instruction, "Select up to 6 adjectives that best describe the person you interviewed." Neither interviewer nor subject knew whether the subject had been nominated "effective" or "struggling."

The adjectives that were selected for effective clergy were: clear, consistent, quick, collaborative, confident, decisive, innovative, energetic, planful, accommodating. The staff labeled this list "proactive." The staff then divided the list of clergy into three groups: (a) no proactive adjectives applied to them; (b) 1 or 2 out of a possible 6 applied; (c) 3 or more applied to them. We then compared Average Sunday Attendance one year before the arrival of the clergyperson with average attendance two years after her/his arrival. For group A, attendance went down 4 percent; for group B, attendance increased by 16 percent; and for group C it increased 28 percent.

We also found that age distribution of members is more balanced in effective congregations, particularly a greater representation of

² This is the place to acknowledge our debt to Dr. Melany Baehr of the University of Chicago's Human Resources Center. Her database of thousands of professionals, managers, technical specialists, and executives, the Higher Level Personnel, provides the grids with which we compare clergy. We have also relied on the work of Professor David McClelland of Harvard University, who has studied differentiating characteristics and behaviors of leaders, from which we have benefited.

children and youth. There is a consistent pattern of ministry in the local community, of adult education directed to the community at large and to daily life challenges and experiences, and of worship that incorporates concerns and relationships of daily life. Lay ministries in the community are developed and lay ministry skills and abilities increase continuously and substantially.

Adjectives applied to struggling clergy were: sensitive, kind, intuitive, intelligent, empathic. THQ staff named this list “pastoral, but non-directive.” The greatest positive change in attendance—an increase of 30 percent—was for clergy that had *no* “pastoral, but non-directive” adjectives applied. These results should not be interpreted as evidence that lack of pastoral qualities increases attendance. Rather, it indicates that interviewers made all their six choices from the “pro-active” leadership adjectives.

Standardized measures were part of the national survey. Self-reports from clergy were compared with large populations of professionals and executives. Effective clergy are at the 43rd percentile for decisiveness; the whole national sample is at the 34th percentile; and struggling clergy are at the 15th percentile. Effective clergy are at the 49th percentile for self-confidence; the national sample is at the 39th percentile; and struggling clergy are at the 33rd percentile. These results are consistent with impressions created in the minds of interviewers.

Lay members of congregations also report different experiences, depending on whether their clergy were identified as effective or struggling. Members of struggling congregations mentioned *passive engagements* slightly more than members of effective congregations. Effective congregation members reported *active engagements* about 65 percent more often than struggling congregation members, and spoke of a sense of *kinship* with others in the congregation almost three times as often as those in struggling congregations. This link between active engagement and kinship is as old as Aristotle’s observation that engaging in an activity together leads to affiliation. Asked to describe the tone of the congregation, 90 percent of members in struggling congregations identified tensions, compared to 22 percent in effective congregations. In struggling congregations, 70 percent of members reported depleted energy or demoralization, compared to 20 percent in effective congregations. In effective congregations, 90 percent of members reported *enjoyment*, compared to 40 percent of respondents in struggling congregations.

Markers of Effective Clergy

THQ wanted more than a “wish list” of desirable characteristics of ministerial leaders. We asked what the adjectives “clear, consistent, collaborative, decisive” look like in parish practice. The purpose of Phase One interviews was to obtain narratives from priests about their understanding of and actions in the interview areas already named. It is very important, for example, to have an understanding of “decisive” that is derived from the experience of ministerial decisions, rather than importing an image from, say, business.

In the search process, effective clergy leaders decided to accept a call based on intrinsic motives related to the future work itself, assessing the opportunity for a vibrant ministry. Struggling clergy decided to accept based on extrinsic factors, such as the desirability of the community as a place to live or the salary. Effective clergy listened for mission potential and valued honesty in a congregation, while acknowledging risk. Struggling clergy emphasized warmth and safety. The goals for the first year differed in one important respect: effective clergy begin by building a purposive infrastructure—defining responsibilities, helping people find positions that fit their abilities and interests, and developing standard operating relationships.

Effective clergy make more positive assessments about lay leadership than struggling clergy, and less than half the number of negative assessments. Effective clergy are here exercising the power of positive expectations, which is well-documented in leadership literature.³ Struggling clergy use harsh language when they make negative assessments, such as “controlling,” “back-room dealing,” “unwelcoming.” Negative assessments by effective clergy are more analytical: the congregation is “pained” or “hurt,” or they “have no spiritual grounding.”

Decisions approached in a reactive mode were twice as likely not to go as well as those that were approached proactively. Decision focus was important. Maintenance decisions went well some of the time for both struggling and effective clergy. Mission decisions almost always went well, and a greater proportion of effective clergy’s decisions were mission decisions. Effective clergy are aware of the networks of communication and influence that are centered in long-established parish members and in elected or appointed holders of key positions. They observe carefully how key people in those networks respond to

³ Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Irvington, 1971).

actual or proposed changes. They are aware of their own anxiety at moments of conflict or change, and of signs of anxiety in the congregational climate. They have developed ways of managing anxiety, an important competence since 52.2 percent of national clergy say they need further training in “Managing anxiety in the face of disapproval.” In the national survey, parish priests obtained little help in decision-making from college or seminary education. Most education in decision-making took place in education programs after graduation or through trial-and-error learning on the job.

Episcopal parish priests have a very high level of creative potential: they score above all but one of twelve occupational subgroups when compared with large populations of professionals and executives. Clergy creativity is used to develop particular identities for their congregations and to build strong relationships among people. Our data suggest that effective clergy combine higher levels of self-confidence and decisiveness with their creative potential.

Effective clergy have usually had very strong mentors, most often in the years after ordination. Struggling clergy usually have not. In the national survey, clergy responded to the question, “What is the greatest influence in shaping me in the development of my ministry?” as follows:

- Mentor, 27.6 percent;
- Post-ordination experience and training, 16.9 percent;
- Seminary, 15.1 percent;
- Work with people in need, 11.8 percent;
- On-the-job learning from lay leaders, 11.2 percent.

Mentors are perceived to help protégés take perspective on situations, but usually do not help them learn how to deal with conflict, build networks with people, or develop communication strategies.

We see a consistent pattern in effective clergy. Their sense of agency is very strong. They make mature, intelligent assessments of their own development needs and find and use resources to meet those needs. They initiate the same pattern in leading their parishes. They work to clarify the identity of the parish, the structure of responsibilities, and the path of communications. They understand the social networks in their congregations and in their local communities. These competencies come together in a pattern that we can best understand by seeing what clergy told us about theology as a guide to ministry.

Story and Embodiment: Constructing Local Theologies

Two authors can help us understand what clergy tell us about theology as a frame for parish ministry: Howard Gardner, cognitive psychologist, and Robert Schreiter, theologian. Howard Gardner says that a central story links leaders and their followers, a story that expresses an identity and provides meanings and values to those who respond to it. He maintains that the story gains power and credibility when the leader embodies it in her/his actions. Importantly, he observes that these stories must make their way in an environment of counter-stories.⁴

Effective clergy readily identified life challenges facing people in the local community, including congregation members: “Too little time, too much debt”; “People have really overbought . . . they are overextended on commitments of all kinds”; “Loneliness in this big city.” One parish has a Lenten series called “What hinders you?” that explores what hinders participants from living fully into the call of Christ, naming the counter-stories as they are lived out. One clergy person noted an important counter-story: “I think we are way too materialistic. I don’t think Jesus was very materialistic. We are also basically afraid and I don’t think that he was afraid.” Another observed, “I see people worshiping here that treat their kids like hell.” They also responded to “counter-stories” by framing creative worship.

Embodiment reaches beyond the leader’s own actions. It is essential that the gospel be embodied by whole communities. Ministry in the larger community embodies the gospel, as does the development of ministry and leadership by all the members. Adult education does not limit itself to instruction in certain beliefs, but works to activate in individuals an awareness of their humanity, the correlate of their relationship with the Spirit. The descriptions “clear” and “consistent” have an anchor in the ordained leader, but the actions and relationships of the whole congregation over time make the “message” of the church clear and consistent to the wider community.

Robert Schreiter can help us understand this. Some people in a local community, says Schreiter, hear and receive the gospel and welcome the Spirit into their hearts and their common life. As people struggle over time with Jesus’ teaching, his life and ministry, his death

⁴ Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

and resurrection, the Spirit draws their life into Christ. A certain spirituality takes shape among the believers, a pathway that provides the context within which a local theology is developed and continuously renewed. Two types of theology are important in local congregations. Wisdom theology understands the interiority of human experience as a pathway to knowledge of God and the universe. Liberation theology seeks true social consciousness, leading to social transformation. "What wisdom theologies try to achieve via the interior path," says Schreiter, "liberation theologies do via the outer path."⁵

An Example

Short selections from interviews and summary points communicate truth up to a certain point. The longer selection that follows shows the many facets of mission and leadership in relationship to each other. Reverend Rachel's parish is in a town-and-country setting. Two small missions in a valley, yoked together, were there when she arrived. Seven years later, a united Episcopal mission had three hundred members. Pastoral ministry, several community-wide ministries, innovative education, and the development of lay ministries and lay leadership are parish signatures.

That's not to say that there weren't people who wanted their church to stay a Sunday morning club. There were those, and some of them have left, and that's okay. We're still friends. Once we started education for total ministry and started looking at what that looks like, they got excited and they were on board, not like in a big mass movement, but one at a time people came to an understanding of what their ministry looked like. We don't have any pew-sitters.

We have brown bag lunches that meet at both churches every week. They can study *Embraced by the Light* or *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. We have a thing called, "What's it like?" Three or four times a year we have an evening supper and program: What's it like to be in prison? What's it like to get old? What's it like to lose a child? What's it like to be gay? I always advertise it in the paper and people come. We have a hundred people.

⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 93.

I have a vision for a radical, different church so I have real specific outcomes that I'm looking for. People think it's a pipe dream, and it's not. I'm seeing it in these people, little old ladies that are not afraid to go sit in a cell with a murderer and listen to his story. More and more people have lives filled with joy because they're living out who they're supposed to be. It's about helping them discover what God wants them to do with their lives. "I was hungry and you fed me." We live in desperate poverty in this place. And Jesus is here. Youth gangs are a big concern. The suicide rate is enormous. Problems exist in this rural area and we are called as Christians to offer reconciliation.

We needed a ministry of listening and pastoral care beyond what I could give. We sent two people to be trained as Stephen ministry leaders and now we have eleven Stephen ministers trained in jail and prison ministry and hospital visiting. Three of them have been through a basic unit of CPE and we have licensed them as lay pastors. There's no reason in the world why I have to do every service or preach every sermon. I train the preachers in theology, in scripture, in homiletics.⁶

When Reverend Rachel did accept a call to another parish, a community member took the full three-year course at seminary and was ordained to the priesthood. With the help of many lay ministers, a deacon, and a locally ordained priest, the ministry continues.

Conclusion and Challenge

Leadership is not a personal performance, nor does it rest on expertise. From these clergy and congregations we learn that leadership is a process of collective decision-making, inseparable from mission. Prayer and worship are integral to this process, but so are the particulars of the local community, the history and people of the congregation, the gospel, trust in the guidance of the Spirit, and joy in the compassion of Christ. The process by which we learn to embody the gospel in the community is the same process by which the people form and grow in Christ. But the model which THQ data suggests is

⁶ Excerpts taken from the transcript of Reverend Rachel's interview. This and transcript selections from many other THQ interviews will be available in a book on THQ research, forthcoming.

not a new *ideal* we can all talk about; the data on attendance suggests that it is strongly practical and we had better *do* something rather than *say* something.

Specifically, 18.7 percent of survey respondents—all of whom are rectors or vicars of Episcopal parishes and a few of whom are among our effective clergy—had substantial difficulty in the ordination process. If we have compassion for applicants, as well as for bishops and commissions on ministry, we need to clarify what we are looking for in ordained leadership, both in selection and recruitment, and as a basis for education and coaching. On a website survey of confidence in their ability to do job activities, clergy indicated confidence in being a role model, sacramental ministry, preaching, and, to a lesser extent, pastoral care. Very little confidence was indicated in developing lay leadership, community outreach, Christian education, and organizational leadership. The confidence levels reflect a narrow focus limited to a “sacred performance” image of clergy work, similar to the image that dominates a recent major study of institutions that educate clergy.⁷ Effective clergy such as the Reverend Rachel are confident in a much wider range of responsibilities.

We need leadership at diocesan levels—not just bishops, but lay people and clergy as well who will rely on their own strong sense of agency and will be clear, consistent, quick, collaborative, decisive. We have followed the easy path, rather like General Motors in recent decades. In particular, we have not called upon predominantly lay resources in advising the development of human resources. It is common knowledge that many of our selection and deployment processes are political, and do not serve well even those who supposedly benefit from them. As Edwards Deming, well-known inventor of contemporary quality management, tirelessly repeated, “ninety percent of the errors are in the system.” We need to work together to improve the system. The purpose of THQ is to begin to provide the information needed to do so.

⁷ Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

