

Defragging the Pastoral Mind

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Every once in a while I defrag the hard drive on my laptop. Techies tell me that this helps my computer run more efficiently because it creates space for blocks of information and sorts bits and pieces of data into a more orderly format. Sometimes I think my mind needs to be defragged. I have put so much information in there that it appears that my "hard drive" is full. I am afraid for every new thing I learn, something I once knew falls out. This is especially true when it comes to the information I am storing regarding pastoral ministry. I have read too many books, heard too many lectures and attended too many seminars to keep it all straight. I need to defrag my mind and sort out all that clutter in order to focus on what I really need to "keep in mind."

I have learned to concentrate on three aspects of pastoral ministry. These are the things, with the help of the Lord, I want to do well.

The first is Effective Communication. I am purposely staying away from calling this one simply Effective Preaching or Anointed Preaching or whatever the appropriate adjective might be. I want to be a better preacher but it seems to me that much of my effective communication needs to be outside the pulpit. I have staff meetings, board meetings, vision casting opportunities, etc. where I need to communicate in an articulate and godly way what needs to be said. In fact preaching is a rather small part of the role I play in communicating with others. I have been struck recently by the fact that Jesus did most of his ministry in conversation with people, not in preaching mode. We are learning from the emerging church movement that in order to reach Postmoderns much of our communication must be dialogical rather than didactic. Communication seems to be as much about who you are as what you say. By this, I mean who we are tends to spill out of us when we communicate. Good communication comes out of having something important to say. I need to think, pray and study as I allow God to shape me. In the busyness of our hectic schedules we need to take time to reflect and process what the Lord is saying to us so that we can articulate it in a timely and effective manner.

The second aspect of pastoral ministry where I want to excel is in regard to Authentic Relationships. I need to focus on my relationship with God and my relationships with people. Healthy, friendly, loving relationships are the underpinnings of pastoral life. Generally, people will treat you like you treat them. Some pastors seem to always be in the midst of a battle with people in the church. They tell me of story after story of confrontations with their board members or congregation. To hear them talk it seems like there is a fight brewing around every issue of church life. This has not been my experience. Usually, a gracious attitude toward others begets grace in return. There is no doubt that at times sheep bite, but it is usually because they are in pain. A veterinarian friend of mine once told me that if you want to be a vet you had better be prepared to get bit. Wounded animals bite out of defense and if you are around long enough and are trying to tend to their wounds, sooner or later, no matter how tender you try to be, you'll get bit.

Although I am a Pastor/Teacher, in my relationships with my staff and congregation I want to be a student as well. I want to listen and learn from others. I want to gather around myself people who can teach me something. I hope members of my staff know more than I do about a whole variety of things. The younger of our staff members can teach me a lot about their culture. And I need to hear them in order to be a better communicator. A couple of months ago we decided on

their recommendation to stop calling believers in Jesus "Christians." Evidently in their culture Christian is a pejorative term. It often is associated with narrow mindedness and hypocrisy. It is particularly confusing to those of other faith backgrounds who do not distinguish between authentic Christianity and nominal Christianity. We have learned to call ourselves "Followers of Jesus" or "Believers in Jesus" or "The Community of Faith."

A third aspect of pastoral ministry where I want to excel is in Administration. I need to focus on being proficient at administration. I don't think you can be a pastor today without some skill in this area. You cannot delegate all of this responsibility to others. I need to think and pray and plan and act with goals in mind. I need to sharpen these skills and not yield to the temptation to just say: "It's not my thing."

In particular, two habits have helped me immensely. I have learned to always ask: "How can we do this better?" After every worship service and every event we ask ourselves this hard question with the thought in mind that we can learn to do things better. Peter Drucker, the famous business consultant says there are only two main questions to ask. The first is: "What is your main business?" The second is: "How is business?" I translate these into the questions: "What were we trying to do?" and "Did we do it?" This always leads to some interesting and fruitful discussions and it always pushes us to become better administrators.

I have also learned to never ask anyone to do anything without having in place a method to check to see that it has been accomplished. This may seem simple but too often I have been caught not knowing if anything is being accomplished. If someone is appointed to take on a specific ministry task and there is no way of telling if the ministry is accomplished and if there is no way to give feedback to the people involved, it seems to me that we have done a disservice to everyone involved. People need to be affirmed and I think generally they want to know if they are accomplishing what they hoped to do. We need to make sure that we are using the Lord's resources wisely. This basically means that gracious and loving evaluations of staff and ministries need to be a regular part of our schedule.

A couple of months ago I received an early morning phone call from one of my friends. He had pastored with me in another city and he and his wife had helped to plant the church we now pastor. Our families had been close friends for years. On the phone he told me in broken sentences that his wife had been killed in a car accident the previous evening. One of those phone calls you hope you never get. As I got into my car and rushed over to his house my thoughts and prayers went in just about every direction. But I was able to focus on three things. My first priority was to think about what I needed to communicate both to my friend and to our church. I called my administrative assistant and two of our youth pastors so that the prayer chain could start praying the high school aged children of my friend could have someone to talk to. I reviewed what words of comfort I might have for my friend and his family. At times like this you realize that more can be communicated with a hug and simply with your presence than with anything you might say.

I also focused on relationship issues. I reflected on our long friendship (we had graduated from high school together.) I thought of some of the great times we had shared together as couples. I prayed that God would use me to be of strength and comfort and I made sure I was in tune with the Lord so that I could hear him clearly. I thought of my now deceased friend's relationship with the Lord and took comfort in her lively and devout faith.

As I drove, I thought about all the administrative details that needed to be taken care of at a time like this. I reviewed what I would recommend to my friend regarding things needing to be done right away and things that could wait a day or so. There would be a funeral home to

contact, insurance forms to fill out, family members to inform and a host of other details that would need to be sorted out. By the time I reached their home I had a plan in mind.

In that short, 20 minute drive I had to rely on all three areas of my defragged mind: Effective communication, authentic relationships and proficient administration. Of all the information I have packed into my mind as a professor, pastor, husband, father and friend, these were the areas that became my primary focus. Not that I have attained but like the Apostle Paul I press on toward the mark. In the end, God is good and in spite of my overloaded and at times fragmented hard drive His grace prevails.