

Conversation Descriptions with Guiding Questions

The Advancing Pastoral Excellence program has been developed with a focus on seven strategic issues for pastoral leadership in the contemporary American church. The Forum on Excellence in Ministry will offer small-group conversations corresponding to these seven themes. We ask you to review the following descriptions, then on the selection form choose the three topics that are the most appealing and relevant to your own ministry. We will enroll you in two discussions and will accommodate your preferences as best we can.

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Calling a New Generation of Pastoral Leaders

Today's children and youth are tomorrow's leaders, and the church must call gifted, visionary young people into God's service to secure a strong future. But there are signs that the church's capacity, perhaps even its *willingness*, to call young people to ministry have waned in recent years. Many initiatives are launching creative efforts to cultivate a new generation of leaders for Christian congregations. Yet little is known about the particular contexts and congregational settings that are most effective in calling forth a new generation of leaders, and the networks of relationships among institutions that engage in this vital work remain weak. Many of the specific initiatives the Lilly Endowment supports have developed excellent understanding and good practices. These insights need to be synthesized so that they can take deeper root in a variety of contexts, and the relationships among these institutions needs to be deepened.

The issue of calling future leaders has wide-ranging implications for Christian ministry. For example, one of the challenges that the church's reliance on second-career clergy has presented is the financial burden on pension funds and on health insurance programs. It has also presented challenges for the number of pastoral leaders needed: if clergy are typically ordained in their mid-forties, then a system will need twice as many pastoral leaders than if typical new candidates are in their mid-twenties. Many theological schools are reporting a surge in younger persons entering seminary, but this does not come without its own complications. A significant number of younger students who come to seminary in their early to mid twenties know that they are "called" but have little denominational or congregational context for that call. This makes the task of educating and forming a new generation of leaders more complicated than in years past when seminaries could count on students having deep roots in congregational life. This underscores the need to build on a variety of institutional connections to encourage "cultures of the call" within congregations, especially linking seminary education with congregations in order to enhance the identification and preparation Christian leaders.

There is a pressing need to identify best practices for calling a new generation of pastoral leaders and supporting them over the long term. Congregational and institutional leaders, as well as younger pastors who have caught a rich vision for ministry, must work together: to articulate the qualities and skills needed for excellence in pastoral leaders; to identify individuals with these gifts; to help congregations and other religious organizations develop "cultures of call;" and to build up networks of leaders and institutions engaged in this work.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) What are the characteristics and gifts of excellent pastoral leaders and how do we recognize these gifts in potential pastors? In other words, how do we identify a new generation of pastoral leaders? Who are we looking for?
- 2) Where do we find individuals with these gifts?
- 3) What encouragement and support do individuals need to explore a call to ministry? What people and organizations are best positioned to provide this support?
- 4) How can congregations and other institutions work together in creating and sustaining a "culture of call?" What support structures are needed to sustain this network?

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Getting Started Well in Pastoral Ministry

Pulpit & Pew research, along with many other studies, has shown that the first five years of pastoral ministry are critical to the longevity of pastoral careers and to the formation of long-term habits for ministry. The drop-out rate is high during those years. If new pastors get started well, they are likely to remain in pastoral ministry. And the better their start, the more likely the habits they establish will enable them to flourish in ministry over time. At the same time, church leaders admit that the structures for supporting new pastors are weak and that new pastors often begin their ministries in difficult parish situations. The result is that most find themselves both geographically and professionally isolated. Many have expressed a lack of strong mentoring relationships with experienced pastors and have limited contact with peers. This poses a critical dilemma for church leaders. During the period in which new pastors develop the leadership habits and spiritual practices that mold the character of their ministries and the course of their careers, they too often receive little or inadequate support. Thus, any discussion of excellence in pastoral ministry must attend to how new pastors form healthy and life-giving habits for ministry during these formative years.

Several fundamental questions need to be addressed. How do pastoral leaders get started well? What needs to happen in the first years of ministry as new pastors make the transition from seminary student to full-time pastoral leader? How do pastors cultivate habits and practices of excellence? What conditions are necessary to enable these pastors to develop healthy leadership habits in congregations and spiritual practices that will sustain excellence in pastoral ministry over time? What is the role of congregations, experienced pastor-mentors, denominational judicatories, and other supporting organizations in creating these conditions?

Several experimental projects supported by the Lilly Endowment and others are testing new approaches and generating fresh insights into these questions. These include: intensive mentoring through congregation-based pastoral residency programs; integrating new pastors into peer learning groups; cultivating congregations that have the intentional vocation of training and launching excellent pastors; and efforts by denominations and religious organizations to build up systems of support for new pastors. These efforts are promising, yet they are still at early stages. Their findings need to be analyzed carefully and translated into broader programs for younger clergy just getting started.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) How do pastoral leaders get started well? What needs to happen in the first years of ministry as new pastors make a transition from seminary student to full-time pastoral leader? How do pastors cultivate habits and practices of excellence during this period?
- 2) What specific challenges do new pastors and their families face as they begin their ministries? Professional? Spiritual? Familial? Financial? Other? How has the context changed? How has it stayed the same?
- 3) What conditions are necessary for new pastors to develop healthy leadership habits in congregations and spiritual practices that will sustain excellence in pastoral ministry over time? What enhances these conditions? What inhibits them?
- 4) What is the role of congregations, experienced pastor-mentors, denominational judicatories, and other supporting organizations in creating these conditions?

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The Pastoral Work of Shaping Communities

It is a central task of pastoral leaders to shape Christian communities to enable faithful Christian living in the world as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign. But what theological concepts and ministry skills equip pastoral leaders to shape such communities of faith? How can and should this practice be focused on the primary place where pastors shape community, the congregation? How are congregations related to other communities of faith that serve a world in need? The necessity for pastoral leaders to take this role might seem obvious, but there are strong cultures of resistance to this type of pastoral leadership as well as to careful theological reflection about the positive significance of congregations. Many American Christians think in individualistic terms and have not experienced community of any kind. Some pastors think their call is only about preaching, administering the sacraments, or one-on-one pastoral care, but they view fostering community as outside their training or pastoral responsibilities. There is much confusion about where pastors learn the art of shaping community: in seminary, from community organizational models, or on their own in the parish? The pastoral practice of shaping communities is thus often neglected in the training, formation, and on-going work of pastoral leadership.

Yet when pastoral leaders do the work of shaping communities well, extraordinary life-giving ministry among congregations is found. Lay leadership is crucial to such communities, and pastoral leadership is indispensable for supporting and enabling effective lay leadership. Furthermore, congregational communities shaped by God's grace, and practicing God's hospitality and justice, become exemplars for other communities needed to bring God's healing to the world.

Despite the importance of this pastoral practice, there has been little systematic attention given to its significance. This attention must be at once deeply theological and immensely practical. The goal of the discussion will be to articulate both the theological significance of **congregating** and the skills that equip people to shape communities well.

Pastors, scholars, and lay people who understand the significance of faith communities for their vocations in the world (e.g., as health care providers, lawyers, teachers, business leaders, etc.) will contribute to this conversation. It will explore the practical-theological dimensions of community and will propose specific action strategies for fostering effective new approaches to strengthen the practice of shaping communities of faith.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) Describe examples of excellent pastoral leaders who are gifted at the practice of shaping communities of faith. How do they do it? What do they look like? What are their practices? What are a few of the concrete ways pastors exercise leadership in these communities?
- 2) Why are theologically rich descriptions of these kinds of congregational communities so rare?
- 3) Why is it so difficult for many pastoral leaders, and those who train and form them in ministry, to see this practice as an essential ingredient of excellent congregational leadership? Where and how does a pastoral leader learn this practice?
- 4) How does this pastoral practice relate to the ministry of all Christians in the world and the other communities necessary for God's work in the world to be realized?

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The Economics of Pastoral Leadership

Economics significantly influence how pastoral leaders define and fulfill ministry. Any consideration of excellence in pastoral ministry, therefore, must address critically important financial issues that are felt by pastoral leaders and their families. It must also attend to more systemic institutional issues that create the conditions in which pastoral work is performed. Several examples illustrate this point. Pulpit & Pew's research found that morale among clergy is generally quite high, but plummets between the ages of 45 and 54. Why? During those years, the clergy, like other Americans, are often focused on paying for their children's college education and preparing for retirement. Yet the project's research found that the earning power of clergy decreases during these years relative to comparable vocations. At the same time, indebtedness among students preparing for ministry has risen significantly in recent years, creating a troubling situation for many newer pastors whose ministries are hampered by high levels of debt. Congregations have not escaped the economic pinch. In the face of rising health care and pension costs, it is increasingly difficult for the average-sized congregation (with around 100 people in weekly worship) to provide the salary for a full-time pastor.

These are challenging and perplexing issues. Some, such as educational debt, have emerged with a new sense of urgency. Many are not new. Even so, we are convinced that these issues must be addressed in order to strengthen pastoral leadership and there are ways to make progress on at least several of the crucial ones. A key first step is to frame the issues theologically as well as economically in order to generate fresh perspectives. A second related step is to distinguish the "perennial" challenges of financing Christian ministry from those conditions that have changed in recent years.

An example of an important framing is this: most conversations about the economics of pastoral leadership begin—and end—with debates about the cash salary of pastors. How much should we pay the pastor? What position does our congregation occupy in the ministry market? These questions, though pressing, may ignore the larger context in which economic questions emerge. We suggest beginning instead with prior theological questions: What is the shape and character of a good, faithful and well-lived life? What material goods and resources are needed to sustain this life? These, of course, are pivotal questions for all Christians. As a Christian community, then, we must ask together what material goods and resources enable a pastor and pastor's family to sustain a well-lived life. Reframing the economic question will enable us to identify multiple sources—both within and beyond congregations—that can contribute to creating and sustaining the material conditions necessary for excellence in pastoral ministry.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) What are the material conditions necessary for creating and sustaining a good, faithful and well-lived pastoral life? What current economic challenges inhibit the practice of excellent pastoral leadership? What helps it flourish?
- 2) What economic forces seem controllable by congregations and religious institutions? What seems beyond our control?
- 3) What economic issues seem to be perennial challenges (meaning that they are issues or tensions that are part of the character of Christian ministry)? What, if anything, is new?
- 4) What challenges can be addressed through creative and collaborative action?

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Nurturing Well-Lived Pastoral Lives

A number of research studies, including the Pulpit & Pew National Pastors Survey, have yielded alarming data about the physical and emotional health of clergy. Congregations and judicatories are experiencing spiraling health costs for pastors and other church workers. Clergy regularly identify a sense of loneliness and isolation as among the greatest barriers to personal and vocational well-being. These problems are related to recent tendencies toward “lone ranger” ministry and also to bureaucratized practices that often discourage the development of friendships and collegiality.

Pastors and theologians, as well as health policy experts and denominational officials, increasingly agree that poor clergy health is not a primary phenomenon but a symptom or manifestation of the dissonance many pastors feel due to the huge demands on their lives. Clergy well-being is thus part of a larger spiritual dis-ease in the church. If we are out of right relationship with the body of the Christian community, we are likely to be alienated from our individual bodies as well. In response, an expanding group of leaders from various institutions seek to address these circumstances by reframing the issues in light of the concept of “a well-lived pastoral life.” A broad hypothesis concerning both the essential elements of such a life and what resources are needed to nurture and sustain it is beginning to emerge.

The theological colloquium of Pulpit & Pew, which informed the writing of Jones and Armstrong’s *Resurrecting Excellence*, raised the theme of “holy friendships,” a theme which has gained wide resonance. Numerous Lilly projects are identifying and developing fruitful strategies for building peer group networks to nurture friendships. Other Christian practices such as sabbath-keeping, prayer, hospitality, and honoring the body are also essential contributors to a well-lived pastoral life. Cultivating such personal and communal practices is a means of accessing the nourishment of the Spirit and recovering a sense of vocational agency, in which there is freedom to improvise and power to make a difference.

Above all, a well-lived pastoral life is best understood not as one isolated from the communities in which pastoral leaders serve, but rather as a life rooted a healthy Christian way of life as practiced by the various communities of which one is a part. Indeed, a well-lived pastoral life best takes place when one is embedded in several overlapping communities of competent shared practice: a congregation living out its faith; a company of other competent pastoral leaders who are friends as well as guides; a family with whom one shares life in all its joys and sorrows, work and leisure, conflict and forgiveness; the civic or public community through which one participates in and contributes to the healing of the world through God’s grace. Concomitant membership in each of these communities of competent shared practice is vital for a truly well-lived pastoral life.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) What do you think are the elements necessary for a well-lived pastoral life?
- 2) What conditions, institutional structures, and systems of support are needed to encourage and assist pastoral leaders in leading well-lived lives?
- 3) Where are there encouraging signs of this work already underway? What must happen to allow more of this work to begin and flourish?
- 4) What steps are we and/or our organizations ready to take that can help nourish well-lived pastoral lives for leaders within our own spheres of influence?

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Evaluation and Placement of Pastoral Leaders

The very terms “evaluation” and “placement” tend to raise defenses and anxiety among clergy. How pastors are evaluated and where they fulfill ministry significantly impact their personal and relational well-being and their vocational satisfaction and effectiveness.

Evaluation and assessment of ministry tend to receive particular attention at three critical junctures. One is at the point of entry into ministry as congregations and judicatories discern ministerial candidates’ suitability for the pastoral role. A second is when a vocational or personal crisis occurs within the pastor. A third is when a change of pastors is being determined. Yet all these junctures are uncertain and emotional times in the life of a minister as well as the life of a congregation. Constructive and balanced reflection is difficult to achieve.

Even regular annual performance reviews, often taking place in the context of budgeting and setting the pastor’s salary, may create anxiety for the pastor and even conflict within the congregation. Formal bureaucratized evaluations may surface or aggravate conflicts between the expectations of the congregation and the pastor’s own self-understanding and expectations.

The personal and vocational health and effectiveness of pastors requires ongoing evaluation that is organic, supportive, and formational. The church needs systems and structures that are grounded and shaped theologically, ecclesiologically, and missionally. The questions asked in evaluations communicate priorities and expectations. For example, one judicatory leader asked pastors and congregations to address the following question: “Where have you seen, and are you seeing, signs of the presence and power of God at work in this pastor’s/congregation’s life?” This was an invitation to think about ministry in theologically evaluative, life-giving ways.

Lay members yearn for theologically wise and spiritually mature leaders; and when clergy think there is a good fit between them and their congregations, they find ministry a highly satisfying vocation. Yet, the yearning for wise and mature leaders is not well articulated, nor is it closely related to how pastoral leaders are evaluated and assessed in their ministry. Clergy are anxious about the ability to find a good fit, either because of a distrust of judicatory leaders charged with making the assignments or because of uncertainty about networks that support a call system.

We believe that it is possible to engage these issues theologically and ecclesially, and create processes of evaluation and placement that will deepen understandings and develop practices that advance excellence among pastors and within congregations. We hope to bring together a mix of seasoned pastoral and judicatory leaders, lay people with experience in assessing ministry, and younger pastors who are new to the possibilities and perils of their evaluation and placement.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) What are the theological issues related to evaluation and placement and how do those issues inform the systems and processes needed for evaluating and placing pastoral leaders?
- 2) How do we foster evaluation systems that are theologically informed, organic, life-giving, and formational?
- 3) What are the factors in the placement of clergy that build trust, fulfill mission, and advance excellence of pastors and congregations?
- 4) What questions best reflect the values, expectations, and gifts inherent in excellent ministry?

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Institutional Leadership for the New Ecology

Pastoral ministry and congregational life depend for their nurture and excellence on a wide range of institutions that are steadfast, imaginative and effective in supporting pastors and congregations. These institutions include local, regional and national denominational judicatories and agencies; theological seminaries; a large number of colleges and universities; many publishing houses; and a host of independent, ecumenical and interfaith organizations that serve pastors and congregations in relation to various needs. These organizations are different in kind from local congregations. While some of them are small in scale, many of them are large and complex. While some serve only local constituencies, many operate across extensive geographical ranges and seek to serve a great many pastors and congregations simultaneously. Some of these organizations specialize in terms of the kinds of services they provide, while others have rather broad mandates. Because these institutions are deeply concerned about and engaged with many issues of profound interest to congregations and their pastors and members, their leadership and staff must be people who care about and understand congregational life intimately. At the same time, because these institutions are so different in character, they require leadership capacities and practices of a different order than those demanded by pastoral ministry at the local level. Many people who move to such leadership positions from pastoral ministry find that to be the case and need assistance in making the transition.

The larger and broader scale religious institutions that serve pastoral ministry and congregational life—and their relations to pastors and local congregations—have been undergoing rapid and dramatic change in recent decades. Some of them are shrinking in size and resources, while others are growing or are newly emerging. The missions, constituencies and services of these organizations can no longer be taken for granted, either by the organizations themselves or by their constituencies and the larger public. At the same time that each of these organizations is changing internally, so too are their relations to other organizations in the larger “ecology” of institutional support for pastoral ministry and congregational life. It is no surprise, then, that the demands on the leaders of these organizations are significant and sometimes overwhelming. Further, there are few places where such leaders can go for the complex kind of training and/or ongoing reflection and support they need in order to be able to deal wisely and effectively with the demands they face. Nor are there many forums where the creative and imaginative work of building and re-building the emerging new ecology of religious institutions that our rapidly changing environment inevitably requires.

Much work needs to be done to analyze the character of the religious organizations that serve pastors and congregations on a broader scale, to understand the leadership capacities and practices required to lead specific organizations of this kind, to imagine and mobilize efforts and energies that will build for the future, and to provide the educational and supportive forums and programs by which such leaders may be enabled to exercise their responsibilities as wisely and creatively as possible.

Questions For Our Conversation:

- 1) What are we learning about both the demands on and the creative new opportunities for broader scale organizations that seek to support and strengthen pastoral ministry?
- 2) What helps these leaders most to conceive and exercise their responsibilities wisely, effectively and imaginatively?
- 3) What effective educational and supportive forums already exist for such leaders? If new ones are needed, what shape might they take?
- 4) What are each of us able and prepared to do?