Charism and Office

Samuel Cruz

The Reformed Church in America has been challenged in many different ways in the last several decades, resulting in concern and dialogue among church leaders and various constituencies. The role of office in our denomination has been a topic of much discussion in recent years. Many questions have been raised, such as, "Why do we have only four offices? Can they be expanded? What should the qualifications be?" It is my intention to analyze briefly the role of charism and office within the context of the discussions taking place in our denomination. My perspective is that of a Latino man who is committed, involved, and concerned about urban ministry. At the inception of this presentation, I would like to state clearly the theological and sociological biases that inform my understanding of charism and office. My intention is to be reflexive in my approach, in an effort to recognize that the participant's agenda, perhaps unconscious, will inevitably influence her/his understanding of these current discussions regarding office. As an individual, I am extremely concerned with the cultural and social ramifications of the theological decisions made by the church.

What has given rise to this particular debate of Reformed theology and traditional understanding of office? One of the many challenges to our denomination has been a decline in membership, a decline that has also occurred in many other mainline denominations. Despite the fact that this decline in numbers has slowed in recent years, we have nevertheless continued to lose rather than to grow.¹ Concern over the decline in numbers has raised many questions about what has been done wrong and what should be done differently. This investigation has prompted suggestions as to how the denomination should respond to this reality. One response has been to call for a renewal of our liturgy, implying that perhaps we need to join the many churches that have adopted a contemporary worship style. The cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity we have experienced in the last thirty years has also posed great challenges to our church. Major changes in demographics have left many churches without a sense of direction and, in many cases, have rendered them incapable of addressing these challenges meaningfully, as well as host of others issues. It appears to me that there is also a shortage of ministerial candidates and/or ordained ministers who are willing to pastor the churches that are struggling. This situation has led some to propose the creation of an alternative program of pastoral leadership for our churches. In order to uncover meaningful solutions to these problems, it may be helpful to take a retrospective look to understand charism more clearly and how
the Reformed Church in America and other denominations have dealt with past challenges.

Charism in the New Testament

The term “charism” derives from charisma, meaning gratuity, benevolence, and/or (God’s) gift, given to an individual. With one exception in 1 Peter 4:10, the term “charism” in the New Testament is found only in the Pauline writings. The apostle Paul taught that every individual member of the church has been endowed freely with at least one charism (1 Cor. 12:7). Nobody should attempt to possess all of the charisms: Paul asks, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” (1 Cor. 12:29). According to Paul, the Holy Spirit is made visibly active in the church by the diversity of charisms distributed to its members. The apostle Paul describes the church as a body with many parts. Each body part is needed to perform its specific task, so that the body as a whole can function at its full potential. The body of Christ consists of the community called church, in which each member must exercise her or his charisms for the benefit and edification of the others. From a practical point of view, there are no passive members within the church. We can conclude with the apostle Paul that if some members of the body are not exercising their “gifts,” the body will suffer the negative consequences.

This manner of having the church nourish itself and build itself is very egalitarian and does not lend itself to strong hierarchical structures. However, there appears to be a hierarchy among the charisms in which some charisms are more necessary or important than others (1 Cor. 14:1-5). This does not negate the need for all charisms or usurp their roles in strengthening the church community. There would be no church without charism. Can you imagine a church without teachers, preachers, people who console, people who encourage? Despite this, the use of charisms in the church has almost always created conflicts and power struggles. Which charisms are more important? Do they pose challenges to the authorities of the church? When should they be applied? Some charisms come with a lot of fanfare, creating powerful personalities within the church. I raise this issue because I have no doubt that we may encounter powerful personalities who think they need nothing else. Is possessing a particular charism enough? Do we need to supplement it with training? The remainder of my presentation will focus on responding to these two last questions.

The Reformed Church and Pentecostalism

As stated earlier, my personal experience will be put to use in offering an attempt at some answers. I was raised in the Latino Pentecostal tradition, a church in which charisms are on center stage. In similar fashion to the Reformed tradition, the Pentecostal tradition holds the belief that for the office of minister of Word and sacrament, the individual has to be called and must possess the
charisms that provide the abilities to perform the calling. There was, however, one major difference between the Reformed Church and the majority of Pentecostals in their understanding of this process. In the Pentecostal church, having the necessary gifts and call, combined with experience, met the requirements for office; little emphasis was placed on formal theological training. However, a rigorous and intense theological and experiential training did occur in many cases, lasting up to seven years.

This approach to ministry and office eventually posed some challenges to the church. There seemed to be a great many people who possessed the gifts necessary to be pastors; however, they seemed to be lacking in many areas that were pertinent to successful ministry. Many seemed to lack deep competence in biblical interpretation and exegesis, basic skills in homiletics and public speaking, a sense of historical theology, and/or they lacked the ability to address, from a theological perspective, the issues being faced by the communities in which their churches were found. This scenario can also occur with well-trained ministers. I would contend that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, more than ever in the history of the church, its leadership must possess excellent skills in many areas in order to conduct competent and successful ministry. Many upcoming leaders within the Latino/a Pentecostal church, both women and men, began to question the lack of formal training among a great majority of the church leaders who they respected and loved, but who were truncating the growth of the church community as well as its development. As a result, an effort was made to seek ways in which the new generation of pastors could obtain solid contextual theological training. Interestingly, this move toward higher theological education for pastors was made in a church which was experiencing enormous membership growth. In the Spanish Eastern District of the Assembly of God denomination, growth in numbers was interpreted by the Latino leadership as a need for better-trained ministers. The result has been that many theological graduate school and seminary programs have been developed and/or targeted as training centers for Latino Pentecostals. Surprisingly, more than 50 percent of Latina/o students in seminary and/or graduate programs of theology are Pentecostals or have Pentecostal roots. The percentage of Latino/a Pentecostal pastors who are seeking theological training at the graduate level is increasing on a yearly basis, despite the fact that it is not a requirement for ordination.

The Latino/a Pentecostal church has responded to its challenges in ministry in a manner almost opposite to the way many in the Reformed Church have chosen to respond. The gifts are necessary, they seem to be saying, but they are not enough. Is the Reformed Church saying, through its commissioning of lay pastors, that graduate theological training might be useful but is not necessary? Does the Reformed Church believe that attracting well-trained pastors is not as important as attracting enough pastors for the churches who need them?

The push for commissioned pastors that was passed at the 2002 General Synod seems to me to be saying that, although we need well-trained pastors, the
challenge to the church is so great that we need a larger pool of pastors who do not necessarily have the time to be trained but certainly have the charism necessary to do the job. It is fascinating to me that a historical denomination like ours is revisiting an approach to ministry from which a charismatic movement, namely Pentecostalism, is moving away. The idea of developing a cadre of pastors who would be commissioned rather than ordained has undoubtedly risen from a concrete, contextual social and spiritual reality. The need for a greater, more diverse pool of pastors that may be willing to work under circumstances that the ordained minister might not accept would certainly justify seeking ways by which we can address the spiritual needs of our members. However, I believe we might encounter serious problems with this new, yet old, approach.

Let us think about some of the challenges that we are facing as a church: decline in membership; major demographic changes in the neighborhoods surrounding many of our churches; and cultural, ethnic, racial, and economic diversity. I contend that, in order to cope effectively with these challenges, we need more training rather than less. Not only must a pastor dealing with these major issues be able to interpret theologically for the church how these issues can be addressed, but also she or he must have the skills to understand the sociological changes taking place in the church community. For example, if a pastor of an urban church that has been declining in membership fails to reach the growing Asian population that currently makes up a large segment of the community, and if that pastor perhaps is struggling with a consistory that is afraid of change or even racist, should we expect these challenges to be tackled solely by the gifts of the Spirit?

This discussion gives rise to another problem in that churches facing the greatest challenges of this sort are usually the ones with the fewest economic resources. These churches will inevitably end up with the commissioned pastors, who will be the ones willing to accept such challenges but who will also have the least amount of training to cope with them. Another area of great concern for me is the further displacement of well-trained and qualified women ministers. Research has shown that ordained women have to move into specialized ministry in large numbers because, regardless of official denominational policy, most are never called to parish ministry. This is the case even when there is a scarcity of pastoral candidates; I could only imagine what would occur if the pool of pastors was expanded through commissioned pastors.

My commitment to urban ministry is high because the need is great, but one of my concerns stems from the fact that the resources allocated to urban ministry are usually scarce. Currently twenty-five percent of R.C.A. churches are urban, and the number of urban churches continues to grow steadily. In fact, the aforementioned approach inevitably will create two classes of churches and two classes of pastoral staff in our denomination. Perhaps some are feeling as though the well-trained pastors are not comprehensively qualified, and this might be so, but then the solution should be revamping our theological curriculum and our process of screening ordination candidates rather than lowering our standards. In
recent years, our seminaries have been evaluating their curricula in hopes of offering the best contextual training for future pastors. New Brunswick Theological Seminary has been addressing this issue successfully for more than ten years. It designed, developed, and is offering a specialized program with a concentration in urban ministry to meet the needs of urban churches and pastors involved in ministry within urban centers. In fact, these types of innovative programs underscore the need for specialized seminary education and a learned leadership.  

ENDNOTES

1 For more detailed data on this issue, see the Minutes of the General Synod, the statistical data section. For the purposes of this presentation, I focused on the Minutes from 1992-2002.


3 This data was obtained from the Reformed Church office of development for urban ministry. This data was collected via a survey, forwarded in 1999 to classes throughout the denomination.