



Pastor as Theologian: Nurturing Our Minds

By Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Ph.D.

Pastoral ministry is a deeply theological endeavor through which pastors help persons link their everyday stories with the Story of God. As part of this central ministry function, pastors enter into exegetical study of scripture and call upon other resources that inform the pastoral roles of preacher, teacher, care-giver, administrator, and community leader. In this way, pastors are practical theologians.

Yet, all too often, the many pastoral roles impinge upon the pastor's ability to nourish the self, intellectually and spiritually. The call to demonstrate "perfect" behavior in and beyond the congregation weighs heavily on pastors. As one pastor put it, "We're called to carry out a good ministry wherever we are at a given point in time. . . . I feel the pressure. As much as I try, there is simply not enough time for the kind of devotions and study I really need for myself."

Research studies also bear out this reality. One study report of 1,050 pastors indicates that 72 percent said that "they only studied the Bible when they were preparing for sermons or lessons. This left 38 percent who read the Bible for devotions and personal study." In that same study, only 26 percent stated that "they regularly had personal devotions and felt they were adequately fed spiritually."¹

There are pastors, of course, who are intentional about what one pastor called "making time for God" through daily early morning prayer and Bible study, built on the lectionary. This pastor said, "I

do it because I need it for my own journey; and I need it for what I do for others." But, without these consciously designed occasions, the situation becomes akin to what another pastor described as "living in a desert, thirsty for, but out of reach of water. It is an experience of intellectual and spiritual dehydration that I know I must do something about." This same pastor spoke of the threat this situation poses to the self and the self's ability to carry out ministry with and on behalf of others.

Developing Nurturing Practices

These pastors' comments highlight three considerations in pastors' moving toward a personal process of nurture. First, there must be a conscious awareness of the *need and purpose* of the self to be nurtured. Nurture refers to an obligatory or required need we have to continually cultivate who and Whose we are. We need nurturing activity through which we might form ever anew the same mind that is in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). The kind of nurture of the mind that is required is evocative. It is to prompt our dealing with the nourishment we find in times of study and devotion. It is to make a difference in our lives, to reveal some answers to hard questions we raise. And, yes, it may raise new questions.

Second, the pastors' statements point to a connection between *intellectual and spiritual results* of nurture. We may find intellectual nurture through study of

scripture, other literature or resources, and devotional experiences that result in a new or renewed mindfulness of the character and activity of God in salvation history and in our personal journey. We may discover new ways of thinking about and imaging God or the character of Christianity in light of the realities of the world in which we live with all its promise and travail. But, as humans, we are not simply intellectual beings. On the one hand, we need nurture that enriches our minds—our knowing, our views and understanding of God, ourselves, Christianity, the Church, the communities in which we serve, and our calling. On the other hand, the meaningfulness of this nurture necessarily goes further.

To be meaningful, evocative nurture resulting in knowledge must also make way for Christian wisdom formation that "has its source in God. . . . relies on our faith in God, openness to God's Spirit, discernment of God's desire for our lives, and a commitment or sense of duty to sojourn toward the good and true."² This is about more than knowledge. It is to form our faith, our attitudes, emotions, and sensibilities as Christians and as pastors. The nurture of our minds is necessarily intertwined with the nurture of our spirit by the Spirit of God.

Third, moving toward nurture that is evocative and formative requires *intentionality*. To be intentioned means that we make a conscious, deliberate effort to organize our schedules to allow time for studying and being with God, forming habits that eventually become instinctive

or “second nature” to us. Central among these habits is individual or group scripture study through which we grapple with our faith and life in light of God’s activity and purpose, God’s presence in Jesus Christ, and the unfolding shape of Christian community and moral Christian character. This intentioned study may also include other materials focused on doctrine, polity, exegetical methods, and the broader Christian tradition. It may center on literature exploring the human experience, such as novels and biographies; or on books advancing our social-cultural, psychological, ethical, liturgical, and administrative understandings.

Enriching Our Story

We do not come to any form of study as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Instead, we form and enter habits of study and devotion based on the stories of our lives. The theological immersion process is narrative oriented, a theological endeavor that inevitably forms and informs our unfolding story. This immersion process involves four pivotal practices.

1. *Relevant inquisitive engagement* of our everyday stories in family, congregation, denomination, and larger community. What stories of promise and challenge do I bring to my habits of study and devotion? What do I bring of my identity and context as pastor; of key events in my church and family life; and of my relationships? Where is my story headed? How do I feel about my story direction? What plot is emerging in my story?

2. *Review of our story in light of the nurturing habits* in which we engage. The practice of review involves reflection on and interpretation of our life stories in light of the larger Story of God in which our life stories belong. What “sticks out” for me in my exegetical study of scripture? What guidance does scripture give to the aspects of my story that are challenging to me? What in scripture affirms, evokes my critical thinking, and empowers my role and functions as pastor? What in the other books I read provides me with practical knowledge about the nature of ministry or models for ministry? What challenges my thinking about ministry and how I now carry it out? How can I make sense of disjuncture and tensions between what I study, my own experience, and what God is calling me to be and do? What views are unfolding about God, God’s activity in the world and my life, and my call?

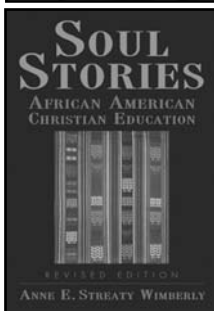
3. *Reframe our story in light of our review process.* The knowledge we gain and insights we form from reflection and interpretation inform the direction of our unfolding life story. What difference has my engagement in study and devotion made on how I intend to carry out my life and ministry? What changes do I need or intend to make in my view of God, self, family, church, denomination, community and my daily relationship with God and others? How and with what or whom will I now continue in my development of habits of study and devotion?

4. *Re-engagement in the life’s story.* This part of the process entails our actual application of meanings and ways of living and serving as pastors that emerge from the immersion process and that are relevant to our situation or the circumstance of our lives.

Our formation of these habits is not meant to be an end in itself. As means of nurture, in essence, we are to ingest the stories and information found in the materials we use as nourishment for our own life stories, to interpret the material on the basis of our own stories, and in turn, to reframe our stories in ways that are more vital for our faith and life. □



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Notes

- 1 Richard J. Krejcer, “Statistics on Pastors,” Frances A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development.
- 2 Anne E. Streaty Wimberly & Evelyn L. Parker, “Introduction,” in Wimberly & Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 13.

Nurturing Our Minds

Questions to consider as you read Scripture or other resources

What experiences and challenges do I bring to this reading?

What “sticks out” for me in this reading?

What guidance does this reading give to challenges that I am facing?

What knowledge or assistance does this reading offer for my role as pastor?

What in this reading challenges my thinking about God and ministry?

What spiritual vitality has emerged from my study?

What views are unfolding about God, God’s activity in the world and my life, and my call?

What changes do I need or intend to make as a result of this reading?

Tear out this list to keep in your Bible or on your desk.
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