

THE MADNESS OF THE MINISTRY

Dr. James E. Means
Professor of Pastoral Ministry
Denver Seminary
Denver, Colorado

There are times when our problems become ossified by our conscious or sub-conscious refusal to deal with them. It is precisely that kind of a stubborn problem that I propose to examine in this paper.

Through more than twenty years of pastoral ministry, a number of interim pastorates, and 23 years of teaching in a theological seminary on ministry, I have come to a measured degree of understanding of the difficulties faced by the under-shepherd of God's flock. There is a remarkable thing about tenured service in the church; it is that one tends to have fewer answers, but more intelligent questions, as the years pass. Collie tells the Hassidim story of the rabbinical wise man who was approached by a person for help in finding his way out of the forest. The wise man replied: "I do not know the way out of the forest; however, I have gone further into the forest than you and I will lead you that far and then we will try to find our way out together."¹ Neither do I know the way out of the dilemma, but I do feel that I have been a considerable distance into the "forest" and trust that together we may find our way out. At least I hope that we may take one giant step in the right direction.

Bluntly put and in over-simplified terminology, our problem is one of façade. The Psalmist confessed, "I am poor and needy," but not many professional ministers are quite so ready to make such an humiliating admission. Such a blatant acknowledgment of need would be contrary to the image which we normally desire to disseminate, an image of omni-competence. We naturally want to portray ourselves as those who "have it altogether" and as those who have, with some degree of sweat, achieved an enviable level of confidence. Inwardly we may feel like crying, but outwardly we "pack up our troubles in our old kit bag and smile, smile, smile." The smile often turns to a sob when we are alone. Cedarleaf observed

"Somehow the open admission of a need for care goes completely counter to the image of the capable, mature, well-organized adult we want to portray. How we have built up the myth of the superhealer!"²

This problem is not a simple one. Consider with me a few of the subtleties and pitfalls of the issue. First, there are ministers who find out "painfully" after a number of years of Christian service that they are in desperate need of being ministered unto, but, for a variety of reasons, have no one to whom to go. Perhaps they feel a slipping of their grasp on their own Christian faith. In

¹Collie, R. H., "Counseling the Middle-Yeared Pastor," *Pastoral Psychology*, 22, 50-3, 1971.

²Cedarleaf, J. L., "Pastoral Care of Pastors," *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 27, 30-4, March, 1973

one study of pastors who sought consultation at the Menninger Foundation one of the significant problems which came to light was

“a desperate groping for relevant religious faith. Pastors themselves are subject to so many demands from others that they begin to feel in need of a pastor themselves. Many experienced this as a gradual sense of losing the reality of the faith that they proclaimed, related to their own tendency to give up on really important central tasks in favor of becoming mere functionaries, playing their roles with decreasing involvement, commitment, and integrity.”³

This spiritual entropy in the lives of ministers and missionaries is no secret, but it is compounded enormously by the fact that most individuals in such prestigious positions have no one to whom they may confide their inner distress. We have fostered a Christian community in which it is unacceptable behavior for ministers to reveal their own need of nurture. They feed everybody, but they themselves starve. The premise that the study and preparation of sermons is adequate for the pastor's own need is false. It is tragically possible to grind out sermons by the score and to be left spiritually unfed. Pastors comfort the afflicted and dress their wounds, but there is no balm for them unless they can find it for themselves. They assuage eloquently the doubts of their parishioners, but are deeply perplexed about their own carefully concealed doubts. They are available to all, but have no real friend of their own. They may become professional driers of tears, but in secret weep profusely and bitterly. Ah, occasionally at some far off ministerial gathering they who have committed themselves to ministry confide hesitantly to a colleague or two that they are troubled, but perish the thought that their home church might find out that they are somehow, after all, human and hurting.

Consider secondly, that as the issue increases in severity in the minister's life the availability of a sympathetic ear and effective nurture decreases. Pastors may have no difficulty sharing with members of their congregation that they have a touch of arthritis in their right knee, but are considerably more reluctant to share that they have developed an ulcer because of its association, falsely, with worry and distrust in the Lord. And if, perchance, they should be so unfortunate as to have a marriage problem they had better do everything possible to keep it a secret because it will damage their reputation, hinder their ministry, preclude a call to another church, and become the scandal of the community. If they are to get help at all they figure it is necessary for them to sneak off to a professional counselor in another city and then worry that somehow the news will leak out. In other words, the more pastors need help the less apt they are to find it within the Christian community in which they serve. Hence it is that pastors receive no help in the significant matters which confront them. Their image must be the more protected as their need increases in its critical value. The facade, must become higher and thicker the more needy the pastor. The ridiculous nature of this dilemma is self-apparent. Sometimes, of course, a situation arises where great stress in the pastor's home cannot be hidden, as in the case of a wayward child. Often then the pastor completely breaks down, feeling a failure, and is often judged that way.

Third, there are ministers who actually succeed in deceiving themselves into believing that they have risen above a need for care. As pastors grows older and become more “successful” and

³Houts, Donald C., “Pastoral Care for Pastors: Toward a Church Strategy,” *Pastoral Psychology*, 25, 186-196, Spring, 1977.

climb the ladder towards more status, acceptance, and eminence in their chosen profession, the pressure to conceal their own inner tensions or behavioral deviations becomes greater. It is one thing for an obscure nobody to admit failure, incongruities in behavior, or inconsistencies in doctrine but it is quite another thing for the distinguished bishop, elevated theologian, seminary professor, or veteran missionary to confess their need. Far better, one thinks, to blink back tears, swallow hard, squelch doubts, and play out their assigned role even more cleverly as the years roll on, hiding anxieties, resentments, or desperation. As the religious life becomes more sophisticated there is a corresponding tendency to conceal, minimize or deny the need of care altogether. Such a man or woman comes eventually to repress need and believes a lie, that he/she has become the invincible, infallible super-saint. Such people pray, subconsciously at least, “God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are....”. This is often the precursor to a colossal fall.

The problem of isolation and façade becomes one of spiritual pride. We feel awkward, embarrassed, uncomfortable, and ashamed of our capacity to cry. When our pride refuses to allow us to admit that we stand in need, it then becomes necessary to hide behind the face-saving mask of assumed adequacy. But the problem is deeper than one of pastoral pride. It frightens and threatens the laity to discover that their beloved pastors, like themselves, are groping, sometimes futilely, for answers to problems in their own life. The laity is comfortable in the thought that someone, chiefly the pastor, has the answers and is the model Christian. The layperson is fond of putting the pastor on a pedestal. We who are ministers have found that it feeds our ego to be on the pedestal and cannot find it within ourselves to take ourselves down from the lofty position. Thus it is that the problem is two-sided. The laity is comfortable in the assumption that the minister has become the model achiever and pastors do not want to risk disillusioning parishioners or diminishing their own status. The problem becomes self-reflexive. The greater the status the more incumbent it is to maintain it.

Certainly there are a few perceptive church members here and there who know that the minister has feet of clay, and more, but it is so easy to be determined not to let that fact become generally known. Then when ministers, through sheer desperation or imminent collapse, do finally come out of the closet to confess their humanity, their weakness, and their need of care, the reaction of their church often make them wish that they had continued their façade. Cedarleaf reported that when he admitted the need of care some “became cool and objective. Others fled in terror. Some demanded that I stop my plea for help.”⁴ Only a few sensed and shared where he was in his torture and were willing to share their own pain. Healey reported that surveys have shown that many ministers are “leading lives of unquiet desperation.”⁵ Joseph Sittler coined the expression “the maceration of the minister” to express the horror at what he saw in the professional ministry today.⁶ What happens when pastors are denied the freedom to develop their own personhood? What happens when the minister ministers year after year to everybody, but is ministered unto by nobody? What happens when the man of God awakens one day to find that his

⁴Cedarleaf, J. L., *Op. Cit.*

⁵Healey, R. M. “The Ministerial Mystique,” *The Christian Century*, 91, 131-5, Fall, 1974

⁶Healey, R. M., *Ibid.*

manhood has been emasculated, his family life has become a shambles, or his nagging doubts have been unresolved and have matured into unbelief? What happens when undershepherds become mesmerized by the crushing, multifaceted role they are expected to play unceasingly? What happens when they can no longer maintain their precarious position atop the pedestal?

Typically, they do one of three things.

1. They leave the professional ministry and seek sanctuary in secular work.
2. They seek the help of a psychiatrist, counselor, or mature friend, if one can be found.
3. They build higher their wall of isolation, repair torn masks, touch up the façade a bit and grit it out a few more years, hoping desperately that somehow everything will turn out all right eventually.

Consider these options. Option number one, that of seeking secular work, appeals to many. But it is often very difficult. Typical middle-aged pastors are not really trained for any other work than the ministry. If they have been successful in the ministry they may be faced with a financial hardship in secular work at a time when their children are ready for their college education. Option number one also necessitates the implied admission of failure with its concomitants of multiplied explanations, embarrassments, and criticism. There is also the problem of guilt. Did not Christ say “No man having put his hand to the plough and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God?” and will not Job’s comforters use those words, incorrectly, to add to the pastor’s burdens? How then do pastors who leave their professed calling quiet the mental dissonance with which they are faced? Option number one, the sanctuary of secular work, may ultimately be chosen of necessity, but it is seldom a happy choice.

Option number two, the seeking of help, is similarly rejected by many. It, too, necessitates the admission of failure, or, at least, the admission of the pastor’s need of care. But the real problem is “to whom shall we go?” Psychiatrists are frightfully expensive and in many localities a good Christian psychiatrist or professional counselor is non-existent. The district superintendent, denominational executive, bishop, or seminary president may be incredibly busy, an inveterate blabbermouth, or just a long way away. Shall we go to a mature friend? Well, if there is one, can he or she really help? Do they have the training to deal with a sickness that may have reached the terminal stage some months or years ago? Clearly option number two, though eminently logical, is fraught with peril, expense, or just downright impracticality.

That leaves option number three, that which bids preachers to touch up their façade and grit it out with a desperate hope and a prayer. When pastors decide, perhaps by default, to go on disguising their need they have become fit candidates for what John Wesley spoke of in 1756 “a madman of the highest order.” Many of us add complexity to the problem by the worship of the false god of which Herbert Marcuse speaks in *Eros and Civilization*, “the performance principle.” When people make a god of production, promotion, and prestige they can no longer recognize that they stand as beggars at the door of grace and must be ministered unto if they are to continue ministering with any degree of effectiveness. Those who think they have risen above the need of care or those who purposely ignore that need have become spiritually obtuse.

Churches and clergy alike have fostered this madness of the ministry. Churches, for their part, do precious little, if anything, to facilitate the growth of their shepherds, to strengthen their professional competence, or, most important, to meet their personal need for care. After all, they may reason, the shepherd ministers to the needs of the sheep and whoever heard of the sheep ministering to the needs of the shepherd? Frazier poses the question as follows. “What does the real life shepherd get from his flock other than an occasional bleat and the prospect of someday fleecing them?”⁷ Obviously, the analogy of shepherd and sheep must not be taken too far.

On the other hand, we who are clergy have done much to compound our own problems and little to alleviate our situation. We have often substituted subservience for service and have become “Esau by choice” in trading our personhood and true freedom for the porridge of the pedestal. We have allowed the ravages of oftentimes unreasonable church expectation to emasculate our humanity. One man puts it succinctly when he says that the typical pastor “finds himself on a treadmill of routine that saps his intellectual energy and kills his creativity, and he is frustrated by constant demands and interruptions of his parishioners. Eventually he begins to hate them, to hate himself for hating them, and finally to look for someone (a wife or a seminary professor?) to hate in particular... for getting him into such a mess.”⁸ A fellow pastor sat in my living room some time ago and told me that he had become a mere machine in which he routinely burped out a sermon or two for Sundays, a prayer when it was requested, a hospital call, or oil for troubled waters. What is meant to be the high and holy calling of Ambassador for Christ we have allowed to become “a treadmill of routine” and a stale caricature of leadership.

In part, at least, our distorted concept of the role of the minister is due to our gross misunderstanding of the Biblical model. Take, for example, the typical image of the Apostle Paul. When Paul flashes into our mind, what is our concept of him? Most likely we think of him as the greatest of the apostles, the greatest of the missionaries, the greatest of the preachers, yea, the greatest of all saints. He was not only the Hebrew of the Hebrews, but he was the man among men, the devoted, passionate servant of Jesus Christ. He was constantly assured, confident and capable. He was the articulator and advocate of the Christian faith, of legally astute mind and perception, one who could do anything, suffer everything, become all things for Christ. He was a spiritual giant who stood alone, the miracle-worker, the possessor of all spiritual gifts and graces, the solver of problems, the caretaker of the church, the author of Scripture, the inspired one of God, the servant and pleaser of none but God. He was in need of none but Christ, the minister unto all men, the confronter of tyrants, the preeminent hero of the faith, the Man for All Seasons. While there is, of course, much truth in that portrayal of Paul, there also is much error.

⁷Frazier, Richard, “The Role of >Need= in Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 27, 35-39, March, 1973.

⁸Cleal, Clifford, “The Role of the Ordained Minister Today,” *The Baptist Quarterly*, 25, 194-203, January, 1974.

We tend to think that Paul was great because of his ministry, his devotion and his gifts. I have never heard it suggested that the secret of his enormous accomplishments as a man of God might just be that he was so adequately ministered unto. We are fond of dehumanizing Paul, making him into some kind of a super-saint not subject to the weaknesses, the inconsistencies, and the needs of the rest of us mortal men. The truth is that he was no giant who stood alone; he found the need for many to minister unto him and largely because they did so effectively he was able to be an achiever for the cause of Christ. Not only do we nearly deify Paul but then we develop a fuzzy concept that somehow we too are to attain that lofty position of idealized and isolated adequacy and with an omni-competence almost magically minister untiringly and with unflagging zeal slay the dragons that would devour the church. Such is sheer nonsense.

May I attempt to give a corrective to our false image of Paul? This man, who was the “least of the apostles” and a “chief of sinners” by his own testimony, recognized his own profound weakness and desperate need to be ministered unto by his associates. He said we are all the members of “the body of Christ” and that “the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary” (1 Cor 12:21,22). How often did he demonstrate his own critical need, as he did at Corinth when he was there “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” On occasion he “had no rest in (his) spirit” because he did not find Titus where he was supposed to be. Titus was his “partner and fellow-helper.” He spoke frequently of his infirmities, his weaknesses, his troubles, his perplexities, and his failings. Criticisms hurt him, and he revealed his hurt. But from the time he was led by the hand into Damascus and ministered unto by Ananias, with few exceptions, God provided him with devoted and able companions who taught him, encouraged him, refreshed him, and succored him.

What would Paul have been without Barnabas who encouraged him and rescued him from obscurity in Tarsus? What could he have achieved had there been no Silas to sing with him in the prison at Philippi or no beloved physician, Luke, to care for his needs? Would he really have been so successful without Priscilla and Aquilla who “risked their own lives” for him? How about Paul without Phoebe, without the Lydias, the Marys, the Urbanes, the Epaphrodituses, the Timothys, and the Tituses?

Consider the contribution to the life of Paul by Onesiphorus. We know nothing about Onesiphorus except that Paul says “he often refreshed me” and “was not ashamed of my chains.” When Onesiphorus was in Rome he “searched hard” for Paul and came to him. Paul reminds Timothy that when he was at Ephesus this man, Onesiphorus, “helped me in many ways.” What would Paul have done without him?

Do modern day pastors have anybody like Onesiphorus who “refresh” them? The word used there in 2 Timothy 1:16 and translated “refreshed” in the King James Version and the NIV comes from the Greek word meaning “to give someone breathing space” and then “to revive.” When Paul says that Onesiphorus refreshes him he is saying literally that he “provides me breathing space,” i.e., he does not close me in, he does not suffocate me, he lets me breathe freely, and he lets me have the freedom to be myself. Most people have a very stereotyped role of “preachers” and they get upset and not a little annoyed if they should refuse to conform to that role, that false role, that

particular mold pre-carved for them. Very few people allow pastors to be themselves. Almost everyone tries to squeeze them into the suffocating role which they believe they should play as pastors. But Paul says this man, Onesiphorus, does not suffocate me, he allows me the perfect freedom to be myself, he revives me! With this man Paul did not need to put on anything, he did not need to play a role, he did not need to wear a mask, he did not need to pretend. The word “refresh” in its noun form means relaxation, and hence we might infer Paul suggests that in the presence of Onesiphorus he could relax. With Onesiphorus Paul could just pour out his whole heart, perhaps his doubts, his frustrations, his joys, his fears, his sorrows, whatever, with absolute certainty that his friend would accept him, love him, encourage him, and would never, never judge or condemn him. He would never be suffocated in the presence of Onesiphorus. Paul needed that man!

Perhaps some of you have read the little paragraph on friendship which reads as follows:

What is a friend? I'll tell you. A friend is a person with whom you dare to be yourself. Your soul can go naked with him. He seems to ask you to put on nothing, only to be what you really are. When you are with him, you do not have to be on your guard. You can say what you think, so long as it is genuinely you. He understands those contradictions in your nature that cause others to misjudge you. With him you breathe freely. You can avow your little envies and absurdities and in opening them up to him they are dissolved on the wide ocean of his loyalty. He understands! You may weep with him, laugh with him, pray with him, and through and underneath it all, he sees, knows and loves you. A friend, I repeat, is one with whom you dare to be yourself.

By that standard, few of us have many friends. But such was Onesiphorus to Paul. We know nothing of Paul's ministry to Onesiphorus, but we do know that Onesiphorus ministered unto Paul in many things. And there were many such people in Paul's life. By far the saddest words Paul ever penned were those written at the end of his life when he was alone in prison in Rome. He pled with Timothy to hurry to him. He had need of him. He needed to be ministered unto.

Every one of us needs to be ministered unto and there are few ministers, to my way of thinking, that have been successful in developing the kind of support structures needed daily. Jesus said, “the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many.” And yet, there were women in those days who “followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him” (Matt. 27:55). Mary, Martha and Lazarus ministered unto him. The woman in the house of Simon the leper ministered unto Him with her precious box of ointment of spikenard. And, at least on one occasion, the Father deemed it necessary to send the angels of heaven to minister unto him. No man is above or beyond the need of care, not even the Son of Man.

None of us can be effective for long who has not discovered that he/she must receive if he/she is to give. We must ask God to raise up around us those who are able to accept us, care for us, minister unto us with graciousness, with rebuke, with wisdom, and with love. Failing in this we will become “madmen of the highest order.” We will have succumbed to the madness of the ministry. We must be nurtured.

When Elijah fled into the wilderness and collapsed under the juniper tree and from there to the mount of God his complaint was “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:10). Yet God said, “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel Call whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18). Isn’t it a pity that Elijah didn’t find one of those seven thousand who would minister to his needs? Is it inferring too much to suggest that Elijah thought he could do it alone, but then found tragically that he could not? Moses, for a time, thought he could do it alone, but Jethro gave him some ministry-saving counsel. Pastors must have support; they must have constant and meaningful nurture. God has no omni-competent super-saints.

To stimulate discussion and creative thinking I offer the following few suggestions which might help us to take a step in the right direction out of the forest.

1. We who are ministers must develop a greater level of honesty with our parishioners. In spite of the threat to their equilibrium we must start saying: “Here I am by the grace of God. I am human. I am not a super-saint. I do not have all the answers. I cannot do everything. I do not have all the gifts. I am a learner and a struggler with you. I need to be nurtured; I need to be taught, I need to be comforted, I need to be encouraged.” It is terribly difficult to change the image of the ministry, but it must be done. We must do all we can to argue against furthering a miserable tradition and we must stop adding to the development of the myth and the madness of the ministry.
2. We must discover more effective ways to minister to each other within our peer group. McElvaney writes:

“We (need) a recognition of the importance of support structures and caring resources for ministers and their spouses and families. We are long overdue in enabling some vehicles through which ministers may give and receive care among themselves. An occasional ministerial institute where we typically listen to a lecture is not enough. What we need is constant, ongoing ministry to each other in which we are nurtured and in which we may feel safe to confess our need and find healing.”⁹
3. Churches must be taught that it is their sacred responsibility to their pastoral staff to provide both time and money for the nurturing and refreshment process. Institutions of higher learning, including theological seminaries, have for years recognized the wisdom and the necessity of providing sabbaticals for their professors for their refreshment, learning experiences, and new perspective on their ministries. It is high time churches begin to do the same for their pastors.

⁹McElvaney, W. K., AMinistry, Measurements, and Madness, @ *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 30, 55-68, March, 1976.

There is an entropy process in any person's ministry. Wise is the church that recognizes it and meets the problem. It is encouraging to note a few of the larger churches are now doing this.

4. Pastors must ask God for individuals who can be a support and accountability group. Ask God for an Onesiphorus. Lots of them. Learn to recognize them out there in the congregation and let us not be too proud or too spiritually dull to refuse their care. Our future ministry depends upon it! Harris observes "... (there is) a chronic conflict with laity over the purpose of the church in society, low salaries, isolation from peers, a numbing multiplicity of role demands, dissatisfied wives, no accepted standard of ministerial performance, apathetic church officials, confusion about what a minister is supposed to do and beCall become a destructive cluster of forces capable of eroding human enthusiasm and investment."¹⁰

Such are the pressures and conflicts that force ministers into the madness of the ministry, a lifetime of ever-increasing pretense. We must, however, find those with whom we may relate in honesty and change our image from that of supposed omniscience to that of men of "like passions," humble servants of the living God.

Have you seen the little placard that reads:

"We have not succeeded in answering all your questions. The answers we have found only serve to raise a whole set of new problems. In some ways we feel we are as confused as ever, but we believe we are confused on a higher level and about more important things."

We may be as confused as ever, but let us hope that we are confused about something important and that we have taken one step, however small, out of the forest which is the madness of the ministry.

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