

NAVIGATING THE CONNECTION

A Young Pastor's Perspective

By Sara B. Thomas

Being invited to lead was not a new adventure. I had served as the leader of sports teams, organizations, and projects. Excited by the opportunity to serve in full-time ministry, I jumped in, unaware of all that entailed. Not having been raised in church, I had no orientation to the depth and breadth of pastoral leadership. The journey through seminary and the steps toward ordination challenged my leadership sensibilities.

I had the privilege of serving one congregation for seven years, and those people were my constant companions on the journey to ordination. We experienced a great deal together, and I learned the art of spirit-directed leadership when tragedy, grief, and shock pervaded my first year of ministry.

Together, we struggled to comprehend the death of a quiet servant from our community on 9/11. Just a few months later, while attending a music festival together, one of our teens died. The floodgate of grief opened. By late summer, we found ourselves attempting to untangle an embezzlement nearing \$225,000.

Confronted with young, eager souls looking to me for spiritual guidance, accompanied by parents waiting for a word of hope in the midst of turmoil, I was swimming in water well over my head. Thankfully, I was swimming surrounded by faithful companions, all of us attempting to stay afloat.

These were the moments that began to shape my understanding of pastoral leadership. The local church, as it interfaced with the world, provided my classroom for leadership development. Serving on a staff and being surrounded by faithful leaders offered me the opportunity to engage in both

servant and point leadership. We knocked down walls together, opening new possibilities for teens to grow their faith. We encouraged each other in the hard places of life, and celebrated milestones together. Together, we launched a new worship service prompted by a burden on my heart, a glimmer of a vision as we watched for God's movement.

This congregation offered me the gift of experiencing, or perhaps enduring, all my "firsts" in ministry. They endured my first sermon, walked with me through my first funeral, rejoiced when I presided at the sacraments for the first time, and did not miss a beat by sending the first "you offended me" letter. I learned to tuck the signed letter objecting to something I said or did behind the thank you notes. These people embodied grace and kept me humble, skills learned beyond the seminary classroom and ordination process.

There are tensions in pastoral ministry that continue to challenge me, particularly those that push on my leadership sensibilities. I desire a church that claims our connectedness, embodies organic systems, and continually cultivates opportunities for people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus. We have a network built into our nature as a connectional church; unfortunately, we do not use it well. I see every opportunity to create meaningful networks of churches, collaborating as teams to leverage influence for the kingdom. A tension exists when competition with the church down the road becomes our primary connection. While healthy competition can motivate us, collaboration within our connection creates both accountability and kingdom opportunity. I am not willing to sacrifice either.

There is also a tension in how we function as a church. Often relying on ineffec-

tive systems, we have a process for credentialing pastors that can seem more like an obstacle course than a pathway of empowerment. The end result can be sacrificing creative, God-sized visions at the altar of ineffective, unhealthy systems. Whether evaluating the steps to ordination or the discipleship process in our local church, our systems need an organic edge, able to respond to the ever-changing mission field around us.

I wonder, too, if we will risk cultivating opportunities that reflect our missional challenge. Will we risk embodying authentic grace that awakens the generations to the hope of Jesus? Will we be willing to risk failure, to learn to be leaders who cultivate grace that opens the door of opportunity for the next generation to experience the joy of ministry?

Although my credentials say "Elder in Full Connection," and I am appointed to a local church, the world is my parish. When I incarnate grace in the world, I run into generations looking to be valued. When we create healthy, effective churches that embody grace, we create opportunities to empower disciples for ministry; this is the leadership God called me to facilitate. The journey of leadership continues. I will continue to jump in, trusting God's faithful, irritating grace. □



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