

**THE PASTORAL THEOLOGIAN**  
by Timothy W. Whitaker

It is a privilege for me to deliver the first of The John and Claire Evans Lectures. I wish to begin by acknowledging the risk you have taken in inviting me to deliver this lecture designed to make a contribution to the theological task of the church. I am not a member of the academy, and I am not a theologian by profession. I have devoted my life to being a pastor of local congregations, and now I serve as a general superintendent of The United Methodist Church. In my office as a bishop, I spend my time and energies participating in the work of the Council of Bishops, directing the complex life of an annual conference, appointing clergy to their ministries, and overseeing the discipline of the church. I have learned that there is some truth to the old adage, "A bishop is someone who never sees a movie, never reads a book, and never hears the truth." Since I am not a professional theologian, but a practitioner of ministry, I have asked myself, "What could I say to you from my own experience that might be a contribution to the church's task of doing theology?" I decided that the most appropriate topic I could choose would be a reflection upon the minister of the church as a pastoral theologian.

Occasionally we do encounter the term "pastoral theologian" as a description of the role of the minister. It is one of those terms whose meaning is not defined. Accordingly, it means different things to different people. In spite of the fact that there is no common definition of the term, or perhaps because of it, the term "pastoral theologian" evokes within people either a vigorous nodding of assent or a derisive shaking of the head.

The concept of the minister as a pastoral theologian is embraced enthusiastically by bookish clergy who find in it a justification for their boredom with the practical tasks of ministry and the many hours they spend reading and marking the latest work of academic theology. To them, being a pastoral theologian is a description of an intellectual style of ministry.

I do not understand the term "pastoral theologian" as a description of a style of ministry. If it were a description of a style, then it would describe the practice of only a handful of clergy. More importantly, if being a pastoral theologian meant that the work of a minister is primarily intellectual so that the minister is aloof from the practical tasks of leading a congregation, then it would be a reductionist understanding of ministry.

The concept of the minister as a pastoral theologian is derided by others who assume that the real measure of ministry is its effectiveness in leading the church to embrace a new vision, managing a complex program to meet the needs of people, and devoting oneself to a mastery of techniques which will attract and engage as many people as possible in the life and mission of the church. Their cry is that the minister today must be, not a pastoral theologian, but a leader.

As a bishop who is acutely aware of the force of secularism, which has eroded the centrality of Christian ideas and values in our culture, the increase in pluralism, which has made more people aware of spiritual paths other than Christian discipleship, and the attraction of consumerism, which has enticed people to hunger and thirst for comfort and pleasure rather than for righteousness, I do believe that ministers must accept the role of leader in their congregations. Energy, initiative, and visionary imagination are required of all of us who are ministers today.

While I also affirm the importance of leadership as a necessary dimension of the practice of ministry today, I believe that the question that must be asked is, "What kind of leadership should ministers offer?" For many, leadership is the mastery of techniques. I believe that technique is a good servant, but a poor master. If leadership consists merely in the mastery of techniques, then it transforms ministry into a technological project. It is not technique, but theology, that should govern the leadership of the pastor. The leader of a congregation must be a pastoral theologian since it is theological imperatives that should govern the choices which a pastor makes in leading the life and mission of a congregation.

I would submit that every minister should strive to the best of his or her ability to be a pastoral theologian, and that being a pastoral theologian means being the leader and servant of the church whose motives and methods are guided by the compelling truth of the church's theological claims.

In order to more fully demonstrate my case that the minister is called by the church to be a pastoral theologian, I wish to offer some reflections on the premises and the practices of the pastoral theologian.

There are certain premises that require us to understand why the minister is called to be a pastoral theologian.

The first premise is that the church is a theological community. Of course, we all know that the church has an institutional form of life. As an institution, it must possess a structure, a body of laws, a financial base, processes of planning, and programs. Even though the form of the church is institutional, its essence is theological. Its essence is theological because the church is created by God the Father through the incarnation of God the Son in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and by the energy of the light and life of the Holy Spirit. The classical trinitarian depiction of the church is that the church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

In his magisterial work, *The Drama of Doctrine*, the Reformed theologian, Kevin J. Vanhooser, describes the church as a theatre in which all of us are assigned roles to act out the drama of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives together. The Gospel is the drama in history of God's speech and acts. Scripture is the script of God's drama. The doctrine or theology of the church provides the direction for how to interpret and to enact the script of the divine drama. The church is the theatre in which every member plays the role of an actor who improvises in his or her own life, and in their lives together, the practice of the Christian life. The pastor is the director of the play who guides the community in its creative improvisation of acting out the drama of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Vanhooser says, "What the pastor/director really needs to do is to take the congregation's imagination captive to the Scriptures so that the theo-drama becomes the governing framework of the community's speech and action (2 Cor. 10:5)."

The practice of ministry must be based upon the understanding of the church as a theological community, or it will fail. It may not fail institutionally, but it will fail in building up the church as the church, the creation of the triune God. Eugene Peterson told how disturbed he is by the description of ministry as "running a church." He said he knew how to run a church, and he did it well for decades. However, ministry is more than running a church. He said he would never describe the work which he and his wife do as "running a house." Their purpose is not running a house, but building a home. Likewise, the pastor's aim is not running a church, but building up the church as the body of Christ. One of the premises of the minister as a pastoral theologian is the knowledge of the church as a theological community.

A second premise is that theology is a missional task. When we speak of theology today, we usually assume that theology is the work of scholars in the academy. Theology became the work of professional scholars in schools during the High Middle Ages when the church established universities, and this trend toward the view of theology as an academic specialty was reinforced by the Enlightenment. While there is a role for theology in the academy, we should not understand the task of theology to be limited to the province of the schools and their specialists.

Remember that originally theology was a missional task of the church. Theology developed as Christians were sent into the world to explain the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to its cultured despisers and to guard the truth against false teachers in the church. Most of the first theologians were bishops or presbyters who engaged in theological work while they were burdened with the administrative and pastoral responsibilities of their office.

The theological task of the church today is still the work of addressing the world and stabilizing the church according to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the post-modern world where most people do not know the Gospel, the task of theology cannot be left to the specialists in the academy. It must be the passion and the responsibility of bishops, presbyters, deacons and many of the laity. Fulfilling the mission of the church to evangelize and to form believers as disciples of Jesus Christ requires that the whole church be engaged in the work of theology.

A third premise is that the presbyter is the resident theologian of the congregation. This is the responsibility of the ordained elder, or presbyter, by virtue of office. Early in the history of the church, it developed a three-fold order of ministry consisting of the offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon. One could infer that the church assumed that the laity constitute a fourth order of ministry. In the ecumenical movement today, many churches are considering ordering their ministry around this pattern. Whether a church adopts this pattern or not, it is common for most churches to place a high value on the office of the presbyter because it is the presbyter who is the leader of the local congregation. As that leader, the presbyter has the responsibility to serve as the resident theologian.

The main responsibility of the presbyter is to witness to the apostolic and universal faith of the church. The church invests this responsibility to an office because the apostolic and universal faith is the ground of the church's own being and existence. If the church did not invest the authority to witness to the apostolic and universal faith in the office of the presbyter, then the church would possess less confidence in its capacity to be faithful to the Gospel over time. Yes, the church also has the Scriptures and the creed, but it also requires an authoritative teaching office in every location. That is why the presbyter must be the resident theologian of the church in every congregation.

Remember, the work of the resident theologian is a function of an office, not necessarily a charism. It is not unusual to find lay persons who are better practicing theologians than the presbyter because the Holy Spirit equips them with this charism. Ideally every presbyter is a theologian by virtue of both office and charism. However, even when the presbyter has not received an abundant gift for doing theological work, the presbyter can fulfill her or his office by guiding and nurturing all of the fruitful work of doing theology in the congregation in ways that adhere to, rather than veer from, the apostolic and universal faith of the church of Jesus Christ.

These premises – the church is a theological community, theology is a missional task, and the presbyter is a resident theologian – inform and form my conviction that a minister is a pastoral theologian. Now I wish to offer a brief sketch of the practices of the pastoral theologian.

In my own church, a presbyter is ordained to practice ministry around three primary foci – Word, sacrament, and order.

The first task of the minister is to preach and teach the Word of God. A minister's best opportunity to be a pastoral theologian is when he or she preaches during the Sunday service. Without even beginning to address the complex subject of the scope of the content of preaching or its most effective methods, I would simply urge us to never forget that the minister's preaching must always be the proclamation of the Word of God. Preaching is not political indoctrination, personal therapy, or organizational shop-talk. Nor is it the disclosure of the principles of self-help or a moralistic berating of the congregation. It is heralding the glorious and gracious Word of God that comes to us and our world from beyond ourselves according to the witness of the prophets and the apostles. In the pulpit, the minister proclaims the good news around which the whole life of the congregation is ordered.

The late Reformed theologian John Leith spoke of “what the church has to say that no one else can say.” Every minister should also ask herself or himself before entering the pulpit, “Am I ready to say something that these people will not hear anywhere else – on television, in the newspaper, on the therapist’s couch, at the Rotary Club, or in the self-help section of the local bookstore?” If not, then it is likely that the preacher will preach some human word instead of the divine Word. Leith claimed that once a congregation learns to appreciate this kind of preaching it will never be satisfied with preaching that does not contain the strange Word of God.

The second task of the minister is to preside at worship and administer the sacraments. The worship of the church is the most important thing that the church does because there is no other organization on earth that offers the public worship of the triune God. Worship is doxological, but it does have a pedagogical dimension. The Lutheran liturgical scholar, Philip Pfatteicher, says that liturgy is “the school of the church.” It is the means through which God gives God’s presence to us and shapes us in the life of discipleship. As in preaching, the minister plans and presides over worship mindful of his or her role as a pastoral theologian.

The third task of the minister is to order the life of the church. Under this umbrella of order is gathered all the many practical and often burdensome mundane tasks of the minister. The many jobs of the minister often leave her or him feeling fragmented and dissipated. However, when the minister grasps that the key to ordering the church is in accordance with the truth of the Gospel and the mission of the church, then the minister will know what he or she is doing and will bring purpose to all these tasks.

Karl Barth once observed, “In a really living Church there is perhaps nothing inconsequential at all.” This is a gratifying insight from a major theologian who was happy to leave the parish for the academy because he did not want to spend the rest of his life leading confirmation classes or meeting with the trustees to discuss the condition of the boiler. The pastoral theologian approaches every practical or mundane activity in the church knowing that in some way or the other the church’s faithfulness to the Gospel is at stake. He or she knows that the church’s budget is one of its most significant theological documents because it indicates whether the congregation is acting like a club or the church called to mission in the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today the church needs ministers who practice their ministry as pastoral theologians, who preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, and order the life of the church. The life of a minister can feel lonely. Most ministers live and labor in rural crossroads, quiet small towns, or vast tracts of subdivisions indistinguishable from one another. They may not be lonely in that they have no family or friends to bless them, but they may feel lonely in the great stretch of the church’s life across the globe. They may sense that their work will make a difference in their own community or in the lives of the persons they know, but it will matter little to the larger life of their own communion or the universal church in its long march down through the centuries. If they are tempted to feel lonely or lost in the great life of the church of Jesus Christ, then they should remind themselves that their seemingly small work is a part of the great work of God in human history. In their office, they embody the apostolic and universal faith of the church. When they do their work well as pastoral theologians who build up the church as the body of Christ where they are, they are making a contribution far larger than they usually think.

Throughout my life, I have observed one renewal movement after another. These renewal movements have brought new life to the church, whether they have been the lay witness movement, the charismatic renewal movement, the liturgical renewal movement, the church growth movement, the Cursillo movement, or the contemporary worship movement. Observing all of these successive renewal movements has caused me to realize that the church needs more than renewal; it needs reform. The church cannot be the church unless it reforms itself around the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This work of reformation is the work of the Holy Spirit, but it requires our on-going participation. The reformation of the church – the re-forming of the church according to the Gospel – does not occur in some grand event or through the work of caucuses, but in the local churches scattered across the world. When these churches are led by ministers who study, labor, and pray as faithful pastoral theologians, then they become a part of something greater than themselves.

Edwin Chr. Van Driel tells the story of the reformation of the Netherlands Reformed church over the last century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of its ministers denied the resurrection or the divinity of Christ. The leadership of the church refused to uphold the doctrinal standards of the church. In this situation, the orthodox minority divided into camps. One group wanted to demand that the church uphold its doctrinal standards, or they would leave the church. When they failed, they did leave and formed the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The other group decided to stay in the church on the principle that as long as one is not prevented from preaching the Gospel, one should not leave the church. They believed that the medicine of preaching the Gospel would heal the church. Most people assumed that the splinter group, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, would become a bulwark of orthodoxy while the parent body, the Netherlands Reformed Church, would continue to drift into extreme liberalism. What actually happened was the exact opposite. The splinter body gradually drifted leftward theologically while the Netherlands Reformed Church gradually underwent a theological reform. In 1950 an overwhelming majority of the synod of the church restored the church’s affirmation to its confession of faith and accepted a new, Christ-centered church order. Edwin Chr. Van Driel said, “The preaching of the gospel – and only preaching – had healed the church.” The story of the reformation of the Netherlands Reformed Church is one testimony to the contribution that faithful pastoral theologians and local congregations make to the life of the whole church.

Taking seriously the role of the minister as pastoral theologian is not only necessary for the church to be the church, but also necessary for the well-being of the minister. Ministers often complain about their low morale. It is not clear that ministers actually do suffer from low morale as much as they often say. Nevertheless, it is true that the problems ministers face and the range of demands they encounter daily can leave them feeling overwhelmed and dispirited. There will always be weariness in ministry, but a clear sense of a purposeful vocation will always overcome the feelings of being burdened and distracted. That purpose, which guides the minister in tasks large and small, consists in being a pastoral theologian of the church.