

FOURTH EDITION

Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring

exploring parish ministry

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Christian Reformed Church
Pastor Church
Resources

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Introduction

Since Synod 1982, all those who enter or re-enter ordained ministry as Ministers of the Word within the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) must be engaged in a mentoring relationship. This is true for newly graduated seminarians as well as experienced pastors from other denominational backgrounds. In 2002, the CRCNA received a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. that focused attention on sustaining pastoral excellence. Enhancing the mentoring program formed a significant part of that focus and led to the writing of the mentoring manual “Toward Effective Pastoral Mentoring.” This is the fourth edition and the first revision since 2008.

Rationale and Framework

Rationale

Preparation for Christian ministry cannot be completed solely in the academic context of a theological seminary. In the contemporary ministry context, practitioners must develop capacity for ongoing learning and creative adaptation to a changing world of church and community, all while staying rooted in the soil of sufficient theological and biblical depth. The theological foundation and capacity for critical thinking fostered in an academic community must be supplemented with ongoing opportunity for learning and reflection. In this way, ministry is a challenging adventure. The Thriving in Ministry proposal that the CRCNA's Pastor Church Resources submitted to Lilly Endowment Inc. in 2018 details particular challenges in contemporary ministry as well as signs of healthy ministry, saying:

Pastors are every bit as ordinarily and wonderfully human as parishioners, yet pastors are set apart by ordination as somewhat “other.” Pastors live in communities as though they belong and will stay forever; yet pastors do not quite belong in the way that others do and usually move on after a time. Pastors connect the human and divine: they call attention to the presence of God, the way of God, and the words of God when these are not always obvious to the human eye or ear or heart. This pastoral task is both painful and tender; it is work and play; it transpires in public settings and in intimate settings. . . .

The variety of skills required on a regular basis is substantial: public speaking, empathetic listening, administration, conflict management, group facilitation, spiritual direction, composition, organizational leadership, and more. This collection of tasks would be daunting all by itself, [but there are] many factors which exacerbate the challenge.

- Congregations are anxious because of aging membership and shrinking numbers.
- Competition from mega-churches and accessibility of excellent preaching online is daunting.
- Unrealistic expectations placed on pastors encourage unhealthy heroic leadership paradigms and make pastors easy lightning rods for criticism.
- Managerial models of leadership take precedence over spiritual models of leadership—that is, the health of the church as an organization becomes more vital than the church as a living organism.
- Work-life balance is an increasing challenge, with technology allowing more and more possibility for perpetual tethering to work.
- Balancing competing values so as to be rooted in Christian tradition yet nimble enough to adapt requires the wisdom of community: congregation members, pastoral peers, and role-model mentors/exemplars.

While our understanding and acknowledgment of the challenges to pastoral ministry have increased, so too have our understanding and articulation of the “marks” [that are] present in those who are thriving in ministry:

- A well-developed sense of pastoral identity: integrating self-awareness, coherent and rich biblical-theological insight, and an understanding of the immediate ministry context.
- A layered grasp of how a pastor's individual story, congregant and congregation stories, and the Scripture story intersect, unfold, and develop together. This allows an appropriate mix of humility and responsibility in the exercise of pastoral leadership.

- A healthy alignment of pastoral gifts and skills with the particular job description and expectations of a given congregation and its leadership.
- Relational skills that allow connectedness to congregation members and are enhanced by an understanding of the congregation as a social system, providing stable leadership and wisdom in navigating anxiety.
- Engaging with peers in mutually respectful collegial relationships so as to resist an unhealthy isolation in ministry.
- Embracing the wisdom of role models in ministry for the purpose of being mentored so as to continue learning and growing in pastoral ministry.¹

Over the past thirty years within the CRCNA, the number of pastor-church relationships that became strained and led to separations has increased dramatically. One chronic factor in many of these situations is personal and professional isolation, the “common cold” of pastoral ministry. Pastors who do well are those who recognize the issue and proactively address it throughout their ministerial careers.

Ministry can be both exceptionally complex and lonely. Mentoring within the CRCNA is a strategic program that addresses these two concerns. First, it provides pastors with a solid foundation for a pattern of lifelong learning. Second, it offers an out-of-the-gate opportunity for building a relationship with a seasoned ministry practitioner—one who can support newer pastors by listening deeply and asking thoughtful questions. There may be moments when a mentor coaches, and there may be others in which a mentor offers spiritual direction. Encouragement and support from an experienced colleague can provide both inspiration and accountability so that healthy patterns are established right from the start.

Framework

Pastoral ministry involves the ongoing intersection of three distinct “circles of calling”: the **person** of the minister, the **role** of a minister of the Word, and the **context** within which ministry occurs. The three intersecting circles represent how ordination into the ministry **role** occurs when there is an external call to a particular **context** matching the internal call within a particular **person**.

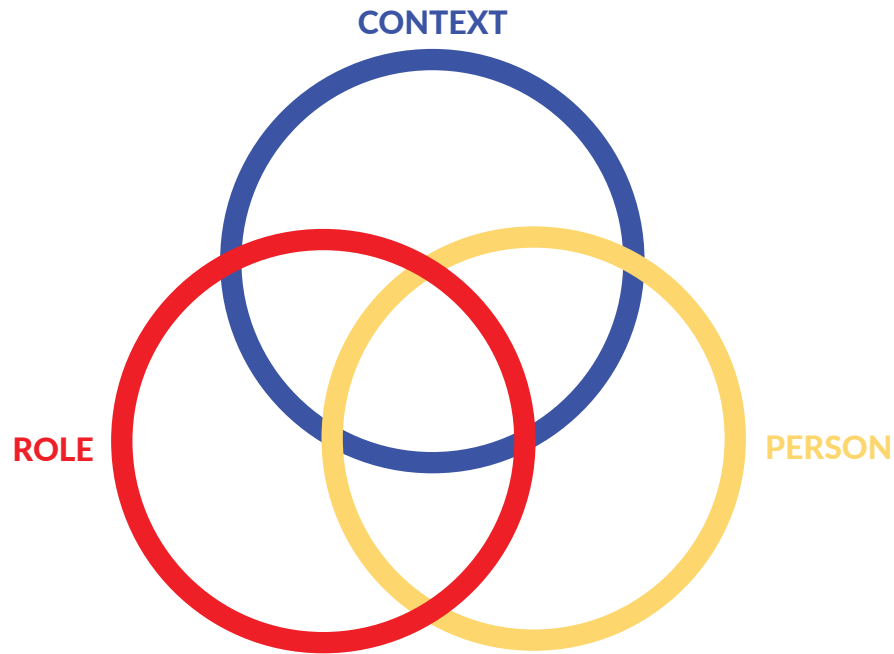
The **role** is about the “what” of ministry—the range of pastoral responsibilities and expectations. These include preaching and teaching, equipping the saints for ministry, pastoral care, and keeping alive the vision of God’s “already but not yet” kingdom.

The **context** has to do with the “where,” “when,” and “with whom,” including geography and culture, both local and global; societal trends, development, and values; the age of a congregation or ministry effort; and the demographics of a congregation and its community.

The **person** refers simply to the question “Who am I?” This includes the nested question of “when” (one’s life situation); the nested question of “why” (one’s motivation); and the nested questions of “what” and “how” (awareness of one’s own strengths, tendencies, style, and blindspots).

¹ Thriving in Ministry Proposal prepared for Lilly Endowment Inc. by Pastor Church Resources, 2018. p.1

Circles of Calling



A mentoring relationship will address and attend to the mystery and the dynamics of a particular person engaging in a particular role in a particular context through consideration of the pastor's internal dynamics, the problems and processes (the "how-to") of ministry, the ministerial context, and how God is at work in the pastor in his or her particular role and context.

During the course of ministry, change happens. This is true with respect to each of the three circles.

- The community or cultural context may change.
- The pastor grows, matures, and ages.
- The manner in which a role needs to be filled or to function may change.

Consequently, the alignment of person, context, and role is a dynamic process.

The persistence of change in each of the three circles of calling suggests the ongoing relevance of mentoring relationships throughout a career to counteract isolation and encourage ongoing learning by way of collegial relationships.

Mentor Training

General practitioners of medicine must implement a variety of skills in a field where others specialize. It is clear from our denomination's definition of mentoring that those who mentor must do the same. "Mentors are pastors who will serve without pay or honorarium as consultant, friend, and confidante to other pastors. . . . [They will] regularly or as often as appropriate with the assigned pastor and in a pastoral mode to discuss, guide, listen, encourage, confront, [and] pray [, and will] work in the spirit of mutuality and collegiality with the pastor to whom [s] he is a mentor."²

In this manual, we offer a paradigm for mentoring that brings together postures and practices of several specializations: mentoring, coaching, and spiritual direction. Doing so both recognizes the variety of tools mentors need to carry and captures the formational opportunity that exists when mentor and mentee gather. A mentor, therefore, is one who:

- possesses expertise and shares that resource with another, providing knowledge, advice, guidance, and encouragement (a traditional understanding of **mentoring**);
- asks questions to draw out assumptions, motivations, ideas, and answers that are within the mentee, as a **coach** would; and
- uses methods and techniques similar to those of a coach but focuses on issues related to spiritual formation and life (**spiritual direction**).

While you may already use several or all of these skills in your normal ministry, using them as a mentor requires thoughtfulness and preparation. Pastor Church Resources is committed to supporting you with training and resources designed to focus your skills and experience in your mentoring relationships. A regularly updated list of training opportunities and resources is at crcna.org/classis/mentors.

² *Acts of Synod 1982* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1982), 584.

Getting Started

How a pastor begins and experiences ministry in a first call can profoundly affect how a pastor fares in years to come. Sorting through and establishing healthy perspectives, habits, styles, and regular reflection is essential groundwork. Discerning God's leading and deepening self-awareness as one engages in ministry also promotes healthy ministry in which opportunities and challenges match one's gifts and passions. The mentoring program is designed to strengthen the possibility of good beginnings that lead to a lifetime of fruitful service and to sustained excellence in pastoral ministry.

In the CRCNA, a newly ordained pastor takes the initiative to find a mentor. Ideally there will be a suitable mentor who is geographically convenient for face-to-face interactions. However, technology now affords the opportunity to meet virtually as well, expanding the pool of potential mentors. Yet it is important to keep in mind that every locale, region, and congregation has its own unique context and story, so it will be vital to have a mentor who is aware of and sensitive to these dynamics.

There are regional pastors in the CRCNA, appointed within each classis, who can help identify and select suitable mentors. While the default expectation is that mentors will be ordained pastors within the CRCNA, there may be exceptional circumstances that warrant selecting a mentor from outside the denomination.

Tending the Relationship

The most critical factor in the success of the mentoring program is the quality of the relationships between mentors and mentees. The need for mutual respect, humility, appreciation, and candor is essential for the kind of learning, growth, and reciprocity that mentoring relationships afford. The quality of a mentoring relationship must be regularly assessed and addressed by the mentor, the mentee, and the regional pastor.

Affirm the Fit

It is possible that anticipated chemistry in the relationship does not happen. If after a few meetings it becomes apparent to any of the parties involved that the relationship will not be productive, the initial mentoring relationship should be terminated and a new one begun.

Clarify Expectations

Within the first few meetings, the expectations of those involved need to be clarified. This pertains to things such as the place and frequency of meetings, the selection of topics for discussion, the occasional participation of spouses (if applicable), relationships with other ad hoc mentors, and occasional group mentoring.

Make Necessary Adjustments

Throughout the mentoring process, adjustments will be needed. These may pertain to schedules or meeting locations. It may mean introducing something new. Or perhaps the mentee will ask the mentor to do less advising and more clarifying of thoughts or feelings.

The point is that the relationship can plateau or atrophy if adjustments are not made. You are encouraged to develop patterns and sometimes tweak them for an effective mentoring process. Typically a mentoring relationship evolves from a teacher/coach–learner dynamic into a more collegial relationship with mutual learning from one another's experiences and wisdom.

Toward Effective Mentoring Relationships

A helpful tool for a mentor and mentee to use together is a Birkman assessment. These assessments are provided for everyone entering ordained ministry in the CRCNA and can also be provided to those serving as mentors. This tool can help deepen a mentor's self-awareness and enhance the working relationship between mentor and mentee.

Information about Birkman assessments can be found on the Pastor Church Resources website: crcna.org/pcr/pastors/vocational-ministry-assessments.

Attending to Imbalances in Power

Handle with Care

All mentoring relationships present certain power imbalances. These have potential for significant benefit and significant liability. Often a mentor is older, more experienced, and likely more influential than the one being mentored. A newly ordained pastor is likely younger, less experienced, and less influential. The difference in age, experience, and influence is a multi-faceted type of power which the mentor holds. The assumption and genius of a mentoring relationship is that the mentor uses these types of power to encourage the mentee's growth and maturity, allowing the mentee to flourish.

It is vital to stay alert to the potential challenges of power imbalance. For instance, mentors and mentees often share vulnerability, not only about matters of church life, but also about a pastor's inner life and personal life. Along with the potential for meaningful engagement, this can be problematic. It may be that a mentor begins to seek an unhealthy amount of support from a mentee. Wise mentors will regularly ask themselves, "Whose emotional needs are getting the most attention here?" Mentors should be finding their primary support elsewhere.

Similarly, a healthy mentoring relationship is one where a pastor may share sensitive information without fear of reprisal. A mentor without proper boundaries and other support systems might carelessly disclose sensitive information. Wise mentors are clear about expectations regarding confidentiality, and these expectations need to be clear to both mentor and mentee.

It is important for mentors and mentees to have a clear-eyed view of the dynamics at play in their relationship—and to speak openly together about these dynamics.

The power imbalance present in a mentoring relationship is also a real dynamic in every relationship that a pastor has with members of a congregation. It's worth some serious reflection!

For a deeper dive, check out CRCNA Safe Church Ministry resources on the [Network](#).³

Handle with Extra Care: Mentoring across Genders or Ethnicities

Because good mentors help broaden their mentee's perspective, there are occasions when mentees seek out mentors with backgrounds and experiences different from their own. In particular, mentoring relationships across genders or ethnicities can help both mentor and mentee see the world and themselves with greater clarity and insight. But these potentially rewarding relationships also carry unique challenges.

People from different cultures may have different expectations about confidentiality or the way in which their story may be shared. There may also be different expectations about the nature of the mentoring relationship itself. Within the CRCNA, there has been a historically dominant culture tied to a particular ethnic group. Mentors who are a part of this dominant culture should be aware of the many challenges a mentee from outside this culture faces. Rather than dismissing or diminishing the validity of these challenges, wise mentors will ask questions, reserve judgment, and listen carefully to the experience of the mentee.

³ <https://network.crcna.org/>

Likewise, particularly when men mentor women or women mentor men, the intimate sharing and vulnerability so crucial to good mentoring relationships can run the risk of violating emotional and even physical boundaries. Many mentoring relationships, for example, include times of prayer. This is a practice that creates intimate bonds that need to be protected with appropriate boundaries. The mentor should lead in taking responsibility for maintaining such boundaries, but both parties need to attend to this aspect of a healthy relationship.

There are deep and long-standing cultural differences among ethnicities and genders that need naming, acknowledging, and respectful attention. Our histories, our ways of learning and knowing, our ways of being taught and trained, and our ways of sharing in the exercise of authority are all examples of how we might have deeply ingrained differences. It is important to agree right at the outset of a mentoring relationship on appropriate ways to address differences that become difficult.

Mentoring Modules

Mentoring modules are tools that provide access points for a mentor and mentee to engage with each other in conversation and meaningful reflection. The modules included in this manual are not exhaustive, but samples which can and likely will be supplemented by topics of conversation identified by a mentee and mentor.

Over the course of a mentoring relationship, all of these modules will be discussed. A number of them have been identified as important first conversations. The rest may be chosen randomly at the initiative of either member of the mentoring relationship.

Each of the modules has a set of questions intended to foster further reflection, with each of the three circles of calling represented: **role, person, and context**. Although a given module may most clearly focus on one of the three circles, there is always a degree of intersection.

Further information on this three-circle paradigm, as well as access to video presentations, can be found at crcna.org/classis/mentors.

We have identified the following modules as most helpful early in the mentoring process.

1. Ordination: Set Apart (see page 11)
2. Pastors and Councils: Who's the Boss? (see page 16)
3. Boundary Keeping: Intimacy (see page 33)
4. Time Management (see page 19)
5. Significant Others: Pastor Peers (see page 37)
6. Authority (see page 15)
7. Spouses: For Better or Worse (see page 23)

Ordination: Set Apart

Ordination into ministry is a watershed moment. In a public ceremony, before God and the people of God, a person is set apart for a specific task or role in a specific setting. To be ordained into ministry is to step into the long line of those who have gone before and into the collegial fellowship of Christian ministers around the globe. Ordination marks an intentional commitment to have one's life be one of specific service to the church of Jesus and the mission of God.

While a pastor is one of the people and lives among the people, she or he is also, by virtue of ordination, set apart for service, and that very role of calling attention to the presence of the Other sets a pastor apart. There is a certain "otherness" that a pastor wears as part of ordination. A pastor will never belong to the church community in the same way that he/she belonged prior to ordination, and a pastor may in fact experience this dynamic as a loss.

The dynamics of being "set apart" and the ways in which this can impact one's life are hard to imagine. Yet all of these things will provide rich fodder for reflection as the circles of one's person, one's role, and one's context intersect. Navigating this intersection with a good balance of stability and flexibility will require wisdom, humility, courage, strength, and humor.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on your own experience of the ordination journey and its culmination in the actual public worship moment. What seems especially affirming and wonderful? Are there any ways in which ordination seems daunting? What pitfalls can you imagine? Reflect on what you think and feel about ordination. Why do you suppose you think and feel the way you do?
2. Reflect on significant role models for ministry who have impacted your desire to serve in ministry and the shape your ministry might take. How do you suppose your imagined role compares to or contrasts with the expectation within the ministry context to which you have been called?
3. "Context" may mean the immediate setting of one's ministry (a particular congregation or location), but it also means the long and broad context of church history. To be ordained is to stand with and on the shoulders of all those who have gone before. Ordination also sets the ordained person shoulder to shoulder alongside ministers of the Word around the globe. Reflect on the reality of this grand context and the trajectory of your ministry.

Ordination: Covenant and Contract

The relationship between a pastor and a congregation is sealed by making vows: solemn promises made in public, before God and others. It is similar in this way to the relationship between marriage partners who frame their relationship by making solemn vows. Pastors and ministry settings do not, however, commit to each other “till death do us part”! In fact, the relationship between a pastor and those to whom she or he ministers is shaped most broadly by covenant-like promises, and nestled within that framework are contractual expectations: preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and the like.

There are pastors and parishioners who think about their relationship primarily and almost exclusively in spiritualized terms: that ministry is a calling from God affirmed by an internal awareness and by an external letter of call. Especially in contexts of conflict, pastors and parishioners tend to reduce this relationship primarily and almost exclusively to being contractual: pastors focus on their pastoral and ministerial tasks, and parishioners focus on all that a pastor does not do.

It can be helpful to think of the covenant framework as a guide to how pastors and congregations ought to think of each other, speak of and with each other, and seek the very best for each other. Together they are children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, maturing through the persistent presence of the Spirit. The contractual elements describe expectations, both quantitative and qualitative: how much is being done and the manner in which it is being done. And there are always items that simply need to be done even though they are not our most favorite tasks or aligned with our strongest gifting.

At best, fulfilling contractual expectations is a lovely demonstration of covenant keeping. And at best, keeping covenant provides some flexibility in navigating and negotiating contractual demands.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the notion that pastors are bound by both a covenant and a contract. Does your view of ministry tilt more toward one or the other? Why might that be? What impact does the presence or absence of a tilt have on the way you view yourself and your relationship to those with whom you minister?
2. Do you sense the people in your current setting see your pastoral presence as more of a covenant relationship or a contractual relationship? Identify a number of things in your experience that support your thinking and observing. How does your community inform you of your contractual obligations?
3. Reflect on the wisdom of and need for a pastoral job description that is more specific than the language of a letter of call. How might a pastor and council navigate the need to identify firm core expectations as well as some “elective” activities (such as community chaplaincy), keeping in mind the reality of both covenant and contract?
4. It is not “till death do us part.” Use the notions of “covenant” and “contract” to help you engage in an ongoing discernment of your call to ministry, whether here or elsewhere. Who can help?

The Curious Art of Entering

When a pastor comes to a congregation, God is already present. There is work underway. Pastors do not so much initiate action as find ways to join in what the Spirit is already undertaking. Pastors are single cars merging into existing lanes of traffic.

There are a variety of ways in which drivers merge into traffic, ranging from aggressive all the way to overly cautious. Ideally, there is some respectful adjustment as the merge happens. There are also a variety of ways to enter a room or a community, and some respectful awareness on the part of pastors and parishioners is necessary. A bull in a china shop also makes an entry! It is essential for pastors to recognize that they are entering a dynamic existing culture with patterns and personalities, expectations and landmines, rules and history. Curiosity and a willingness to be alert and to listen are paramount. Pastors will ultimately bring their own personal story and their own gifts and leadership to the table, but recognizing the story of God already at work in a community and in individual lives calls for humility. A pastor's story is not the only story that counts!

To be effective along the way, a pastor needs to understand a community's people and its culture. It is important to be curious, to absorb as much as possible about the people, their patterns, their history, and their values. Sample questions might include: How are decisions made here? By whom? What are the expectations for a pastor? How does this community relate to the larger community around the church? Was there a "golden age" that serves as the measuring stick for this congregation's health?

For consideration:

1. What have you been learning about the people in this congregation and the ways in which God is at work in them? How have you been listening to the story of this church and the stories of the members of this church? Describe the process of merging into the existing traffic.
2. How does the culture of this community and the context within which this community lives compare to or contrast with the culture and context of the community in which you were raised?
3. What have you been learning about this community's expectations for the role of pastor, and how well does that match your own expectations for that role?
4. What's going on inside of you as you discover more and more about this ministry context? How will this ministry context call out your personal strengths, and how will it challenge you as a person? When and where will adjustments be required, and by whom?

Sabbath Keeping

“Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Ex. 20:9). But the seventh . . .

God built a day of rest into creation’s rhythm. And along the way, God has offered some rationale for this rhythm: it imitates God’s own rhythm in the work of creation, it serves as a reminder of rescue from slavery, it encourages providing rest for others so that they are not our slaves, and it is a deeply powerful symbol of the reality that life is lived by God’s grace, not our own unending efforts.

Sabbath keeping is a wonderful and significant spiritual testimony as well as a thoroughly wonderful and significant experience of resting from work, resting in the work of God, and, indeed, resting in God.

But the rhythm of a pastor’s life runs opposite the typical rhythm of Sunday being the Sabbath. A pastor’s work timeline usually crescendoes through the week and peaks on Sunday. Leading worship, along with personal interactions and other responsibilities, can make Sunday an especially demanding day, and the reality of being available or on call can impact whatever good intentions pastors may have for setting boundaries.

For consideration:

1. How are you personally keeping Sabbath? Describe your own rhythm of work and rest, in terms of both resting from one’s own work and resting in the work of God. Have you found this refreshing, challenging, irreplaceable, or impossible? Reflect on your internal conversations.
2. How does the misalignment of your pastoral weekly rhythm, which crescendos toward a Sunday peak, impact, and intersect with the weekly rhythms of your loved ones? How can this be addressed?
3. As one who preaches and teaches that we live by grace, describe the challenge of functioning in the role of pastor—the demands of work—and being a role model for a life lived by grace.
4. How are you engaging your need for Sabbath-keeping as it intersects with the needs of your community? How might those around you help you keep a healthy rhythm? How might your context require growing self-discipline on your part?

Authority

There is an inherent authority that comes with ordination as a minister of the Word. As one who represents God, a minister's voice and manner in preaching, teaching, and pastoring is important.

What is said from a pulpit or during a pastoral visit can carry a great deal of weight. Children might even imagine that their pastor is actually God! And ordination—being set apart for a highly visible role within the church of Jesus—means that many see ministers as being a step closer to God.

Because there is inherent authority in a minister's role, one's relationship to authority requires a great deal of self-awareness, honesty, humility, and courage. For some the authority of the pastoral position is intoxicating. The platform to speak publicly, to be a trusted confidante and advisor, to affect council decisions, to teach—all as a representative of God!—can be alluring. There are also those for whom the authority of the pastoral position seems overwhelming. Having such authority and responsibility might even be daunting, so exercising authority is avoided whenever possible.

But pastoral authority is a reality. So too is abuse of authority. And so too is the neglect or abdication of authority. Finding one's way requires personal reflection as well as good conversation with those in the leadership circle.

Pastors and councils can serve as good sparring partners, unwitting enablers, and as those who exercise unhealthy control. These dynamics are the focus of the module "Pastors and Councils: Who's the Boss?" (next section).

For consideration:

1. In your current context, how do people reckon with you as minister of the Word, an authority on interpreting Scripture and describing the ins and outs of living the Christian life?
2. How do you understand and experience the reality of authority as you fulfill your ordination vows? Describe the interaction between what you have learned academically and what you are learning from others' life experiences as well as your own.
3. Reflect on your own exercise of authority within the range of "strongly assertive" to "extremely cautious." How might your relationship to authority intersect with your motivation to become ordained? Is exercising pastoral authority something you look forward to or something you dread?
4. The authority that rests in the person of Jesus, our Lord, is an authority that was forged through submission as described in Philippians 2. How are you submitting to authority as a person and as a pastor? How would it be evident to your council and to those you serve that your authority is also being forged by willing submission?

NOTE: An important document for pastors to review is the [CRC Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders](https://www.crcna.org/synodresources/crc-code-conduct-ministry-leaders).⁴ Helpful information and reflection about the use and abuse of authority and power is also available on the [Safe Church Ministry website](https://www.crcna.org/SafeChurch).⁵

⁴ <https://www.crcna.org/synodresources/crc-code-conduct-ministry-leaders>

⁵ <https://www.crcna.org/SafeChurch>

Pastors and Councils: Who's the Boss?

The relationship between a pastor and a church council is complex. On the one hand, a pastor is called to lead. A pastor's voice carries weight afforded by ordination and calling, academic training, and the reality of the public and central role of a pastor within a community. Historically, a pastor's leadership role was underlined by councils having the pastor chair its meetings.

Though a pastor is called to lead, on the other hand a pastor (according to the Church Order of the CRCNA) is to be supervised in life, doctrine, and duties by the council of the calling church. But other capable people can and often do serve as chair, and in some jurisdictions, including all of Canada, the law does not allow pastors to chair council meetings. To serve as the chair of the very group that is one's supervising body is a clear conflict of interest.

Nevertheless, there is an intriguing dance in this relationship in which a pastor submits to the supervising authority of a council while the council submits, both subconsciously and deliberately, to the authority of an ordained minister of the Word. Therefore it can be a challenge for councils and pastors alike to assert themselves appropriately and gracefully. When a council's respect for a pastor as a spiritual leader is deep and rich, there is a temptation to defer too easily and become unhelpfully passive, allowing or even enabling a pastor to exercise excessive authority and control. There are also moments when councils overstep and pastors are too keen on keeping peace to object.

Ideally, pastors and councils collaborate as partners in the gospel and forge a relationship that demonstrates the blessing of iron sharpening iron.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the strength of your voice in the council room compared to the strength of the other voices there. Are you inclined to speak more or less than you do now, and for what reason? How might you help all of the voices in the room to be heard?
2. Both councils and pastors have a measure of authority. Is there a particular authority that belongs to the role of minister of the Word? If so, can you describe it? How might that compare or contrast to the authority of the council?
3. In this ministry setting, does the buck stop with the council or the pastor? Can you describe some ways you experience default expectations within the community about who is in fact the boss?
4. How might a sense of collaboration be developed in your ministry setting so that both council and pastor can exercise authority as well as submit to the other?

Plagiarism

Imagine a pastor writing this in a journal:

It's hugely daunting, it is. Writing a fresh new sermon each week that is biblical and solid in terms of exegesis. And then to ensure that it keeps everyone's interest, when there are listeners who range from elementary school all the way to senior citizens. Wow. Sometimes it feels impossible. Oh, I do alright most of the time, but lately my sense of inadequacy has been getting stronger and heavier.

And it's exhausting, this being faithful, consistent, and creative. Some weeks it requires more energy than I can muster. The thought of coming up with something new again sometimes paralyzes me.

I've been going online a lot more these last months. There are so many good preachers out there, and with live-streaming options, people have a ton of choices. It just adds to my worry about doing this work well enough. Oh—and written sermons—there are tons of them online with all kinds of really interesting illustrations and angles. Technically, I could quote someone and give some credit, but after a while that seems cumbersome, and well, if I do that a lot, that just underlines the point that much of my sermon isn't really rising from me.

Is it so bad to borrow from another preacher? Really?

I suppose "borrowing" doesn't quite describe it.

And if the listeners are blessed and my anxieties are muted, does that maybe reduce the wrongness?

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24).*

For consideration:

1. Reflect on your own wrestling with adequacy or inadequacy on the pulpit. Does your reflection hinge more upon content or upon style? Why might that be? Describe your greatest fear with respect to preaching, as well as your greatest hope.
2. To stand in front of a congregation and publicly proclaim God's Word is part of your role, and it requires an ego. But it also requires utmost humility. Andy Crouch notes in his book *Strong and Weak*, "Flourishing requires us to embrace both authority and vulnerability, both capacity and frailty."⁶ Preaching is an event in which we are required to be simultaneously strong and weak (vulnerable). How is this true in your experience?
3. How does your personal struggle with this issue intersect with your relationship to the community with whom and to whom you are ministering? Reflect on the dynamic of integrity as that impacts your relationships with yourself, with God, and with this community.
4. Reflect on the helpfulness of acknowledging sources as well as on any potential dark sides to over-relying on outside sources.
5. What reasons or circumstances might a pastor use to justify plagiarism? How can you guard against this temptation?

⁶ Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 11.

Friendships within the Congregation

The appeal of friendship is real and necessary. We all need friends—people with whom we can let our hair down and simply be ourselves. We need the safety, encouragement, and straight talk of those who know us well, love us, and care enough to share life with us.

Pastors and their families often find themselves in unfamiliar places and settings, and they can struggle with degrees of loneliness. Within a church community, there are often people who reach out to establish friendship. On the one hand there is something good and affirming about this, and that's cause for gratitude. On the other hand, there are dynamics at work that require alertness and discernment.

Two things come to mind. The first is an old adage: “Beware of those who meet you with gifts at the train.” Some folks value friendship with a pastor because of what this relationship can provide for them: prestige, perhaps, or access to information, or an inside track to influence. There is just enough truth to this old proverb to encourage pastors to keep their eyes open. Second, there are moments when a parishioner friend will need you to be more than a friend—when illness or grief or some other trouble arises. There may also be moments when you as a pastor will need to be more than just a friend to this other because of concerns that require addressing.

The need for friendship remains. How to fulfill this need is a curious challenge which finds a pastor at the intersection of person and role. Pastors are persons, and once ordained, these persons are pastors.

It is impossible to fully separate these realities, whether in our own minds or in the perceptions of others.

For consideration:

1. With whom do you find it most workable to build friendships? Reflect on the ways in which you value and appreciate friendships. How are you ensuring that you and your family are experiencing the benefit of friendships?
2. Reflect on the perception that members of your ministry community might have when their pastor has a close friend or cluster of friends within that community. What factors might be at work, for better or for worse?
3. Are there ways in which you are experiencing loneliness in ministry? Why do you suppose that is (or is not) the case for you?
4. How might it be possible to build friendships in which your identity both as a person and as a pastor are part of the equation? What would this require?

Time Management

It would be a lot more straightforward for pastors if there was a timeclock to punch into or out of. It would be a lot more straightforward if a letter of call or a ministry description identified the exact number of hours a pastor would be expected to work each week.

But ministry, both as a calling and as a salaried role, is not first defined in terms of hours on the job. So many aspects of ministry are hard to measure in terms of time needed or allotted. How long does it take to craft a sermon? How long does it take to prepare for a class or to make a pastoral call? How do you measure time to read, to reflect, to process? The list goes on. And therein lies the rub: ministry is a profession in which it is very easy to work far too much because the work is never done. Ministry is also a profession in which it is very easy to work far too little because no one is in the office with you monitoring every moment.

On the one hand, pastors have a very flexible schedule. On the other hand, they face incessant demands. How much time is allotted to this or to that and exactly when the work is completed is mostly negotiable. A minister can be away from home quite frequently as well as work from home quite freely.

So how should pastors approach this question of time management? How ought they prioritize the available hours? Is there ever a moment when enough is enough?

For consideration:

1. Describe the length of a typical work week in your ministry. Reflect on your own level of peace, guilt, and service that go into this pattern.
2. How are you managing the flexibility that ministry affords? What have been pleasant surprises for you, and what has been a challenge or even an Achilles' heel?
3. What aspects of pastoral ministry are receiving the bulk of your attention, and what aspects are being shortchanged? Reflect on the relationship between your time management and what you perceive to be the weightiest aspects of your pastoral role. Why do you make the choices you do?
4. Reflect on the expectations for the pastoral role in your setting (whether articulated or not) and how they intersect with your own expectations for the pastoral role. In what ways might you need to address a gap in expectations about time management? How might you do that?

The Preaching Event

It is a highly public and strategic component of a pastor's ministry: that moment when a pastor stands at the intersection of the metanarrative of Scripture and the narratives of everyday life in a specific community. How can one help forge an ongoing interaction of faith, hope, and love so that the story of Scripture speaks truthfully and gracefully into the stories of a gathered people? How can one speak directly into the details of the here and now while keeping the long view of God's coming kingdom in focus?

There are as many individual styles of preaching as there are preachers. Some might be described as teachers or lecturers, some as defenders of the faith, some as gentle shepherding pastors, and some as inspirational or motivational speakers. Some intend to comfort the afflicted; some intend to afflict the comfortable.

For ordained ministers of the Word, the assumptions lying beneath our preaching patterns and informing our sermon content and purpose are significant. But often we are unaware of these assumptions within ourselves and in others. Assumptions are often simply *there*, unexplored and unarticulated. For example, an assumption that a pastor needs to provide clarity on the truth and proclaim "Thus says the Lord" with authority would lead to one kind of sermonizing. An assumption that a pastor needs to encourage the struggling with hope would lead to a different kind of sermonizing.

Preaching requires some self-confidence, an ego capable of standing in that intersection between God's Word and God's people and engaging them. It also requires vulnerability, a humility that knows dependence and the surprise of grace. Preachers do not replace Jesus or serve as a proxy for Jesus. Preachers defer to Jesus and to the Spirit.

For consideration:

1. Describe your own struggles with, enjoyment of, or fear of preaching. How does preaching intimidate you? How does it excite you? How does it exhaust you? Why might any or all of these realities and feelings be so?
2. Reflect on your personal assumptions about preaching and how these inform your preaching content, style, and purpose. Do you find yourself preaching in a fairly predictable manner, or do you try to provide some variety and balance? When are you confident that a sermon is ready to preach?
3. Reflect on your listeners' assumptions about preaching. How do they impact your preparation and delivery?
4. What is the purpose of preaching?

Preaching in Person

When the Word became flesh, the Almighty and Eternal God preached in the person of Jesus. He had a hometown, parents, and siblings, and it was his being—and manner of being—that underscored the eloquence of his words.

Something about this dynamic persists for those called to preach the gospel. A pastor is a person, a fully human being, just like every member of a congregation and its surrounding community. And somehow the words of this person find added weight and glory when they are spoken by someone judged to be an authentic human being. When people experience a pastor as genuine in faith, in care, and in diligence—when people experience a pastor as a person with integrity—then they are able to listen to the words the pastor speaks with far more openness and trust.

The converse is also true. If congregants do not experience a pastor as caring deeply and honestly, their capacity to be blessed by the preaching diminishes, no matter how eloquent the words.

Preaching is intimate in the sense that preaching people speak of the commitment, hope, love, pain, and longing that exist in their hearts as well as in the heart of God, and a preaching person intends to connect to the hearts of those who listen. Preaching does not focus on the inner life of the preacher, but inescapably, that inner life is revealed nonetheless. How much should preachers share of their own stories? How does one preach personally but without going into inappropriate detail about personal heartaches, struggles, and challenges?

For consideration:

1. How much does your preaching resonate with your own inner life? Does your personal life (including family life) inform your preaching, or do you resist that? Why?
2. Reflect on the ways in which the preaching event does not stand alone, but intersects with the ways in which listeners experience a pastor's person. What are your congregants and community members experiencing in you and from you while you function in this role?
3. Explore the relevance of the CRCNA's [Code of Conduct](#) for ordained ministry leaders.⁷ How do you find it helpful? How do you find it daunting? Why?
4. What expectations does your ministry setting have for preaching? How have you discovered this, and/or how are you learning this? How well do these expectations match your own?

⁷ <https://www.crcna.org/synodresources/crc-code-conduct-ministry-leaders>

Preaching from the Book

Choosing a text from which to preach can be time-consuming and treacherous. Some traditions provide a lectionary that preselects readings but for various reasons does not include some portions of Scripture. Other traditions allow preaching pastors to choose readings and texts themselves. This can be done week to week or as part of a larger plan.

There are always moments when a schedule must be altered; perhaps critical current events will call for a reading and text quite different from the one originally planned. Still, whether an urgent need or a longer-range plan drives the choices, the challenge is to ensure that a healthy range of Scripture is covered: prophets, history, Torah, wisdom, gospels, epistles, and apocalyptic passages are all chapters in the book that tells the story of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relationship to the created cosmos.

Lectionaries, whether provided by a church tradition or created personally by a pastor's planning, are based first of all on readings from Scripture. To stand at the intersection of God's story and the stories of communities and individuals is to stand on strategically holy ground.

But the challenge of choosing passages first and then discovering the message or focus through prayer, study, and the Spirit's guidance is real. There is a pernicious temptation to choose a theme or focus first, and then choose a passage to underline that theme. All preachers must regularly ask themselves if their agendas are shaping the way they use Scripture or if Scripture and the Spirit are setting the agenda for what is proclaimed and how the pastors are being used.

For consideration:

1. Review your choices of preaching passages and identify patterns. Do you overuse some types of passages? Why might this be so? Are there passages and genres of Scripture that are conspicuously absent from your preaching? Why might that be so? How does your person impact this choosing?
2. Reflect on the goal of your preaching. How does the nature of your role impact the choices you make when choosing and preaching passages? Reflect on the practice of basing preaching messages based on books other than Scripture and whether and how this intersects with your pastoral role.
3. How do you relate the choice of preaching passages to your current community? Imagine ways to invite input or collaboration. Consider the rewards and the risks. How might you be appropriately responsive without simply trying to keep folks happy?

Spouses: For Better or Worse

Ministers who enjoy the support and friendship of a spouse can experience great blessing. A marriage partner has a front-row seat to the joys, the stresses, and the challenges of ministry. At best, one's partner provides the blessings of unconditional love, encouragement, and accountability, acting as both a safe haven and a reality check! Marriage partners are friends as well as confidantes, and they remind us of our ordinary humanity quite apart from the pastoring role.

But even as spouses can offer a heap of “better”, they can also offer a heap of “worse.” There are spouses who have an outsized influence, controlling influence on the lead pastor, impacting the pastoral agenda in both content and style. And there are spouses who are quite uncomfortable with their partner's role, sometimes disengaging entirely and other times inadvertently sabotaging their partner's ministry.

Setting appropriate boundaries for helpful and necessary engagement as well as helpful and necessary distance is necessary and will require wisdom, creativity, and discipline. At best, partners help to create a suitable environment in which to co-exist and help each other flourish. Yet a minister is the one called to and employed by a congregation; a spouse (most often) is not.

Complicating those dynamics are expectations for a spouse, from both the pastor and the congregation. Sometimes these expectations are overtly expressed, and sometimes they remain unarticulated, lurking beneath the surface. Discovering these expectations and working through them in some way is necessary for both the spouse and the pastor.

The health of a pastor's marriage relationship will also affect ministry capacity and functioning. This is explored in the module “Significant Others: Friends, Family, Loved Ones” (p. 36).

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the ways in which your spouse contributes to your wellbeing as a person who functions in the role of ordained minister. Why is it important for you to remember that you are first and foremost an ordinary human being and a child of God? How does your spouse encourage you and hold you accountable?
2. How do you and your spouse navigate and respect the boundaries between your persons and your ministry role? When does the ministry role get in the way of your person? When might your spouse get in the way of your role?
3. Describe any expectations for the pastor's spouse that you have discovered either purposely or inadvertently. How are you navigating those expectations, and which do you consider weighty?

The Spiritual Discipline of Listening

Pastors are called to be regular, alert, and respectful listeners. It is one of the ways in which all human beings, but particularly pastors, image God.

But listening requires great intentionality and utmost attentiveness, both to the one to whom we are listening and to one's own inner voice. The goal is to ensure that the speaker—always a significant “other”—knows he or she is being heard. This requires our mind, ears, eyes, and heart—in short, our whole being. Stilling one's own voice, so eager to jump in, and focusing entirely on providing space and creating room in our being for the benefit of others requires humility and deep resolve. It is the basic building block of hospitality.

There are those who seek out a pastor's ear, sometimes regularly. There are those whom a pastor finds hard to endure. And there are those whose voices must be coaxed out to be heard. There are shrill voices, loud voices, demanding voices, opposing voices, quiet voices, authoritative voices, timid voices, and rebel voices—and probably more.

One challenge for listeners is imagining that they must have an answer or solution or pearl of wisdom ready to provide. The temptation then is to focus more attention on preparing a response than on ensuring that the other person is heard. Our role, our response, and our agenda then crowd out the voice of the other.

Listening to others at meetings, over coffee, in a sickbed, and in the parking lot after church, listening to the Lord speak in Scripture, in creation, and through events and people—in all of these settings, to listen well requires deep humility and an expectation of being transformed in heart and in mind.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the ease or unease you feel in listening to various people. What is it in you that accounts for the differences you notice? Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses you sense in your listening practice. Why is it so tempting to do more than merely listen?
2. “Providing pastoral care” suggests a more active stance, while “listening” suggests a more passive stance. Reflect on whether this is an appropriate summary. How does the pastoral role tilt one toward doing more than mere listening? Does providing pastoral care intimidate you in any way? Why or why not?
3. Describe the expectations you sense within your current setting related to pastoral care. How might the reading of Scripture and the offering of prayer mesh well with or sabotage the spiritual discipline of listening?

Ministry of Small Talk

Among all the meetings, sermon preparation, worship planning, teaching, administering, and urgent pastoral care, there are requests—perhaps even expectations—for pastors to simply visit parishioners with no specific agenda beyond connecting and engaging in what is often called “small talk.”

Even the adjective “small” makes a judgment of sorts, as if to say that other things are more important to do or talk about. Some pastors who resist “doing tea,” claiming they do not have time to chat with a person over coffee. If there is a real question or concern, fine. Something worthy of a pastoral presence, sure. But just a chat at a person’s home, in the lunchroom of a workplace, or in a grocery store aisle?

Pastors communicate a great deal of their theology by how they handle the demands of ministry and choose which threads will form the fabric of their relationship to a congregation and a community. Pastors also communicate a great deal about how they view their own presence as an ordained person within the congregation and community.

The measure of a spirituality that is biblical and theologically Reformed includes an awareness and appreciation of the significant spiritual depth that exists even in what might typically be viewed as the shallow end of the pool. Spirituality is deeply and utterly material, constructed of the nuts and bolts of everyday life. The extraordinary dimensions of life are present in the ordinary because there is in fact nothing ordinary about the ordinary. This wonderful and mysterious reality is underlined in the incarnation of Jesus, our flesh-and-blood teacher of parables filled with everyday things.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on your personal responses to the dynamics and demands of “small talk.” Why do you react the way you do, for better or for worse? How have you invited small talk and/or protected yourself from it?
2. Consider what your level and style of engagement communicates about you as the pastor and what theology it communicates. Reflect on what the incarnation of Jesus communicates about the Creator and the creation and how this relates to the pastoral role.
3. Describe the written and unwritten expectations related to “small talk” that you encounter in your ministry context. Reflect on what these expectations reveal about the history and theology of this church community and how you intend to engage for your sake and for theirs.

The Intersection of Challenging Personalities and a Healthy Community

There are stock characters in every church community, and one of these varieties is the challenging personality. When this person is present, whether at a committee meeting, a social function, or after a worship service, the temperature in the room changes. Perhaps it heats up. Perhaps it grows chilly. Either way, tension increases for all who are present. Challenging personalities manifest themselves along a broad spectrum, from loud and demanding to quietly and subversively resistant.

Sometimes a community has had a difficult time in confronting and changing this challenging behavior. Often there is a form of acquiescence that has become more acceptable to the community than constant friction. One thing is certain: challenging personalities profoundly reveal and affect the health of a community.

For pastors, frustration with an individual's behavior as well as with the community's method of managing that behavior can easily set in. And while the conventional wisdom of "it takes a village" is relevant to the way in which a community deals with a challenging individual, a pastor may be able to provide some helpful leverage and modeling.

For consideration:

1. Describe the impact challenging personalities have on you. Which buttons are being pushed? Why is this so? How much of this is tied to your inherent personality, and how much of this is tied to your family experiences growing up?
2. Describe the ways in which your ministry community has dealt with challenging personalities and behaviors, for better or worse. How has this affected communal health? Reflect on the presence (or lack) of expectations with respect to becoming a healthier community.
3. How have you responded to the challenging behaviors you have observed? What kind of leverage do you have within your pastoral role to address these challenges? Does anything else need to be considered?

Conflict: Clear and Present Danger—or Opportunity

In every relationship there are moments when differences of personality, perspective, priorities, needs, and wants go beyond pleasant give and take. And in congregations, where there are even more personalities, differences of many kinds will at some point produce conflict. Many people avoid conflict whenever possible—stifling themselves, giving in, or deflecting and changing the subject—because conflicts not managed well can be painful and destructive.

In the church of Jesus, avoiding conflict is an especially appealing temptation because we want to confirm the fruitful presence of the Holy Spirit by being a community of peace in which kindness, love, and unity prevail. Disagreeing disagreeably can lead to fractured relationships, resentments, and even schism—even more so when part of the framework for disagreement is the quest to be “right” or most biblically and doctrinally sound.

Conflict develops in predictable patterns. Understanding these patterns is useful in identifying what is going on and what might be helpful in addressing it redemptively. In fact, conflict carries both danger and opportunity. Untended, conflict can burn and destroy, and when avoided it will predictably smolder underground until it erupts later. If tended well, conflict can provide occasions for healthy conversation, including careful listening, articulating hurts and sadness, and building momentum for reconciliation.

In addressing the conflict between humankind and the Almighty God, Jesus Christ appeared, full of both grace *and* truth. The conflict was not left to burn on its own. It was not avoided and left to smolder underground. It was faced directly by the courage of the Lamb and the vulnerability of the Lion.

For consideration:

1. Describe your personal response to conflict within a range of deliberate avoidance to provocative pleasure. How do your own experiences of conflict inform and shape your own posture?
2. How do you perceive the role of a pastor in dealing with conflict in a church community? How might you appropriately and pastorally balance a desire for unity with a desire for biblical and doctrinal correctness?
3. Describe the conflicts your ministry context has faced, both historically and currently. How has its history affected its approach to conflict in the present? Reflect on what might need to be addressed immediately and what might need to be addressed long term. Imagine how you might engage these needs.

The Dilemma of Competing Values

Jesus is described as being full of both grace *and* truth—uniquely and perfectly so. That balance remains an ideal for everyone else, for whom “grace” and “truth” are often competing values. Some espouse all grace and only grace; some are all about truth and only truth. But Christians do not have the option of choosing one or the other. Christians are obliged to hold grace and truth together in healthy tension. This follows the creational pattern of activity and rest: seemingly opposite, yet both necessary and interdependent. Likewise the creational pattern of inhaling and exhaling: one cannot choose between the two; they are interdependent and essential, yet opposites.

When a pair of interdependent, essential, and competing values are not held in healthy tension—when a choice is made for one or the other—polarization results. Polarization is a familiar and unhappy dynamic that seeps relentlessly into our lives and surrounds us as we consider issues such as morality or all things political. Polarization clusters and separates people into opposing camps with very little room for dialogue, listening, learning, and transformation together.

Truth and grace, tradition and innovation, individual health and communal health, caring for those inside the church and for those outside the church—these are examples of pairs of competing values that are interdependent, essential, and incomplete without each other. When competing values like these are viewed as problems to be solved rather than differences to be managed, polarization results.

Flourishing ministry requires holding these competing value pairs in healthy tension, speaking to each other, pulling and pushing and engaging with each other every step of the way. Competing values need each other.

For a deeper dive into this topic, consider the book *Managing Polarities in Congregations*.⁸ The authors identify and explore eight polarities found in every congregational setting.

For consideration:

1. Identify some competing values within yourself and reflect on your own tendencies to lean in a particular direction. How might you need to manage your own inclinations?
2. Reflect on the content and style of your preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. How are you balancing the competing yet interdependent values of grace and truth in your work? Is this more a testimony to the balance within yourself or a response to the inclinations of your ministry setting? Explain.
3. Identify some polarity pairs you see in your current ministry setting and reflect on how they are being managed, helpfully or not.

⁸ Roy M. Oswald and Barry Johnson, *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

Ministry Firsts

In every minister's life there are a great many firsts: first communion, first baptism, first profession of faith or confirmation, first funerals, first weddings, first hospital visits, first Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter . . .

Any of these moments is an occasion for many questions and wonderings. How has this been done in the past? What significant pieces of tradition—in the church more broadly or in a particular ministry setting—need to be affirmed and continued? Are there ways in which your own person and ministry should stretch, enhance, or challenge these traditions? To put it simply, what do we need to keep, and what traditions might benefit from helpful and hopeful innovation?

Doing anything for the first time is filled with learning. We enter into very specific moments imbued with a great deal of history—specific patterns, expectations, weight, anticipation, and consequence—and we do so as a pastor for the first time. These are moments when the intersection of person, role, and context are especially real, dynamic, and rich.

What follows are two sample modules for ministry firsts. You may wish to have a conversation to explore other ministry firsts. As with all the mentoring modules, it may be helpful to consider each of the three circles of calling as you reflect.

Funerals

A funeral has so many dimensions: loss, grief, thanksgiving, humility, and worship of the One so much greater than we are. Funerals call us to frame our experience in the hope that the gospel of Jesus gives to human beings and indeed the whole creation. There are so many swirling emotions, including regrets, lament, poignant remembering, laughter, and gratitude.

There is the challenge of articulating, simply and deeply, how the story of the deceased person's life was anchored, illuminated, and meaningful in the Story that Scripture tells. Pastors must demonstrate the link between God and God's imagebearers.

There are formal prayers and readings that can be helpful. There are also opportunities to personally craft rich, warm, and substantial prayers.

Every community has its own rituals that carry deep and often unarticulated weight, and those need to be respected. But there is also a great deal of freedom to be creative and even playful as you help the community work through the reality of death, loss, and grief while holding on to the Christian faith.

For consideration:

1. Regarding death and funerals, what do you wish you knew more about? What uncertainties are dancing in your mind and heart?
2. Reflect on the ways in which your own emotions and your own way of conducting yourself may be tied to your personal history and experiences.
3. How might your role be guiding you, and how might your role potentially be overriding your true self? How will you navigate being both pastor and person?
4. What traditions, rituals, and patterns surrounding the loss of a life and the funeral service have you noticed in your context? What do you find surprising? What questions come to mind? How will your person and theology intersect with this community in these situations?

The Lord's Supper

A core pastoral privilege is the administration of sacraments. Frequency and level of formality vary a great deal from setting to setting.

The Lord's Supper has been at the center of Christian gathering and worship since Christ Jesus was with the disciples in the upper room. And the Supper as we know it has roots going back even further, into the story of God's people leaving Egypt and later gathering at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Navigating traditions, imagining innovations, and adding personal touches all require a great deal of thoughtfulness. Within the Christian Reformed Church's history, simply moving from using a common cup to individual cups was deeply controversial. Closed versus open communion, children at the Lord's table, and variations in the manner of serving and receiving communion have all been matters of conversation and controversy in local settings.

This is perhaps the most significant example of a core pastoral privilege intersecting with a core practice of the gathered community, and the people in a community probably have deep feelings and convictions they may not even be aware of or fully understand and which they perhaps have never articulated. At times these deep feelings and convictions translate into perceptions about pastors and the role pastors play within a community. When administering sacraments, a pastor is placed in an especially visible mediating position.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on your own sense of privilege in being called to administer this sacrament. Describe what you find exhilarating, surprising, and perhaps daunting. Explore why you feel what you do.
2. Reflect on the authority and responsibility that accompany this privilege. Describe what you find daunting, weighty, and perhaps invigorating. Explore why you feel what you do.
3. What traditions, rituals, and patterns about this sacrament have you noticed in this community? What surprises you? What questions are forming in your heart and mind? Describe and reflect on how this sacrament functions in the life of this community.

The Intersection of Pastoral and Organizational Leadership

There can be quite a difference between what a pastor imagines his or her work will be and what a pastor discovers the work entails.

A pastor may aspire to a vocation that includes significant reading, reflection, prayer, sermon preparation, and meaningful pastoral conversations. The reality may include seemingly endless meetings, administrative details, and attending to dynamics within the staff, church council, and ministerial team. In short, organizational leadership demands an immense amount of time and energy, leaving so much less for the kind of pastoral leadership to which one was called.

And when there happen to be concerns about a church's trajectory—membership, attendance, changing demographics, a changing neighborhood, finances, volunteer burnout—the focus on organizational health tends to increase. Directly and indirectly, pastors can feel that pressure and also the expectations arising out of real trends, real numbers, and real anxieties.

There is a temptation then, to *do* something: Initiate. Create. Make happen.

Do: that's common sense.

But *what* to do? That's a matter of wisdom.

What might it look like to trust the truth of grace?

For consideration:

1. Describe the ways in which your experience of the pastoral vocation does and does not match what you imagined. How is this affecting your sense of calling? How is this affecting your wellbeing?
2. Reflect on the expectations that accompany the role of minister of the Word. Describe the ways in which you find yourself responding to the expectations you have for yourself and the expectations others have for you.
3. Reflect on the anxieties that are present within your community. Note the expectations that exist and describe those that are being generated. How might these be addressed meaningfully and redemptively?
4. How will you navigate the swirling, urgent expectations that seem to squeeze out, minimize, distract from, or redefine your sense of pursuing gospel ministry?

Feedback and Teachability

Every ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church is accountable to the council of a calling church. The council supervises a pastor in areas of doctrine, life, and duties. But how supervision is envisioned and implemented can vary from congregation to congregation.

Altogether, there can be a great deal of intrigue! Because a pastor is often viewed as the leader within a church—a spiritual leader with years of theological training—council members may be reluctant to exercise its supervisory role. On the other hand, some councils are quite willing to supervise to the point of micromanaging the pastor whom they have called, yes, but also hired.

Similarly, there are some pastors quite unwilling to be supervised at all and others who willingly submit to being held accountable by a supervising council.

Within these extremes, the dynamics of supervision are really all about giving and receiving feedback. Councils are called to provide formal feedback. Congregation members, in various informal ways, provide feedback as well. And pastors are called to be open to it.

Some feedback will be positive and encouraging—truthful grace.

Some feedback will be challenging and perhaps even painful; hopefully this is graceful truth.

Not all those who provide feedback are subject-matter experts. But feedback presumes that discernment is a communal dynamic and that humility is a core value.

For consideration:

1. Describe the ways in which you receive formal feedback from your council. Reflect on the ease of that process for your council and on the value of that process for you.
2. Describe the ways in which you receive informal feedback from church members on the ways you fulfill your role. Reflect on the ways this has affected your functioning as pastor, for better or worse.
3. Describe the ways in which you invite feedback from other people. Reflect on your own level of longing for affirmation. Reflect on your own level of wincing after receiving criticism. What is going on inside of you?
4. How teachable are you? How do you demonstrate teachability? With whom do you sort through the feedback you receive?

Boundary Keeping: Intimacy

It is a great pastoral privilege to be engaged with folks at significant moments in their lives: when children are born and when they are struggling with health; when marriages begin and when marriages struggle; when faith blossoms and when faith fumbles for traction; when there are moments of great gain or moments of great loss.

Pastors meet with others in moments that are sometimes painful, sometimes precious, and often filled with vulnerability—moments when people pull aside their veils of protection and allow a pastor to engage them quite intimately. There are moments of confession, of emotion, of need and longing, of frustration—in short, moments when interpersonal boundaries have been lowered and when more than ever certain boundaries must be respected. Respecting boundaries is a vital pastoral responsibility that accompanies the privilege of being afforded entry into intimate conversation.

Part of boundary keeping includes resisting the instinctive urge to share personal stories. The intimacy of a parishioner confiding in a pastor does not require additional fuel.

What makes boundary keeping particularly challenging is the potential for the personal neediness of both parishioner and pastor to unwittingly find its way into the regular dynamic of a pastor-parishioner interaction. Pastoral intelligence includes a growing awareness of how this dynamic, often called “transference and countertransference,” is affecting ministry relationships.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the privilege of others allowing you into the privacy of their deep thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Describe the ways in which the stories that others share connect with and call out facets of your own experience and story. How might this be helpful? How might this be problematic?
2. Describe the paradoxical dynamic of boundaries simultaneously being lowered and needing to be respected. How can you ensure that pastoral responsibility will sufficiently protect both the parishioner and yourself?
3. Reflect on expectations and practices in your current context that are helpful or unhelpful in navigating pastoral care relationships. How might you build awareness of these issues but also encourage the trust necessary for parishioners to confide in you?

Boundary Keeping: Confidentiality

Leaders within the church—particularly pastors—end up knowing more than they really want to. There are moments when people act badly, when hurtful things are spoken, when deep and longstanding frictions flare. These are times when pastors can be taken aback by the presence and experience of vicious venom.

These moments may happen in the course of pastoral care conversations, communications from those who are hurting, angry, and lashing out, or in the course of meetings—often behind closed doors. While conflict can provide opportunity for meaningful conversation, it can also produce harsh and hurtful words that have the capacity to destroy.

Knowing the dark and difficult things people are struggling with can be daunting. There is a weightiness to knowing more of a person's story than what that person presents in public. There is a weightiness to knowing more of the underbelly of the church even as one is called to be a hopeful leader.

Beyond the hard things, of course, there are many other kinds of information that a pastor is privy to, some of which are interesting, amusing, and even joyful!

In all of these possible situations, pastors may be tempted to share information. But there is the matter of confidentiality. Ordination vows call attention to the importance of holding things in confidence. Parishioners must be able to trust that what is said in confidence stays in confidence!

For consideration:

1. Reflect on how witnessing unhealthy, hurtful behaviors affects you personally as a follower of Jesus. How might this affect you over time?
2. Describe the ways in which you may find it challenging to maintain confidentiality with both incidental information and more weighty matters. Imagine how you might be able to both maintain confidentiality and have the opportunity to be debriefed and to process.
3. Describe an occasion when either you or someone close to you (e.g., a spouse or child) has been directly or indirectly tested with respect to information they might know because you shared a confidential matter. How challenging is it for your leadership group to keep confidence? How might this be addressed meaningfully?

Boundary Keeping: Self-Awareness and Self-Discipline

Paying attention to boundaries of various kinds is a prominent feature of pastoral ministry. There is the matter of confidentiality in pastoral care: pastors are privy to much sensitive information that they must hold respectfully and carefully, providing safety for the always significant other. There is the challenge of managing one's own information carefully so as not to share inappropriately, be it in one-on-one conversation, in meetings, or from the pulpit.

And then there is the ongoing stress of facilitating conversations and the effort of being a calm presence at the junction where many relationships intersect and where many differences and conflicts are encountered. This is particularly notable in a polarized culture and increasingly polarized church settings. Monitoring our engagement so that it is helpful requires tending boundaries almost non-stop, a demanding and exhausting task.

Thankfully, because pastors have so much discretionary time with little direct supervision, there is also opportunity for pleasant diversions—a healthy change of pace or break from the work at hand. But while this can be a healthy infusion of play, food, drink, or internet surfing/research, it can also be a nasty offroad leading to unhealthy addictions of many kinds, including alcohol, gaming, and pornography.

This is about attending to boundary keeping in our own lives.

The challenges here are far deeper than merely the use of time. Unmet needs, untended dynamics, the challenge and stress of dealing with conflict—any number of pressures can lead to emptiness that desires filling and boundaries that are minimized. This is about self-awareness and self-discipline.

For consideration:

1. How attentive are you to your own level of weariness, exhaustion, and powerlessness? What are the signs that alert you to excessive wear and tear in your own being, both as a person and as a pastor?
2. Describe the ways in which you find relief, a pleasant diversion from the weight of stressors and distractions. With whom do you share these needs, either in conversation or by way of shared experiences?
3. How does your leadership group (council) encourage you and help you to sustain a healthy body, soul, and mind?
4. Have you identified someone to be the “first phone call” for that moment when you are aware that your own boundary keeping is being threatened because of pressure from others or because of your own frailty?

Significant Others: Friends, Family, Loved Ones

Pastors are the persons who are called, ordained, and accountable to the church. Sometimes pastors are single. Sometimes pastors are married. Either way has both benefits and drawbacks.

Single pastors will need to navigate questions and wonderings about their singleness as well as attempts to “altar” their situation. By definition single pastors must navigate their aloneness and level of need for interaction with others.

Married pastors will need to navigate assumptions from parishioners about the wellbeing of their marriage as well as varying levels of support, encouragement, and direction from their spouses. Some spouses are resentful of the demands of ministry; others seem to be the de facto pastors, calling the shots and setting the standards. Either way, extreme dynamics such as these can affect pastors as they engage in ministry. Whether single or married, and with or without children, a pastor’s personal or home life, for better or for worse, can affect the quality of ministry. These dynamics can be exceptionally challenging for councils in their role of supervising a pastor.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on how your marital status affects you for better and for worse. Describe the level of engagement, support, or outside influence you might need, and relate that to what you experience.
2. How does your at-home self compare to or contrast with your ministerial self?
3. How does your singleness or your marriage affect the ways in which you fulfill your pastoral role? How does your status as a clergy person affect the way in which you carry yourself?
4. Reflect on expectations and assumptions you experience in your ministry context related to your marriage or to your singleness. Describe the boundaries that may or may not exist between your ministry work and your home life in this context.
5. If you have children, how do their persons and presence affect your ministry? How might you help them navigate their position as children of the pastor?

Significant Others: Pastoral Peers

Pastoral ministry is complex and intriguing, filled with paradoxes. It is exhilarating but exhausting. Pastors are every bit as ordinarily and wonderfully human as parishioners, yet pastors are set apart by ordination as somewhat “other.” Pastors live in communities as though they belong and will stay forever, yet pastors do not quite belong in the way others do and usually will move on after a time. Pastors connect the human and the divine: they call attention to the presence of God, the way of God, and the words of God when they are not always obvious to the human eye or ear or heart. This pastoral task is both painful and tender; it is work and play; it transpires in public settings and in intimate settings.

Researcher Matt Bloom notes that “significant others” in the lives of pastors are vital for thriving and also points to the key role that “similar others” play.⁹ These “others” provide a shared understanding of life in pastoral shoes, a capacity to be wise guides, and a voice that affirms another’s vocational call, and in some instances they serve as exemplars.

Development of pastoral intelligence and the cultivation of wisdom by way of mutually respectful relationships with significant and similar others is key. Such relationships are a necessary oasis in what otherwise can become a “desert experience.”

It is utterly essential for pastors to connect with other pastors because other pastors “get it.” They know the wonderful and painful dynamics of ministry. They know the tension and turmoil and thrill.

For consideration:

1. Describe the person(s) you see in the mirror. Reflect on the challenges of being fully human as a friend, a spouse, a parent, a son or daughter, a pastor, and an imagebearer of God.
2. Reflect on the challenges you experience in the role of pastor and whether you are able to take off the “clerical collar” when not on duty. There are things to love and be grateful for, and there are things that exasperate. Reflect on the paradoxes of ministry.
3. Identify those you know to be significant and similar “others.” How do you build the opportunity for collegial relationships and conversation into your life? How do you minister to the subversive loneliness that can come with the profession and affect a pastor’s mental health?

⁹ Matt Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry: How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Wisdom for Navigating Transition

From the moment life begins to the moment it ends, every human being is in transition. From single cell to day of birth, from first steps and first words to developing, maturing, aging, and dying, life is about loss and growth, growth and loss. There is no fixed-in-stone reality. Even the creation develops, ages, and groans with loss or gain.

So too does the church of Jesus develop, grow, mature, experience loss, and need to navigate transitions. Sometimes we experience polarizing tendencies, with some inclined to maintain traditions and some inclined to innovate. Sometimes these tendencies are posed as an either/or, but in reality, they are both/and. It is always wise to ask what we need to firmly hold on to, and it is always wise to ask what needs refreshment and innovation. To ask only one of those questions is a recipe for unhealthy division. To ask both questions is an invitation to conversation and an on-ramp for pastoral wisdom.

When we navigate transitions and experience change, there are gains and there are losses. There is anticipation and joy, and there is grief and regret. Both experiences are true, and both need acknowledgment. Both the need for change and the fear of change can incite passion and heat. Ideally, differing voices will speak to and with each other, respectfully holding each other in a tension that is healthy and dynamic.

For consideration:

1. Identify some ways in which you have experienced or are experiencing transitions in your own person, and reflect on what you are learning.
2. Reflect on your understanding of how the role of pastor can or should intersect with or function within a community wrestling with transition. Describe the ways you, as a pastor, wrestle with frameworks of either/or as well as both/and. How do you manage the interplay of your inner conversation/perspectives and your external clerical leadership role?
3. Describe the ways in which your community has navigated transitions, and identify some of the ways they may have polarized on matters of tradition and innovation. How does your ministry context reckon with the call to reflect Jesus as one who was full of both grace and truth?

When Stories Are Told

Stories are always told from a certain perspective. When we tell our personal story, or when churches and pastors tell their stories in the profiles prepared for pastoral search processes, there are usually three basic vantage points: hero, victim, and villain. The hero perspective tells of one's good and honorable intentions and actions. The victim perspective tells of woundedness and injustice. The villain perspective tells of the ways in which one contributes to brokenness and mess.

A healthy individual, church community, or organization knows its story and can tell it with all three of these perspectives intersecting and meshing. As a spouse, for example, I can extol my virtues, identify ways in which I have been hurt, and own my moments of overt ugliness and silent sabotage. The story is incomplete unless all three vantage points are included.

It can be interesting and instructive to pay attention to the ways in which we tell our stories, noting the differences in how we do that with various others and with God. It can also be both interesting and instructive to pay attention to the different ways we tell our stories as pastors when we are in the company of other pastors, in a council meeting, speaking to our congregations, or talking to God. Depending on whom we are with, our stories can take on subtle or even seismic shifts.

In general, we are much more adept at telling our stories from the vantage point of a well-intentioned hero or aggrieved victim than we are at telling our stories from the vantage point of a villain. Perhaps this has to do with the necessary challenge of self-examination required to recognize and own the ways in which we contribute to what is broken or dysfunctional.

For consideration:

1. Describe the perspective from which you generally tell your own personal story. Reflect on differences that may occur when you tell your story to family, friends, strangers, or God. What accounts for these differences?
2. How do you integrate self-awareness into the pastoral role—as preacher, as teacher, and as a member of council? Reflect on the way you function at leadership meetings. When do you sense yourself tilting towards a particular vantage point?
3. How does your ministry community know and tell its story? How did the community tell its story to you during the pastoral search process? Do they allow you to function as a pastor-person who is hero, victim, and villain all together? Explain.

Pastoral Care: The Intersection of Our Stories and God's Story

Pastoral care occurs at the place where personal and community stories intersect with the Story that Scripture tells. These stories do not intersect as equals. Human stories are anchored by, framed by, and find meaning within God's larger, longer, and deeper story.

In telling God's story and telling our own stories, pastors spend a great deal of time attending to the ways in which stories are told. If it can be instructive to listen for the narrator's perspective in telling a story, then it seems important to also listen to Scripture with an ear for how it tells the story of God and God's relationship to the created cosmos.

How rounded is the theology we preach and teach? How do we integrate the different vantage points as we tell "the old, old story," whether in preaching, teaching, or pastoral care?

A particular temptation for pastors is to see oneself primarily in the heroic role (see p. 39), providing answers to life's hard questions, providing clear articulation of doctrine and Scriptural teaching, and leading with confidence. The temptation to elevate our own status within God's story can come from within but be strengthened by the expectations and hopes that others project. When our heroic delusions meet others' illusions about the pastor as hero, a recipe for unhealthy expectations and practices is born.

Further, when there is an expectation of a pastor to readily and competently navigate spiritual concerns with others, there can also be a surprising pressure on a pastor to navigate these same spiritual concerns within him/herself. Keeping the public person and the private person in some kind of healthy sync is important.

For consideration:

1. Reflect on the suggestion that when Scripture tells the story of God and the creation in relationship, we might benefit from listening for all three narrative perspectives (hero, victim, villain). What are the benefits and drawbacks of such an exercise?
2. Consider the ways in which you both know and tell your story as someone in the role of pastor and simply as a person. Describe any differences you observe and explore the reasons for those differences.
3. Why might a ministry community or church expect a pastor to be a heroic presence? Explore the possible consequences of this expectation for a pastor, a church, and the pastor as a person.
4. How might listening for narrative perspectives bless the ministry of pastoral care in terms of both what one hears and what one might offer in response?

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