What challenges face congregational leadership today?

In no particular order, I would argue that following challenges loom over congregational leadership in North America. Leading a congregation in a cultural time governed by fast paced technological advance, the ruling cult of celebrity, and the omnipresent entertainment industry, presents some unique challenges to leading congregations in communal growth as disciples of Christ. How can a consistory compete for attention and focus amid the constant clamor of text messages, the next blockbuster movie, or the emotive expressiveness of Saturday night’s concert? How does a board of elders and deacons communicate a unified vision for the mission of a church amidst the various appeals and rants that come to people through social media?

Related to this issue is how the teaching, worship and life of the church appeals to the whole person: intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Congregational leaders would do well to examine whether they are unable to preach to those outside their church because their worship is too intellectual, or their ministries do not appeal to our embodied natures. Does their worship appeal to the heart or invite the indwelling of the Spirit? Do their mercy ministries dispense food without attending to the emotional and social damages that may perpetuate poverty?

Another difficulty for church leaders yesterday, today, and tomorrow is navigating ethical disputes such as sexual conduct, materialism, creation care, or the issue of the day. Since the early church, congregations have struggled to balance proclaiming God’s love for all people, prophetically denouncing those aspects that are unjust or ungodly, and maintaining integrity across a wide range of ethical concerns. As the world becomes more linked and the connections between local and global political, economic, and ethical concerns grows ever more close and more public, it is difficult for congregations to faithfully proclaim the Word of God as it addresses the concerns of our day. To look at a pertinent North American example, what does it look like for a local church hold out the promise of redemption to the homosexual community while also wrestling with prohibitions on the homosexual lifestyle in Scripture? This is definitely a challenging question!

Another issue that combines the above two concerns is how a consistory is supposed to practice church discipline in a consumerist culture. Discipline, as outlined in the BCO, seems almost meaningless when the person disciplined can just walk down the street to another church and consume the worship and preaching. Unless congregational leaders work to develop church communities, not just religious commodities of “worship” and “teaching”, that are in constant engagement with Christian communities of differing traditions, the third mark of the Church will remain somewhat erased.

In addition, the increasing number of revelations coming from both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches of sexual abuse should remind church leaders that congregations have not always been places of peace and healing. For all those who have been harmed by sexual abuse in churches, there are myriads more who have been maimed by unbalanced teachings, unkind politicking, burnout, and careless words in our churches. It is a tremendous task for leaders in our church to navigate these issues with love and seek to invite these wounded people back into peaceful and healing church communities.
A final challenge facing congregational leaders is an unhelpful sense of professionalism. While high standards and a focus on best practices are quite helpful, I notice a large number of church leaders treating their positions more as a job than a calling. When this happens, a congregation becomes a business that has to be efficiently run and is judged on quantitative growth of programs, converts, buildings, members, budget, or number of weekly services. To maintain this growth the church must constantly be marketing its brand, the pastor must maintain a carefully manicured persona, and members are pigeon holed into market segments that are carefully designed to meet their “needs”. It is easy to slip into this plan for success, but it is not easy to reflect on whether this is the healthiest way for a church to be a sign of the Kingdom of God. I would argue that when church leadership begins down this path of thinking, they inherently neglect vital aspects of what it means to be “a chose people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God”.

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