Your Adventure in Ministry: Receding or Re-Seeding?

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I have a confession to make. I never intended to be a minister. Sometimes I am tempted to think the good Lord pulled a decades-long trick on me. I entered Western Seminary primarily to get my own spiritual questions answered. My concerns were well-addressed, but I also experienced a sense of call, even though I did not want it. After graduation from Western I escaped to Calcutta for graduate school. That was about as far away as I could get from anything resembling pastoral ministry. When I finally accepted God’s call to a congregation, I spent several years trying to prove to myself that I could fulfill the role of pastor. I learned much from God’s people there who without a divinity degree possessed a good deal of saintly wisdom.

Three decades later, my life adventure has turned out more different than anything I could have imagined. The answers to my questions in one chapter of life always seem to come at the outset of the next. God’s responses to my needs at one moment are often not apparent until later. Thus, a life of ministry and a life of learning have become God’s answer to my original quest for some faith answers. There have been pains I did not expect, and there have been joys better than anything I did expect. Eventually I became content to be a small but useful partner in God’s kingdom. Fulfillment has not come easily, but it has come richly. In the midst of it all, I gained some life-changing skills. I discovered means of nourishing my faith that were previously unknown to me. Some became habits that have enriched my soul and my ministry again and again. My lifelong learning has of course included books, seminars, and workshops. But it was the Doctor of Ministry experience that revolutionized my learning, and changed my vision of myself.

Ministry does not always change us for the good. Ministry is a calling that often changes from a spiritual adventure into a professional challenge. For some it imperceptibly becomes a daunting task or an overwhelming burden. A significant number find it so intolerable that they leave the ministry disillusioned. The adventure was not what they expected. Men and women enter seminaries each year eager to gain knowledge and skills for their calling. Although they may emerge with great confidence and motivation, the energy and vision often fade, worn down by real-life experiences no one can adequately anticipate. How can we keep the adventure in ministry? How can we maintain a sense of
discipleship? How can we preserve the experience of following the Master that once filled our souls with wonder? How can we renew the faith adventure that will refresh our preaching, teaching, and healing ministries?

In these pages I want to suggest what can be done when any sense of adventure has become a receding memory. I want to tell you about my experience of re-seeding rather than receding, about a secret I learned about nurturing the seeds of the kingdom within myself. It was to let my mind be a fruitful place where study and contemplation join into fresh seeds of growth. The result is that increasingly I now receive satisfaction from generating new life in my spirit and in the spirits of those I serve.

We all receive weekly stacks of advertisements and invitations to workshops and seminars on evangelism, worship, biblical archaeology, music, cultural change, preaching, or teaching. A boundless Christian entrepreneurialism has made such offerings big business. I have attended dozens of very helpful short-term events. Sometimes I have thought, "Why didn’t I hear about this in seminary?" But then, maybe some things were said that I didn’t hear. We listen and learn differently after some time on the job. The realities of life drive us to search for more adequate faith and skills. We keep hungering for food for thought and tools to be more effective. Does that mean another new educational program? With plenty to do already, does it mean taking on an additional challenge? For me, what might have been an additional thing to do turned out to be the core of my next life chapter. The Doctor of Ministry program at Western Theological Seminary was the means that led me back to the center of my life in Christ.

**My Study Changed Me**

I was engaged in a specialized ministry and was learning on the run. With a team of volunteers, I was leading Good News Community, an organization which offered seminars for people coping with divorce and a range of other programs aimed at single adults. We picked up ideas here and there. But I was not satisfied that our seminars for divorced persons were as well-designed as they could be. I wanted to make sure we offered personal growth groups that were well-founded. Support groups can easily become arenas for ego-driven leaders or aimless clubs for the woebegone. I did not feel that I was professionally qualified for what I was doing. Therefore, the main focus of my self-designed Doctor of Ministry studies was research that looked at divorce recovery. That research needed to make a real difference for me and the people assisting in our ministry. Therefore I was challenged to do what I should have done before, but had not taken time to do on my own. I looked at the scholarly literature, both secular and religious. I compared and evaluated program materials from groups with similar goals from around the country. By the time we had evaluated, tested, and created a seminar program based on these studies,
I knew we had a ministry tool which needed no apology either to religious or secular professionals. With the help of a local corporate employer, we published the results of our evaluation of programs for the divorced. From across the nation came about 200 requests for the material. A Christian publishing house invited us to produce a complete "how to" book for them.¹

My self-image and personal confidence were changed. The self-help system we developed was of interest to many in West Michigan and elsewhere. We developed a cooperative relationship with several large employers. Our work became known to the Friend of the Court, psychiatric hospital staff members, other counseling professionals, and area clergy. Invitations to address audiences of professionals became less intimidating as I progressed in my research. For instance, I was invited to speak to the Kent County Friend of the Court staff, a group often perceived as jaded, overworked, and underappreciated. Although I did not expect a happy audience, the experience turned out to be a pleasant one. I knew my subject. I had a self-help system to offer which could help them do their work, and they appreciated it.² Even more daunting was the invitation to address the professional staff of a private psychiatric hospital not identified with the Christian faith. The room was filled with psychiatrists and psychologists. But by that occasion I was confident that I knew something they did not know, and I could tell them things that would help them. This was something I could do only because my Doctor of Ministry work had prepared me.

My Colleagues Changed Me

Part of my confidence resulted from the collegial way of learning which the Doctor of Ministry program encourages. My faculty supervision committee respected me enough to give me responsibility for initiating and directing my own work. I was expected to schedule meetings with them and to set the agenda. Materials I was working on were communicated to them for comment. They were critical, but positive, and always helpful. I was impressed by their singular devotion to helping me to do quality research, and to write a quality project. They insisted that there be clarity and conciseness in my research proposals. To pack meaning into brief statements is not an easy task, but my skills were being sharpened by the flinty questions they insisted on asking. They helped me to narrow the scope for my inquiry, but expected me to do thorough work in the specific areas I chose. When I was discouraged they cheered me on. This collegial guidance was the wonderful gift Stan Rock, Elton Eenigenburg, and Bob Coughenour gave to me.³

I was challenged to make the most of collegial relationships already in place, and to develop the new ones I needed. For three years I met regularly with ministry colleagues for breakfast. This support and mental stimulation proved so valuable that since then I have helped start such groups wherever I locate.
During the past several years I have been part of at least five different groups which have provided personal and professional nourishment, often through prayer, but always through informal conversations.

During my research I also made good use of other professionals. A teaching psychologist friend helped me find secular resources and introduced me to testing instruments and computer analysis of data. Another good friend who taught creative writing agreed to read and critique my reports. A Jewish acquaintance with experience on Ph.D. review committees for a public university helped to focus my thinking and sharpen my methods. I learned to be much less a loner in my work and in my studies. A variety of colleagues changed my style of learning and helped to change me.

My Outer and Inner Process Changed

I found the time for continuing education by letting others in on the process and the goals. I negotiated with my church board for one day each week away from the office for "protected study time." Eugene Peterson reminds us that pastors should consider it part of their calling to study and contemplate. But it is often hard to do on site. For me, it was necessary to get into another environment, at home or away. It also became profitable to have an occasional two- or three-day study retreat. I chose to use vacation homes which were generously provided by parishioners and other friends. This concentrated time in isolation offered a delicious immersion in my areas of study. When major project deadlines neared, I sometimes used a full five days or more at a time. Study breaks such as these seem impossible to many pastors. I can already hear the cry, "My job (or consistory, church, habits, compulsions) just wouldn't allow for that." But I have been doing it now for ten years while serving a growing and prospering church.

Because "study break" doesn't convey the full picture, I may need to clarify the phrase. There is an inner process that goes beyond the word "study." While doing my very first unit of research, for example, I came to a point where I was simply baffled. I had gone to an isolated cottage to finish up this unit. My goal was to understand the divorce recovery process from a clinical, experiential point of view. Although I knew what it felt like, I needed to see it analyzed in a way that would help others. This analysis was essential to plan effective recovery seminars and support groups. I read books, journal articles, and personal testimonies. I considered descriptions by several "experts" who built their own therapy systems. I even discovered a journal article that surveyed the literature of several decades, and compared a dozen clinical descriptions. But they were all different. My head was spinning. I wanted to start writing my unit report, but I had no idea how to organize the assembled data. At supper time, I simply gave up.
Prepare to Receive a Gift

That evening I turned away from my work to read a short biography of Thomas Merton by Henri Nouwen. My sole goal was to be distracted and refreshed in spirit. I read a psalm and a few meditative thoughts by Mother Teresa. I played my guitar and sang a few songs. My mind was pulled away into meditative peace. After some quiet prayer, I went to bed and slept well.

At seven o’clock the next morning I sprang awake, and sat straight up in bed. At that moment I realized I had in mind a way to integrate all the disparate details I had found to be so confusing. I hurried to capture my thoughts on paper. In a couple of sentences and a brief chart the whole picture was clear. This became the core of my first unit. A year or so later, that material was published in the Journal of Pastoral Psychology under the title, "Making Sense of Divorce Grief." It was later republished in the annual, The Best of Theology. I share this because it was not an example of impressive scholarship, but of a gift received. I expect that many people have experienced this phenomenon in other ways.

In sermon preparation, ministers may study the biblical text in its original language and historical setting, may read commentaries, and collect illustrations from magazines or the internet. But many times the spark of insight that brings a message to life will come during a quiet time devoted to prayer and meditation. Is this the work of the Holy Spirit? Surely. But it occurs because of a planned opportunity to listen. Busyness and anxiety can block out both our best thinking and those divine whispers. Dull facts and sterile ideas can be wonderfully transformed in the creative moment of insight. James Loder calls this the transforming moment. He describes a special part of the experience as the "constructive act of the imagination; [when] an insight, intuition, or vision appears on the border between the conscious and unconscious, usually with convincing force. . . ." When that truth becomes a part of the preacher’s soul, it has transforming power, and its expression gains power to transform others as well.

This is the inner process that is now so important to me. You may experience it in other ways. But you will not experience it at all unless you make a time and place for it. I have decided that I can neither live nor be a good pastor without it. I do not apologize to my congregation or board for taking time to think, to wait for thoughts to come, or to seek adequate rest.

Accountability Matched with Confidence

These experiences have given me confidence to use time responsibly. If someone could watch me (through a hidden camera), it might look like I am not accomplishing anything. That would not trouble me, for the most important events are unseen. This old idea has been described by Christian writers of all
For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19).

Eugene Peterson is perhaps the most prominent contemporary writer who has called us to recover contemplation to supplement our analytical exegetical ways. He writes, "Exegesis, if it is to serve the church’s life and be congruent with the pastor’s calling, must be contemplative exegesis."9 To share my understanding of that responsibility, I have acquainted the congregation with my study process and my needs for study time. Both pastoral relations committee and elders are kept informed of my study habits and my retreat schedule. Their understanding and support of this important means to richer teaching and preaching encourage me.

Most importantly, I take a forty-eight hour retreat each month of the year. These retreats include reading the lectionary passages and other Scripture relevant to my work for a month or two in advance. Sermon ideas, outlines, adult electives, and other pastoral initiatives often spring to life. I also include time for prayer, for play, and for rest. Whether or not my plans are completely realized, that is always the design.

Several years after I had finished the Doctor of Ministry work, my congregation gave me a four-month sabbatical leave. By the time it was approved I had a topic to study clearly in mind: ministry to people in suffering. With my training and experience from the Doctor of Ministry program, I had the confidence to develop my own research plan. The plan was shared with the congregation and I showed how it related to our church’s ministry. My congregation had an investment in what I was going to do. They knew that these times of retreat and refreshment brought greater depth and vitality to my leadership. Since my plan had value for the wider church I was able to receive travel and study grants from benefactors outside my congregation.

By now I had the confidence that what I was doing was important. I gained the cooperation of people who could help me when I described my project to them. I sought out individuals from whose experiences I could learn. They included Stephen Ministries volunteers, people working in an inner city AIDS
hospice, and others engaged in a medical ministry to street people in Washington, D.C. The social work administrator at a government veterans facility who supervised dozens of staff gave me full cooperation and scheduled interviews with staff members for me even while informing me that he was not a Christian. I interviewed some people who had experienced the death of a spouse. Some correspondents were ordinary people. Some were extraordinary. I enjoyed a mind-bending personal interview with David Mandel, a survivor of Auschwitz, whose teenage experiences parallel those of Eli Wiesel.

All of the above emphasizes how the original Doctor of Ministry program changed me. It prepared me to do further study and to do it with confidence. Its most visible product was my published D.Min. project, *Ministry to the Divorced*; the more subtle product was a person renewed for ministry.

**To Dissipate or to Disseminate:**
*Understanding the Business of Seeds*

The business of seeds is a familiar biblical theme. "The kingdom of heaven is like a sower who went out. . . ." Seminarians (literally, seed carriers) go out from the seminary (seed house), often with eager anticipation. They have presumably gathered the tools, skills, and biblical knowledge for the work of ministry, and are motivated by a refined sense of calling. As newly ordained ministers they inevitably become immersed in the work of preaching, teaching, youth ministry, pastoral care, and church leadership/administration. Even if they have a specialized role on a larger staff, the mixture of mundane things they have to do with the stimulating things they want to do is seldom what they had expected. Some tasks are very satisfying, but some wearisome ones also need to be done. Worse than that, some members of the congregation fail to share their minister's vision. Illusions are dispelled. Often, without further nourishment, the work of ministry wears down its leadership. There seems to be too much rocky soil and too little fresh seed. All too easily, the "exciting call" turns to weariness, discouragement, and perhaps despair. Pastors find themselves throwing their energy in all directions, because ministry naturally exposes them to needs too great to meet. Without focus, their energy literally dissipates.

But, there is an alternate picture to be painted. Look again at the biological world of seeds. We are so accustomed to the miracles of nature that we miss what is going on behind the scene. Every spring we see apple trees which blossom gaily. Spring breezes and helpful bees carry pollen back and forth. Within each tiny grain of pollen is an even smaller miracle. Spiraling DNA molecules packed into a single living cell carry the whole secret plan for the making of a tree, a root system, a trunk, a leaf, a blossom, a fruit, and another seed. Concentrated into a tiny speck, the plan is transferred back and forth, recombined with another copy of the "blueprint" in another blossom. Hidden
away from our observation, multiple miracles take place as the DNA from one tree combines with that of another, and new seeds spring forth.

Each of us is the result of the DNA from one person meeting up with that of another. In one secret moment of conception, a unique person begins to take shape. A never-before formulation of the human plan comes into reality. In the video, "The Miracle of Life," this process has finally been captured on camera. Once that combination occurs, the cell begins to divide rapidly and reduplicate, generating life at a dramatic pace. Ordinarily this exquisite concentration of the life-message and the eruption of new life (renewal) occurs out of sight. To see it happen is awe inspiring.

Seeds of the Kingdom: Formed and Transformed in Secret

When ministers take time for a continuing education course, study good literature, or consider a passage in the original language, we are gathering data, gathering pollen, if you will. When we brainstorm with a group who read the month’s lectionary together, or when our colleague group gathers for lunch, we are opening ourselves up to the intercourse of souls. But when we study and pray, when we give ourselves time to ponder, to consider quietly, and even to wait, we are opening ourselves to life-giving generativity. That concentration of information needs time and space to enter a new stage of insight. We provide the time and space. God provides the gift. Almost miraculously, new formulations come pouring forth, seeds for planting in the minds of those to whom we preach and teach. This kind of sowing fosters growth of the kingdom in depth and in transforming power. Henry Nouwen has described this kind of leadership: "The man of prayer is a leader precisely because through his articulation of God’s work within himself he can lead others out of confusion to clarification; through his compassion he can guide them out of the closed circuits of their in-groups to the wide world of humanity; and through his critical contemplation he can convert this convulsive destructiveness into creative work for the new world to come."¹⁰

Therefore, we should never apologize for taking time to learn, or to meet with others to stimulate our souls. We ought never apologize for isolating ourselves for study and prayer. Meditation, concentration, and creativity go on in secret. There is a time for brainstorming, for group sharing, and for the stimulation of good lectures and books. These are vitally important. But the type of nourishment that seems to be missing in so many lives is precious time for concentration and contemplation. Concentration means "to fit together." Contemplation means (in Latin), "to make a temple for listening to the gods." Concentration of information, together with contemplation to listen to God, brings about the creation of fresh seeds for sowing.

Then, instead of dissipation (literally "to throw apart"), we will have fresh energy for dissemination, "to scatter seed." Generating new life in ministry
brings about the scattering of the seeds of the kingdom in others’ lives. I encourage all who wish to engage in life-giving ministry to concentrate, and to contemplate, and thereby generate what is needed for a new day in God’s work. Both we and the church may be transformed in the process.

I never intended to be a minister, but I have become engaged in a lifelong calling, nourished by lifelong learning. With Paul, I must say, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."11 I am more confident than ever that "the Lord will fulfill his purpose for me."12

ENDNOTES


2. Although I left that ministry several years ago it has continued to flourish. As of this writing the Kent County Friend of the Court recently began to mandate divorcing couples with custody disputes to attend the Coping with Divorce Seminar offered by Good News Community.

3. Dr. Elton Eenigenburg died before I completed my final Project Report. Dr. Coughenour was appointed in his place.

4. Eugene H. Peterson, The Contemplative Pastor (Carol Stream, Illinois and Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989). He describes with humor one source of his insight, on page 32. "A number of years ago I was a busy pastor and had some back trouble that required therapy. I went for one hour sessions three times a week, and no one minded that I wasn’t available for those three hours. Because the three hours had the authority of an appointment calendar behind them, they were sacrosanct. On the analogy of that experience, I venture to prescribe appointments for myself to take care of the needs not only of my body, but also of my mind and emotions, my spirit and imagination. One week, in addition to daily half-hour conferences with St. Paul, my calendar reserved a two-hour block of time with Fyodor Dostoevsky. My spirit needed that as much as my body ten years ago needed the physical therapist. If nobody is going to prescribe it for me, I will prescribe it for myself."

Creativity often comes from rest. Franklin Roosevelt often amazed his staff by taking vacations and long weekends in the midst of the most critical and trying times of his administration. He would sleep late in the morning, drive in the country and not once discuss the pressing issues of the day. One such vacation occurred during one of the darkest periods of World War II, in December of 1940, long before the U.S. entered the war. Many were wondering how we could support Great Britain more effectively before it would be invaded and defeated. Churchill was pressing for more aid. But Congress was deeply divided. Roosevelt decided to take a ten-day vacation on a ship cruising the Caribbean. The war and Britain’s crisis were hardly discussed. Relaxed days and evenings were spent with social visits, and various diversions. Harry Hopkins remembers, "I began to get the idea that he was refueling, the way he so often does when he seems to be resting and carefree. So I didn’t ask him any questions." Near the end of the cruise the President announced a new program to his staff and soon to the country, that he would call "Lend-Lease." It would get aid to the British that they desperately needed, and in a way that would make sense to the U.S. public. Many believe this program turned the course of the war. One of his staff commented, "We have no idea where he got that concept." Robert Sherwood said, "He did not seem to talk much about the subject in hand or to consult the advice of others, or to 'read up' on it. . . . One can only say that FD, . . . had put in his time on this cruise evolving the patterns of a masterpiece." "Frances Perkins later described the president’s idea for lend-lease as a 'flash of almost clairvoyant knowledge and understanding.'" ". . . When it came, he suddenly understood how all kinds of disparate things fit together." In Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 192-193.


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