

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



NUMBER 149 - MARCH 2005

BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Loving and serving— pastors' first responsibility?



“A pastor’s first responsibility is to love and serve his people,” a pastor recently wrote me in response to something in *Connections*, and I’ve often heard other pastors say something similar. Soon after hearing this claim recently, however, I heard an experienced and effective pastor say something quite different. He’s leading a project designed to help especially talented pastors early in their ministry, to gain the skills and confidence they need in order to be effective and to hang on when inevitable discouragement strikes. His work with these pastors, as well as his experience as pastor of small and large churches, convinces him that being an effective pastor requires much more than loving and serving.



Hearing these two views reinforced my feeling that for pastors, loving and serving are necessary but not enough. Talent and skill are also essential.

Loving and serving can be an escape

For pastors, being content with loving and serving can be a way of avoiding the need to carry out the many other responsibilities that leading a church requires. Focusing on members’ desire to be loved and served, to keep them and the pastor comfortable, can also be used to avoid addressing controversial issues that need to be addressed, and nudging members to change views that contradict Jesus’s teaching and example. Pastors do members no favor by focusing on the comfort Christian discipleship provides, without also emphasizing the demands it makes.



Yet this subject isn’t quite that simple. The answer to the question of whether loving and serving is a pastor’s main responsibility depends partly on what we mean by loving and serving.

Who are a pastor’s people?

Besides wondering what pastors mean by loving, when they say their first responsibility is loving their people, I also wonder who they see as “their people.” I’m a bit uneasy about being seen as belonging to whoever happens to be my congregation’s current pastor.



I’m also uneasy about pastors’ seeming to feel responsible only for ministering to members of their congregation, rather than to the larger community also. After all, God calls the church to minister to the world, not just to its members.



However, the church is mainly lay Christians, and they, rather than clergy, often have the best access to the world, so church members rather than pastors may need to take the main responsibility for ministering outside the church. Sometimes we depend on church professionals to do much of the ministry that lay Christians need to be doing themselves. Still, in today’s society some ministries require more training and experience than lay “volunteers” are able or willing to acquire, so pastors may need to see people outside the church as well as inside it, as “their people.” That’s a large order!

A very tough job

“Pastors aren’t interchangeable,” a pastor I spoke with recently commented, and of course he’s right. The combination of personality, talents, skills, and experience that fits one ministry setting or one congregation won’t necessarily fit another.



But church members aren’t all alike either, even within a congregation. What some consider essential for their pastor to do, others find unacceptable. Ways in which some members want to be loved and served are the very ways in which other members want not to be treated.

Being an effective and faithful pastor, therefore, is a really tough job. That shouldn’t come as a surprise to any churchgoer, yet most of us, lay and clergy, seem to forget it at times. It’s important for all of us to remember!

What kind of loving?



The kind of love most often advocated in the Bible, it seems, is not a feeling but rather a deliberately chosen way of treating people without regard to how we feel about them. This kind of love means treating them in whatever way will benefit them most. It means having their best interest at heart, and treating them in the way that seems most likely to promote that interest.

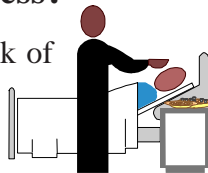


■ Affection? Geniality?

However, when pastors speak of loving their members. I often get the impression that they mean, for one thing, giving members the feeling that the pastor likes them and is likeable. I think of this as affection, friendship, and geniality. It's what we communicate by hugs and smiles and other body language as well as by casual conversation and shared social activities.

■ Ministry in grief and illness?

In addition, when pastors speak of loving and serving their people they often are referring to performing specific pastoral duties such as visiting church members when they're in the hospital. They're talking about counseling members when life-threatening illnesses or other serious problems confront them or their family members. They're also referring to comforting and counseling them about death and the grieving process, and leading the funerals of family members. These, I often hear pastors say, are among the main ministries that establish rapport with church members and make members feel loved by their pastor.



Some members, however, never happen to be hospitalized or to experience a family member's death during a particular pastor's time in their congregation. Some feel little need or desire for counseling about problems they face. And some, when they're sick or troubled, prefer not to be visited by anyone other than their close friends and family. So if being loved and served by their church's pastor means receiving these kinds of ministries, these members won't experience it.

■ Being known?

What communicates love to them instead may be having the pastor of their church get to know their interests and appreciate their special talents and achievements. It may be having him or her ask about their family, their background of experience, or their work.



■ Being challenged?

For some members, being loved by their pastor means being challenged to think in new ways, to see a side of a justice issue they hadn't seen before, or to reconsider their understanding of what God is like and what being a Christian requires. Being loved may mean hearing thought-provoking sermons, or



being made aware of stimulating books and having the opportunity to discuss the ideas they present. Instead of being comforted, to some Christians being loved can mean being made temporarily uncomfortable by being nudged to think and to question.

■ A long list

Important as all those ways of showing love to different church members may be, however, there's a long list of other duties that must be done and done well, to make a pastorate successful. And if loving means treating people in ways that promote their best interests, then for pastors these duties are very important parts of loving. But they're duties that pastors often seem to downplay by claiming that if they merely love their members by showing one of the other kinds of love, everything else will somehow fall into place or take care of itself.

The long list of important pastoral duties includes all the practical aspects of being in charge of the church organization and its activities. It includes financial management and supervision of volunteers and staff. It includes having a program of Christian education. In a church of any size it includes having a program of youth activities and assorted other programs for people of many ages and interests. Then there's a lot related to worship services—overseeing a music program, planning liturgy, and of course preaching. The larger the congregation, the more of these jobs there are and the more complex they are.



Reflected in all these duties needs to be a vision of where God is calling the congregation to go, and of how it can carry out that calling. Discerning that vision and communicating it to the congregation in ways that inspire active participation in it are among a pastor's most important responsibilities.



A culture of specialization

The Bible's descriptions of loving pertain to all Christians, not just to clergy, but we often see some kinds of loving—giving spiritual guidance, for example, and sometimes even visiting the sick—as mainly the responsibility of pastors. This change has partly been a result of our society having become more complex than the societies in which our scriptures arose. We live in a world based on specialization and division of labor that didn't exist in the world the Bible describes.



Some of the change, however, seems to have come from our unwillingness to be the church now in the ways that Jesus and Paul evidently had in mind. We expect our pastors to play the loving and serving game for us instead of being the coach who motivates, trains, and organizes us to play it.

Ministry has gotten harder

For many reasons, being pastor of a church in our culture has become much harder in recent years, observers of today's churches and pastors find. Church members and potential members have higher expectations than in earlier years. They're surrounded by opportunities to hear top-quality professional speakers and mu-

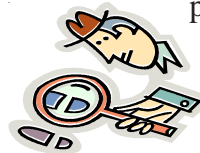


sicians, so they expect top quality from worship services and other church programs. They see professionally produced multimedia presentations in their workplaces and the places they go for entertainment, so they aren't satisfied with amateurish speeches or plain printed materials at church. In addition, we now live in a 24/7 world, so we expect pastors and church functions to be constantly available too.



These characteristics of today's culture mean pastors must fill many roles. They're expected to do more than it's possible for anyone to do. The only solution, says one I talked with recently, is to figure out what you do best and what you can't delegate to anyone else—sermons, for example—and then make sure that everything else gets done well by other people, but that's not easy.

Besides having higher expectations, churchgoers are more skeptical of authority than they used to be, pastors find. The integrity of clergy was assumed in earlier years, and members mostly accepted what their pastors said. But now, as one pastor puts it, members are continually asking "What's his hidden agenda?"



There's a sense, of course, in which we need to be skeptical of authority figures and question what they say. However, at some point we must establish systems likely to put trustworthy and capable people in leadership roles, and then trust them.

Waiting too long before speaking?

Besides wondering if pastors use loving and serving as a way of avoiding the need for greater competence, I wonder about their using it too long to pave the way for saying things that will make church

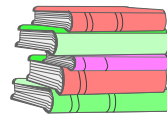
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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

members uncomfortable. Many pastors feel they must wait until they've been in their current pastorate for several years before addressing controversial issues or acknowledging ways in which they disagree with official church doctrines or policies. They say they need a long track record of loving and serving before addressing controversial subjects. Three years is the time I hear mentioned most often as the minimum, but in one successful pastor's book I've just read, he says he waited ten years (*Confronting the Controversies*, by Adam Hamilton, Abingdon 2001).

I'm baffled by that, because plenty of Christians gladly attend talks and read books that present con-



troversial positions, without having to feel loved personally by the speaker or author. And if Jesus had followed a policy of waiting three years or more, he'd never have mentioned any controversial subjects or said anything that might make his hearers uncomfortable. (Of course, I know some pastors are saying to me right now, "Yes, but look what happened to him!") That's just one of the reasons I keep being a bit skeptical when I hear pastors say their main responsibility is loving and serving.

Barbara



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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Thinking about loving and serving . . .

**"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
—Mark 12:31**

**"... whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant ... just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve ..."
—Matthew 20:26-28**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..."
—Matthew 5:43-44**

**Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth ... Love never ends.
—1 Corinthians 13:4-8**



**"... the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves."
—Luke 22:26**