

So You Want to Be a Pastor

Rev. Charles St. Onge

So you want to be a pastor. Not just any pastor, but a Lutheran pastor in twenty-first-century North America. To quote St. Paul, you desire a noble task. Not an easy one, mind you, but a noble one. Speaking as one who has been engaged in this vocation for four years, I can say that leading a congregation to Christ and His cross is as challenging here and now as it has ever been. It will require all your talent, all your knowledge, and all the formation a good seminary can provide.

You will be caring for older members who are in the Church but may not be of it. They attend worship, lead committees and councils, and participate in every congregational activity. But ask them to define their faith, and they will be at a loss. As you define for them in your preaching and teaching the faith delivered once and for all to the saints, they will struggle with you and with their own spiritual life. You will learn you are not their corrector. Seminary will train you to be their shepherd.

You will be caring for hurt and angry people. Some will claim to have been hurt by you or your predecessors. In some cases, this will be true. In some cases, it is the Law of the Lord that has done the hurting. You will learn you are not their counselor. Seminary will train you to be their confessor and speak the Lord's commands or His Absolution as the Spirit leads.

You will be caring for sick and dying people. Many will not fear death, believing falsely that after death they will become angels living with all their loved ones and all the good people of world history. Some will dread it, fearing the judgment of a God who despises wrongdoing. You will learn you are not their consoler. Seminary will train you to bring the consolation of the One who has died for them and risen again to bring new and eternal life in His name.

You will be approached by people with an alien morality and theology, such as people fleeing the Catholic Church because of the pope's "unchristian" stand against abortion and women's ordination, and seeking shelter in your congregation; people fleeing that Baptist Church because they asked them to change their immoral lifestyle; people fleeing the Episcopal Church because their worship was not "uplifting and

passion-filled;" the woman at the grocery store who claims to be a member of your church, even though you've never met her; the man who asks you to bury his mom, who "never had no use for org'nized religion" but was a Christian woman who believed in the "good man upstairs;" those who claim to love Jesus but despise his Church and its servants as having nothing relevant to offer them. You will learn you didn't learn everything at seminary. Yet surprisingly seminary will have prepared you for what they did not have time to teach.

You will be living among confused people who, to paraphrase Satchel Paige, know an abundance of things that just aren't true: that all religions are the same; that God only punishes those who are truly evil, none of whom we know personally; that Oprah Winfrey is as much a preacher as Joel Osteen; that Jesus was married and had kids; that the only thing we can know for sure about God is that whatever the Church says about Him is a lie; that all behaviors and lifestyles are acceptable to God, especially those in which our children and grandchildren are engaged, except those we know are wrong, and those things change yearly. You will learn you are not their judge. There is already one, our enemy, who fills that role. You are not their accuser. There is already one who fills that role quite well, one from whom we pray to be delivered. Seminary will train you to be what God has called all Christians to be. It will train you to be His witnesses, even to the ends of the earth.

Most importantly, you will be serving alongside a sinner who will be constantly tempted to be the leader of the Church, the savior of the congregation. He will always know how to improve things, why so-and-so is wrong, how to make the parish a more perfect place. He will be tempted to trust that God helps those who help themselves. He will act spiritual and seem full of faith, but he secretly believes Christ Jesus is no longer head of the Church but rather a distant observer who has handed the reigns over to him. This man will call himself a pastor. Seminary will train you to kill that man each and every day so that a new shepherd may daily arise to live before God and His people in righteousness and purity forever.

As a pastor, you will sometimes find yourself correcting, counseling, and consoling. You will find yourself sometimes accusing, sometimes defending, and sometimes even judging. You will find yourself leading. But those activities are not what a pastor is. A pastor is a shepherd, a confessor, a teacher, and a witness. He is an undershepherd of the one and only Good Shepherd: Jesus. You desire to be a pastor. You desire a noble vocation. Seminary will prepare you not just for the tasks but the whole challenging vocation that may lie ahead of you.

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