

# **Dimensions of Pastoral Authority**

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After intense years of study and sacrifice, he turned in his last seminary papers. The master of divinity diploma is framed, ready for hanging. Behind him also are the yearly meetings with the denominational committee whose interrogations earnestly and prayerfully sought to discern his fitness for ordained ministry. After all the affirmative votes were counted, a worship service was held in which he made promises so large they could only truthfully be answered, "I will, with the help of God." Hands heavy with hope were laid upon his head and a stole was placed around his shoulders. Now called to serve his first congregation, his mail begins to arrive with the title "Rev" on the address label. The word "pastor" is printed beside his name on the church's signboard outside on the street corner and in the Sunday morning bulletin. He climbs the worn steps to the pulpit on his first Sunday and breathes a sigh of relief, believing he has, finally, fully arrived. In his first small attempt to begin to make a mark on this congregation's life, he had replaced the ink sketch of the church's building on the front cover of the worship bulletin with a graphic that illustrated his sermon topic. Immediately following the service, as he shakes hands with the members of his new church, more than one asks with concern what other changes he plans to make. Deflated and baffled, the new pastor wonders what, if anything, he has done wrong, and what this might mean for his future in ministry with this congregation.

This illustration is not an isolated incident. My experience in the past three years working with nearly 80 new clergy—both as the coordinator of a pastoral residency program at the Wellesley Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, and as the associate for new clergy development for the Massachusetts Conference, UCC—has revealed that nearly all new pastors have some more or less dramatic version of this story to tell from their first encounters with their congregations. Only recently, however, as first-call pastors have come together in small groups designed for their reflection and support, have they begun to recognize this experience as common and to see in it an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of what it means to become a congregation's pastor. The conversation often settles on exploring the meaning of "pastoral authority." We have come to see that pastoral authority is not just one thing. It has several dimensions, which I have come to name as granted, earned, claimed, borrowed, and shared.

### **Pastoral Authority as Granted**

There are some denominations, and certainly there are congregations, in which the authority of the pastor is more naturally assumed—where, for example, the congregation grants a pastor permission to make changes or decisions on his or her own. The truth, which remains largely unspoken, however, in seminary classrooms, in the process toward ordination, and by local church search committees (even by those who claim they are looking for strong pastoral leadership), is that in most places very little authority is simply granted to pastors new to a congregation.

There may be many reasons why a congregation would feel hesitant to immediately grant such authority. Much has been written already about how the status of the church has shifted in our current culture. The church, after all, does not hold the same honored place in civic life that it did even a generation ago. It follows that the pastor does not either. Though the church building may still sit on the center of the town green, the church and its pastor now rarely reside at the center of influence in a community's life.

I am convinced that gender, age, and a congregation's history also play a role. Although the number of ordained women has increased exponentially in recent years, it is still true, though thankfully not everywhere, that congregations are often slower to grant female pastors authority. Young pastors are also often granted less authority than second-career clergy, though their number of years in ministry may be similar. Congregations who have had a healthy relationship with a previous pastor may be willing to grant authority more easily. Churches that have suffered a breach of trust in relation to a former pastor will naturally grant a new pastor less authority.

One of the most important factors in how much authority a congregation grants is theological. One of the central tenants of the faith and polity in churches of the Reformed tradition is the "priesthood of all believers." Our fundamental commitment to this Protestant doctrine makes us wary of an understanding of ordination that marks a distinction in status or substance, elevating someone above others. Each congregation is a priesthood of believers, which has a life that is more than a mere collection of individuals. It has a history of defining moments, traditions it holds as sacred, aspirations it yearns to achieve, practices that reach to the core of its identity, and a faith that may be expressed in its own peculiar way. "The priesthood of all believers" does not mean that the congregation will not recognize the calling and priesthood of the pastor, but the role of the pastor needs to be defined in relation to the particularity of the congregation he or she has been called to serve.

Congregational consultant and author Roy Oswald has repeatedly advised any pastor new to a congregation to begin by becoming a historian of a congregation's life and to take time to discover its norms and values before jumping in to making changes.<sup>1</sup> In response to the concern raised when he changed the bulletin cover on his first Sunday, John Hamilton, the new pastor of First Congregational Church, UCC in Norwood, Massachusetts, did two things. He immersed himself in reading the archives of his new church, and reflected back to the congregation in sermons and meetings what he was learning. He also established the practice of inviting church members one by one to have coffee with him at a local café. Following a predecessor who had served this church for more than thirty years, John understood how important it was for him to get to know as fully as possible the congregation who had called him.

By contrast, however, many new clergy are so eager to use and prove their gifts that it is often only after they have made missteps in leadership—and perhaps even alienated their first congregation—that they realize their actions could be perceived as less than respectful. When a new pastor revamped the church school after hearing dissatisfaction with the former curriculum but without discovering what parents and children had appreciated about the old way of doing things, she later recognized that it was difficult for members who had poured their energies into the former program not to feel criticized by the dramatic change. This was true even though it was a successful shift by any other account. When another new pastor began his ministry by rearranging the

parts of the worship service into an order his seminary had taught was more theologically sound (without first engaging the congregation in conversation), committed members of the church no longer felt that worship was in their voice. For them, it was no longer “liturgy,” the work of the people, and some long-time members began to leave.

### **Pastoral Authority as Earned**

Another word for pastoral authority is trust. Very little of a congregation’s trust is simply granted. Mostly it is earned. As a pastor consistently—day to day, Sunday to Sunday—leads worship faithfully, offers care compassionately, affirms the gifts of others, equips members for ministry, and assists the congregation in making wise and faithful decisions, she earns their confidence. Pastoral authority that is granted focuses on the pastoral office; pastoral authority that is earned has more to do with one’s character, with the congregation’s observations of the pastor’s behavior, and with relationships—not only the pastor’s relationships with individuals but also his or her relationship with the congregation as a whole.

It takes time to build trust, lots of time. Even after many years of serving the same church, this trust, which is essential for a congregation and pastor to accomplish anything together, can rarely be merely assumed. The work of building rapport and nurturing relationships, of considering who else needs to be involved in the conversation and in making decisions goes on continuously. Attentive pastors quickly learn that patience is an important pastoral virtue.

So is love. When a congregation knows that their pastor loves and respects them, trust grows. After serving for a year as a pastoral resident at the Wellesley Congregational Church, Nicole Lamarche remarked that one of the things she knows now that she didn’t know when she started ministry is that “first and foremost my job is to love the congregation that has been given to my care. All of the other pieces of ministry are almost meaningless without this. Certainly my call to be prophetic will fall on deaf ears without the love.”

The pervasiveness of conflict in church life comes as a surprise to many new clergy. Over time, wise pastors come to see conflict not only as inevitable but also as a potentially creative dynamic. Members of the congregation watch how a pastor interacts with viewpoints different from her own and how she copes with emotionally charged situations. Whether she reacts defensively in anger or calmly and thoughtfully can mean the difference between resolving a conflict and causing it to escalate. When arguments erupt, it is incumbent on the pastor to be one of the people in the room exhibiting the least anxiety. Staying centered and connected even when tempers flare contributes enormously to helping gather the trust of a congregation.

Emotional maturity is an essential pastoral quality, not only for engaging in conflict but also in every interaction a pastor has with his congregation. Every pastor loses some battles. Losing them with grace sets a tone for the whole congregation. Loving every member of the congregation, even those who are the hardest to love, is an important part of pastoral identity. It is also a powerful Christian witness.

### **Pastoral Authority as Claimed**

Recognizing the difference between a decision that a pastor has the authority to make and one that the congregation needs to consider is a skill that comes with experience,

sometimes after many trials and errors. Often it depends on the style and practice of a particular congregation. There are times, however, when a pastor needs to step in and claim the authority of the office to which she has been called.

When a premarital couple becomes mired in the details of creating a show as a bride and groom, it is the pastor's role to step in and recover the wedding as a worship service, an expression of covenant commitment and God's own faithfulness to us. When a bereaved family becomes overwhelmed by trying to incorporate into a service all the people who have something to say about their lost loved one, it is the pastor's role to claim the funeral as first and foremost an assurance of the promises of God. When a congregation is lost in conflict, with members focused on trying to convert one another to their own points of view, it is the pastor's role to guide the church into a process in which members can instead discern God's point of view together.

Sometimes claiming such authority calls for courage. For months, one congregation wrestled mightily over whether or not to become open and affirming of gay and lesbian people. Members who normally got along relatively well were locked in heated debate and became very upset with one another. Insults were exchanged and people lost their ability to listen to one another. In all this time, the church's pastor never told the congregation where his own faith called him to stand. He was concerned that if he did so it would sway the congregation one way or another, and some would criticize him. The problem is that they were already divided and there was no one who was providing direction. Although the pastor was earnestly trying to be respectful by serving as a disinterested peacemaker, I believe he neglected to claim the authority that was his call to claim and that his church needed him to claim. The congregation flailed around in the dark, while the person charged with the responsibility to help them interpret the Gospel and to listen prayerfully for the leading of the Holy Spirit, the one holding the flashlight, neglected to turn it on.

Congregations do rely on their pastors to set a loving tone, to discern the right questions, to offer a thoughtful perspective, and to shed a glimmer of light in the midst of confusion. This does not mean that the pastor always knows what to say or do. But every pastor needs to claim from within him- or herself the authority that comes from a clear sense of calling to ministry in and on behalf of the church. While it is a call to lead, it is not a call to have all the answers. Sometimes stating loud enough for everyone to hear that the way is not yet clear is a deeply faithful answer. There are occasions when saying "we need to pray about this" is even more so. And when a pastor thinks she might have the answer, or is sure she does, this is the time when she needs to be especially attentive to which kind of authority she is speaking from and how she is being heard. Is she merely offering her own opinion? Is she amplifying voices in the congregation who may not otherwise be heard? Is she allowing room for other perspectives that may be just as faithful as her own? Most importantly, the pastor's role is continually to bring God into the room, to bring the resources of the Christian faith to bear on the congregation's life, and to help the congregation listen for God's guidance.

### **Pastoral Authority as Borrowed**

The greatest source of pastoral authority, then, is not granted by a particular congregation or earned by personal integrity. It is borrowed from the Christian tradition, from the

church, from the Gospel, and from Jesus himself. In fact, it is safe to say that all other forms of pastoral authority are derivations of this one.

John Thomas, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, puts it this way: Understanding that ordination “is the authority conferred by the church to represent the ministry of the whole people of God... reminds us that ministry in general and ordination in particular belong to the church and not to the individual.” Pastoral authority is a “conferred authority that is, in a sense, ‘on loan’ to the individual.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the power of borrowed authority is exhibited most clearly when there is a death in the congregation or the community. At such a time people look to the pastor to be the one to offer some good news. It is not the preacher’s eloquent words, however, that mean the most to them. It is the Word that comes from God, the Word that carries God’s presence and comfort in grief, and God’s promise of eternal life. By this borrowed or representative authority, pastors are invited to be the ones to bless others at funerals and bedsides, at baptisms and weddings, and to stand in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday serving as a point of intersection between our human longing for God and God’s desires for our lives.

While carrying such authority is itself a blessing and an awesome responsibility, it can also sometimes feel like a burden. As one new pastor realized after one of her first encounters with a member of her congregation, “clergy can be a lightning rod for a lot of things.” The day after she had invited her congregation in prayer to come before God “holding the *New York Times* in one hand and the Bible in the other, fully aware of all the troubles and burdens in the world,” she received an irate e-mail message from an angry parishioner who took her *Times* reference to be an endorsement of the newspaper’s editorial viewpoint. In reflecting on this experience with her peer support group of other new clergy, she came to see that “people project onto you all kinds of things simply because you are a pastor.” Every pastor receives many kinds of criticism and praise. Only some of either actually have anything to do with them.

Most pastors would do well to remember that their ordination is not their possession. It is an authority that the church has loaned to them as a trust to be held with reverence and great humility. Because pastors are permitted, by virtue of their role, very privileged access into people’s lives, their intentions must be honorable, their speech and actions respectful. Pastors hold the safety and well-being of the church and its members and are called to make themselves into safe harbors, worthy of the confidence others place in them.

### **Pastoral Authority as Shared**

The final form of pastoral authority brings us back to where we began, with the priesthood of all believers. No matter how remarkable or well-rounded the gifts of a particular pastor may be, ministry is always a communal project. It is the work of the people, not just the pastor. Offering care to the members of the congregation, for example, is not simply something the pastor is called to do. Rather, the role of the pastor is to care for the whole congregation in ways that enable all the members to recognize that caring for one another is their common calling. Similarly, it is not the pastor’s work to set the agenda or to determine the vision for the congregation. Instead, it is the pastor’s role to work with the congregation to create an environment in which members can together

discern God's vision for them and take the risks to which God is calling them. Our apprehension of God's work in the world is made richer when there is room for the experiences of all the gathered to find expression. God's realm comes closer when the gifts of all the faithful are acknowledged and nurtured and used.

Ultimately, ministry is a gift that God shares with us. The church is given its calling and its tasks by God, who boldly places faith in us. Ministry is our response to God's extravagant grace. Excellent ministry, then, is less about anything we ourselves might accomplish on our own and more about what God is able to do through us as pastors and congregations together.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Oswald, Roy. James Heath, and Ann Heath, *Beginning Ministry Together: The Alban Handbook for Clergy Transitions* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2003): 64.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Thomas, "Something More: Authorized to Represent" Ministries Issues Convocation, March 7, 2002.

## Reflection Questions

How do the different dimensions of authority operate in your congregation? For instance, how can you know, as a pastor, when you have "earned" authority from the congregation? Or, in what ways do you "share" authority in your setting?

As members of a congregation, how do you honor and validate the authority that your local church and the wider church has conferred on your pastor, and, *at the same time*, claim your mutual role as a priesthood of all believers?

If you are members of a congregation who has called a pastor who is new to ordained ministry, how might your church's role be different than if you called a seasoned pastor? What is your role in helping to establish a relationship of trust and of being formed together in ministry? If you are a pastor new to a congregation, what can you do to build the trust of a congregation?

What implications does understanding ordination as an authority which is "on loan" to you as pastor have on your relationship with your local congregation? With the wider church?

The author identified several virtues that are essential to effective pastoral ministry – love, patience, emotional maturity, courage, and humility. Are there others you would name as essential for you in your context of ministry? As a pastor? As a lay leader within a congregation?