

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Leadership

Authenticity is Essential

In the opening chapter of John's Gospel, following the testimony of John the Baptist, Jesus calls his disciples. Among them is Nathanael, whom Phillip sought to recruit – *“Hey Nate, we found the one whom Moses and the prophets have long spoken, Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth”* (John 1:43). Nathanael's response is as earthy and real as can be. *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Phillip immediately introduces him to Jesus, who in return says of Nathanael, *“Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”* Some translations use the word “guile” -- meaning slyness, deviousness, scheming, deception, etc.

Jesus could sniff out a fakester in an instant. In this case, his instincts tell him that Nathanael is a true, bona-fide, what-you-see-is-what-you-get person. This is the Real McCoy – here is a potential disciple that will reflect the full array of emotions and all the contradictions and complexities of life.

I remember when our family initially subscribed to cable TV (according to our children it was about 20 years after everyone else) and I was flipping through the tele-evangelist channels. Honestly, I couldn't even get to the terrible theology because I couldn't get past the façades of perfection! If that's what holiness is, I don't want to anything to do with it!

We in the UCC are, by and large, earthy and genuine people. I have long believed that parishioners yearn to connect with their spiritual leader in authentic and heartfelt ways. When we naturally demonstrate our passions and struggles, our fears and dreams and Spirit filled wonderings, we connect well. Biblical exegesis and theological reflections are foundational in preaching, but storytelling often captures the heart. Some pastors are extraverts and others introverts, so naturally our comfort levels around self-disclosure vary widely. There is a sweet spot, however, somewhere between sharing enough of your personal life that invites parishioners to feel our emotions and appreciate our vulnerability, yet not so much that it becomes all about us. Ministry is first and foremost relational. People don't want fake or phony or pretentious or pompous. They want real, earnest relationship.

A long time ago, a professor taught me about an essential ingredient in pastoral ministry – “You must ring true!” If you don't, everything else will be compromised. Authenticity is essential!

Remember the story of Nicodemus? He was a well-respected, widely admired, highly successful leader. By all accounts, he had his life together. He looked the part. But in his heart, there was something missing. Perhaps he wasn't blatantly disingenuous, but he wasn't ringing true. So he snuck to Jesus by night and asked what more was required. “You must be born of the Spirit!”

Perhaps the key to an authentic pastoral life is our willingness to be born again and again of the Spirit.

Please share your thoughts on my [blog site](#).

Shalom,

Franz