

# There's something about a pastor

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A young mother dies, leaving a husband and two young children. The school makes the decision to cancel classes the afternoon of the memorial service so that the students and their families can attend. As many as a 150 elementary school-aged children may be at our church for the service.

How do we plan worship knowing all of that?

My colleague, a pastor of exceptional skill and insight, says we need to have a children's sermon. "Really?" I say. She says she'll invite all of the children up front and ask them to stand around the communion table while she talks to them about life and death and God's providential care.

I am skeptical. I am not a fan of children's sermons, mainly because most of them fail spectacularly at everything but comic relief for the congregation when children make unexpectedly funny (and darling) comments. But my colleague persists. "It will be just right," she says.

The day of the memorial service arrives. More than a 100 children walk to the front and stand around the table. They fidget, but they are surprisingly quiet and expectant. They seem to know the solemnity of the occasion. In beautifully chosen and soothing words, my colleague speaks to the children and assures them of God's

love amidst the mystery of death. It is, as she predicted, “just right.”

My jaw drops. I realize that there is really no need for me at this point to go to the pulpit for the “homily” listed in the order of worship immediately following the children’s sermon. Everything that should be said at this service has been said – in language children can understand. I go up anyway of course – in the unlikely event that one or two people did not hear and grasp the meaning of what was said in the children’s sermon.

What sort of skill or gift makes a pastoral move like this possible?

My colleague has demonstrated something called “pastoral imagination.” The move she has made grows out of her education, experience, reading, and intuition. It’s a way of looking at the world – not so different from the way a lawyer learns to look at the world. With training and experience in a particular method, a lawyer is able to zero in on the heart of complicated issue, not distracted by a million and one interesting questions. Call it “legal imagination.” When we witness it, we are amazed. When we have need of it, we are overwhelmed and grateful.

Pastors – many of them – have something similar.

Craig Dykstra, until recently a vice president with the Lilly Endowment and a keen observer of pastoral ministry, first coined the phrase:

*The pastoral imagination requires multiple kinds of intelligence. Pastors must ... allow these intelligences to be trained and formed within a lifelong process of learning. Both substantive knowledge -some of it fairly abstract – and practical know-how will be required, and because ministry takes place amid the changing circumstances of life, intelligent adaptation and renewed learning will often be necessary as well. Extensive reading and serious observation, along with a great deal of accumulated personal experience, is essential to the emergence of a mature pastoral imagination.*

So, it’s a complicated thing, but it’s real. And it lies at the heart of what pastors – the good ones – do.

Here are a couple of other examples:

A 200-year-old church in northern New York state is struck by lightning and burns to the ground. The pastor, who never doubts that the church must be rebuilt, saves a charred beam from the ruins and commissions a local artist to fashion the beam into a cross that will hang in the new sanctuary, a sign of God’s power to move us from death to resurrection, from ashes to new life. No seminary class can prepare a pastor to know how to respond in a situation like this.

A chaplain at a children’s hospital in Cincinnati notices that parents of

very sick children spend long stretches of time at the hospital, often with children who do not get well. They find themselves in the chapel, attending services or sitting quietly when no one else is around. The chaplain realizes that certain psalms – filled with pain and anguish and doubt – can help these parents give expression to feelings that need to be expressed. They find the words they need.

I have been a pastor for more than 32 years. Most days I can't explain why I do what I do. Young pastors on staff will sometimes say, "Why are you doing it that way?" And my first response is, "I don't know. It seemed like the right thing to do." Later on, maybe, I will find an explanation, but this is pastoral imagination – part skill, part intuition, part guess, part prayer.

And there's no need to admire it – only to recognize it and to trust it.

(Photo credit: An ink and watercolor drawing by my daughter Sarah Brouwer – for a bulletin cover at her church.)

- See more at: <http://www.dougsblog.org/2013/06/20/theres-something-about-a-pastor/#sthash.vNcnUgHw.dpuf>