

Vulnerability in pastoral ministry

Pastoral ministry is relational, and so it involves watchfulness, vulnerability and integrity. Julian Hardyman explores people-centred ministry which is made possible and joyful through God's grace

Candidates for ordained or paid Christian ministry are often attracted by the idea of a life of study and speaking. While this is undoubtedly central to the work of the minister, the people-centredness of ministry is equally important – in fact, *ministry is inescapably relational*.

The New Testament images point to this: the body, the family, the household and the flock. Paul uses the last of these in his great farewell address to the church leaders from Ephesus.

He sums up what he wants them to remember about ministry: 'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28).

Ministry means a relationship with people because the church is not a building or an anonymous crowd. It is a group of individual human beings, each with their own stories, secrets, characteristic sins and spiritual potential.

They come in all shapes and sizes. One Sunday evening I was slated to preach on Psalm 23. That afternoon we popped

into a local agricultural show and I was struck by the variety of sheep on display.

Some had wool as tough as a carpet, while others looked as soft as a Harrods jumper. Friendly sheep, shy sheep, quiet sheep, noisy sheep. Formidable sheep and anxious sheep. Bidable sheep and intractable sheep. Almost as diverse as the congregation waiting for me that evening.

Our ministry is to every single one of them: 'all the flock', whether we naturally gel with them or not. That is a challenge for everyone in ministry or who is aspiring to ministry.

It is a challenge for the more introverted and shy of us who prefer our own company and get drained by others. We may have been drawn to ministry because we like commentaries and Bible software, systematic theologies and Bible overviews. We enjoy studying, preparing talks and giving talks. But the people side of thing is a bit intimidating. Our ideal would be to have a study in a place like a comfortable nuclear bunker. There would be a single tunnel from there to the church building or place where the church meets.

And once a week we would stride purposefully down the tunnel, emerge in the pulpit, deliver our brilliant sermon, shake a few hands, enjoy the thanks and then head back down the tunnel again.

For others of us, the 'people-centredness' of ministry is more appealing. We are natural extroverts and leaders. We feed off others. We gain our energy from them – and from being in charge of them. 'Shepherding the flock – amen to that!'

Our problem is that we like being in charge too much. And we see people as objects not persons. As John Steven of FIEC observed, we are rather like Emma in Jane Austen's great novel, who loved using her position in society to play God in the lives of others.

But for all of us, ministry is about developing relationships of loving pastoral leadership with a variety of people.

One of my theological college teachers had previously been a pastor for 20 years. I asked him what the difference was. 'Now, my problems graduate,' he replied. 'But pastors are called to a life of commitment to people who may remain "problems" for years and years!'

The inescapably relational nature of ministry has several consequences for Paul in Acts 20.

Since ministry is relational it means being watchful

'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' (Acts 20:28-31).

This is an important expansion of the relational nature of ministry. It is too easy for the standard requirement for a Christian worker to be that he is to be a nice guy (or the female equivalent). Warm, exuding bonhomie, enthusiastic and unthreatening – this is what people want.

Paul's explanation of what pastoral relationality looks like is rather different. It means watching like a guard dog for people's spiritual safety.

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Guarding people against the dangers outside and inside them means well aimed sermons which are more than exegetical lectures. We need the people contact to know what the issues are – and then the wise love to address them constructively

The responsibility also means individual warning, about the marriages they are neglecting, or the spiritual disciplines that have shrunk almost to vanishing point. This is the very hardest aspect of the relational heart of ministry, but it is integral to the task.

The relational nature of ministry means personal vulnerability

We see this in Paul's repeated references to tears: in his introduction he reminds them that I served the Lord with great humility and with tears (Acts 20:19). This takes us way beyond the detached professionalism many of us would like to hide behind. Even acknowledging the cultural and personal variations in how easily we cry, this is a model we cannot ignore.

A vicar friend of mine teaches his curates to 'walk towards the pain'. When we do that we start to share in it. We take on our shoulders some part of the anguish of premature bereavement, marital breakdown, family dysfunction, or spiritual decline. If we never feel like crying because someone we love resists the gospel, we need to ask ourselves what walls we are hiding behind.

If ministry is inescapably relational that has another implication. Paul is clear that watchfulness is not just for

the flock but for the shepherds themselves: 'keep watch over yourselves' (Acts 20:28). He shows one way in which that operated for him: earning his own living so that he would not be tempted to desire the Ephesian's resources and so that he could demonstrate help for the less well off.

Ministers today may be tempted to manipulate people for financial gain, and there are all sorts of ways of fleecing the flock. We may try to treat people as means to our ends, or build our little empires.

I got a warning of this in an annual review a few years ago. One of the deacons pointed out a couple of times that year that 'You sounded as though you thought we should do what you said just because it was you saying it.' He was quite right.

The 'flock' is not there for us. We are there for them. They are not there to provide a stage for our talents. Church is not a project to puff our egos. Instead, the flock is there to be cared for, even at high personal cost. As Paul says: 'I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.'

Only one person has ever been in ministry who had no relational issues to overcome in himself and that was the Lord Jesus Christ.

He gave himself to die for our glaring failures, our inner twistedness, our sly self-centredness, and for our mixed motives. God is able to build us up by the word of his grace so that we can rise to this challenge – and the cross is big enough for our continuing failures.

Shy inhibited people: he can help you become less shy! He really can. This was my experience in becoming a Christian. And I think in his grace it has continued to develop.

Extrovert, outwardly confident people: he can help you become sensitive. He can give you the self-control to become good listeners. I know people who are off the scale extroverts. Christ has taught them to care for people pastorally, to sit and listen and ask questions, rather than just answer them.

Because of the grace of the gospel, ministry which is people-centred becomes possible and even joyful.