Emotional Intelligence and Congregational Leadership

Roy M. Oswald

Within congregational ministries, emotional intelligence is essential for pastoral effectiveness. Without it, great sermons may be preached, effective pastoral care offered, and scripture interpreted soundly, but when a pastor[1] does not have a relationship of trust with congregants, little transformation occurs. Clergy who are unable to forge meaningful relationships with congregants will rarely have effective ministries—it is that basic. In congregational work, it is all about relationships.

Effective clergy find a way to relate to all members of their congregation, not just a portion of them. Whatever differences these clergy might have with particular congregants, whether political, social, theological, or personal, effective clergy must somehow work at connecting with every congregant in a significant way. As I sometimes say to clergy, "You may not even like each other, but that should not prevent the two of you from developing a significant relationship. Following that kind of connectedness, whenever you encounter that person, the two of you smile at each other, knowing that you have bonded in a special way. Without this kind of bonding, the two of you will look at ways to discredit each other, whether consciously or unconsciously."

Roy M. Oswald is founder and executive director of the Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills (www.eqhrcenter.org). Formerly, he was a senior consultant for the Alban Institute for thirty-one years. Email: roymoswald@aol.com.

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Speed Leas, while a senior consultant for the Alban Institute, conducted primary research on the involuntary termination of clergy.[2] He found that when the ousting of clergy due to sexual indiscretions was taken out of the equation, the number one reason clergy were fired was their lack of interpersonal skills. They simply did not have, nor were they able to foster, significant relationships with congregants. There is little in a congregation that works well when there is no basic trust between the pastor and the people. Church consultant Howard Friend wrote an article for Alban Institute's magazine *Congregations* entitled "The Failure to Form Basic Partnership: Resolving a Dilemma of New Pastorates."[3] Over many years of consulting with congregations who were in conflict with their pastor, he discovered that many of these congregations never had much trust in their pastor right from the beginning. Then, some four to five years later and in the midst of conflict, there was no way to re-establish trust.

These are some examples of ways in which low emotional intelligence tends to sabotage effective ministries:

- A pastor is so averse to conflict that whenever anyone offers a criticism of his ministry he tries to avoid that person as much as possible, rather than meeting with them to work out their differences.
- A pastor has a good theology of grace but is unable to embody that grace with congregants, remaining mainly aloof, critical, and dismissive of them.
- A pastor loses her temper frequently with congregants so that people try to avoid her, not wanting to be on the receiving end of her anger.
- A pastor is so depressed that he is barely able to do what is minimally expected of him, putting in at most thirty hours per week.[4]
- A pastor is a micro-manager of staff and volunteers but is unaware of the emotional effect that has on people, who always end up feeling they are being treated like immature children.
- A pastor is so introverted that he appears unable to make connections in significant ways with congregants; members rarely come to know the real person hiding behind the clerical collar.
- A pastor takes credit for everything positive happening within the congregation but rarely acknowledges the efforts of others and is unaware of how this impacts others emotionally.

These examples of a lack of emotional intelligence represent actual people I have worked with in the past. I could offer a dozen more examples. These are basic flaws in people that cannot be remedied by one or two workshops on leadership development or another semester at seminary.

Research On Emotional Intelligence

Soon after the 1995 publication of Daniel Goleman's bestseller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ, Time Magazine*'s front cover asked the question "What's Your EQ?" From my perspective, a pastor's EQ [emotional quotient] is definitely more important than his or her IQ. How pastors deal with congregants and staff on a daily basis certainly trumps their mastery of Scripture and theology on the cerebral level.

Research on the human brain reveals that the brain is a triune organ.[5] The three levels of the brain reflect human evolution as a species. The base of the brain or brain stem is sometimes referred to as the brain stem. It manages all basic bodily functions such as the interaction between the lungs and the heart, body temperature, breathing, etc. On top of the brain stem is a walnut-sized brain organ called the amygdala which has stored within it every negative experience that a person ever had in the past. The amygdala has allowed human beings to survive throughout history. Whenever we encounter something dangerous, it moves us into fight, flight, or freeze mode. Goleman refers to this as the *amygdala hijack*.[6] When this happens, we lose our ability to think clearly and we enter into survival mode. The amygdala, however, must pass this information through the two pre-frontal lobes, which act as a kind of brain executive, deciding if the crisis in front of us is really a serious threat or not. These pre-frontal lobes have six seconds to decide whether to go into crisis mode. Emotionally intelligent people are aware of their hot buttons and know that triggering these can result in an amygdala highjack.

The second tier of the human brain is called either the mammalian or the limbic brain. This is essentially our "feeling brain." What we value and feel passionately about resides in our limbic brain, and this is where most decisions are made. The limbic or feeling brain possesses a kind of intelligence that can continue to mature and develop. It has every bit as much need for education as our "thinking" brain. Basically, our IQ remains stable throughout our lifetime, but our EQ can continue to gain in wisdom and dexterity. This is as challenging as any kind of intellectual growth. It may not be easy and requires great determination and focus, but growth in emotional wisdom is possible. We become different people as our ability to connect with others changes, gradually at first and then dramatically over time.

The third tier of the human brain is the neocortex or "thinking brain," which clearly separates us from all other species on this planet. Yet, our neo-

cortex is managed by our feeling brain. Whenever we are challenged with a dilemma, there are many interactions between the neocortex and the limbic brain. Eventually, however, it is the limbic brain that decides upon which kind of reasoning to follow in addressing any particular challenge.

In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman describes a case in which a corporate executive, whom he calls Elliot, had been diagnosed with a tumor in his brain the size of an orange.[7] An operation removed the tumor and was considered successful, but Elliot was not the same person afterwards. Within six months, his board of directors fired him. Within a year, his wife left him. He squandered all of his investments and could not manage even a simple job. He ended up living in a spare bedroom in his brother's basement. Fortunately, a social worker recognized that Elliot's brain surgery was to blame. Looking at images of his brain, the surgeons realized they had severed the connections between Elliot's neocortex and his limbic brain. He remained as bright as ever and could give you all the arguments for or against a decision, but he could not decide. He did not have access to his values or innate self-interest. On the basis of this research, a strong argument can be made that all decisions are made within the limbic (feeling) brain. The limbic brain can explore a great variety of rational arguments within the neocortex, but the feeling brain decides which train or school of thought is to be followed.

Definition Of Emotional Intelligence

Goleman defines emotional intelligence as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships."[8] Many people are out of touch with their feelings and are being manipulated by those feelings without conscious awareness of this. State prisons are full of individuals who have committed crimes of passion ("He made me mad so I shot him"). Only when one is aware of a strong feeling within and is able to step back and observe it does the choice of whether to act on the feeling or not become possible.

It is here that self-awareness becomes crucial. It is the foundation of emotional intelligence. To be sure, greater self-awareness can be learned, but where is it taught? In the home? In grade or high school? In college or seminary? There is no single institution that claims responsibility for teaching people self-awareness. It is best learned within communities that practice healthy emotional intelligence, whether a company, church, or family of ori-

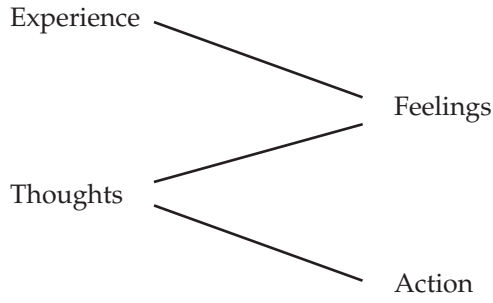
gin. Within these separate communities, it is best when one has a mentor or simply someone to observe to see how he or she manages emotionally laden situations. What kind of self-awareness does the mentor bring to a range of social/emotional situations?

In one sense, humans are wonderfully made. We can use one part of our brain to observe another part of the brain in action. This is called *mindfulness*. Mindfulness can be practiced in some forms of meditation. Yet, even though our brains have this capacity for reflective self-awareness, it is a process that needs to be developed; it does not come naturally.

Consider the ways in which emotional intelligence is necessary to attain certain life goals. The determination and self-motivation required to get a college degree, for example, are not the result of a rational decision. Rational explanations can support the decision to go to college, but it is the limbic brain that keeps the person focused on life goals. This is similar to what happens when we go on a diet. Our rational brain can give us all the reasons why dieting is a good idea, but it is the limbic brain that makes all the tough decisions that need to be made in order to stay on a diet.

The capacity to manage our own emotions and those of others is an acquired skill. Hopefully, all of us will continue to improve in this skill, as it is a lifelong learning process. Persons who lack this ability may not able to pick it up easily. It usually requires changing people's basic personality so that they come to view themselves and others differently, which is not something that occurs in a short period of time.

The process that moves from experience to action follows the evolutionary process of human development. This is the pattern:



Every thought is preceded by a feeling. Some people think they can go directly from experience to thought without going through the limbic (feeling) brain. However, when we lack self-awareness, we lack the capacity to

recognize the feelings that underlie our thought process. Awareness of the feeling tone behind a thought might lead us to reconsider the argument we are putting forth.

When trying to bypass feeling to get immediately to thought, people miss out on important data. Human feelings are important data that help us move toward a decision. There are times when our rational mind tells us that a specific decision is the correct one, but we just don't feel right about it. Emotional intelligence theory posits that we ought to pay attention to these feelings and hold off on the decision, thus recognizing the intelligence that resides in the limbic brain. More than likely, when we change the way we feel about something we will also change the thoughts we have about it.[9]

Some people, however, go from experience to feelings and get stuck there. They do not allow objective thoughts to influence their feeling process. For example, the logical conclusion that they might spend the rest of their life in prison if they kill someone is lacking. When emotional intelligence is operating at a high level, dozens of interchanges happen every minute between the neocortex and the limbic brain. This interchange results in people making the most appropriate response to most emotionally laden circumstances.

Emotional Intelligence As Practiced By Jesus

In the book that I co-authored with New Testament scholar Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders,*[10] we used Goleman's definition of emotional intelligence to look at Jesus' human relationship skills. We concluded that Jesus not only possessed great emotional intelligence but actually taught it to others. He valued relationships higher than religious ritual: "When you are presenting your gift to the altar and there remember you are in conflict with another, leave your gift there at the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother and then present your gift at the altar" (Matt. 5:24).

Jacobson and I explored the passage in the gospel of John (8:1–11) in which Jesus is teaching people on a mountain top when an angry crowd approaches him, dragging with them a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. Someone says, "Master, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses states that this woman should be stoned to death. What do you say?" Jesus doesn't answer right away—instead, he stoops down to write in the sand with his finger. This was an exceedingly com-

plex, emotionally charged event. Jesus first had to become clear about his own feelings. He also had to figure out how to manage the emotions of the crowd. He then stood up and came out with that famous phrase, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (v.7, NRSV). Once having said this, he went back to writing in the sand with his finger. He did not remain standing and try to bully the crowd by staring them down. He was taking a huge emotional risk, and he wasn't sure it would work. Eventually, the angry crowd dispersed, leaving him alone with the woman, and he sent her back, forgiven, to her village. This is an amazing example of the emotional intelligence of Jesus and how people with high emotional intelligence can manage their own emotions and the emotions of others.

Within his communal life, Jesus emphasizes forgiveness and love of one's enemies. How is communal life ever going to flourish without that kind of emotional intelligence? Most impressive is Jesus' capacity to elicit trust among those who come to him for healing. Sick people tend to avoid being open about their illness, but Jesus had such credibility that they came forward anyway. After such healing incidents, Jesus would tell people to go in peace and/or would tell them that their faith had made them well. I used to think he was referring to their faith in God, but now I think he meant their faith/trust in the man Jesus who performed these miracles. What kind of healing might be possible today if there were a similar trust between the pastor and the people? We might learn much about emotional intelligence if we become curious about the ways Jesus was able to foster this kind of trust in people.

Feelings Are More Important Than Thoughts

Society is slowly recognizing that the limbic (feeling) brain is the one that determines people's effectiveness in their vocation and happiness in their personal lives. Academic achievements, such as various degrees behind one's name, may get us in the door, but it will be our limbic brain that determines how well we do in a new job. Thus, an MDiv degree may result in a pastor receiving a call to a specific congregation, but it is his emotional intelligence that will determine his effectiveness within that congregation.

The educational system in most Westernized nations has not really assimilated this truth. Higher education continues to overemphasize the ability of students to deliver correct answers and, at the same time, downplays

their social and emotional maturity. A student may be brilliant in the classroom but not know how to navigate relationships in the school cafeteria. The same principle holds true in college and seminary. Classes are aimed at intellectual insights, and students assume that if they have mastered these insights their life and work will be successful.

Clergy take this same assumption with them when they enter congregational ministry—they assume that if they are able to change the way their congregants think, their hearts and pocketbooks will follow. Sermons focus on changing the way people think, on articulating correct theology, assuming that will produce personal transformation. Most clergy fail to recognize that the transformation of a person's life is a relational rather than a cerebral process. The opposite is the reality—people need to arrive at a different feeling about a subject before they can change the way they think about it. Emotional preaching, such as Christian Pentecostal preaching, might actually be more effective in transforming people's lives than well-thought-out theological sermons. Established believers might benefit from more rational sermons that fortify and nurture them in their faith, but, in light of emotional intelligence theory, I wonder if highly emotional sermons are actually more effective at transforming people. Or, to phrase the issue differently, how do religious leaders blend rationality and emotionality in ways that are truly transformative?

Emotional Intelligence and Seminary Education

The process of teaching seminarians lacking in emotional intelligence to become an effective pastor is a huge, complex challenge. Most seminaries do not have the resources or capability to offer this kind of learning to students. Seminaries or religious training programs that take on this challenge are to be commended. It can be likened to changing from a postgraduate school model of education to a professional school model of education. At the very least, it will require a shift in pedagogy because teaching emotional intelligence is much more an experiential process than an academic one.

Courses in clinical pastoral education do have the potential to teach students emotional intelligence. These courses usually take place within hospital settings, and students meet regularly with a CPE supervisor to review their experiences in dealing with hospital patients and each other. For some students these are powerful learning opportunities in which they are

confronted with the impact their words and behavior have on patients and other students.

The drawback to CPE is that a basic unit can be too short in length to have a major impact on students. The five to six weeks of a typical CPE basic unit is not nearly enough. When CPE courses are extended to six months or a year, they definitely can have life-altering effects on students. Another drawback to CPE is that the insights learned are rarely supported and reinforced when these students return to the academic setting of their seminary. Maybe seminary faculty hope CPE will transform all the social misfits they have in their classrooms into emotionally health and spiritually mature pastors because the seminaries do not have a contract with students that allows them to offer feedback regarding inappropriate individual behavior.

Another approach to teaching emotional intelligence to seminarians is to seek a greater balance between kataphatic spirituality and apophatic spirituality.[11] Since seminary students are being trained to lead congregations in worship, it makes sense that they practice leading worship at seminary—hence the emphasis on leading and attending daily chapel. Between daily chapel and seminary courses, students are supposed to develop into spiritual giants. As long as they pass the required courses, they are considered great candidates for the ordained ministry. In this process, they have gained greater competence in kataphatic spirituality. An apophatic approach to prayer and spiritual formation would entail a greater emphasis on meditation and contemplative prayer. One of the most important emotional traits in emotional intelligence is self-awareness, as noted above. Meditation and journaling are considered two of the most potent disciplines in acquiring greater self-awareness. With greater self-awareness, one is able to first sense a feeling that might need to be managed well and then, with greater objectivity, be able to manage that feeling more effectively.

Actually, I think prayer is best understood as a polarity. A polarity involves two neutral positive poles, each pole having an upside and a downside. The downside of one pole is always answered by the upside of the opposite pole.[12] See Figure 1 (below) as a diagram of a polarity map of our connection with God:

CONNECTION WITH GOD	
• Sending words and images to God • Liturgy • Hymnody • Private and group prayer	• Meditation • Contemplative prayer • God in the still small voice within • Openness to revelation
KATAPHATIC PRAYER	APOPHATIC PRAYER
• Little emphasis on listening to God • Assuming God doesn't want to speak to us • Being taught to send requests to God • Not being taught how to listen to God	• We become passive and open • We do not bring our concerns to God, but we are commanded to bring our concerns to God in prayer: "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you."
ALIENATION FROM GOD	

Most seminarians remain locked in the kataphatic pole without access to the opposite pole. When this polarity is managed well, people oscillate between the upsides of the two poles while sinking less deeply into the downsides of each pole. Ideally, seminaries should train students in both the kataphatic and apophatic forms of prayer.

A third task that seminaries could do to enhance the emotional intelligence of students is to have them engage in individual spiritual direction. Like psychotherapy, spiritual direction is considered a practice that supports greater self-awareness. In spiritual direction, directees are encouraged to reflect on their daily lives in a more disciplined way. That reflection usually increases self-awareness. Combining contemplative prayer with spiritual direction enables a student to talk about what they become aware of in their meditation times. During meditation, they are to practice staying completely in the "here and now." If they hear God's voice during such contemplative prayer, it will usually come within thoughts that take place in the

here and now. To get to that place, however, they will first need to learn to observe their ego in action—to become more self-aware.

Rowan Williams, former archbishop of the Anglican Church, claimed that the only hope for spiritual transformation within Christian denominations is though contemplative prayer.[13] Personally, I would not use the word "only," but Williams did. He believes that Christians, like all believers, can become stuck in repeated ways of thinking. In the research on emotional intelligence, neuroscientists talk about neural pathways that only get deeper with time. These grooves within human brains become deeper and larger with age. We notice this dynamic in some elderly people who never change their way of perceiving the world and others. How free are we really when we are locked into certain patterns of thinking? Awareness of these neural pathways opens up the possibility of seeking alternative ways of perceiving our life in God and how we choose to view the world.

Finally, seminaries could support growth in emotional intelligence by structuring some of their courses as laboratories for learning rather than as academic presentations. Within a laboratory format, students would be encouraged to offer each other feedback on the impact their words and behavior have on each other. Most people are unlikely to change their behavior until they hear from others how those words and behaviors impact them in a negative way. A course structured as a laboratory would fit easily into a J-term course, meeting in three-hour sessions twice a week for four weeks. The small groups would be together within this context for a total of twenty-four class hours. The groups would need to be limited to twelve students and have no fewer than four students, and the attendance would need to remain stable and consistent. The facilitator of such a laboratory would need special training in how to manage such a learning environment. Basically, no leadership is offered to the group. Within this vacuum of leadership, the participants must choose to enter into what they are experiencing in "here and now" time. Students would be encouraged to stay present in the moment and not bring in stories of past behavior or future plans. The way to stay in the here and now is to be aware of what one is feeling in the moment and share that with the group. In the process, participants get to know each other very well and are then able to offer feedback on the way their words and behavior affect others. Such a format and process has the potential to teach people greater emotional intelligence.

CPE supervisors usually have the skills and insights to facilitate such an experiential learning process. A seminary faculty member could learn to

facilitate such a laboratory course by attending a week-long EQ-HR workshop offered by the Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills that I and several colleagues founded eight years ago. These workshops are based on a powerful human relations training methodology developed back in the early 1950s and 1960s by the National Training Laboratories located in Arlington, Virginia, combined with the emerging research on emotional intelligence. For some people, this process has turned out to be a life-changing experience.

Seminaries often rightly claim that they can only educate the students that their denominations send them, not all of whom have emotional intelligence skills. I encourage denominational screening teams to utilize an EQ 360 survey as part of their discernment process. This survey results in a detailed analysis of a person's emotional intelligence. I believe we owe it to aspirants who score low in emotional intelligence to be clear with them that they will not have a very satisfying career in the ordained ministry. They will be shifted from one small congregation to another, often leaving congregations under a cloud of controversy.

However, an aspirant's low score on an emotional intelligence survey need not block them completely from the profession of ministry. As stated earlier, emotional intelligence can be acquired—not easily, but it is possible. The EQ 360 survey results could offer an aspirant some concrete issues to work on in the next several years, at which time they might apply again. The main reason to learn more effective ways of exercising emotional intelligence is that it amounts to changing one's personality, but that is not done easily. It requires a new and different way of understanding oneself and viewing reality. It means coming to terms with the many barriers that one puts up in one's relationships with others and the things one does to keep others at a distance.

Getting Down to Basics

From my perspective as a professional who has worked with clergy for forty years, such basic skills as self-awareness, emotional self-control, empathy, and conflict management need to be strengths of ordained congregational pastors. To be sure, these skills can be acquired through commitment and hard work, but they are not normally acquired in an academic setting.

When I conducted workshops for clergy around the United States, many of them focused on leadership development, I usually assumed that

workshop participants possessed some basic skills in interpersonal and intragroup behavior. In retrospect, that was a mistaken assumption. Without some basic emotional intelligence skills, leadership strategies are worthless. With some regret, I wish I had started earlier to focus on basic emotional intelligence skills before proceeding with teaching other leadership strategies. For the past eight years I have worked to bring training in emotional intelligence to congregations and denominational systems. In 2016, the Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills is sponsoring seventeen week-long workshops in various parts of the United States and Canada. Some of these workshops are taking place on seminary campuses that offer them for course credit.

Recent decades have revealed a decline in congregational vitality, at least among mainline denominations in most Western nations. There is no one sure-fire bullet that will spark congregational growth. It is my conviction, however, that a congregation with an emotionally intelligent pastor will have the greatest possibility of reducing congregation conflicts and reaching out to the millennial generation and non-churched individuals of any age.

NOTES

1. In this article, I use the title "pastor" in a generalized way to include any clergyperson serving a congregation.

2. "Research on Involuntary Terminations of Clergy in the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church, and the Episcopal Church," was published internally by the Alban Institute in 1979. This project was funded by The William and For a Hewlett Foundation.

3. Howard E. Friend," The Failure to Form Basic Partnership: Resolving a Dilemma of New Pastorates," *Congregations*, October/November 2002, https://alban.org/archive/the-failure-to-form-basic-partnership-resolving-a-dilemma-of-new-pastorates/.

4. Some pastors have serious and persistent psychological disorders, like clinical depression that reduce their effectiveness as a pastor. Training in emotional intelligence might help their struggle with depression, but a full implementation of emotional intelligence will be limited until the mental illness is treated.

5. This section is based on Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005), 9–29.

6. Ibid., 11.

7. Ibid., 52–59.

8. Ibid., 43.

9. I recognize that what I am arguing here is the opposite of cognitive psychology, currently the dominant approach to psychotherapy. Cognitive psychology's goal is to change the way the client thinks in order to change the way the client feels.

10. Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

11. Simply put, kataphatic prayer is prayer that speaks of God and about God and is filled with words and content, whereas apophatic prayer is an emptying of one's mind of words and ideas, a resting in the presence of God. Prayers of petition and intercession are kataphatic prayers, whereas centering prayer is an example of apophatic prayer.

12. For more information about polarities, see Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

13. Rowan Williams, "Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome, Oct. 10, 2012, Dr. Rowan Williams, 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome.