

Imagination and the Pastoral Life: A Way of Seeing



by Craig Dykstra

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Reflection questions and a set of resources are included at the end.

Introduction

In working closely and personally with lawyers, I have come to see that they have been formed—by their legal education and even more by their years of professional work in the law—in a particular way of seeing and thinking that is distinctive to that profession. They have developed what we might call a "legal imagination." It consists of a penetrating way of knowing that enables really good lawyers to notice things, understand things and do things that others of us simply cannot see or do.

There may also be such a thing as an artistic imagination. Artists in every medium have an imagination and an intelligence that enables them to pull together what they perceive in the world and contemplate in their souls in the process of creating new works of art that in turn help the rest of us apprehend reality in entirely new ways. Like the legal imagination, this imagination relies on individual gifts but is also shaped by the community, education, artistic tradition and material relations within which the artist works over time.

But what of the kind of imagination I have seen in so many pastors? The pastoral situation itself shapes pastors in a way of perceiving and understanding and relating

to the world that has distinctive characteristics. The unique confluence of forces and influences that impinge on those who engage deeply and well in pastoral work shapes them powerfully, fostering a set of sensibilities, virtues, and skills that characteristically belongs to good pastors.

Every day pastors are immersed in a constant, and sometimes nearly chaotic, interplay of meaning-filled relationships and demands. They attend to scripture; struggle to discern the gospel's call and demand on them and their congregations in particular contexts; lead worship, preach and teach; respond to requests for help of all kinds from myriad people in need; live with children, youth, and adults through life cycles marked by both great joy and profound sadness; and take responsibility for the unending work of running an organization with buildings, budgets, and public relations and personnel issues.

In the midst of the interplay of all this and more, pastors become who they are; indeed, pastors are transformed. The unique confluence of all these forces both requires and gives shape to an imagination marked by characteristics and features unlike those required in any other walk of life. Life lived long enough and fully enough in the pastoral office gives rise to a way of seeing in depth and of creating new realities that is an indispensable gift to the church, to all who are members of it, and indeed to public life and to the world.

Multiple Intelligences

The pastoral imagination requires multiple kinds of intelligence. Pastors must also allow these intelligences to be trained and formed within a lifelong process of learning. Both substantive knowledge—some of it fairly abstract—and practical know-how will be required, and because ministry takes place amid the changing circumstances of life, intelligent adaptation and renewed learning will often be necessary as well. Extensive reading and serious observation, along with a great deal of accumulated personal experience, is essential to the emergence of a mature pastoral imagination.

Indispensable to good ministry is a deep, sustained, and thoroughgoing engagement with the scriptures and with a sound theological tradition that brings the word of God into an ongoing history of endlessly contemporary thought and practice. Every good minister also has to have a reliable understanding of what makes human beings tick, of who people are and how they operate. This has to be learned from lots of firsthand experience with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations, as well as from novels and poetry, history and psychology, and again, of course, the Bible and theology.

Above all, learning humanity requires a disciplined spiritual life through which one enters into the deeper levels of one's own self, encounters one's own deepest hopes and fears, and, placing them in God's hands through sacrifice and prayer, learns to trust the spiritual terra firma that enables one to live a faithful and generous life.

To do pastoral work well, a person needs to have a truthful and nuanced understanding of how congregations and other institutions actually work, both on a day-to-day basis and at the strategic level where long-term patterns are identified, shaped, and reformed. Pastoral leaders need to know how to keep the life of a community alive and how to keep it effectively engaged in a way of abundant life,

both for the sake of the specific company of people who make up that congregation and for the sake of the larger world. All this requires a fairly profound understanding of organizations, and particularly of congregations.

Pastors must have a broad awareness and understanding of the world that the church exists to serve, both in its scope and contemporary need and in relationship to the specific environment in which a pastor and a congregation operate. All of this requires continuing study and reflection, but also experienced, practical know-how that has been tested and developed through broad experience, struggle and sustained engagement.

Finally, and above all, pastors must have clarity of mind and spirit about what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Being Overwhelmed

Pastoral imagination can only in part be brought to the ministry, because deep and sustained experience within the actual exercise of pastoral ministry itself is essential to its ultimate emergence and maturation. But however it comes into being and however differently it manifests itself in very different people serving very different kinds of congregations, I think that we would consistently find that something like the kind of imagination I have been trying to describe lies at the core of almost every good ministry. Without this gyroscope, it is difficult for pastors to keep their balance in the midst of all that is required of them and all that happens to them, for good and for ill.

I have talked with several groups of ministers about these ideas of pastoral imagination and pastoral intelligence. From them I have gotten two basic responses. One response finds this way of thinking very helpful. Many pastors say that it gives them a language with which to understand both the complexity and the coherence of the ministry. It helps them understand why pastoral ministry is simultaneously so difficult and so satisfying. It helps them to see that all the many pieces involved in carrying it out are not just shards to be reassembled like broken crystal, but rather essential currents that somehow gather, by the power of the Spirit, into a coherent way of being.

And for many it validates their own strong sense that pastoral ministry does, in fact, require the very best they have to give—their best thought, their full energy, their deepest engagement. It affirms that pastoral ministry requires real strength of every kind. And these pastors are glad when someone says that, because in our society—and even in the church—the malignant assumption that pastoral ministry does not really demand or require very much surreptitiously undermines both our legitimate expectations of and our sense of gratitude for the Christian ministry.

The second response is really the flip side of the first, and this is one I typically get from seminary students and new ministers—ironically, especially ones whom I sense to be particularly promising. For them, these ideas can be a bit intimidating. "If that's what it takes to do ministry well," they say, "there is no way I can ever do it! I can't live up to that." A high view of pastoral ministry—of its significance in and for the church and the world, of the importance of doing it well, of understanding all that is involved in it and required of a person to do it—can be so daunting as to be overwhelming.

Actually, those who make this second response are right. Ministry is overwhelming. But let us think for a moment about what it means to be overwhelmed. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the sheer hugeness or complexity of something. We can't get our arms around it. We can't figure it out. We are unable to organize it or to bring it under control. We are overwhelmed in a way that makes us feel small, weak, and inadequate. On the other hand, "overwhelmings" happen in other ways as well. On the shore of a mountain lake at sunset, we are overwhelmed by beauty. At the birth of a grandchild, we are overwhelmed with joy. At a low point in our lives, we are overwhelmed by unexpected generosity.

The British theologian David Ford says that "Jesus Christ is an embodiment of multiple overwhelmings. He was immersed in the River Jordan and then driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. He announced the kingdom of God as something worth everything else, a pearl beyond price, a welcome beyond anything we could deserve, a feast beyond our wildest desires. At the climax of his life he agonized in prayer in Gethsemane, he was betrayed, deserted, tortured, and crucified, and he died crying 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Then came the resurrection, the most disorienting and transformative overwhelming of all."

The life of Christian faith, says Ford, is itself the most profound experience there is of being overwhelmed. In baptism we "take on an identity shaped by the overwhelmings of creation, death, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit. We have also entered a community that spans the generations and relates us to ... perhaps two billion people alive today who are identified as Christians.... This is the dynamic of being shaped by being overwhelmed."

The Buoyancy of God

The idea that pastoral ministry involves a distinctive imagination and a subtle and complex intelligence can be bad news indeed—an intimidating and dispiriting "overwhelming"—if we think of them as demands or achievements that each of us on our own can and must individually attain. But the pastoral imagination is not something to be achieved or attained. It comes as a gift. At the very heart of pastoral ministry lies the good news of a power that is not our own, a labor that ultimately is not our work, a grace that is not of our own doing. The way is not so much one of earnest striving as it is, in Ford's words, "the 'active passivity' of letting ourselves be embraced, or letting ourselves be fed the food and drink that can energize us for" ministry.

Years ago, when I was a seminary student, I worked for a time at the local YMCA, teaching swimming lessons. My students were three- and four-year-olds. Each Saturday morning at 9:00, down the steps they would come from the locker rooms into the pool area. As their parents sat along the wall, watching warily, the little ones wandered over toward the shallow end of the pool, where I was waiting.

You know how little kids hold themselves when they are cold and at least a little bit nervous. They clutch up and shiver. They hold themselves tight and grit their teeth. Well, it is a law of nature that you cannot swim while cramping your body and gnashing your teeth. So what I would do is take one child at a time off the edge of the pool and into my arms. Holding them close, I would carry them gently into the water. As we went, we talked quietly. I tried to make them smile and ease them into

relaxation. Along the way, I would dip down into the water, allowing them to feel the warmth of it and the flow of it across their skin. After a while—maybe on their third or fourth venture with me into the deep—I would sink them lower and let them feel the water buoying them up.

Eventually I could lay them on their backs and, holding my hands beneath them, get them to begin to relax their knees, let loose the muscles in their necks, and slowly draw air into their lungs. At first, of course, when I would remove my hands, they would panic a bit. They would clutch up again and start to sink. But sooner or later, they would finally get the feel of what it is like to float. And at that point, they could roll over and start to swim.

The first priority in teaching children to swim is to enable them to trust the water. Somehow or another they have to come to a specific kind of knowledge. In a deeply somatic, bodily way—and in a way that is in no small part existential, for it is a knowledge that must be strong enough to address their fears—they must come to know the buoyancy of the water. Buoyancy is not something you can teach children—or anyone else, for that matter—through a lesson in physics. Objective as it is, for the sake of swimming one has to come to know it personally.

So it is with the life of faith. At the heart of the Christian life there lies a deep, somatic, profoundly personal but very real knowledge. It is the knowledge of the buoyancy of God. It is the knowledge that in struggle and in joy, in conflict and in peace—indeed, in every possible circumstance and condition in life and in death—we are upheld by God's own everlasting arms. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin says, "We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Faith for Calvin is not a blind leap into the utterly unknowable, much less mere speculation. No, it is knowledge. It is a deep, profound, existential knowledge that infuses not only our minds but also our hearts and even our bodies. It is knowledge that, as we come to know it more and more deeply over many years, will give form and substance to our entire imagination, to our whole way of being in the world, to our very existence. It is the knowledge of the overflowing abundance of the grace and mercy and love of God.

When pastors try to master ministry on their own, they are overwhelmed by the fearfulness of it. They can become frightened and defensive, clutch up, grit their teeth and sink. When ministry is received as a gift of God within a larger life of faith shared by pastors and people, an entirely different dynamic begins to take over. Instead of working frenetically and compulsively to harness their own powers and energies, pastors are somehow set free to receive, draw upon, release and share in the multiple energies and capacities of the people of their congregations and of the whole body of Christ.

The Ministry of the Congregation

What the pastors from whom I have been learning talk about most is not their own ministry, but the ministry of their congregation. What focuses their attention and anchors their interest is their congregation, their people—who they are, how they are

living, what they together are doing. When I listen to these pastors, what I hear them talking about is the way in which their "being with" their people has given them their ministries.

These are pastors who have fallen in love with their people because they have seen in them corporately and individually the Christian life embodied. For them, it is the quality and depth of their people's worship that make it possible for them as pastors to lead worship with integrity. It is the people's care for one another that makes it possible for them to be caregivers as pastors. It is the people's engagement in the church's mission that enables the pastors to lead the congregation in its mission.

It is the congregation's ecclesial imagination that over time gives rise to the pastor's pastoral imagination. It is the congregation's ecclesial intelligence that is the source for the pastor's pastoral intelligence. What these pastors tell me is that whatever imagination and intelligence they as pastors may have, it has come to them as a gift given to them—quietly, almost unwittingly, over time—by God in and through the people of faith who make up their congregations.

Ecclesial imagination is the way of seeing and being that emerges when a community of faith, together as a community, comes increasingly to share the knowledge of God and to live a way of abundant life—not only in church but also in the many contexts in which they live their daily lives. Ecclesial imagination emerges among the people themselves, fostering a way of seeing and being that is in some ways different in content, quality and character from that which prevails in the culture surrounding them.

The people talk just a little differently than most. The assumptions they make about themselves and others are not quite the same as the conventional wisdom. They do not pretend to know too much—about others, about themselves or about God. They are more eager than most to listen and to learn. They possess a kind of humility before reality that enables them to be truly attentive to it.

When troubles come or things go wrong in one way or another, they don't necessarily panic in the way others do—or even as they themselves might have done at an earlier time. While they are not necessarily all that optimistic, they are nonetheless a deeply hopeful lot. They invest in their youth and they build for the future, whether they expect to live long enough to benefit from it themselves or not. They seem generous, more likely to give of themselves—and not only of their money but also of their time, their patience, their care.

Resourcing and Guiding Congregations

Ecclesial imagination is most likely to emerge when pastoral leaders possessed of rich pastoral imaginations make it their primary task to guide and resource communities in embracing this kind of life. The fundamental work of pastoral ministry is to foster such a way of life among a particular people. Pastoral work is first and foremost the work of enabling, teaching, helping, guiding, and encouraging a specific community to practice Christian faith themselves.

This may seem obvious, but I fear that many pastors, including me, lose sight of this all the time. It is an easy trap to fall into. In any kind of hard work (especially work that takes place in public and often under considerable pressure), it is our natural

human tendency to attend primarily to our own performance, to our own action, to what we ourselves are doing, to how well we are performing—and, perhaps especially, to how other people think we are doing.

The genius of a pastoral imagination built on the knowledge of the buoyancy of God, however, is its capacity to attend first and fully to others, to the people, to their lives and their life together. The confidence that arises when pastors themselves know, in a deeply personal way, that they too can rest confidently in God's upholding arms enables them to let go of the anxieties that can plague and eventually defeat pastoral work when it is driven by compulsive striving.

Under such conditions we are freed to do pastoral work that is not mainly about us and, say, our preaching. We are freed to attend first and above all to how the people are proclaiming the gospel in words and with their lives. Our own preaching, we can then come to see, is in service to their ways of proclaiming the gospel. Similarly, we can also see that what matters is not our own liturgical leadership but rather the people's worship of God.

A spiral of mutual influence, encouragement, and empowerment takes hold when pastors and congregations give these gifts of God to and receive them from one another. Pastoral imagination is a gift that is given by God in and through communities of faith possessed of deep, rich ecclesial imaginations. Ecclesial imagination is a gift that is given by God through the sustained nurture and shaping ministries of wise and faithful pastors with deep, rich pastoral imaginations.

Through eyes of faith, pastors come to see the abundance that is before them and that surrounds them already. Through eyes of faith, they can see what gifts they have been given in the people who, however flawed, are the members of their congregations. Likewise, through eyes of faith, the members of congregations come to see the abundance that is before them and surrounding them too. And through those eyes, they can recognize what gifts they have been given in the people who, however flawed, have become their pastors.

Ministry like this has about it a kind of beauty and allure that is almost irresistible. And so it replicates itself by drawing more and more people into it, forming and shaping their lives and imaginations and launching them into new ministry in turn. Such ministry has about it a freshness, an improvisatory character, a liveliness that is itself infectious. Thus an imagination that is at its heart a seeing in depth—seeing reality truthfully—turns out to be an imagination full of creativity, an imagination that sees what is not yet and begins to create it.

Reflection Questions

1. What influences have shaped the way you view your pastoral ministry? What skills have you developed in response to these influences?
2. Dykstra points to the importance of both substantive knowledge and practical know-how for developing the pastoral imagination. Reading, observation, and experience ground a pastor theologically—as well as provide insight into human psychology, organizational structures, and larger communities. What readings, observations, and experiences have most contributed to your "multiple intelligences," and why?

3. Pastoral ministry is "overwhelming," says Dykstra. And while we can feel inadequate in the face of being overwhelmed, we can also "take on an identity shaped by the overwhelms of creation, death, resurrection, and the Holy Spirit." What does "overwhelming" mean for you? How do you respond?
4. As children learning to swim must first trust in the buoyancy of the water, so we are called to trust in God's "buoyancy"—God's grace, love, and mercy. How has your ministry been transformed by a larger trust in God's presence?
5. Do you agree with Dykstra that "it is the congregation's ecclesial imagination that over time gives rise to the pastor's pastoral imagination"? If so, what are the elements of this ecclesial imagination that have most enriched and informed your ministry?
6. Dykstra says that "Pastoral work is first and foremost the work of enabling, teaching, helping, guiding, and encouraging a specific community to practice Christian faith themselves." He also says that such work can best go forward when pastors trust in God and are no longer driven by compulsive striving. What practices have deepened your own trust in God? How might you encourage these or related practices in your congregation?

Resources

[Becoming a Pastor: Reflections on the Transition into Ministry](#) (Report)
James P. Wind, David J. Wood, Authors. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008.

An initiative of Lilly Endowment Inc., and involving the participation of more than 800 new pastors, Transition into Ministry (TiM) helps recent seminary graduates prepare for pastorates by immersing them in communities of practice that include the guidance and feedback of senior pastors, peer pastors, and lay groups. *Becoming a Pastor* examines the cultural contexts from which TiM programs were conceived, reports on the experiences of those who have participated in residency-based and peer-based TiM programs, explains the importance of "reflective immersion" in congregational and pastoral life, summarizes key discoveries surrounding pastoral formation, and poses challenges for those who seek to deepen and expand this transitional work.

[Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination](#) (Book)
Charles R. Foster, Lisa Dahill, Larry Golemon, Barbara Wang Tolentino, Authors. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

This text reports the authors' findings on how Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish seminaries prepare clergy to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. A key premise of the book is that "a primary task of seminary education is cultivating the pastoral, priestly, or rabbinic imagination necessary for clergy to embrace this multifaceted and public work" and that "seminaries ... are the primary setting for the intentional, disciplined, and sustained cultivation of [this] imaginal capacity." The authors examine diverse seminary teaching approaches, four pedagogies in clergy education, students' communal learning experiences, the influence of tradition, and the cultivation of spiritual practices among seminarians. Future formation of clergy is also discussed.

For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry (Book)

Dorothy C. Bass, Craig Dykstra, Editors. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008.

Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra draw together the voices of pastors, seminary professors, and practical theologians to address how Christ's abundant life may be embodied within congregations and for the sake of the world. The authors ask what shapes are given to a way of life that is truly life-giving; how people in congregations can support one another in fostering this way of life; how pastors can collaborate with and support each other in their ministries; and how theological education can encourage the development of pastoral imagination and leadership. Throughout the book is the conviction that "Christian life and ministry belong first and last not to us but to God."

Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices (Second Edition) (Book)

Craig Dykstra, Author. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

Believing that "education in faith presupposes and depends on people's experience of the Mystery of God," Craig Dykstra has written this second edition of *Growing in the Life of Faith* to provide a foundation for developing faithful and faith-filled Christian education. The author holds that education in faith should be an *investigative* process guiding the explorations of our experience of God; a *critical* process freeing us from patterns of thinking and living that diminish such experience; and a *caring* process enabling us to invite others into this experience. As we engage in these processes, we are called into community and into life-giving practices that deepen our faith.

Leadership in Congregations (Book)

Richard Bass, Editor. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006.

Richard Bass, Director of Publishing at the Alban Institute, has gathered together some of *Congregations* magazine's most thought-provoking articles on leadership. Featured here are insights on pastoring a small congregation, leading when consensus fails, serving as a woman pastor, assessing leadership skills, empowering laity, encountering God's presence, and more. These insights are illustrated with stories grounded in the authors' experiences as leaders. Featured also is the Alban Institute's special report, "The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations," which examines current leadership challenges in congregations—including the needs for new environments by which clergy can learn and connect, new learning processes for all congregational leaders, and new approaches to recruiting future leaders.

Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry (Book)

L. Gregory Jones, Kevin R. Armstrong, Authors. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.

Theology professor Gregory Jones and United Methodist pastor Kevin Armstrong examine such issues as power, office, call, professionalism, collegiality, ordination, pastoral imagination, and other topics related to ministerial excellence. Through the stories and testimonies they relate, they demonstrate that there is no "one-size-fits-all" form of excellence. Instead, the authors show that excellence emerges in the partnership between pastor and congregation. Ultimately, they believe, pastoring is

Also available online at www.congregationalresources.org/Imagination/Introduction.asp

about discipleship and faithfulness; while skill development and academic education have their place, at the heart of the pastoral vocation is "a life well lived, a life of creativity, intellectual engagement, and imagination, a life that asks the best of us."

Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (Web Resource)

A project of Lilly Endowment Inc., and based in the Leadership Education Program of Duke University, Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) helps ministers "create environments for ongoing biblical study, theological reflection and spiritual renewal, and develop sustained friendships and opportunities for mutual support." Its website features numerous articles from religious scholars and practitioners that address topics of interest to pastors across denominations. W. Craig Gilliam discusses conflict resolution; Michael Jenkins explores healthy leadership; John Witvliet examines pastoral excellence and Christian worship; Kevin Armstrong offers resources for Sabbath-keeping. In January 2009 SPE also launched the Faith and Leadership website, which offers a more dynamic and interactive collection of resources.