

The Rev Dr Rebecca L Kiser
ABOUT PASTORS
Jan 30, 2022 Epiphany 4-C

I want to talk about pastors today. Yes, I know the scripture we just heard is part of the celebrated “Love” chapter from the 1st letter to the folks at the city of Corinth, aka 1st Corinthians. Although people choose to read this at weddings, the apostle Paul didn’t write it about married love - it’s about the love between Christ-followers, not just in tight-knit communities like this one here, but ALL Christ-followers. And by extension, all people, period.

God has laid it on my heart all week to talk about how a congregation sees the woman or man called as the local pastor. Love is certainly part of that relationship as well, both directions. As you all are in the process of seeking a new Installed Pastor, I want to talk about some things that might help in the new, upcoming relationship. For example, there may be different expectations that might collide, there may not be an understanding of who and what a pastor is, does, has been trained in, and expects to do at a local church. So let’s talk!

Pastors are human beings like anybody else. People forget that, because a pastor is often seen as a stereotyped role, and an idealized role. However, anything common to humans is also common to pastors, as they are humans. Like all people, pastors are people in process - learning, growing in faith and skills, and subject to tiredness, stress, frustration, anger, and all the human experiences. Pastors might know a lot about the Bible and theology, but pastors also have families, spouses and children, and none of them are perfect, either. There may be people in a local church that have deep relationships with God and have followed Christ further in the ways of saintliness than the pastor - the pastor is not necessarily the most spiritually mature and holiest person in the local church - yet she is, or he is, the one called to this role in the overall body of Christ, just as each of you here have a role in the body of Christ. We are EACH called by God; we are EACH expected to fulfill our call and our baptism in the ongoing ministry of Christ in the world. So the pastor is not the only “minister” - each of you here are ministers of God in the gifts that you have. There is no difference between clergy and others except in what call is answered.

Part of being ordained as a pastor is the notion of “call,” being called to this particular role, and set apart for this work. It doesn’t mean we are set apart from being human. Scripture is careful to say that Jesus was human, too, and theologically we believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully God, something the rest of us, even pastors, can’t say. I have a friend who is an Elder in the Presbyterian church, who once argued with me that pastors ought to be held to a higher standard of just about anything. So while the rest of folks get a “pass,” pastors

ought to have it totally together. In reality, a pastor is just another human following their call to a particular ministry. Ordination doesn't give us any special holiness, or any "in" with God - our children still rebel, we still have to deal with our own upbringing and things that have happened in our lives, and we still are growing in faith and love like anyone else. Hopefully we are truly working on our life of faith and prayer, and our relationship with God, and not just coasting along just being a nice person.

As far as being human, pastors have as many different "types" of personalities and traits as other people do. Some are extroverts, some are introverts who also love people, just need to recharge their batteries at home later. Some are academic, who love to read scholarly things about the Bible, church history, whatever; others do enough to pass the seminary class and consider that fine. Some really get into the Hebrew and Greek language studies; others take the required classes which basically introduces them to how difficult translation is, and opens them up to the fact that the Bible wasn't written in King James English, and was only authorized by King James, not God. (I have actually had someone say this to me!)

Some pastors might lean towards philosophical pondering; some might hear a call to action. Some are better teachers than others; some have better social & people skills than others; some can think structurally while others can read spreadsheets; some can handle conflict better than others; some grew up on the Bible while others are coming from a newer place. Some find that writing sermons comes easily, and others struggle with getting their thoughts on paper. Some pastors are naturally good listeners, some love to be creative in worship. Some pastors worry when they think they're not liked; some like being in charge. Other less desirable things common to humanity can also be in pastors - we've seen that in the recent years of the "Me, too" movement - sometimes pastors can unfortunately be predators. Pastors can suffer depression and other mental illnesses. Pastors can act out their problems in affairs or stealing. Anything common to humanity is also common to pastors.

So what draws a person to seminary and pastoring? I think that those drawn to be pastors are drawn like other folks are drawn to their fields - the things of church, worship, Bible and God interest them and are important to them. What's called "discerning a call" is a process of listening to the heart as well as to what others say, what their own pastor says, how the Presbytery responds, and so on. Though there is always a specific personality that shapes what we bring to our ministry, we are not cookie-cutters of each other. Many needed skills for ministry are skills that can be learned or honed.

Most pastors work at the level of the local church, usually the smaller churches, and thus must be jack-of-all-trades as far as ministry goes. So Seminary has to introduce us to a

wide variety of material - there's Bible knowledge - content and history and languages; then there's Church history and doctrine both classical and newer; then there are very basic counseling classes, very basic Christian education classes; then you get how to preach and the theory behind worship services. Finally you have to learn about your denomination's polity, ie the way things are organized and are governed - in my case, the Book or Order (for the Methodists, the Book of Discipline). There are standardized tests that all pastors-to-be have to take and pass; there is a psychological evaluation, then the examination by the presbytery when you get that call and are ready to move - every time, the new presbytery can examine you.

A pastor doesn't learn everything she or he needs to know in seminary. I'm in a Facebook group called Things I Didn't Learn in Seminary, and there are new posts daily! Some things mentioned often are how to work with volunteers; what it takes to maintain a building and how much budget that uses up; how to read said budget, how to use the technology of the day, or the next day; how to motivate folks or change church cultures that are not healthy; how to deal with conflict. My generation of seminarians also didn't have folks talking about our own spiritual growth, our inner experience of God - all the emphasis was on academics, with various folks with PhD's pouring their topic into our heads. I and my peers were hungry for a kind of learning to live the faith outside the way of academia; I think seminaries have responded to that nowadays.

Seminary is a kind of ivory tower where we are surrounded by others whose main preoccupation is Scripture and faith. Part of my loneliness as a pastor is finding folks to talk to about the things that intrigue and fascinate me about the faith - so finding colleagues who share interests has been important. That's probably true in any profession or specialty. I've also realized over time that most things we talk about are fundamentally about faith, too, whether it's obviously faith-related or not.

What I do as a minister and what I trained to do don't correspond all the time. I consider my call as a pastor to encompass calling people to deeper faith, to represent God in the midst of folks, to serve as a reminder of God's presence, to encourage folks at difficult spots on their walk with Jesus, to train people to use their own spiritual gifts in ministry; to fashion worship experiences that hopefully speak to hearts that are at various levels of faith and understanding, to make sure my language about God is open and inclusive; & to choose hymns with good theology. I'm always hoping that my sermons will provoke thought, and that someone will come back to talk with me about something I said. I pour my hearts out in well-considered words, and hope for some dialogue - but that doesn't happen too often. One clergywoman I know was handed a hairdresser's card at the door and told that this person could really help her hair.

People seem to be more critical of a clergywoman's clothing than of men - while we're talking intensely about eternal issues, are folks really thinking we'd look better in heels? Another colleague was told at the door that, "I'm going to leave if you don't stop talking about those blacks." It makes me unsure about folks' commitment to Christ sometimes, what they think the church is for, and what they think my job actually is. Although I prepare weekly orders and worship and sermons, which I was trained for, a good bit of my time deals with newsletters, mailings, urging committees to do their work, keeping the calendar straight; people contact me about mistakes in the bulletins, or a who left a light on in a room during the week, someone who hates the hymns I chose, and stuff at that level. I do home visits, which have been greatly curtailed during covid. While many indicate that they want Bible study and other studies I've trained for, it's the same 6-7 people who come to them, if that. I'm rarely consulted about faith questions, although it happens now & then. I consider part of my call is to develop who I am, that is, to further my own spiritual life and faithfulness to God, do my own inner work, so that as a person I can demonstrate a Christian life. I hope I do that in my personal encounters.

A congregation who takes on a pastor covenants to love & support them, including financially. Our 2 denominations have minimum guidelines of what this means, because although no one goes into the ministry to get rich, we do have the same concerns about costs and bills and retirement that anyone else has. Generosity in that kind of support helps a pastor feel appreciated and is a recognition of her or his work's value. This congregation did several things that made me welcome in coming to a new place - you had an office assistant in place to help me learn how you did things; Pastor Mark left me a folder with all kinds of info and phone #s re who to call if this or that was needed; and one of my calling committee, Louise Stoner, took me around to some area social events for a while before covid closed them. I regret that covid meant I didn't get to eat with more of you or visit in your houses - maybe restrictions will lift before the new person gets here. It's not easy moving into a new community, meeting all new people, finding new doctors and stores and such. Those are some practical ways to make a new pastor welcome and show them love. I know that most folks see the pastor as one who takes care of the congregation's needs; but the congregation also needs to see to the pastor's needs.

We really do work more than 1 hour a week...and getting to the point of being called takes much work, testing, and preparation. Google searches, helpful as they can be in some instances, don't really equal a solid theological program of study. A pastor's specialty can be called on in all kinds of situations, to take advantage of what we bring to the table. On the other hand, even as a pastor I've learned many insights about living the faith from parishioners of all

ages. It can be a mutually enriching relationship as we all seek to use our gifts and answer our specific calls, so that the Body of Christ can function. AMEN.