

Are You Resilient?  
Are You Agile?  
Are You Staying Connected?

Jackson W. Carroll

# LEADERSHIP

## in a Time of Change

In research underway at Harvard, researchers are asking what makes it possible for persons to do good work, by which they mean work that combines both excellence and ethics, work that is both expertly done and socially responsible. They argue that those professionals who are most able to combine expertise with ethics are ones whose work is well aligned with forces in the larger context about them, especially the values and expectations of those who are primary stakeholders in their work.

In a recent book,<sup>1</sup> they compare geneticists with journalists, finding that the values of geneticists are generally well aligned with the values of relevant stakeholders and society more generally. All want the same thing—longer and healthier lives. In contrast, journalism is poorly aligned. What journalists consider as excellent and ethical journalism is often at odds with the financial interests of the corporation media owners and the low-level taste of much of their audience. They conclude that few if any geneticists, but quite a few journalists, would like to leave their respective professions.

Does this perspective apply to ordained ministry? **How well aligned is pastoral ministry with that of the major stakeholders, whether we speak of the public at large, denominational officials who judge our work, or lay members of our congregations?** My guess is that many clergy would say “not very well,” especially when we consider aspects of the broader culture in which the church lives. In a national survey of clergy that we recently undertook for *Pulpit & Pew*, a major research project on pastoral leadership at Duke Divinity School, clergy expressed considerable commitment to their calling and satisfaction with many aspects of their work.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, seventy-four percent of clergy surveyed said that the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel is the major problem that they face today. Other problems reflecting varying degrees of misalignment were also evident in their responses. Here, however, I want to focus primarily on their considerable agreement

about the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel today. What is it about American culture that creates this kind of misalignment? There are striking differences from earlier decades—certainly from the late 1950s when I was ordained. Consider several examples.

### Religious Pluralism

Since 1965, when Congress passed legislation liberalizing immigration requirements, Americans have witnessed an unparalleled growth of religious pluralism. From a nation that was traditionally Christian—or more accurately Protestant Christian—America has now become the world’s most religiously diverse nation. September 11th has forced us to become especially cognizant of Islam, arguably the largest of the non-Christian religions in America. But Islam is only one of many new immigrant groups with which we now share our social, cultural, and religious space. Houston, Texas, for example, traditionally a Bible Belt stronghold, is now one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse cities in the United States, a gateway city for hosts of new immigrants.

As a result of pluralism, the public arena has become increasingly contested as we share fewer common beliefs and practices and as newer immigrants press for public recognition of their holy days and practices. We also experience the impact of new immigrants in our private life. Marriage is an example. When I was growing up, folks took note when a Methodist married a Baptist; now we are witnessing a growing increase in interfaith marriages—Jew marrying Buddhist, Christian marrying Muslim or Hindu. Clergy today have to know a great deal more about the religions of the world if they are to minister to mixed-faith families or work collaboratively with religious leaders from other faith traditions. Clergy also face a growing number of laity who experience pluralism internally as they begin to ask, “Is there anything unique or special about the Christian faith? Are all religions equally true?”

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## Special Purpose Groups

Another example of misalignment is evident in the increase in conflict in denominations and congregations. In the last several decades, we have seen a rapid expansion of special purpose groups—groups that bombard clergy and laity alike with advocacy for various social or doctrinal positions. From conflicts over women's ordination, liberation theology, or doctrinal orthodoxy, to the abortion controversy, to current debates over gay, lesbian and transsexuals, denominations are battlegrounds of warring factions. Schisms are not out of the question for several denominations, including the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.. Southern Baptists have been near splitting several times in recent years. These denominational battles often spill over into local congregations, catching clergy and lay members in their crossfire.

Congregational conflicts are not only over the “big issues” that trouble denominations but also are about more local and at times mundane issues: money, staffing, buildings, different visions of congregational mission, pastoral leadership, use of inclusive language, and especially liturgical and music styles—the so-called “worship wars.” Over 20 percent of the clergy in our national survey reported that their congregation has experienced a significant conflict during the past two years, many of which have resulted in leaders or members leaving. Another 50 percent said that there been one or more minor conflicts during this time. **It is little wonder that conflict management has become one of the most frequently requested topics for clergy continuing education!**

## Consumerism

A third broad trend also suggests serious misalignment of Gospel values and those in the larger culture. We live in a spiritual marketplace in which consumers pick and choose among various religious and spiritual alternatives as they construct their religious identity. Where individuals once found their religious identity ascribed, given to them by their family and the denomination into which they were born, present-day religious

seekers are more likely to self-author their identity. They practice a do-it-yourself religion, choosing not only from among different congregations and religious traditions but also from a virtual spirituality industry of self-help books, gurus, and groups. For a recent book on how congregations are responding to generational differences,<sup>3</sup> Wade Clark Roof and I surveyed a random sample of North Carolinians and Californians. We asked whether they agreed or disagreed that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or religious group.” Seventy-three percent of Generation-Xers, 64 percent of Baby Boomers, and 59 percent

In sum, broad changes in the social and cultural context—the growth of pluralism, special purpose groups, and consumerism—are among the forces that contribute to misalignment. It is a very different world from the one in which many clergy thought they were called to minister. These and other kinds of misalignment make it difficult for pastors today to do “good work,” in the sense implied by the Harvard researchers. No wonder so many lament the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel today! In the face of these issues, what kinds of resources do clergy need if they are to do good work? Let me mention three.

## Resiliency

First there *resiliency*—a toughness combined with elasticity that enables one to endure without breaking when facing the tough challenges and difficult tasks that constitute pastoral ministry today. I once heard someone describe a really tough person as being “like a black gum tree against thunder.” That’s a good description of the resiliency that clergy need.

It may be possible, as the Harvard researchers propose, for some professions to avoid experiencing misalignment, but I doubt that this ever has been, or ever will be wholly possible for those engaged in the church’s ministry, ordained or lay. We follow a Savior whose path to resurrection passed through Gethsemane and Golgotha. If ever there is an example of a work of ministry that was misaligned with the powers and spirits of this world, it was his. It was a fragile ministry in the face of the opposition that he experienced, but it was also a resilient ministry—one grounded in deep and abiding confidence in the goodness of God and of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. It was that trust that enabled Jesus to be resilient in the face of the powers of evil. And if we in the church are to continue his servant ministry in the world, then we—ordained and lay ministers—will need resiliency. Like him, we can endure without breaking in so far as we ground our ministry in God’s grace.

Developing resiliency is a fruit of engaging in regular spiritual disciplines,

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of those born prior to World War II, agreed with the statement.

The spirituality industry that has risen in response to this self-authoring trend has encroached fairly far onto turf that congregations and clergy have traditionally claimed as their own. Congregations and pastors no longer have a monopoly on religion or spirituality. It can be “bought” on the street or downloaded from the Web. I recently came across a virtual Eucharist, complete with do-it-yourself instructions for celebration in the privacy of one’s home!

Indeed ministry itself has been transformed into a commodity, a service to be purchased. United Methodist bishop Kenneth Carder has lamented that “Congregations see themselves as consumers of ministry and the pastor as the dispenser of the religious wares. . . . Laity choose churches on the basis of need fulfillment rather than as a context for being in ministry. Failure to fulfill the [laity’s] needs will result in a request for a new pastor, or a shopping trip to a nearby religious outlet. . . . In a market-shaped church, all activities are optional and depend on ‘what the market will bear.’”<sup>4</sup>

disciplines in which we proactively put ourselves in position to be overwhelmed by God's grace. Just as the act of eating often makes us realize how hungry we are, such disciplines awaken a hunger for God. **Those in our survey who expressed the most dissatisfaction with their spiritual life were also the ones who were significantly more likely to doubt their call** to ministry, to have seriously considered dropping out, to complain about the difficulty of reaching people with the Gospel today, and to report feeling drained in fulfilling their functions in their congregation.

### Agility

Closely related to resiliency is a second characteristic necessary to confront various expressions of misalignment. We might call it *agility* or, as I have described it elsewhere, *reflective leadership* or simply *reflexivity*.<sup>5</sup> Reflexivity involves an agility that enables one to respond both faithfully, innovatively, and appropriately in the face of a constantly changing world, a world sometimes experienced as being like white water. Such a world confronts congregations and clergy with an ongoing need to adapt to new challenges, often to improvise, or be bypassed. Adaptation is not the same as accommodation. Rather it involves holding in creative tension the goods of our Christian tradition and the challenges of the present situation. In so doing each informs the other in an ongoing dialogue or argument. In this reflexive process, the tradition remains a living one as it is retraditioned in the encounter with present challenges. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has said, living traditions always involve a continuous argument about what it means to live by them.<sup>6</sup> In the same process, however, one's response to the present avoids simple accommodation but rather it adapts in faithfulness to the Gospel, informed and guided by the argument with the tradition and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

### Willingness to Stay Connected

Finally, let me highlight one further characteristic essential for facing the challenges of pastoral ministry today: It is the *willingness to stay connected*, to avoid the isolation that leads to burning out and dropping out. In discussions that we have had with numerous pastors and denominational leaders about pastoral

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ministry, the issue of clergy friendships has emerged as of signal importance for sustaining ministry in challenging times. In one study done for our project, researchers interviewed ex-Catholic priests who had dropped out of the priesthood within five years of being ordained. Isolation and the lack of close friendships were second only to celibacy as the most important reason for dropping out. Protestants are not immune from such isolation. Many clergy and their families feel lonely and isolated, hungering for deep friendships, whether with lay members of their congregation or with other clergy.

Staying connected, being proactive in establishing appropriate friendships both within one's congregation and especially with fellow clergy are powerful armaments for one to take on the journey of pastoral ministry. Like resiliency and agility, staying connected is crucial for doing the good work of ministry in world of the 21st century.

It is God's ministry to which we are called, but it is also our ministry to keep vital and alive. □



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<sup>1</sup> Howard Gardner, et al., *Good Work: Where Ethics and Excellence Meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about Pulpit & Pew, go to

the project's Web site, [www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu).

<sup>3</sup> *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> "Market and Mission: Competing Visions for Transforming Ministry." Address given at Duke Divinity School, October 16, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, *As One With Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 207.

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