

Flourishing in Ministry is About Balance

Scott Sullender

As a pastoral psychotherapist, I have been working with protestant clergypersons for fifty years. Most of my work has been focused on providing psychological/vocational assessments for candidates for ministry. In addition, and to a lesser extent, I provided intervention, consultation and counseling services for ministers who were in trouble for one reason or another. Over the years, I have employed a couple of conceptualization systems for understanding who flourishes in ministry and who does not. Initially, I conceptualized my work in terms of psychiatric diagnoses and tried to identify the diagnoses that typically create problems for ministers. For a variety of reasons, that approach proved unsatisfying and unhelpful.

In my assessment battery, I employed several inventories that are considered normative, not diagnostic. Chief among them, I relied on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. Initially, I tried to identify the most common personality types among Protestant ministers, and the correspondingly strengths and weaknesses of each type. However, this approach was been complicated by the fact that there are so many different types of ministry and cultural contexts for ministry. Over the years, it became hard to make generalization about ministers. A minister who is a NF might wash out in one church/cultural/denominational context, but be precisely what the search committee

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wants in another context. Similarly, a minister who is profoundly introverted would not be very effective in most congregational settings, but do fine as a scholar, author, spiritual director, or monk or if their introversion is not too extreme, as a chaplain or administrator.

So in time I came to conceptualize the subject of psychological health for ministers in terms of a model of balance. *The ministers that are most likely to flourish in ministry (combination of being successful in ministry and enjoying it), maintain a high degree of balance, across several domains in their life and work.*

Ministry, particularly congregational ministry is really one of the last “generalist professions” remaining in the modern world. A minister is expected to do so many different work activities reasonably well, from preaching, to counseling, to fund raising, to administering, to worship/music leadership, to spiritual guidance, to staff development, not to mention the less universal activities such community leadership, marketing and public relations, visual arts and budgeting. That is a lot of different work activities, requiring a diverse set of skills! As I often said, the really successful pastoral ministers are often never really excellent at any one aspect of ministry, but reasonably good at a wide variety work activities. You might say they were all around B students, not an A+ student in one subject and below average in others. Of course there are specialties in ministry these days, more so than when I entered ministry 50 years ago. There are evangelists, preachers, bishops and teachers and chaplains, to mention only a few. One would hope they would be excellent (A +) in their specialty, made so by having specialized training and experience in their specialization. In other work activities, outside of their specialty, they might be average performers. Yet, even in the context of a specialized ministry, I would argue that if ministers want to maintain psychological health, they must find ways to balance their lives. If their ministry is mostly focused on preaching, then in their off hours they need to spend time in nonverbal activities, silence retreats, physical work or construction. If their ministry is as a hospice chaplain, they need to balance their work life with time spent with children(hope) and in nature (renewal).

So if flourishing in ministry is about maintaining balance, here are some of the polarities that one has to keep in balance if one wishes to thrive in ministry. ¹

INTROVERSION VS. EXTRAVERSION

The terms extravert and introvert have become common in every day language. Most of us know that extraverts are energized by socializing and are naturally verbal, outgoing, and friendly. Introverts tend to draw energy from the inner world of ideas and feelings, and are naturally deep, thoughtful, and sensitive. Even though ministry is “a people business” and congregations tend to prefer extraverted pastors for that reason, I would argue that ministers who flourish in ministry strike a balance in their psyches between introverted and extraversion preferences. They are able to draw upon different sides of their personalities, depending on the social context and demands of the moment. They can appear extraverted in the pulpit, but also draw strength and even enjoy moments of quiet in prayer and study. They can be outgoing and talkative when greeting visitors at the church socials, but in the hospital room, switch to being a sensitive and empathetic listener. Ministry is like that, demanding ministers to access different parts of themselves in different settings. Effective ministers can do that kind of switching.

Further, I would argue that the stronger a minister is in one direction or the other, in extraversion or introversion, the less effective that minister will be in general pastoral ministry and the less satisfied. Or to paraphrase, as one becomes more extreme in one direction or the other, one also becomes more rigid in that preference. It isn't introversion or extraversion per se that is good or bad, but the inability of the introvert or extravert to be anything else other than what he or she is, the inability to respond to the needs of the moment, to step out of their comfort zone, even though the ministry context demands it. So the wise, mature and balanced minister, will strive to develop skills and habits of behavior that enable him or her to meet the needs of the moment. So the introvert will learn public speaking skills, and the extravert will learn to deep listening. That's balance and that's flourishing in ministry.²

SELF-CARE VS. CARING FOR OTHERS

In recent decades, scholars and denominational authorities have noticed the increased incident of clergy burnout. There are many reasons for clergy burnout, including idiosyncratic reasons and board changes in the

culture, but the lack of self-care has surfaced again and again as an important contributing factor in burnout.

Ministers are notoriously poor at self-care. Their rates of stress related illnesses are as high or higher than the general population. To flourish in ministry, ministers must find and maintain a balance of ministry and self care, and adjust that balance periodically in light of one's age and life circumstances.

It is hard for ministers, who are generally kind and caring people, to strike this balance. The needs of their flock can seem so numerous and urgent. There is always another hospital visit or phone call to make. And in smaller, less functional congregations, the system itself needs constant attention, meetings to attend, irate congregants to calm down, programs to administer, volunteers to recruit and manage. Not mention the weekly demands of preaching, teaching and worship preparation. Further, ministers are also very dedicated people, who feel called to meet the high expectations of their calling, "Christ demands nothing else than our best." So it is then, that ministers typically have a hard time carving out time for themselves, and sometimes even when they do, they have a hard time really unwinding and recreating in restorative ways.

To flourish in ministry ministers must maintain a healthy balance of self-care and ministry to others. Roy Oswald has worked with clergy well being for years with the Alban Institute, and later as a teacher, consultant and author writes, "The difference between an effective and health-full ministry and a stressed out, burned-out ministry can be described in one word: balance." ³ The particular balance he is focusing on is the balance as between self-care and ministry. For too many ministers, self care is understood as a sign of lack of dedication, devotion to Christ, or even as selfishness. As admirable as such dedication might seem, over time, such an imbalance sets the stage of burnout, ineffectiveness, health problems and misconduct issues.

Denominational leaders and ministry experts have noted that one of the key issues in maintaining this balance is professional boundaries. Many denominations now require regular attendance at workshops on boundaries. Self-care for ministers begins with the establishing and maintaining of appropriate boundaries on their time. It begins with such basics, like maintaining one's day off and one's vacations. Most congregations are under-

standing of their pastor's needs in this regard, as long as the minister is clarifies and is direct by his or her policies in this area.

Creating your own Sabbath is more than take time off. Here too, there needs to be a balance. The three foci of a healthy balance here are: recreational activities, family activities and personal spiritual growth. Ministers would do well to develop early in their careers some healthy hobbies or recreational activities that can renew and refresh them. They might benefit from developing a few friendships outside of the congregation and community activities outside of the church. For example, some ministers I have known over the years enjoy musical theater, civic organizations, and hobbies such as photography, painting, or writing.

Ministry is a very mental profession. Ministers spend a lot of mental energy, thinking, sometimes overthinking their ministry. So it is then, in the spirit of balance, I find that the Protestant ministers who have thrived the best, who are poster children for self care, have incorporated a good measure of physical activities into their lives. They have found that it has been valuable for them "to get out of their head for a while"...to not think for a while, or to allow intense physical activities to clear their mind. A colleague of mine was a wood worker, (like our Lord); another built houses for Habitat for Humanity; another enjoyed hiking in the near by wilderness, and still others are avid runners, bicyclists or swimmers. Physical activity can be a good balance to the cerebral nature of most ministry work.

DOING VS. BEING.

Doing vs. Being is a philosophical construct that I employ to describe another balance of the psyche key to thriving in ministry. Let me ask you, "Is ministry something you do, or something you are?" In this capitalistic culture that emphasizes doing over being, most ministers are doers not be-ers and most pastoral search committees prefer ministers who are do-ers. Indeed, on the MBTI, most Protestant ministers show Judging (J) preferences over Perceiving (P) preferences. J-types are typically goal oriented, methodical, systematic, and good planners. In the extreme, they can become obsessed with getting things done, often are overachievers and when under stress, they over function. They tend to evaluate their ministry in terms of numbers, programs, buildings and accomplishing stuff. In this regard they can fall into the trap of the culture's definition of success, instead of the

Kingdom's measures. In contrast, P-types are process oriented, casual, open ended, flexible, spontaneous, more focused on the present moment, and the needs of the present, and on the movement of the Spirit. They enjoy novelty, energized by the excitement and challenge of creating, what's new and different. They can work in bursts, when the spirit moves them, and sometimes lacks the urgency or discipline to complete routine tasks in a timely way.

I would argue that ministers who flourish in ministry need a balance of doing and being. Ministers do have to get things done and the pressure of the weekly schedule can be demanding. Program driven churches, which are typical of the suburban environs, are doing oriented churches, led by doing oriented ministers. Yet in all fairness, I must admit that "programs" are important. They are the activities that get people in the door. Programs, whether they are Bible studies, sewing circles or films nights on the lawn, meet felt needs of congregants. But programs are not the end all, nor is being busy to be busy. Programs are a means to the end, the end is helping people grow spiritually, or if you will, giving them the context in which to meet (again) the living Christ. At the same time, often a minister's biggest impact on a congregation comes not from doing anything, but being who you are, modeling the Christian life, healthy spiritual habits, loving and forgiving others. Often it is not what you say or do, but who you are that communicates your message. The messenger is the message.

The minister who wants to thrive in ministry must intentionally strive to maintain a balance between doing and being. The church needs both its Mary's and its Martha's, or more precisely, it needs leaders who can embody both modes as the situations and needs demand.

TWO-EDGED SWORD OF SENSITIVITY

Generally speaking, ministers are "a sensitive bunch." Compared to the most people, ministers are unusually attuned to the feelings and needs of others. They are good at reading the mood of the group, or subtle expressions on people's faces and then communicating empathy and support. All these traits are as you might expect, since ministers are essentially caregivers. Yet sensitivity is a complicated dynamic. The same sensitivity that makes ministers sensitive to the needs of others, is also the sensitivity that makes them vulnerable to getting their own feelings hurt easily, i.e. take things personally. It is a tricky balance. Congregations send a mixed mes-

sage: “We want you to be sensitive to our needs, pastor, but don’t take things so personally, when we criticize your sermon or personal tastes or politics.”

Ministers who wish to thrive in ministry need to find a balance regarding their own sensitivity, a balance between being sensitive to the needs of others and not being too sensitive when arrows of criticism are aimed at them. You might say it is a balance between thin skinned and thick skinned or between taking a subjective and objective views of the situation. It is a hard balance to achieve, because the pastor’s strength is also her/his weakness. The very sensitivity that makes ministers great caregivers is also their weakness.

Over the years, how we think about empathy has changed. Empathy came to be understood as foundational to all caregiving, via the pioneering work of Carl Rogers and others in the early years of my career. Over the years, however, it has become clear that one can have too much empathy, become overwhelmed by the problems of others and unable to keep balance. Empathy is a gift, one of the strengths ministers bring to ministry, but it is also in its extreme, a liability, a contributing factor to compassion fatigue or clergy burnout. Actually, the healthiest kind of empathy is empathy that balances detachment with enmeshment, both poles are not helpful for ministers, but a balanced empathy, that enables one to care deeply but also maintain some professional distance is the key to thriving in ministry. Most ministers who flourish in ministry find ways to moderate their natural sensitivity and practice a form of empathy that is balanced.

Congregational conflicts have received attention in recent decades in the literature on pastoral leadership. Ministers are notorious poor at managing conflicts, because in part of their “gifts” of sensitivity and empathy just described. Ministers are typically conflict avoiders. Yet, sensitivity can enable ministers to be skilled at sensing the emerging conflict, bringing people together, getting people talking, finding common ground. However, too much sensitivity or empathy can immobilize other ministers. And especially if the emerging conflict is about them, directly or indirectly, they can be overwhelmed and retreat behind a wall of self protection, which usually makes the conflict worse.

In short, sensitivity is a two-edged sword. It is a minister’s God-given gift, but the same gift can also be a liability if one is too sensitive. Finding

and maintaining a balance in terms of sensitivity/empathy is another important part of flourishing in ministry.

LAW AND GRACE

You would think that most ministers would embody grace, since Protestants emphasize grace as a theological construct and a means to salvation. Yet, a surprisingly high percentage of Protestant clergy candidates, especially men, that I have assessed over the years register as more self-critical than most people. They tend to expect a lot of themselves, having high moral and performance standards and typically have a difficult time accepting failure. I understand this apparent contradiction as follows: the gospel of grace is especially appealing to those who are hard on themselves, offering them through God's grace a path to greater self acceptance. Ironically, most of these same Protestant ministers report being remarkably accepting and forgiving of others and especially of their congregants. Many mainline Protestant ministers are very accepting toward others, but hard, demanding and critical of themselves.

The tendency to be self critical is shaped by the minister's theological and cultural context. Conservatives tend to want to emphasize moral standards; whereas progressives tend to want to preach unconditional acceptance, but generalizations are difficult to make. Sometimes, conservatives can be very grace centered, and progressives can be very judgmental. Over the years I have been more focused on developmental factors, concluding that the most self critical ministers are the ones who were raised in a moralistic or legalistic religious tradition before the age of 12 years, regardless of how progressive or accepting they have become as adults.

However, I would argue that effectiveness in ministry and sound mental health for ministers is not related to being totally grace-full or totally legal, but finding a balance of law and grace. I think either side of this dynamic is problematic. Ministers who are too moralistic, emphasize standards, rules and compliance at the expense of grace. Other ministers emphasize grace, unconditional acceptance of everyone and everything, seemingly without moral standards, expectations or demands, what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace."

The balance must begin within themselves. Ministers need to first find a balance within, holding themselves to standards, but also accepting, for-

giving and embracing their humanity. If they find that balance, they will project that balance in their ministry.⁴

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Over my years of working with clergy candidates, I have noticed that second career ministers tend to understand ministry in ways that reflect their first career, especially if they were successful in that career. Former social workers, for example, tend to treat the local church like a social service agency. A former businessperson tends to run the church like a business, and so on. Among first career ministers their leadership style is shaped by their psychological temperament, their role in their family of origin and the influence of formative early mentors in ministry. In recent decades, drawing upon the leadership theory in the business world, church denominational leaders have shown a renewed interest in the subject of models of pastoral leadership. Some of the models of leadership that have received attention include: servant leaders, transformational leaders, prophetic leaders, authoritative leaders and so on. As I just wrote, I think that a minister's leadership style is shaped more by his or her first career, family roles and psychological temperament than by any well considered theological or theoretical model. But the real point I want to make is that I have come to believe that there is no single leadership style that is suitable for all ministers in all church contexts. There is no single pastoral leadership style, even in the Bible. There are a variety of leadership styles.

The most successful ministers, the ministers who flourish in ministry, are able to use tools and methodologies from several leadership styles depending on the context. There are some situations in the life of a congregation, when the pastor needs to take a more directive, strong leadership role; whereas there are other times, when the minister needs to step back and allow others to lead. And within the same church context, effective ministers notice that the leadership they provide in a hospice setting, helping a family "let go" of their loved one, must be different in flavor and methods, than the leadership they provide the stewardship or building committee later in the same week. Problems arise when ministers have one single leadership style that they apply to every situation. We might say that they have a hammer, and only a hammer, and so come out swinging in every pastoral situa-

tion. Sometimes, the situation calls for a gentle touch, or even a well crafted argument.

Having noted the importance of flexibility and balance in one's adopted leadership style, let me suggest a few more specific polarities, under the general rubric of leadership, that need to be balanced if one is to flourish in ministry:

- A balance between leading by example and leading by motivating and directing others.
- A balance between doing everything yourself and sitting back, being patient while others learn to lead.
- A balance between self disclosure and maintaining some professional distance, dare I say, an aura of pastoral authority.
- A balance between calming people down and stirring them up.
- A balance between motivating people through emotionality and providing reason-based explanations, i.e. preaching to both their heads and their hearts.

Regardless of what leadership style a minister generally employs, effective ministers will strike a balance with the above noted polarities. In general, erring too far on either side of the above polarities invites trouble.

CONCLUSIONS

In this essay I have argued that ministers are most likely to flourish in ministry, if they maintain a high degree of balance across several domains in their life and work. I have briefly described several of those domains and the some of the polarities that need to be balanced. In conclusion a few things seem important.

First, ministers need to know themselves well, have an accurate understanding of their natural strengths and limitations. And

Secondly, they need to be intentional about developing or nurturing their latent preferences, that is, their less developed aptitudes. Such a self development plan will require them to "step out of their comfort zone," try out new behaviors, knowing that failure is a part of learning new skills.

Thirdly, it is important that ministers learn to read the ministry context, so they will know which side of themselves or which set of tools to employ. So many mistakes in ministry can be summarized as "using the wrong tool for the job," doing what you always do, which does not work in

this context. In this model of ministry, there is no substitute for wisdom, the wisdom that comes from knowing your self well, from being psychologically flexible enough to respond appropriately to the demands of the moment and from the ability to discern accurately and sensitively the needs of each ministry challenge.

For many years, I considered the Apostle Paul's self disclosure that he "became all things to all people" (I Cor. 9:22, NRSV) to be a sign of inauthenticity or a "wishy washy" attitude. After years of working with clergy candidates, I have come to believe that Paul is on to something here. As I interpret his remark, he is able to adapt himself to the context and the moment, drawing on different aspects of himself and thereby different skill sets. He can only do that if he is balanced, and is in touch with different aspects or sides of his personality. And he can do that only if he has a strong center that transcends or anchors him, a center that provides a still point or an unifying sense of self amid the necessary fluidity of ministry. Being "in Christ," transforms the components of one's personality and one's work into a balanced, dynamic wholeness, thus allowing one to flourish in ministry.

NOTES

- 1 My remarks are focused on the context of mainline Protestant ministers, because that is where most of my experience is, but I suspect that many readers outside of that context will find my remarks insightful.
- 2 I would also suggest that extraverts and introverts have different experiences of God, different ways of encountering God. Extraverts tend to find God or Christ in the encounter with the other; in the give and take of a relationship whether it is with a loved one, a colleague or a stranger on the road. Introverts are more attuned to God in the form of the still small voice within, in prayer, in silence and an eye opening thought or revelation. Both experiences of God are important and ideally would balance each other.
- 3 Clergy Self Care: Finding A Balance for Effective Ministry, Roy M Oswald, An Alban Institute Publication, 1991. P. 83.
- 4 I believe that this balance is reflected in the Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, that forgiveness of others, God's forgiveness and self forgiveness are all interrelated, all balanced.