

Leading as an Artisan of Time © Brian Paulson – 2/16/07

One of the most profound dynamics of ministry lies within our structures and shaping of time.

Seconds

Despite all of the circles of structure that I have learned to manage as a pastor, I find myself increasingly convinced that the most critical spiritual activity takes place in a matter of seconds. In a matter of seconds, people react to my temperament and receptivity. Opportunities for building relationships routinely pass me by when my head is crammed with the future. I suppose this is an echo of Qoheleth naming all pursuits beyond the present moment as a vanity. If indeed we are like the grass of the field, then I suppose we ought to walk with an awareness of our fragile mortal structure so that we don't miss the moments that God puts in our path.

Minutes

A spiritual pastoral routine I practice, (The Company of Pastors), has taught me that a few minutes can make a great difference in each day. I have never been the ideal "quiet time" person or journal writer. By contrast, my wife wakes every day and manages to write copious and, I assume, interesting notes in her journal. Growing up in Southern California, I would awake to find my mother in the lotus position silently meditating. I have never been much good at carving out minutes for meditation. A careful reading of the sports columns is often the best I can muster.

Yet if I am producing a sermon or some other opus magnum, then I have amazing focus for my spiritual meditation. I am aware of the fact that this keeps God at a safe professional distance from the reverie of my own life's foibles. So I have been trying to make time to read scripture and meditate upon the confessions as a personal discipline. To my surprise, these few minutes I make (and often stumble through) lend a centered strength to my activity during the rest of the day.

One further step will bring an acknowledgement that a few minutes spent in a hallway or at the door to my office or standing behind my desk can often make or break a wide range of initiatives or relationships that I manage. Of course, this also produces another dimension of time. Namely that at the end of my week, I always feel as if those few minutes have added up to hours. So I'll move onto the next time marker.

Hours

My structured encounters come in hour-long measurements. It begins with worship, of course, since Jesus managed to do everything in an hour, Presbyterians have learned to structure the whole of their spiritual life into one hour on Sunday morning. An hour provides the ability to plan in useful bite size pieces. If a meeting is running long, I can gaze at my clock and note the hour as my escape route. I know this happens more than I care to admit in the pews as well.

Yet I want to dig deeper into the hours I structure and model for our members.

Especially as it relates to the meetings I see leaders attend night after night. An hour of structured time is a way of defining significance. It tells the people we see and the people who are near to us that something of importance takes priority over all other possibility during this time.

We stress the significance of spiritual and relational dynamics in meetings at our church. Most people arrive with a production schedule, but I have learned through the years that churches can create a whole year's worth of highly productive meetings and burn participant's spirits to a crisp. This has the unintended consequence of sending a martyrs' mentality into the corps of prospective leaders that, in turn, produces dysfunctional boot camp style candidates from church nominating committees.

I don't have an easy prescription for the dilemma I've just named, all I can offer is an awareness of how a highly efficient set of hours on our calendar can produce unintended consequences we may neglect if not careful. – Such as sleep deprivation. If I cram too much into my hours, and if my members don't eat dinner after a long day of work before coming to church for a meeting that sends them home to family as children are going to bed, then I and my leaders get particularly crabby. I have not yet learned how to get by with less than eight hours of sleep and still be a nice person.

Somehow the number of hours I sleep has a profound correlation to the success of my spiritual leadership. It even improves otherwise marginal sermons. Through the years, I

have come to learn that my subconscious can sometimes pull together clunky pieces of my life or my ministry and do a much better job than I could have imagined. I think this is the work of God.

Days

God created the world according to a daily structure. Time is most clearly measured in holy pattern by the weekly cycle and its culmination in worship. Worship and staff meetings meter my week in the large church. The volume and variety of people and programs seeking blessing in the sacred hour of worship demands a high degree of coordination, spiritual agility, and mental acuity that can, at times, take the fun out of creativity. Since worship is the primary means of participation for most of our members and serves as the regular plenary gathering of the congregation, we spend a great deal of energy packing spiritual powder into the worship keg.

A substratum of activity centers upon our staff meetings. These meetings serve as a weekly version of the family dinner table – an opportunity for everyone to get a hearing on matters of significance for their life and ministries. This meeting often causes the program staff to feel as if they are actually serving the support team. (The Lord will just have to stand in line!) Yet I suppose turnabout is fair play for the people who manage the documents and facilities that communicate the spirit of our ministry.

I have one day off each week. Without a day to put the taxi meter down, I would shrivel up and die. The bummer is that often that day is taken up with bill paying. But at least

they are my bills and not someone else's. I'm not very good at working with my hands. But at least that work I do marks a change in brain circuitry from my usual labors. Still, as good as this day is, it always reminds me of the fact that I am out of sync with my world.

My children have learned that there is something special about Thursday. Their emotional calibrations are set to pay attention on this day because Dad is coming up for air. While other households focus on the structured suburban play of Saturday and Sunday, our family has learned that Saturday is hit and miss. Since a high volume of teenage play takes place on Saturday, I find Saturday to be particularly taxing. My spirit is in the crucible of worship and my body is in constant motion from one event to another. If the week has been particularly unkind, then I am doubly pressed to become an inspiration over the course of the day on Saturday.

Of course, a hallmark committee or program marks each day. Mondays are the major boards and committees. Tuesdays are the minor boards and committees. Wednesdays are the learning nights, preceded by my early morning Rotary meeting for the community. Thursdays are my day off but a constant pirouette of musical activity for all ages at the church. Fridays are wedding rehearsals and a scramble to do more writing that brush fire work hasn't allowed. I'm not saying this is the ideal arrangement of days; it is simply the arrangement I inherited. Unfortunately, established daily routines are not patterns one tinkers with easily or quickly.

Weeks

In many ways, I see spiritual development in terms of weeks. When we seek to put an idea into concrete form, we stare at our planning calendar that marks new initiatives and the arrow that traces their follow through. I count the weeks that an educational series will take. Stewardship has a budgetary demand that causes it to surface in a sequence of weeks. The seasons of the church year are measured in numbers of weeks.

Spiritual attention spans can be measured by weeks. The depth or commitment of a spiritual discipline is often made clear when counting the weeks that will be involved.

I count my vacations in weeks since I cannot truly refresh in one or two days. Oddly, my study weeks have particular meaning as time for me to go to the other side of the lake and focus my spiritual energies. In many ways the measurement of weeks is more significant than months.

Months

The months of the year seem to measure life in patterns we inherit from the world outside the church. The school systems seem connected to monthly meaning and the corporate world seems to place particular importance on one month or another. This is not to say it is insignificant to life in the church. In fact, I find myself being very attentive to the months. For example, I can't get anyone's programmatic attention in December. May is a complete wash for any significant constructive work. September is always distracted and overloaded. Each month seems to have a character of its own determined by national

holidays, school schedules, and temperaments of the world that impact the life of my congregation.

Yet I also know that our Session meets in monthly fashion, as do all of our committees. I think it proves to be a useful regular measurement for our elders and deacons. However, the longer I serve in ministry, the less convinced I am that committees need to meet every month. Committees that are comprised of church worker bees who need something to do. If there is nothing to do on a particular month, then I have to fill the agenda with the spiritual enrichment of teaching so that their activity is not spent in complaint and gossip.

Seasons

Seasons are marked by nature and liturgy in my life. Sometimes those seasons coincide now that I have moved away from the Arizona desert. The virtue of the liturgical seasons is their ability to focus our congregation on a spiritual dynamic for a sequence of weeks that seems to have a kind of divine mandate. I confess I have learned how to align our spiritual vision in the congregation with these seasons. Yet the challenge is to avoid over programming the spiritual movement of liturgical seasons.

Winter and Summer are interesting natural seasons of contrast in the church. The Summer lends a greater sense of play and delight to our ministries. We schedule more outings for the church and try to ease the pace of our meeting schedule. However, in recent years I have noticed that suburban life is relentless in its planning and programming. I recall one successful doctor in my first congregation stating that his

family both worked hard and played hard. This made me wonder where a concept of Sabbath entered into their family life.

Winter contrasts with summer in the way that people expect “serious” business and study should be taking place. We have learned to place opportunities for retreat and longer courses of study into the winter season of life. This is particularly useful in the hardy climates of the Midwest.

Spring and Fall are frenetic times in lives our congregants. Our community is structured by school and community calendars. As such, all of the opening activities and festivals of fall stand in balance with all of the closing and accomplishing gatherings of the spring. We have learned that it is difficult to gain the attention of congregants when they are having a hard enough time remembering which event they are supposed to attend on which evening. Our worship life is strained to carry the full burden of spiritual focus (to the extent there is any) during these seasons of high distractibility.

Years

When I began the “head of staff” phase of my ministry, I was told that I would soon find challenges arise in the odd years of my tenure. There would be mountains to climb in the first, third, fifth, and seventh years. After seven years, I was told, I would have earned my stripes and become part of the extended family. At that point, the congregation would be more capable of entering the waters of change and reorientation. I have found

that advice to be true throughout the years. In many ways, trust is a quotient of years and trust is often the coin of the realm for ministry.

Decades

A colleague recently suggested that there is another shift that happens after eleven years of ministry where the relationships between pastor and congregation move to an even deeper depth level. Perhaps this is why the Alban Institute and other organizations that study congregations are beginning to suggest that long-term pastorates (when infused with appropriate health and reflection) can be of great benefit to a congregation. I suppose an interesting footnote to this dynamic is a greater capacity to raise significant giving for major capital endeavors for a church that require the length of years.

When decades of ministry are considered, we find ourselves moving into the dynamics of change between generations. The pace of change in our society is dramatic these days. The communication revolution continues to evolve with innovation bringing change at a dramatic and exponential rate. All of this impacts the way that congregations worship, communicate, gather, and structure their time. I find that one of my more important roles of late is to be a communicator in chief between a range of generations and their competing values.

Centuries

I find myself thinking about centuries when being mindful of the fact that my ministry stands upon a legacy of faithfulness. One role that I play for the church is to be an

expositor of the great cloud of witnesses that surround our often-parochial parish ministry. It becomes my task to interpret the challenges and language of church confessions from the past in order to let their doctrine and method of ministry instruct the challenges we face.

Millennia

Ultimately my ministry always stands in relationship to the ground of its being in Jesus Christ. I think in terms of millennia when referencing back to Jesus. He stood on this earth two millennia ago. When I look further back in Hebrew scripture, I realize that our faith is grounded in the work of God that founded the heavens and earth and suffered long with the human story millennia before Christ walked the earth.

Every time humankind has arrived a millennium marker, eschatology comes to the fore. We spend time thinking about the “work of our hands” and the prospects for hope and redemption. When grounding my time in Jesus Christ, I find that a powerful interrelation develops between the millennium and the second. The hope I have found in Jesus Christ allows the promise of eternity to permeate the present moment. Perhaps this has become a kind of grounding for me that informs all time that I structure and or dwell within: my heart’s true home - a dwelling place for all generations.