

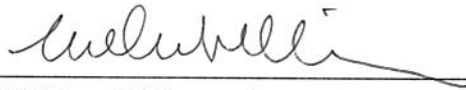
Leading the Church by Serving the Mission: Reimagining Servant Leadership

by

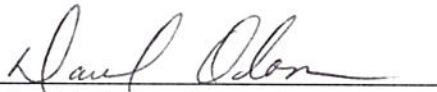
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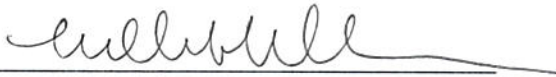
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D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University
2019

ABSTRACT

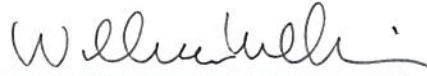
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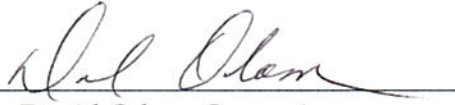
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Abstract

In 1970, Robert Greenleaf coined the phrase, “servant leadership.” In his book of the same name, Greenleaf argues that leaders must demonstrate unconditional grace and acceptance toward those they lead. Greenleaf’s ideas are still popular today among leaders in both the business and social sectors, but especially in the church.

Consequently, many pastors are reticent to use termination as a management technique in favor of attempting to rehabilitate problematic employees. The result, however, is that churches are hindered from achieving their mission by leaders who are more focused on either meeting the needs of their staff or maintaining pleasant relationships than on fulfilling the vision of the church. This thesis attempts to provide a new model of servant leadership that calls on clergy to be devoted to the wider mission of Christ.

The thesis begins by evaluating the crisis that servant leadership creates in the church and the subsequent anxiety that is introduced into the congregation. It then explores a survey administered to clergy across ten denominations that illuminates many of the internal and external barriers in the church that prevent pastors from terminating their staff. Subsequently, the thesis attempts to redeem some of the aspects of leadership that seem to be in tension with the servant leadership model, such as power and authority. Finally, the thesis outlines a new model of servant leadership that retains the best qualities of the servant leadership model but reorients the clergy’s service toward the ultimate mission of the church.

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1. Introduction: The Pursuit of Christ

⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

It is the goal of every clergy person to emulate the character and ministry of Christ and passages such as this one from Mark 10 suggest that Christ's ministry was marked by humility and service to others. It was not unusual for Jesus to subvert the expectations of his listeners in the Gospels, and in Mark 10, Jesus' words seem to be contrary to what many consider to be the qualities of good leadership: strength, authority, decisiveness, and power. Instead, Jesus encourages those who want to lead to be willing to sacrifice their life on behalf of those they serve in the ultimate relinquishment of power. Thus, even if executives in charge of large businesses might lord their authority over their employees, the pastor is expected to toil in the background in the posture of a servant on behalf of the staff and congregation. This style of leadership for clergy has come to be associated with an approach known as Servant Leadership. But is this really the best understanding of Christ's leadership?

In my third call after seminary, my wife and I were offered the opportunity to serve as co-pastors of a United Church of Christ congregation with approximately 700 members. When we arrived, we were confronted by a myriad of staffing issues, from

insubordination to poor job performance, that we felt could hinder the success of our ministry. In our limited training in church administration, we had been taught to exhibit the character of Christ and act like servant leaders. It was our understanding that we were to demonstrate love to our employees, display grace when they made mistakes, and coach and encourage them to become the best employees possible. In his book, *Servant Leadership*, Robert Greenleaf says that “Many otherwise able people are disqualified to lead because they cannot work with and through the half-people who are all there are. The secret of institution building is to be able to wield a team of such people by lifting them to grow taller than they would otherwise be. People grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are.”¹ We felt that this was our responsibility: to work with who we had been given and to help shape them into productive staff members through proper management and lots of love, accepting our employees for exactly what they were.

So, we tried a diversity of techniques in an attempt to solve our staffing woes: we set clear goals with weekly check-ins to evaluate progress, we tried taking staff out to meals to establish a personal connection, we tried overlooking small mistakes and giving staff the benefit of the doubt, we tried to keep clear communication lines open by directly discussing mistakes and inappropriate behavior, we tried to bring staff

¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power & Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), pg. 35.

members into the process of casting our vision so that they could feel part of the overall ministry, we read countless books on management and tried to apply their principles, and nothing seemed to improve the problems that we were having. One thing we did not consider at first was termination. It did not occur to us that we should fire our employees because it did not seem to be the Christ-like course of action; a servant does not give-up on those she serves.

One of the books we read in the midst of our turmoil was Jim Collins' *Good to Great* where Collins states that any effective leader "first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats—and *then* they figured out where to drive it."² Collins was suggesting that we might continue to be stymied in our leadership until we effected the necessary staff changes to get the right people on our team. I lost countless hours of sleep as I considered this path as questions ran through my mind about what it meant to be a Christian leader who fired his staff. Had we given our employees enough opportunities for improvement? How many opportunities were enough? How long should we allow for them to change? If Jesus exhibited unconditional love, then how could we claim there were some staff behaviors that were unacceptable? Were our expectations too high? Had we been focusing more on

² Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Other's Don't* (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2001), pg. 13.

results than on the people themselves? Had we tried the right tactic for improvement? Where were we failing as managers?

After wrestling with the apparent contradictions between the frameworks of Greenleaf and Collins, and after accepting that none of our other tactics had proven successful, we decided to move forward with staff terminations. In the end, over the course of our first eighteen months, we released seven employees, including two of our own hires, in an attempt to build the most dynamic team possible to help fulfill our ministry goals. We feel that our course of action has been successful and has paid dividends. However, we know that for both minister and congregation, the act of firing an employee, particularly one who is a church member, is often unthinkable. But how has the servant-nature of Christ somehow become conflated with leniency and low expectations for church staff? How can the head of staff of a church exercise power and authority while still maintaining the humility that Jesus demands? The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how the pursuit of servant leadership can sometimes prevent pastors from effectively managing their staff and how the result is that the mission of the church suffers. The thesis will subsequently provide a framework for reimagining servant leadership in a way that allows pastors to exercise appropriate power and authority over the staff and congregation while still retaining the most vital aspects of servant leadership. In the end, the minister will be able to help the church better serve the actual mission of Christ in the world.

The first chapter will evaluate foundational texts on the topic of servant leadership such as Greenleaf in order to understand the roots of the supposed conflict between servanthood and terminating an employee. A main conversation partner in this chapter will be Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. Friedman argues for the necessity of a well-differentiated leader who cannot be concerned for the emotions of employees as much as creating a healthy system in the workplace. This chapter will try to reevaluate the concept of servant leadership through the lens of a well-differentiated leader. This chapter will also explore the anxiety that exists within both the church system and the pastor that can prevent rational action.

The second chapter will explore responses to a survey I administered to clergy across multiple denominations regarding the emotional and practical barriers they experienced when contemplating staff terminations. The survey will ask them to consider a time when they felt that firing an employee under their supervision was the best course of action. The survey will then ask them if they followed through with the termination. If they did, why did they feel it was the correct path and how were they supported in carrying out their intentions? If they did not follow through, why did they decide not to, or why were they unable to do so? The goal of this chapter is to present an explication of the impediments that prevent clergy from feeling as if termination is a viable option and to understand the theoretical frameworks used by those ministers who did choose termination as a management technique. This chapter will also explain

how one's understanding of servant leadership plays a role in how comfortable a person is with pursuing termination.

Once we understand the history of the concept of servant leadership in the second chapter and evaluate how the model of servant leadership has prevented real-life clergy from properly managing their staff in the third chapter, the fourth chapter will investigate two common themes in management that have been eschewed by clergy because of their imagined conflict with a posture of servant leadership. The two themes are power and authority, and this chapter will demonstrate how reframing these two terms might help solve the tension between the different models of leadership. This chapter will also establish how Christian leaders can wield power in the management of their staff while still embodying the character of Jesus. Staff turnover and layoffs are so commonplace in the business world and managers are expected to exercise this kind of authority. However, the church rarely discusses the necessity of staff changes and the role of the pastor in effecting them. Pastor John Wimberly says that as pastors, "our task would be easier if we, as the church, discussed management more explicitly."³ Thus, this chapter will be an explicit argument for the necessity of strong management in the church through the use of power and authority.

³ John W. Wimberly, Jr., *The Business of the Church: The Uncomfortable Truth That Faithful Ministry Requires Effective Management* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2001), pg. 1.

The final chapter will provide a synthesis of the above themes but will also attempt to redeem the concept of servant leadership from a new perspective. Lovett Weems states that, "Churches are driven by their missions and visions. Church leaders are seeking to discern God's vision, drawing upon all the wisdom God has given to the community of faith, and then to find those key leaders most committed to or needed for that vision."⁴ This chapter will argue that servant leadership should shape us into servants of God's mission and of the church's vision for carrying out that mission, rather than servants of the staff of the church. When we only serve our staff and the other people of the congregation, then we are actually prevented from working together toward God's mission. Sometimes the most servant-hearted work we can do on behalf of the church is the hard and difficult work of putting the right staff in place. I originally intended for the thesis to build-up to an exciting reveal in the final chapter that the new model of servant leadership I was proposing was rooted in a call to serve the mission of the church rather than to serve a single, troubled employee. However, our mission informs everything that we do as clergy. Unless we clearly understand that our mission should be service to God rather than service to a small group of employees, we will be unable to do our work as ministers. Consequently, the importance of making the mission of the church our main concern is woven into each chapter. Clergy have

⁴ Lovett H. Weems, Jr, *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), pg. 59.

somehow lost that focus because they have become mired in management issues and a false understanding of servant leadership. I think, however, that it makes defining a new approach to servant leadership all the more important. Ministers need to use their power and authority wisely to move the church forward rather than backward simply because they are afraid to lead or because they feel like their church will not allow them to do so.

The motivation for this thesis is the countless nights I spent trying to accept that it was morally appropriate for clergy to fire their staff. As this thesis will demonstrate, it is not only the inner turmoil of the clergy that serves as a major impediment, but there is an expectation from congregations that beloved staff will be retained no matter how ineffective they might be because they are important members of the community. So many clergy feel hamstrung from proceeding with the best course of action because they feel that they do not have the support of the congregation. As Edwin Friedman states, “Our constant failure to change families and institutions fundamentally has less to do with finding the right methods than with misleading emotional and conceptual factors that reside within society itself.”⁵ I hope to break down some of the misleading emotional and conceptual factors that are holding clergy and churches hostage and preventing them from making the necessary changes in their churches. I want to

⁵ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), pg. 6.

dismantle the idea that it is somehow unchristian to terminate employees or that church staff need to be supported simply because they are members of the church or have served long tenures. Friedman describes these sorts of emotional barriers as “beliefs born of mythology and kept in place by anxiety.”⁶ It is time to demythologize the management of our churches and to reduce anxiety.

I want to be clear, though, that this thesis is not meant to serve simply as another book on management. As Friedman astutely points out, “The number of books being written today on management far exceeds the number of managers.”⁷ There are countless books providing advice and direction on how to lead and manage institutions. New theories are developed every day and leaders are constantly trying to discover and implement the latest leadership strategies. Part of my own problem was that I was constantly trying to read leadership books and none of the techniques that I was using were working. This thesis is not trying to provide a new strategy that will somehow solve all of the management problems that clergy face. Instead, I am simply trying to provide a framework to help pastors feel comfortable using management techniques that already exist, namely, terminating an employee when necessary, while still pursuing the example of Christ. We can be servants while still demanding excellence and productivity from our staff.

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ibid., 121.

In fact, even outside of the church, there are businesses that take both approaches to the topic of staff termination. In their book, *An Everyone Culture*, business experts Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey describe the workplace environments of companies that make an explicit commitment to investing in the ongoing development of their employees. One of the companies they spotlight, “Next Jump Inc, has a ‘no firing’ policy and an explicit commitment to stand by employees through thick and thin,” and their CEO Charles Kim even makes the analogy that, “You wouldn’t fire your children from your family.”⁸ The next chapter will outline the complicated boundaries that must be navigated when members of the church also become staff and the tensions that can arise when these staff truly do feel like family members, especially to other members in the congregation who have known them for years. Even some businesses refuse to use termination as a management technique. On the other hand, Kegan and Lahey identify another successful company that created a culture of growth, Bridgewater, whose policy is, “We are up for *growing* people, not *rehabilitating* them; some people have to go. [...] You become a one-in-ten-thousand company by hiring one-in-ten-thousand people.”⁹ For Bridgewater, there is a bright-line between investing in a staff member and pouring resources into someone who is ultimately a detriment to others and the company. Bridgewater is devoted to its employees, but that does not preclude the company from

⁸ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: A Deliberately Developmental Organization* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2016), pg. 13.

⁹ Ibid.

moving on from a worker at the appropriate time. Truly, it is fine for a church to take either position: to commit wholeheartedly to employees and forswear termination, or to accept that sometimes an employee does not meet expectations and they need help finding other employment. Both approaches are tested management techniques. An important disclaimer is that “all ministry is a demonstration of the incarnation.”¹⁰ It is impossible to write about church management in a way that applies to all churches. Leaders of congregations understand that their own context is unique and cannot be handled in the same way as other parishes. Consequently, I do not presume to provide a single, solitary answer for how servant leadership should be lived out in the church. However, this thesis is meant to refute the idea that there is a theological imperative for clergy to avoid staff termination based on an understanding of the servant leadership characteristics of Christ.

A definition of terms is in order, though, because in books that are published on management and leadership, those two roles are sometimes conflated and sometimes sharply contrasted. Indeed, management and leadership are two distinct concepts. Bishop Will Willimon delineates that “Management increases an organization’s capacity to move forward by organizing and staffing, developing necessary structures, evaluating and planning, holding people accountable, rewarding people who contribute,

¹⁰ William H. Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), pg. 9.

and exiting people who detract from a situation's forward movement," while leadership "helps people move in the same direction by talking—motivating and inspiring."¹¹ He goes on to say that "Management and leadership are companions. [...] A leader of change must not only cultivate and encourage a vision, but also do the hard, sweaty, unglamorous management work required to imbed and to instigate that change."¹² Willimon's observations are echoed by John Kotter of Harvard Business School who argues that "planning is a managerial process that is not the same as, nor ever a substitute for, the direction-setting aspect of leadership, a process that produces vision and strategies, not plans."¹³ I recognize that not all managers are leaders and vice versa, however, at the same time, one cannot be a good leader, let alone a servant leader, without being able to effectively manage the staff under his or her employ. Consequently, this thesis may at times seem as if the terms management and leadership are interchangeable, but it is because in my view these two roles are so thoroughly intertwined that it is impossible to separate them, especially for clergy. In fact, the main critique of servant leadership in this thesis is predicated on the fact that many servant leaders fail to practice proper management.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Kotter, *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1990), pg. ix.

Finally, this thesis will also try to modulate between two extremes. As the responses from clergy later in the thesis will indicate, many pastors seek to adopt the mantle of servant leadership in response to management techniques in the business world that demand unrelenting excellence, high productivity, and the pursuit of profit. This thesis is not asking clergy to turn their churches into high-powered businesses where excellence and the bottom line are the sole focus. Many clergy are afraid of losing touch with the humanity of their people and putting church growth above the care of Christ's sheep. The problem, though, is when clergy go too far in the other direction and make the peace and comfort of their congregation the ultimate priority above the hardships of discipleship, risk-taking, and vision-casting on behalf of Christ's church. It is possible to demand excellence of church staff and grow the church while still possessing and exhibiting the best qualities of servant leadership. By the end of this thesis I hope to provide a new model of servant leadership where pastors are empowered to actually lead their churches, keep their staff accountable, and carry out the mission of Christ in the world. It is time to have difficult conversations about the quality of our work and the work of our staff.

2. The Crisis of Servant Leadership

Clergy often build camaraderie by commiserating over everything that one does not learn in seminary about leading God's church. It is true that so much about church leadership can only be learned when thrust into the crucible of ministry. Before taking my first call I truly believed that I was going to be a stellar manager. My default disposition was to always be nice to everyone. I worked hard to listen to the concerns and complaints of others. I would always brainstorm solutions collaboratively with people who were struggling. Everyone seemed to like me, and I imagined that if I just put my people skills to use in the office, my employees couldn't help but like me as well and we would flourish together as a team.

Then reality hit. Working with people is made difficult by the limitations of people. No matter how nice I was or how much I listened, there were always management problems. My sunny personality did not solve conflicts between staff, it did not motivate employees to do their job better, it did not provide skills to underqualified employees, it did not change the prickly temperaments of others, and it certainly did not enable me to manage all of these problems well. I quickly learned that I was not going to succeed simply by being kind and loving my employees. I needed to grow as a manager of people.

There are more management techniques than could ever be mastered by any one person, but my great concern is that clergy often default to some version of servant

leadership whereby they feel that grace, compassion, and empathy toward their staff are their chief priorities. These emotions are not problematic in isolation, but when empathy towards an employee prevents either person, pastor or staff, from effectively carrying out their responsibilities to the mission of the church, then it does become an issue. I do not intend to discredit the entire notion of servant leadership, but I do believe it needs to be reevaluated, especially in the context of the church where we are more prone to default toward grace in order to avoid difficult emotions. Thus, it is essential to gain a basic understanding of the servant leadership approach.

One of the primary originators of the notion of servant leadership is Robert Greenleaf who devoted much of his professional and literary life to advancing the concept of leaders who serve. In his seminal work, Greenleaf states unequivocally that, "The great leader is seen as a servant first, and that simple fact is the key to his greatness."¹ Greenleaf goes on to elaborate what being a servant entails, stating, "Deep down inside the great ones have empathy and an unqualified acceptance of the persons of those who go with their leadership. Acceptance of the person, though, requires a tolerance of imperfection."² This thesis will demonstrate that what Greenleaf suggests in this quotation, a tolerance of imperfection and enough empathy to develop unqualified acceptance, is dangerous to the survival of any institution, churches included. Later

¹ Greenleaf, 27.

² Ibid., 34.

Greenleaf characterizes the empathy portrayed by the servant leader as love, writing, “Love is an undefinable term, and its manifestations are both subtle and infinite. But it begins, I believe, with one absolute condition: unlimited liability. As soon as one’s liability for another is qualified to any degree love is diminished by that much.”³ Greenleaf could not be clearer: his model of servant leadership means unlimited liability and unqualified acceptance.

It is easy to understand, then, why Greenleaf’s understanding of servant leadership would appeal to pastoral types. The qualities of empathy, compassion, unqualified acceptance, and unconditional love are exactly how we understand Christ. The writer of the Epistle of 1 John instructs us that, “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). Jesus’ love knows no boundaries, and therefore it seems to pastors that their love for the employees should have no qualifications. Greenleaf believes that authentic institutions are only built on a foundation of this type of dedicated service from the top. He explicitly claims, “This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built.”⁴

Shortly before publishing this seminal book which coined the phrase “servant leadership,” Robert Greenleaf started The Greenleaf Center which has since evolved into

³ Ibid., 52.

⁴ Ibid., 62.

The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership whose mission is to educate others about servant leadership and advance its implementation in organizations around the world. Greenleaf's ideas are not simply relegated to the past in either the business or church sectors, instead The Greenleaf Center continues to publish books promoting the ideals of servant leadership. In his book, *The Case for Servant Leadership*, former CEO of The Greenleaf Center, Kent Keith, offers a definition of servant leadership for a modern context. He argues that, "A servant-leader is simply a leader who is focused on serving others."⁵ Keith then points to businessman "Bill Turner, former Chairman and CEO of W.C. Bradley Company," who "developed his own list of the common qualities of servant leaders. Those qualities are unconditional love, brokenness, self-awareness [...] meets the needs of others and removes obstacles, and being a cheerleader."⁶ The definitions provided by these two men focus less on casting a vision and making decisions, and more on cultivating a disposition of brokenness. For Keith, servant leadership today still means exhibiting unconditional love to those being served, employees included. The rest of this thesis will demonstrate why these definitions are incredibly problematic. Our service can be to something much greater than the needs of a single person, especially when those needs can be shallow.

⁵ Kent M. Keith, *The Case for Servant Leadership* (Westfield, IN: The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008), pg. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

To be fair to Greenleaf, his idea of unqualified liability does not mean that the servant leader has no expectations of accountability. He writes that, “People grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted.”⁷ However, it is clear from Greenleaf’s writing that even though employees might be critiqued for the quality of their work, Greenleaf would never fail to show unwavering support for the staff member. His ultimate commitment is to the person first and foremost, even if it means dedicating major time and resources to help a person who is struggling in his or her position. For Greenleaf, a servant leader serves the people despite any imperfections.

That seems like such a noble sentiment: the servant leader serves the people. However, it is important to question whether unqualified acceptance is truly what is best for the employee, the church, and the overall mission of the church. This is where Greenleaf’s framework once again comes into conflict with the one outlined by Jim Collins. Collins would argue against a situation where “we have a wrong person on the bus and we know it. Yet we wait, we delay, we try alternatives, we give a third and fourth chance, we hope that the situation will improve, we invest time in trying to

⁷ Ibid., 35.

properly manage the person, we build systems to compensate for his shortcomings, and so forth. But the situation doesn't improve."⁸ Such a situation can certainly occur for someone who is trying to embody the unconditional love and acceptance of Greenleaf's model of servant leadership. The servant leader might attempt to critique and manage the employee, but he or she would never stop trying to find ways to work with and alongside this troubled staff member, no matter how clear it became that the employee was not a good fit. Greenleaf implies that fourth chances and even beyond should always be granted. Collins, though, does not concur that this is emotionally appropriate. He argues that, "Letting the wrong people hang around is unfair to all the wrong people," and that "waiting too long before acting is equally unfair to the people who need to get off the bus. For every minute you allow a person to continue holding a seat when you know that person will not make it in the end, you're stealing a portion of his life, time that he could spend finding a better place where he could flourish. Indeed, if we're honest with ourselves, the reason we wait too long often has less to do with concern for that person and more to do with our own convenience."⁹ For Collins, keeping a person in a position for which they are unqualified is not service, it is depriving them of discovering alternate employment where they might flourish and put their actual skills to use. Thus, unqualified acceptance may harm the employee, his or

⁸ Collins, *Good to Great*, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*

her colleagues, and the entire church, while ultimately doing a disservice to the person the servant leader is trying to protect. Collins cautions that “the good-to-great companies” that he highlights in his book “never used head-count lopping [...] as a primary strategy,” but when a person was not a good fit, they acted quickly to remove the person.¹⁰ Termination cannot become an easy way out, but it must be one option among many for the manager. This seems to be an accepted technique in the business world. Tom Rath, business consultant and originator of the highly respected *Strengths Finder* test, states unequivocally that in his research, “The most effective leaders surround themselves with the right people and then maximize their team.”¹¹ Why is this approach less accepted in the church? It appears that a lot of the fear surrounding management of staff in churches stems from the anxiety in both the leader and the congregation.

The Well-Differentiated Leader

While Collins has established that keeping a person in the wrong position can prevent them from flourishing vocationally, the type of servant leader that focuses only on exhibiting unqualified love to the employee may actually be motivated by larger emotional problems at play in the workplace. I think it is important to put Greenleaf’s

¹⁰ Ibid., 53-54.

¹¹ Tom Rath, *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2008), pg 2.

understanding of servant leadership in conversation with the work of Edwin Friedman who questions the productivity of empathy in our institutions in his book *A Failure of Nerve*. As stated previously, Friedman's main thesis is that "our constant failure to change families and institutions fundamentally has less to do with finding the right methods than with misleading emotional and conceptual factors that reside within society itself."¹² We might assume that empathy is appropriate in every situation, but this is one emotional misconception that is preventing us from helping our institutions grow. We don't need a new management method so much as we need to recognize the emotional barriers that prevent us from leading well.

Bishop Willimon recognizes the dangers of empathy within the church. He writes that, "Empathy causes clergy to go limp," because "becoming an affectionate, empathetic, and caring member of the group becomes more important than truth or results. Too often an appeal to "relationships" is code for: (1) The purpose of your ministry is to maintain harmony with me, (2) harmony with me is a higher purpose than the mission of Jesus, (3) do not violate the niceness boundary and threaten my comfort."¹³ Willimon further argues that, "Empathy is too low a goal for ministry. [...] In the church such concerns tend to become preoccupations that allow empathy to trump every other concern—such as commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ and fruitfulness

¹² Friedman, 6.

¹³ Willimon, 82-83.

of ministry.”¹⁴ The next section of this chapter will evaluate the anxiety within congregations that can keep clergy captive to the emotional demands of the members, but one of the culprits in the family system of the church is often the empathy of the pastor who does not want to upset anyone and therefore allows harmony and comfort to be the priorities of ministry. As Willimon notes, this is often done in the name of maintaining “relationships,” but in reality, these relationships become stale and meaningless because there is nothing challenging them to grow. What ministers need is enough actual concern for the quality of the relationships in their congregation that they are willing to do the hard work of developing disciples who are committed to the mission of Christ. Clergy are too often inhibited by their own anxiety because they don’t want to upset their parishioners. In those instances, empathy is getting in the way of true ministry.

In his book, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, minister and consultant Gil Rendle argues that, “Empathy holds leaders hostage to the ‘client in the room’.”¹⁵ When the pastor is solely focused on making sure that the individual needs of the staff person or congregant are met, then he or she is prevented from pursuing the larger mission of the church. The pastor cannot cast a longer-term vision, because so much time is being consumed on the problem of the moment. Rendle states clearly that,

¹⁴ Ibid., 83.

¹⁵ Gil Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), pg. 185.

“The pastor is tempted to satisfy the individual who is standing right in front of him or her in whatever way necessary and in the process step further away from the purpose or the mission of the church to change lives and to change communities.”¹⁶ The rest of this chapter will demonstrate how anxious congregants can easily demand all of a pastor’s attention. Empathy, a word praised in church circles, can actually be a severe detriment to the larger service to the community the pastor desires to pursue. If ministers want to have empathy, then Willimon suggests that “our empathy [...] be trumped by our empathy for poorly led, underserved congregations.”¹⁷ When we allow our empathy to get in the way of making appropriate staffing decisions and doing what is best for our congregation, then our churches suffer because we are providing our congregations poor leadership and subpar staffing.

Like Collins, Friedman believes that the marks of servant leadership actually prevent leaders from doing what is ultimately best for their employees. He states that it is “widespread misunderstanding about the relational nature of destructive processes in families and institutions that leads leaders to assume that toxic forces can be regulated through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, and striving for consensus. It prevents them from taking the kind of stands that set limits to the invasiveness of those who lack self-regulation.”¹⁸ For Friedman, the leader must

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷ Willimon, 98.

¹⁸ Friedman, 13-14.

understand the relational structure of the people within the institution and do the hard work of moderating against any behavior that could potentially disrupt the system.

Empathy is not enough.

Since servant leadership has the potential to force the pastor to succumb to the emotional demands of the congregation and staff in order to keep the peace, Friedman believes in the “vital importance of well-differentiated leadership”¹⁹ Well-differentiated leaders are those who are able to “focus first on their own integrity and on the nature of their own presence rather than on techniques for manipulating or motivating others.”²⁰ The reason, according to Friedman, that leaders need to be able to focus on their own presence first is because in any institution or family system, and a church is certainly one, there are individuals who do not have the emotional capabilities to tend to their own growth and development. Instead, these individuals allow their anxiety to pull others into unhealthy, triangulated relationships, and they bring those around them into their own troubles. Unless the leader is well-differentiated enough to not get caught in the anxiety of others, the leader will only perpetuate the anxious system. Friedman states that in systems where the leader is trying to maintain a copacetic environment, “in order to be ‘inclusive’, [the workplace] will wind up adopting an appeasement strategy toward its most troublesome members while sabotaging those with the most strength to

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

stand up to the troublemakers.”²¹ If the church has a troublesome employee, the leader cannot attempt to be inclusive of this person and his or her behavior, the leader must stand outside the problem and take the right course of action.

This type of well-differentiated leader, according to Friedman, has “the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system,” while “maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others,” and “being clear about one’s own personal values and goals.”²² Friedman provides an extensive critique of leadership that is not able to maintain this well-differentiated self and, indeed, the servant leader model can easily prevent someone from becoming differentiated. Friedman cautions against leaders who are “more concerned with good feelings than with progress,”²³ leaders who are “more concerned to assuage [...] hurt feelings, to right [a] perceived slight, and to keep good feelings going in the community”²⁴ Friedman even critiques empathy in the leader, arguing that an “emotional barrier to reorienting leadership in our time,” is “the focus on empathy rather than responsibility,” calling it “the great myth,” that “feeling deeply for others increases their ability to mature.”²⁵ He argues very much the opposite, that empathy is “symptomatic [...] of an anxious society,” and that “empathy alone will never promote the self-organization necessary for learning from experience; that can

²¹ Ibid., 76.

²² Ibid., 195.

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²⁵ Ibid., 143.

only come about when [people] are told that if they want to be part of the community, they have to adapt to it and not the other way around.”²⁶ Servant leadership stymies the development of a well-differentiated self when it is more concerned with caring for the employees than with addressing the emotional needs of the system. Leaders need to take responsibility for their actions and for the system and demand the same accountability from their staff.

In defense, once again, of Greenleaf and servant leadership, in an emotionally healthy system, Friedman’s critique does not apply. Moreover, even in anxious systems, it is certainly possible to be a servant leader while still managing to be differentiated enough to avoid being taken hostage by the unreasonable needs of an anxious employee. A servant leader can even discipline an anxious employee and demand better behavior. However, sometimes these anxious systems demand tough decisions. Friedman himself admits that “rehabilitation, reconciliation, recovery, or recuperation,” are always possible, but sometimes it is not enough.²⁷ A well-differentiated leader must be able to “accept the short-term acute pain that one must experience in order to reduce anxiety,”²⁸ especially if an employee needs to be removed from a workplace in order to prevent sabotage. Friedman recognizes that this means the leader must “be someone who is not so much in need of approval that being called ‘cruel,’ ‘cold,’ ‘unfeeling,’ [...]

²⁶ Ibid., 156.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 95.

'selfish,' 'strong-willed,' or 'hard-headed' immediately subverts their individuality."²⁹

Friedman notes that when well-differentiated leaders "had to choose between continuing a relationship and giving up their goals, they stuck to their goals over 'team-building,' consensus, and camaraderie."³⁰ Empathy and rehabilitation are not always effective, and in those instances, the well-differentiated leader is able to make the difficult termination decisions that are required for the overall health of the system and for the success of the goals of the organization.

To synthesize the relationship between the theories of Friedman and Greenleaf, the well-differentiated leader must be able to maintain a presence and leadership rooted in his or her own self without become entangled in the emotional needs of the employee. If the servant leader is fully committed to empathy toward and care of a staff member, the servant leader is much more susceptible to falling prey to the emotional machinations of the employee, even if neither person realizes it. That is how institutional and family systems work. The unhealthy behavior becomes part of the daily interactions of the individuals within the system and will continue *ad infinitum* across generations until a well-differentiated leader is able to step outside of the patterns and take action. While it is possible to take action without terminating an employee, clergy are not always equipped to assist their staff in obtaining the emotional differentiation the staff

²⁹ Ibid., 97.

³⁰ Ibid., 201.

members need in their own lives. The danger is that the leader will devote too much time and resources trying to help one troubled person that the rest of the staff are neglected along with the actual mission of the church. Friedman observes that “a focus on being empathic toward others, rather than on being responsible for one’s integrity, can actually lessen,” the ability of the troubled employee to get better.³¹ Consequently, the servant leadership model is not the best approach in these situations. Too much empathy will prevent the staff member from being able to grow. Sometimes, the best course of action for everyone is to remove the anxious employee from the system altogether. The leader must be able to act with the whole system in mind. Management guru, Peter Drucker, even argues that anxiety is introduced into the system when the leader does not act to remove poor performers from the staff. He writes, “The person who consistently renders poor or mediocre performance should be removed from the job for his or her own good. People who find themselves in a job that exceeds their capacities are frustrated, harassed, anxiety-ridden people. One does not do people a service by leaving them in a job they are not equal to. Not to face up to failure in a job is cowardice rather than compassion.”³² Drucker is suggesting that unconditional acceptance is not acceptance at all, but it is instead a harmful act against the employee because it keeps them in a position where they will constantly fail. When these

³¹ Ibid., 144.

³² Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, and Practices*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), pg. 281-282

employees flounder in their positions, it damages their self-esteem, effects the rest of the staff, and becomes the very source of anxiety being introduced into the wider church system.

Since this thesis attempts to incorporate the wisdom from both the corporate sector and social service sector, it is interesting to note that several business resources identify the necessity of a well-differentiated leader without necessarily employing the same language. In their famous book on efficiency and success in the workplace, businessmen Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan argue that “without what we call emotional fortitude, you can’t be honest with yourself, deal honestly with business and organizational realities, or give people forthright assessments.”³³ They identify that “some people are limited, even crippled, by emotional blockages that prevent them from doing things that leadership requires. Such blockages may lead them to avoid unpleasant situations,” such that “a solid, long-term leader has an ethical frame of reference that gives her the power and energy to carry out even the most difficult assignment.”³⁴ Bossidy and Charan are outlining the same approach to leadership as Freidman and church leader Peter Steinke, introduced below, they are simply coming from a different discipline. All leaders must have the emotional fortitude, or be well-differentiated enough, to be able to objectively assess what is best for their organization

³³ Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (New York, NY: Crown Business, 2002), pg. 79.

³⁴ Bossidy, 79-80.

and make decisions accordingly. Otherwise, they allow the anxiety present in the overall system to not only prevent the progress of the institution, but to slowly disintegrate the effectiveness of the leader and the entire staff.

The Anxious Congregation

Speaking of the whole system, though, the work of the pastor in these situations is made even more difficult by the fact that anxious members of the congregation are part of the system as well. In staffing situations, it is not enough for the leader to deal with personal anxiety and become well-differentiated, nor is it enough to remove the anxious staff member from the system. The leader must be able to address the anxiety within the congregation as a whole. Often, congregants, even those in leadership roles in the church, have strong opinions about the dismissal of church staff, especially if the staff person is a member or has had a long tenure that extends beyond a single pastorate. There are entire psychological theories that have been developed regarding dealing with anxiety in larger institutions. John Bowlby's work on attachment theory and Murray Bowen's writings on family systems are two excellent sources. It is not necessary for this thesis to explicate either one of these men's work in depth, but it would certainly benefit any pastor to become familiar with their theories. In a primer on Bowen Theory, it states that, "A change in one persons' functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal

changes in the functioning of others.”³⁵ When a pastor takes the bold step to terminate an employee, that one change can create a cascade of emotional responses in the congregation, and the minister has to be aware of this reality and know how to handle the situation well. It will become even more clear in the third chapter that the congregation and the feelings of congregants have a large influence over pastors as they manage their staff, whether they realize it or not, and often to their own detriment.

One barrier is that congregants often prefer to maintain the status quo rather than deal with the anxiety of change. In his book *Strategic Leadership for a Change*, Pastor Kenneth McFayden points out that many of our congregants “want leaders to help them avoid the pain of change.”³⁶ McFayden says that “most people recognize, where there is change, there is often conflict,” and so, “hoping to avoid conflict, many congregations remain ambivalent,”³⁷ because they know that ultimately, “where there is change, there is loss.”³⁸ Often our congregants are not focused on strategy, they are not thinking about the best paths for growth, they are not worried about whether or not an employee is the best possible person to help further the mission of the church. Instead, they are more concerned with making sure they have a positive church experience and change can be a

³⁵ Michael E. Kerr, “One Family’s Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory,” The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2000, <http://www.thebowncenter.org>.

³⁶ Kenneth J. McFayden, *Strategic Leadership for a Change: Facing Our Losses, Finding Our Future* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), pg. 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

frightening prospect for them. Our congregants do not come to church expecting or hoping that the staff of the church will change. So, when an employee is terminated, this is a loss that they need to grieve. Consequently, the pastor needs to understand that even in the face of staff inadequacy, the congregation is going to remain mostly ambivalent, as McFayden observes, because they are content with avoiding the pain of change. McFayden acknowledges that “leaders often allow complacency within an organization to diminish the sense of urgency necessary to motivate people to change.”³⁹ It is not unusual for clergy to be overtaken by the same complacency.

Consequently, it is essential for clergy to have an awareness of the emotional systems within their congregation and the resultant anxiety that could arise at any time. Pastor and church consultant Peter Steinke writes that clergy need to “work through the presence of anxious forces in the church rather than to be surprised and rendered helpless by them, or retreat from their distressing influence, or, worse yet, protect those who spread their disease among others.”⁴⁰ Unless the minister is intentionally well-differentiated and aware that anxiety can easily arise in the church, then the minister will not be prepared to handle the situation and that is when the minister can default to complacency or even be beset with anxiety him or herself. In another book, Steinke identifies that, “When facing anxious times, a high percentage of congregations freeze.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1993), pg. xi.

Since action might trigger opposition, leaders delay and delay. No one wants to upset or offend others. Immobility can put off the inevitable, but only momentarily. As long as the congregation is stuck, it remains knee-deep in anxiety.”⁴¹ The minister cannot allow the congregation to remain frozen in place, maintaining the status quo simply because it is easier than making a decision that might potentially upset someone. Our churches are dying because we cannot face the inevitable and make the tough decisions to reverse course or rectify our errors.

This is why one of the major premises of this thesis is that the management technique of terminating an employee is actually one of the greatest ways that the pastor can *serve* the congregation. No one goes into a call wanting to dismiss a staff member. It is emotionally difficult. Firing someone inspires feelings of guilt, regret, and grief. You are altering the course of another person’s life and that person may be upset with you because of it. The congregation doesn’t always understand why you have to terminate someone and they may not agree with your decisions. There are human resource logistics that are difficult to juggle, and the subsequent hiring process can be time consuming and frustrating with no guarantee that you are going to find the perfect candidate who will be an improvement over his or her predecessor. Firing someone is a terrible ordeal, and yet, as the rest of this thesis will continue to demonstrate, it is

⁴¹ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), pg. 13.

sometimes necessary for the good of the church and the good of the employee. So, if the rest of the church is willing to be complacent and ambivalent in the face of an inadequate staff member simply to avoid the difficult emotions of change, the pastor must be the one to do the hard work and take the initiative to make the change that the church needs and deserves. In the end, terminating an employee creates more work for the pastor who must now help the congregation grieve the loss of one of its staff, but a well-differentiated leader knows that this process will be worth it and ultimately more healing and healthy than if the congregation remained ambivalent and anxiety was left to fester.

That is why one of the main roles for clergy is to be the person who can lead the congregation into change. Steinke writes that, "Sometimes leaders get into the position of thinking they are primarily responsible for preserving tranquility in the congregation," but instead, "The leader is the one who can most influence the congregation by challenging it," and "when challenging, leaders will surely kick up the dust of anxiety, since resistance is a natural reaction to challenge. Resisters essentially say, 'Let us be content in our homeostatic world.' A leader has to expect people to raise opposition when the community is resting comfortably, and then it is pushed, pulled, or stretched."⁴² While it is easy for pastors to help their congregation maintain the status

⁴² Ibid., 73, 76.

quo, the real work that is needed is to challenge the congregation to move in new directions. While this naturally leads to anxiety in the system, the alternative, allowing a congregation to fall into a malaise, is even more damaging to the health of the church. So, the minister must first challenge the congregation, and then be prepared to deal with the resulting emotions.

McFayden notes that, “The more attached we are to those people, places, or things that are meaningful to us [...] the more their loss or anticipated loss will evoke grief for us.”⁴³ It is not unusual for congregants to become emotionally attached to staff members of the church. This is not bad in any way. McFayden reminds us that “attaching to others is foundational to human behavior. It is our natural instinct to attach.”⁴⁴ We should encourage our members to form relationships with their staff. The more the congregation supports the people and work of our staff, the easier it makes our job as pastors. One strategy I employ is to always speak very highly of all of our employees in public when I am around congregants so that they will be excited about the people who are working for their church. In fact, it is important to remember that congregants will even interact with staff members in ways and moments that extend beyond the observation of the clergy. Consequently, if after a termination, the pastor discovers that there are people who are resisting the change, McFayden informs clergy

⁴³ McFayden, 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33

that “each resisting person is a *grieving* person.”⁴⁵ Therefore, McFayden teaches that “Leaders are called to stand with members and assist in seeing, naming, and sharing the pain of loss,” so that they might “enable a process through which congregations grieve their losses and deepen their capacity to attach anew” once a new person is hired to fill the vacated role.⁴⁶

Notice, once more, how a well-differentiated leader who is able to assess the emotional system of the church and dismiss a troublesome employee is *servicing* the employee by allowing him or her to heal and become self-differentiated and hopefully flourish in a new environment while also *servicing* the congregation by doing what they might be unable to do otherwise. On top of all of that, the pastor is again *servicing* the congregation by helping them through the grief of the loss of one of their attachments. Famed church consultant guru Lyle Schaller writes about a pastor that he worked with and how he wanted his congregation “to be one big happy family,” and he “wanted the staff to be happy and successful,” and he also wanted his church “to be faithful and obedient to God’s will.” Schaller remarks that, “Those can be overlapping goals, but they are far from identical.”⁴⁷ We cannot acquiesce to the anxiety in our church systems and think that our only goal is to keep everyone happy and successful. If we want our church to be faithful and obedient to God’s will, then we must realize that is a separate

⁴⁵ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40-41.

⁴⁷ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Senior Minister* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1988), pg. 64.

goal entirely, one that will require hard decisions, risks, and the ability to push our congregation outside of their comfort zone. But, if being faithful to God is not one of our goals, then what is the point of our ministry? We must be well-differentiated enough to see beyond the task of keeping everyone comfortable.

There are several strategies that a pastor can employ when trying to implement change in church staffing in order to quell anxiety within the system. Bestselling authors Chip and Dan Heath who write extensively on the social sciences and their impact on the workplace published *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, and their analysis seems apropos for clergy in the midst of an anxious system. Like Steinke, they identify that “decision paralysis can be deadly for change—because the most familiar path is always the status quo.”⁴⁸ When congregations are content to wallow in decision paralysis, any termination threatens to imbalance the system. Therefore, Heath and Heath caution that in order “to make a switch, you need to script the critical moves,” and “think about the specific behavior that you’d want to see in a tough moment,” and then “provide crystal-clear guidance.”⁴⁹ This advice coheres substantially with the wisdom of Steinke and McFayden, because in any anxious system, the well-differentiated leader needs to have the capacity to stand outside the emotions that threaten to tear the community apart and provide direction and guidance to the rest of

⁴⁸ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2010), pg. 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54, 56.

the congregation. When the church members threaten to revolt, Heath and Heath counsel that “clarity dissolves resistance.”⁵⁰ The final chapter will evaluate how a clear sense of mission within the church can be a source of clarity and enable the minister to cast a vision for the congregation to follow, especially if staff terminations are part of achieving that vision. Kotter affirms this need for clarity, stating that, “Clear direction helps produce useful change, especially significant or non-incremental change, by pointing out where a group should move, by showing how it can get there, and by providing a message that is potentially motivating.”⁵¹ These same sentiments are echoed by Rendle who writes that, “The more the leader can verbalize and demonstrate purpose in a stressed system, the more the people will mirror the attention of the leader.”⁵² The minister is well served when working with a congregation if he or she can help clearly delineate the path that the church is taking and walk everyone through the process. This is difficult, but it results in much better progress and service to the church compared to being mired in the status quo.

In order to provide clarity, Heath and Heath recommend a whole series of actions, several of which are pertinent to the church. To name just a few, they suggest that the leader should “point to an attractive destination.”⁵³ If the pastor decides a staff

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁵¹ Kotter, *A Force for Change*, 47.

⁵² Rendle, 189.

⁵³ Heath, 81.

termination is necessary, it is almost always because a staff restructuring or replacement of a troubled employee will help lead the church in the right direction. While the pastor, who works in that environment on a daily basis, may have a clear understanding of this reality, the congregation is not necessarily privy to the same information. Thus, the leader needs to be able to clearly communicate that the course of action they have chosen to take is because it will lead the collective community to a more beautiful place. Heath and Heath also outline the important step of being able to “instill hope and optimism and excitement.”⁵⁴ Once again, the final chapter will enumerate how focusing on a clear mission in the church can have the profound effect of instilling hope in the congregation. If a congregation is mired in anxiety and is prone to defaulting toward malaise or negativity, then the leader needs to be able to outline how the steps being taken are ones that can inspire positivity in the congregation. Heath and Heath explain that all of these small emotional steps are essential because “people are incredibly sensitive to the environment and culture—to the norms and expectations of the communities they are in,” and, “behavior is contagious.”⁵⁵ Thus, it is incumbent on the leader to invest as much time as possible in creating an ethos in the church community where change is not met with distress and resistance, but instead, with an openness to the possibilities and an optimism toward what the future might hold. The idea that

⁵⁴ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 206.

behavior is contagious reinforces the importance of the well-differentiated leader modeling calmness and strength in decision-making so that the rest of the church can learn that change is not something to be afraid of, but rather, something to be embraced.

One unique issue that clergy often face, though, that results in prolonged anxiety in the system is the dilemma that arises when the staff member being terminated is also a member of the church. This member may have developed relationships with others in the congregation. No other industry presents quite the same challenge, and so none of the management books on termination can speak to this distinctive challenge. Consequently, it is necessary to examine what to do when attempting to terminate a member in order to help dispel the anxiety within the system.

The Member on Staff

Pastors have different opinions on whether or not the church should hire members to fill paid staff positions. When we began our current call, almost all of our staff were members of the church who had been hired after they had already been members. Hiring members heightens the anxiety within the system because the staff have formed relationships with others in the congregation outside of the purview of their work and they are put into a position where their church becomes both their source of spiritual sustenance and their employer. While we have made a personal decision to never hire a member to avoid the complicated relationships that result, I do not intend to argue that all churches should do the same. However, it is important to reflect on the

emotional barriers that arise when church members are on staff. In the next chapter, many of the survey respondents wrote about the challenges they faced when their ineffective employees were members who had deep relationships with others in the congregation who came to their defense as a result.

In an article for *Christianity Today*, Arthur DeKruyter makes it clear that whichever path a minister chooses to take on this issue, “We never hire someone we can’t fire,” because “we want to be able to exercise free judgment about an employee’s work and perform our administrative responsibility to the congregation.”⁵⁶ Consequently, his suggestion is not to “hire within the congregation if it is going to hamper effective ministry,” and since that is often a threat, he does encourage pastors “to look outside the church when we need to hire.”⁵⁷ A well-differentiated leader should be able to assess whether the hiring of a member will bring emotional difficulties into the workplace and if there will be any complications with terminating this person if the need arises. The well-differentiated leader must be able to do the work of management and administration without being hindered by relationships between the staff member and the rest of the congregation that are not directly correlated to the work being performed. This is important to keep in mind during the hiring process so that choices can be made based on what is ultimately most beneficial for the church rather than for

⁵⁶ Arthur DeKruyter, “Hiring and Firing,” *CT Pastors: Wisdom and Tools for Your Calling*, Published May 19, 2004, www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/books/masteringmanagement/mstmin11-12.html

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

this particular member, even if this member may be looking for a job. Sometimes churches feel as if it is part of their mission to provide employment to members in need. If it is not the right fit, it is not doing anyone a benefit by putting someone into a position for which they are not suited.

It is also important to keep in mind the distinctions between a member and a staff person because it can become complicated not only professionally, but spiritually, when these two roles are mixed. Pastor Brian Dodridge notes that for a member, “it is presupposed that your specific church was first their place of worship, discipleship, and community,” and when they take a position at the church, “they’re jeopardizing their current relationship with the church.”⁵⁸ Church members often have misconceptions about the nature of the work of the church and the necessary day-to-day operations. Dodridge points out that “being employed by a church doesn’t mean everything is ‘ministry’ in nature. Many church members don’t realize how much business and ‘corporate’ work happens behind the scenes,” and they “may become disenfranchised quickly.”⁵⁹ One member of our church who we had to terminate at the beginning of our tenure expressed that his entire employment experience had been distasteful for him because he was forced to “see how the sausage is made,” and it took away from his

⁵⁸ Dodridge, Brian. “The Pitfalls of Hiring Church Members on Staff.” *Brian Dodridge* (blog). September 24, 2015. <http://briandodridge.com/2015/09/24/the-pitfalls-of-hiring-church-members-on-staff/>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

overall church experience. If our first priority as ministers is to the spiritual health of our members, we may be doing them a disservice by asking them to also be involved in the staffing of the church as well. Our members may also expect that the work environment will always be peaceful and uplifting, and they may become disillusioned by the fact that, naturally, there is conflict and tension. Dodridge also points out that a member's "experience in their work environment can (and likely will) affect their spiritual experience," because, for example, "the pastor may have a bad day on Thursday, be unkind or impatient," and "now their work environment has suddenly negatively impacted their spiritual environment."⁶⁰ The church workplace, like any other, can be impacted by negative emotions, no matter how well-differentiated the leader at the top may be. It may not be wise to ask our members to step into that milieu where work and spirituality mix so intimately.

Furthermore, members of the church may be expecting that employment at the church will be characterized by the unconditional acceptance of servant leadership and that they will be supported no matter how they perform. As a result, this creates another potential source of tension. Dodridge asserts that, "Working in a faith- and grace-based environment doesn't mean you get a pass on performing well. Many think because it's a church, there won't be standards, reviews, or improvement plans."⁶¹ Unless we are

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

comfortable with disciplining, supervising, and making demands for development for our members who are functioning as staff, then it is not appropriate to hire them. All staff need to be accountable for the quality of their work, and the leader must have the emotional wherewithal to create those expectations, even if it means having a difficult conversation with a member of the church.

Another commentator on church leadership, Ann Michel, identifies that an increasing number of churches are hiring from within because of their need for staff who understand the culture of a church. However, like Dodridge, Michel cautions that before any hiring takes place, “Congregations and their staffs need to understand that the relationship between employer and employee is fundamentally different than the covenant of church membership. This is especially true—and needs to be emphasized from the start—when a church hires a member. [...] Members who work for their churches must learn to balance the dual roles of congregant and staff member.”⁶² Michel goes a step further to state that it is also incumbent upon the congregation to understand that there is a fundamental difference between how the church will interact with members and with employees. The need for this distinction will become clear in the next chapter when many of the clergy who participated in the survey dealt with congregations who did not understand this difference and it resulted in the church

⁶² Ann A. Michel, “When Churches Hire Members,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Published March 7, 2018, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/churches-hire-members/>

refusing to place any expectations on the member who was also staff. Their congregations advocated for grace and compassion for the employee rather than expectations and standards. While members of a church are given much more leeway in how and how often they interact with their spiritual community, a church cannot function if that same leeway is given to staff.

The survey respondents who were able to effectively terminate their employees were the ones who also understood that there is a difference between pastoral care and managing a staff. Michel identifies that churches often get into trouble because they do not grasp this aspect of the difference between the roles of members and staff. Michel writes that, “When hiring anyone—member or non-member—a congregation needs to hire the right person for the right reasons. Church personnel problems are often rooted in a tendency to see hiring and employee management through the lens of congregational care instead of objective workplace logic. Many churches hire or refuse to fire someone because they worry about the person being out of work. They fail to hold employees accountable because they don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings or don’t have the necessary personnel systems and skills.”⁶³ This is one of the many distinctions between the role of member and employee. With a member, the minister offers pastoral care and guidance and tends to their needs even when it consumes time and resources.

⁶³ Ibid.

Grace is exhibited to a member even when they fail to meet certain expectations.

However, a workplace cannot expend an inordinate amount of time and resources on one employee and cannot turn a blind-eye to failure to perform duties. Anyone may be welcome to join a church as a member, but a church has a responsibility to selectively determine the best fit for a staff position. Churches often get into trouble with poor performing employees when they fail to understand these distinctions.

This chapter has demonstrated that the hard work of ministry is not providing troubled employees unlimited chances to develop into effective staff members, but the truly hard work is managing the anxiety present within the church system and making the very difficult decision to terminate an employee when it is necessary. The church needs this type of leadership in order to be healthy and to thrive. Ronald Heifetz recognizes that "Followers want comfort, stability, and solutions from their leaders, but that's babysitting. Real leaders ask hard questions and knock people out of their comfort zones. Then they manage the resulting distress."⁶⁴ First, we clergy need to be knocked out of our comfort zones, and then we need to start pushing our churches forward as well. The mission of the church does not call for comfort and stability. It calls for us to be uncomfortable enough with the problems of the world that we are motivated to take action. If we are so consumed with trying to manage anxious staff members and an

⁶⁴ Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001, 131.

emotionally unhealthy church system, then it prevents us from being focused on the mission we are called to pursue. With that in mind, it is important to evaluate the real-life barriers that prevent clergy from terminating their staff when it is appropriate, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

3. Barriers to Effective Management

This thesis is predicated on the fact that clergy do find it more difficult to terminate employees because of various internal and external barriers to their ministry. Consequently, it is not enough to discuss the theory behind servant leadership and the problems that arise with its implementation, it is essential to understand the very real ways that these issues play out in the lives of pastors. To assist in this goal, I disseminated a confidential survey to pastors across multiple denominations. Their answers were anonymous to protect them in their work. The survey began by asking clergy to think about a situation or situations where they considered terminating an employee. They then answered three sets of questions: 1. If you did not follow-through with termination, why not? Were there any internal or external barriers that prevented you from doing so? Do you feel as if it is appropriate for clergy to terminate employees? 2. If you did follow-through with termination, why did you do so? Why did you feel like this was the best course of action? Did you feel that you had the support of your church council or congregation? 3. How do you understand the phrase servant leadership? Do you try to embody servant leadership? The answers were illuminating, and this chapter will be devoted to understanding the experiences of the clergy who participated in the survey and evaluating their responses in the wider context of this thesis. As businessmen Bossidy and Charan state, "Leaders know intuitively that they have a problem and will often readily acknowledge it. But an alarming number don't do

anything to fix the problem.”¹ Many of the clergy surveyed were able to identify the problems that existed within their staff, but a clear course of action was much more elusive.

I received a total of sixty survey responses across ten denominations (American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian Church (USA), Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Covenant Church, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Non-Denominational, and Disciples of Christ). Interestingly, only six of the respondents felt that it was categorically inappropriate for the pastor of a church to terminate employees. Nevertheless, even though the survey participants conceded that a pastor should theoretically be able to fire a staff member, they reported a myriad of internal and external barriers that have prevented them from doing so. This chapter will group their responses around four main themes: the theology behind church leadership, the institutional barriers present in church governance, the emotional barriers of a highly anxious system, and the strategic timing of termination in the life of the church. Finally, this chapter will evaluate what the clergy who successfully terminated their staff held in common.

¹ Bossidy, 118.

It's Not the Christ-Like Thing to Do

In *A Failure of Nerve*, Edwin Friedman writes: "Frequently, the leaders of a church would come to me seeking techniques for dealing with a member of the staff or a member of the congregation who was acting obstreperously, who was ornery, and who intimidated everyone with his gruffness. I might say to them, 'This is not a matter of technique; it's a matter of taking a stand, telling this person he has to shape up or he cannot continue to remain a member of the community.' And the church leaders would respond, 'But that's not the Christian thing to do.'"² As noted above, it is not unusual for pastors, church leaders, and congregation members to feel like staff termination conflicts with the values of Christianity. One Presbyterian respondent noted that he/she waited much too long to follow-through with a termination because the "personnel committee said things like 'it wouldn't be Christ-like to fire him,'" even though he was not abiding by set expectations." In this instance, the personnel committee was willing to ignore clear violations of established workplace expectations in order to adhere to what they believed was the Christian approach to managing a staff. This situation mirrors almost verbatim the example used by Friedman.

A non-denominational pastor confessed that, "It is challenging, because as pastors, I think we are more compelled to give a second chance which then turns into 3rd, 4th, and even 5th chances. Pastors are more compassion driven." This clergy-person went

² Friedman, 9.

so far as to say that, “Leaders should ‘want’ to give that 2nd and 3rd chance to help a person grow out of their weaknesses and grow into strengths.” This sentiment about second chances was echoed by a Presbyterian pastor who affirmed, “My strong belief in a God of second chances makes me try to rehabilitate behavior and give people the opportunity to try again. Given guidance, they may be remediated to working with others again.” The guiding belief of these two ministers aligns with Greenleaf’s commitment to unconditional acceptance of church employees and also reflects Greenleaf’s conviction that a manager should be able to draw out the strengths of an employee and work with and through the limitations of the staff. However, Peter Steinke, a follower of Edwin Friedman, argues in his book *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, that “Friedman believed that the antagonism of the anxious is proportionate to the niceness of the leader.”³ The reason why an employee would need so many chances is because the supervisor was willing to give so many chances in the first place. An anxious employee who is not a good fit for a system may take as many chances as the leader is willing to provide unless the leader is able to take a hard stand and make a determination that no more chances will be given. While some ministers may see this continual investment in the employee as a mark of grace, Bishop Willimon argues that “excessive need for teaching and training are often indicators that those of us

³ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, pg. 77.

in oversight have appointed the wrong person.”⁴ While these ministers might feel as if they have a theological basis for their unconditional acceptance, there is also a theological imperative in Scripture to identify and come to terms with mistakes when they are made. Sometimes as managers we make the mistake of hiring the wrong person, which is okay so long as we take the steps to remedy our error.

As ministers we also want to build a reputation for being a compassionate and kind person so that our staff can trust us and like us. However, ensuring that people view us as “nice” is much too low of a calling for any pastor. Steinke calls out this tendency in clergy by saying that, “Generally, clergy are highly motivated to give and receive affection. Their warmth and kindness contribute to their pastoral qualities. But these same qualities limit their capacity for proactive behavior: being decisive and taking positions.”⁵ We think that in order to be like Christ we have to exhibit unlimited grace and affection toward our employees. But this incessant need for approval prevents us from demanding more from our employees simply because we are afraid of how they or others will respond. This passivity should not be confused with Christ. In fact, Steinke argues that, “A conflict-free congregation is incongruent not only with reality but even more with biblical theology. [...] Nowhere in the Bible is tranquility preferred to truth.”⁶ The image of Christ that we receive in Scripture is one who was willing to confront the

⁴ Willimon, 98.

⁵ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

Pharisees when they fell into religious hypocrisy, one who was willing to confront the money-changers in the temple when they exploited the poor, and one who was willing to confront his own disciples when they become more focused on their own personal greatness than the ministry of God. The image in the church of a Christ who doesn't upset anyone needs to be challenged.

Several clergy felt that their actions were influenced by pervading expectations in the church about how they and the congregation should behave toward church employees. A United Church of Christ minister observed, "Termination is a difficult task in any organization, but in a church it may be more difficult because the expectation may be that the pastor should be more forgiving and understanding." Forgiveness is such a critical component of the Christian faith, and this can present a theological conundrum. The pastor feels pressure to exhibit the forgiveness that is at the center of the story of Christ, a Christ who, when his disciple Peter asked, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Christ responds, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."⁷ So, clergy wonder, should they too forgive transgressing employees seventy-seven times before advancing to termination? One minister claimed that the church environment requires as much. He/she wrote, "At certain times, being a church community means

⁷ Matt. 18:21-22

caring for those who are employees. I have made exceptions for people as they are struggling with certain real-life issues. [...] In all of those circumstances, had it been a different setting, I would have terminated the employee.” This minister has created an ethic, like many churches do, where expectations are different for employees of the church than in other sectors. The pastor did not make a termination that he/she would have otherwise simply because the staffing situation took place in the church. Another respondent spoke of his or her church context where they were willing to try any alternative other than termination: “We tried very hard to see rehabilitation. We spent hours in counseling. We directed outside counseling. There wasn’t a moral failing, but more so someone who was emotionally unhealthy which directly affected his leadership and the culture of the church.” This minister from the Evangelical Covenant Church was trying to embody Christ by not giving up on his employee, but the result was that the entire church was suffering because they were leaving an emotionally unhealthy person in the system and the anxiety was permeating outward.

Another pervasive expectation in the church is that it must operate as a church rather than as a business. Clergy and congregants alike constantly express this perceived dichotomy. A PCUSA pastor wrote that in the midst of one conflict, both the session and personnel committee constantly heard from the congregation, “we’re a church, not a business.” They were dealing with an employee who was falsifying time sheets, and as a result of the pressure from the congregation to act “like a church,” they decided to pay

“a very considerable amount of severance for the part-time position, especially considering how we had been over-paying this employee quite a bit because of falsified time sheets.” The matter was complicated by the fact that, “She was related to one of the members, which didn’t help.” The subject matter of dealing with members and family of members of the church was discussed above, but it is essential to pause and understand why people feel like it is important to draw a sharp distinction between the church and a business, so much so that they are willing to reward criminal behavior.

Some businesses have the reputation of being cutthroat, focused only on profits, such that they are willing to exploit and disregard people’s humanity for the sake of advancement. Scripture certainly has a lot to say about this type of approach: it is clear that those who pursue wealth over justice are judged for neglecting the ways of God.⁸ It is understandable, then, why churches would be wary of business practices that they fear would lead them down the same path. The result, however, is that churches reject wisdom from the business sector entirely, which prevents them from taking advantage of strategy and practices that could be to their benefit. Jim Collins presents a way to reframe this line of thinking entirely. After writing his seminal book, *Good to Great*, Collins was surprised to discover that his principles were being implemented across the social sectors, churches included. He then wrote a companion piece to help non-profit

⁸ Cf. Amos 8:6 and Matthew 6:24.

organizations better implement the findings of his research. He cautions that, “We must reject the idea – well-intentioned, but dead wrong – that the primary path to greatness in the social sector is to become ‘more like a business,’” and “we need to reject the naïve imposition of the ‘language of business’ on the social sectors, and instead jointly embrace a language of greatness.”⁹ Churches should stop being afraid that the pursuit of success, excellence, or greatness will turn them into a business. Churches don’t need to become businesses, they need to be churches, but churches have a mission that they must pursue too.

Collins helps to define greatness for those that might be wary of that word, particularly given Jesus’ maxim that the first shall be last. He clarifies, “In the social sector, performance is defined by results and efficiency in delivering on the social mission.”¹⁰ Greatness is not about the pursuit of profit, Collins makes that very clear, “for a social sector organization, however, performance must be assessed relative to mission, not financial returns.”¹¹ Instead greatness is about how well an organization pursues its mission. We have been given a Great Commission by Christ, and we should not be afraid to pursue that mission with vigor. We should not allow impediments to the pursuit of that mission, employees included, detract from or derail that pursuit. In this

⁹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer* (Boulder, Co: Self Published, 2005), pgs 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

framework, terminating an employee that is hindering the church from achieving its goals is not contrary to the ways of Christ, instead it is a demonstration of our fidelity to Christ and to His mission.

Moreover, attempting to be more like Christ by giving troubled employees multiple chances can actually be quite damaging to the rest of the staff. Pastor Arthur DeKruyter writes about an employee who “wasn’t putting in the time and energy the job demanded,” and “the rest of the staff started to come to [him] and say, ‘Hey, this fellow isn’t pulling his load.’” DeKruyter came to the conclusion that “You can’t hook up a team of horses and have one of them dragging behind.”¹² Greenleaf’s approach to servant leadership makes it seem that the ethics involved are simple: you show unconditional acceptance to each employee individually. Many Christian leaders have adopted that stance as the appropriately Christian one as well. However, there are much more complicated issues at stake such as the justice and fairness of allowing one person to prevent the rest of the staff from advancing in their own work and call. Once again, it may actually be more Christ-like to help a troubled staff member find employment in a place where they can flourish in their own unique calling rather than allowing the entire team to suffer.

¹² DeKruyter, “Hiring and Firing.”

Institutional Barriers

Each denomination has slightly different church polity and an understanding of the hierarchy in church decision-making. The polity sometimes affects who feels empowered to make upper-level management decisions such as the termination of an employee. Even in church governance systems where the pastor should theoretically have the ability to fire and hire staff members who were not ordained and called by the congregation, the church may have developed unique structures that cause the pastor to feel disempowered from making these types of management decisions. It was clear from the survey results that many clergy face external barriers in their management from their church governance structures.

One minister in the United Church of Christ remarked, “My position does not allow for firing authority. The congregational leadership does not seem to agree on whether it’s appropriate [to terminate an employee], so making a change is a process of its own.” The United Church of Christ is a congregationalist denomination, and as a result, the governance of each individual church can be so different and many churches, like this one, do not have clear structures in place. As a result, this minister felt inhibited from pursuing termination when appropriate because the process often felt like too much work to ultimately be worth it.

Another minister in the same denomination expressed a similar feeling of institutional hindrance: “I did not terminate an employee because while I was the senior

pastor, there is technically a personnel team in the church that would have to approve this as well. Our personnel team was not high functioning—did not meet regularly. It would have been a time and spiritual drain on these volunteers. The situation with the staff member was not dangerous, just less than ideal, and so I chose not to enter into termination conversations.” In this situation as well, the minister was prevented from acting by unclear governance in the church. Because the personnel committee did not meet regularly, and because the clergyperson did not want to burden them, he/she did not move forward with termination even though he/she was considering it as an option. It appears this minister is trying to rationalize his or her decision as well by claiming that the situation was less than ideal, but not dangerous. Rarely is a staffing situation truly dangerous, but that does not mean that termination is not the best option for everyone involved. A third respondent confessed that he/she has “witnessed situations in which individuals and organizations suffered personally and organizationally from not having a system in place.” When the topic of staff termination creates too much anxiety in the church, then the topic is often avoided altogether. The clergy then do not feel empowered to use termination as a management technique because they do not know if they have permission and they feel that starting the conversation with church leadership can often raise anxiety in the system even more. This minister is astute to point out that individuals and churches suffer, though, when there is no clear understanding of who has the authority to fire a problematic staff person what the

appropriate process should be. Pastor John Wimberly forthrightly states that, “The more detailed a congregation’s personnel policies are about the process of managing ineffective employees the better.”¹³ He advises a church’s “personnel committee to devote a section of its employee policies to defining the process of dismissal.”¹⁴ We allow our churches to deteriorate if we are unwilling to do the management work of figuring out who is responsible for making the difficult decision to terminate.

At the same time, though, churches that have too many processes may be just as inhibiting for clergy. As I was writing this thesis, I discovered a very unfortunate situation in my denomination where the senior pastor decided to terminate a non-ordained employee, but individuals in the church who were already upset with him used it as an opportunity to accuse the pastor of disregarding the by-laws regarding who could make staff terminations and called for his termination. A church’s policies should be clear but should also be designed to give the pastor flexibility to create a team that will help the minister achieve the vision of the church. These policies should not hamstring the pastor. Several survey respondents indicated that they were not allowed to make termination decisions on their own, and the additional layers of management made the firing more difficult. One indicated, “In the churches I have served, it has not been appropriate for clergy to act alone to terminate”; another, “I never terminated

¹³ Wimberly, 62.

¹⁴ Ibid.

anyone without a process authorized and supported at every turn by the church leadership structures (personnel committee, Church Council)—usually a very long process, because—church”; a third, “It was an external barrier set by church policy that made all personnel decisions the duty of a personnel committee,”; a fourth, “I act as an agent for the church personnel committee, so I do not simply hire or fire on my own without consultation,”; a fifth, “The Church council was involved with decision-making at every step.” Similar sentiments were shared by other respondents that terminations could not happen simply by their own initiative, but often had to be vetted by various committees and boards of the church. There are, of course, several benefits to these extra steps. Firstly, it allows the pastor to gain more widespread support from members of the congregation who can also serve as advocates when other members of the congregation ask questions or express disappointment with the termination. It thus also spreads the responsibility across multiple people so that the pastor does not have to be the primary target for any anger. Additionally, if the termination is a complex matter, it allows the pastor to have the input, advice, and guidance of others who may have additional experience in the field of management. However, if the pastor cannot move forward with a termination when he/she knows that it is the best course of action for the church simply because there are too many institutional barriers in the way or because people without knowledge of the staff have the power to roadblock, then the processes are problematic.

Pastor Kennon Callahan identifies that churches are often beset by an overwhelming amount of institutional structures that prevent the church from taking action. He writes that, "One of the dilemmas in the local church is a propensity for indecision and analysis paralysis. We analyze some decisions up one side; then we analyze them down another side. We hash it and rehash it and then hash it over again. We worry some decisions to death. Committee meeting after committee meeting is consumed with this."¹⁵ Many clergy know that committees can mean the death of innovation and progress. If a termination decision has to pass through too many structures, then it carries the risk that a final resolution will never be made, and as we will see later in this chapter, moving quickly once it is clear that someone is not a good fit is essential for the health of the organization. Bureaucracy is fine. This chapter has already established the danger of not having any institutional structures at all. Nevertheless, Callahan cautions that while "bureaucracy has its value," the reality is that "effectiveness is more valuable. A bureaucracy is of value when it generates green tape—policies and procedures that 'move things rapidly forward.' Some bureaucracies are capable of generating green tape. Regrettably, many bureaucracies are more skilled at generating red tape—policies and procedures that block and stop, bog things down, slow them to a crawl. [...] The trend toward bureaucracy," Callahan argues, "is the

¹⁵ Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), pgs. 159-160.

trend toward oblivion.”¹⁶ Clergy need to be able to have frank conversations with their sessions, church councils, or any other governing body about how to make policies and procedures that allow decisions like staff terminations to be made quickly and effectively, otherwise institutional barriers can be a great hindrance to the success of any ministry.

One clergy participant lamented, “I feel that I did not move more quickly to terminate her employment because I was unsure of the authority that I had in the church system. I knew that I would have to defend the decision to terminate to members of the personnel committee, so it was important for me to follow a formal process, clearly demonstrate how the employee failed to meet expectations, and follow through in a patient and humane manner. I felt that the church council and others in church leadership were generally averse to any decision to terminate. [...] I felt insecure in the support that I might have among leaders in the church.” Unlike the earlier respondents that were highlighted, this minister did have all of the appropriate personnel structures in place but was deterred by her sense of the feelings of her church leadership toward termination, and she found the amount of documentation that was required to be daunting. She felt so much pressure to handle the termination the “right way” that it prevented her from acting at all. It seems this minister did not realize that she was

¹⁶ Ibid., 218.

allowing the anxiety of her church leadership to control the path of the church. Another participant outlined the bevy of steps that were required before termination was an option: “I made this decision only after exhausting all the processes available in our HR policies and after consultation with our local attorney, our insurance carrier, and the UCC national council.” It seems preposterous to imagine that a simple staff termination could only happen after seeking the advice of an attorney, an insurance provider, and the national council of the entire denomination. Perhaps clergy have an inflated view of the delicacy and importance of these types of management decisions.

World famous management guru, Peter Drucker, argues that a claim that the institutional structures are too cumbersome as to permit action is often an excuse. He writes that, “The assertion that ‘somebody else will not let me do anything’ should always be suspected as a cover-up for inertia.”¹⁷ He goes on to say that “even where the situation does set limitations—and everyone lives and works within rather stringent limitations—there are usually important, meaningful, pertinent things that can be done. The effective executive looks for them. If he starts out with the question: ‘What can I do?’ he is almost certain to find that he can actually do much more than he has time and resources for.”¹⁸ There are always institutional barriers that prevent us from acting in the ways that we desire, or at least as quickly as we desire. That is especially true in the

¹⁷ Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967), pg. 96.

¹⁸ Ibid.

church when denominational structures can impede action and where each and every member of the church functions as a “boss” with his or her own opinion. However, if the minister uses that as an excuse for inaction, then nothing will be accomplished. There is always something that the leader can do in order to help the congregation move forward, and the leader must ask what the next step should be rather than being content with the status quo. As Drucker argues, “Executives are not paid for doing things they like to do. They are paid for getting the right things done.”¹⁹ Even if the congregation itself is the one impeding progress, the minister must still remind him or herself that the congregation is paying the leader for doing the difficult work that they are unwilling to pursue. It is easy to let the barriers of the institution shut down progress, but clergy are hired to work within and beyond those barriers to the benefit of the church.

Lyle Schaller writes about how churches can take proactive steps, though, to prevent these kinds of institutional barriers. He suggests that “The lay leadership quietly inform all program staff members, including the secretary to the senior minister, that the new senior minister will be given the authority to build a new staff and that decisions on terminations and tenure will be made by the new senior minister. Thus, the initiation of the idea that changes may be necessary is carried out by the lay leadership, not by the new senior minister.”²⁰ When there are no clear avenues for terminating a staff person,

¹⁹ Ibid., 158.

²⁰ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press: 1980), pg. 118.

then churches can become mired in bureaucracy that can prevent growth and advancement. The next chapter will outline why it is important for congregations to bestow power and authority onto their ministers so that they can make management decisions easily and effectively and focus on the wider mission of the church. The source of that power and authority needs to come from the congregation, and Schaller astutely points out that if lay leadership make it clear that a minister has the authority to make staffing decisions, then it will hopefully reduce anxiety in the system and provide legitimacy to the decisions that the minister makes.

These survey respondents have demonstrated that some churches either have too much bureaucracy or too little institutional support when it comes to empowering clergy to make staffing decisions. It is essential that churches take seriously the topic of staff terminations and sort out these issues, because as social sector leaders Crutchfield and Grant point out, in any nonprofit when the governing “board isn’t effective, it can sink an organization,” and on top of that, they argue that many leadership crises in social sectors are due in part to “the failure of most organizations to develop human resources.”²¹ As the responses above indicate, many churches are afraid of having these tough conversations altogether and so they avoid them. When the governing authorities cannot openly talk about topics such as staff performance and create a clear path for

²¹ Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, *Force for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), pgs. 195, 199.

clergy to take action, then the entire organization can falter. Churches are encouraged to have these conversations before they are needed.

Emotional Barriers

The last section demonstrated that the institutional practices and policies of the church can provide an external barrier to using termination as a management technique. The survey results also revealed that the emotions involved in choosing to terminate a staff member provide what may be the biggest internal and external barrier. Several of the participants indicated that their own internal emotions played a significant role in their decision-making process. One United Methodist minister straightforwardly stated, “I have withheld firing for pastoral/compassion reasons.” Another non-denominational pastor who expressed great internal conflict over whether to fire an employee concluded by expressing, “It would most definitely be easier emotionally if a pastor did not have to terminate.” In his book *We’re Going to Have to Let you Go: A Guide for Effectively—and Professionally—Terminating Employees*, attorney Isaac Hammer spends a significant amount of time in his book recognizing that emotions play a significant role in the termination process and can actually prevent a leader from taking the right course of action. He writes that, “Letting someone go can create just as much internal conflict for the person doing the firing as it does for the employee being let go,”²² and that “the

²² Isaac Hammer, *We’re Going to Have to Let You Go: A Guide for Effectively—and Professionally—Terminating Employees* (Charleston, SC: Advantage, 2015), pg. 20.

hardest piece for any [person] to overcome when he's trying to decide to let someone go is his own emotional response, marked by fear, guilt and hesitation."²³ Hammer goes so far as to claim that when leaders are contemplating firing a staff member, they actually process the decision by going through the "five stages of grief modeled by Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*."²⁴ These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

In his book, Hammer outlines how leaders often move through each of these five stages until they are finally able to accept that termination is the best course of action for the entire organization. For example, Hammer argues that when "deciding to terminate an employee," the leader "always starts out with questioning whether a person should be dismissed from the job," and that "without proper training, a leader won't want to confront the problem."²⁵ Hammer writes that, "The first reaction for the untrained leader is denial—he may make excuses for it, or he may even arrange work-arounds. In fact, business leaders have told me many times that they have a problem employee, but everyone just 'works around it.'"²⁶ I'm sure that many clergy can relate to this first stage of denial where the leader tries to rationalize that everything is not as bad as it seems and that there are plenty of other options available rather than actually terminating the

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 79.

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

²⁶ Ibid., 80-81.

employee. The examples from the last section demonstrate this clearly when some of the pastors said that their problems were not so bad that they needed to bother their personnel committee or congregation even though they would have pursued termination otherwise. Pastor Kennon Callahan suggests that all of our compassion in the moment is misplaced. He argues that, "Compassion does not coddle or settle for second best," and that a "passive understanding of being kind contributes to a person's becoming passive and dependent. A proactive sense of kindness may sometimes be tough."²⁷ When our emotions cloud our judgment, we cannot assume it is because we are being compassionate or kind. Often it is quite the opposite. We are enabling and creating dependencies, and true kindness is being able to be tough enough to tell our employees the truth.

One respondent to the survey noted that even though he/she reached acceptance, there was still grief along the way, writing, "Termination is not easy or pleasant, but sometimes necessary." Another clergy who indicated that he was a seasoned minister who had gone through multiple firings still agreed that the emotions of the process were difficult: "In many settings, the minister is the manager and so 'moving people off the bus is simply part of being a manager. But it is a hard and painful human reality. Yet, I

²⁷ Callahan, 167.

have mostly found people have better lives when they find a job they can do well, so moving people on usually is best for them as well.”

Clearly this minister has read and internalized the writings of Jim Collins, but his point is apropos. There can be no denying that letting a staff member go is almost always an emotionally taxing prospect. Indeed, it is often the most difficult decision that a manager can make to so significantly alter the life of an employee. However, when the leader sits in the stage of denial and forces the rest of the staff to simply “work around” the problem employee, Hammer argues that what this really means is that the staff “are having to take on some sort of expanded role in order to accommodate the issue of how this one individual is letting the company down.”²⁸ Hammer says it succinctly, “You owe it to the company to confront the situation.”²⁹ This is where the well-differentiated leader plays a significant role. The pastor must be able to separate any internal emotions that might hinder proper action, especially if his or her empathy is causing harm not only to the rest of the staff, but also to the problematic employee who is being held back. There is much to learn from this seasoned minister’s response.

Another pastor adeptly identified that if our concern is truly for the employee, then we need to be willing to terminate for the sake of the worker in the right circumstances. This pastor stated, “I take servant leadership to mean leading by

²⁸ Hammer., 81.

²⁹ Ibid.

considering and addressing the needs of the people on the team. This may mean terminating an employee in some instances.” As leaders, we want to serve our employees by making sure that they are supported and flourishing in their work. However, as argued previously, oftentimes what is best for our employee is allowing them to find a job in another context where they will be more fulfilled. A Roman Catholic priest made this same observation, stating, “I understand [servant leadership] as having the motive in all things for taking care of those entrusted to my care. I do try to serve this way, knowing that I should model my life after Jesus who laid down his life for his sheep. This also means, however, that many times I have to lead them to places that they may not want to go, but it is for their good.” When we lay down our lives for the sheep entrusted to our care as managers, then we better have the courage to terminate a staff member who needs to be terminated for their own good and for the good of the church.

However, it is important to concede that there are often unique and overly emotional circumstances in workplace environments that make the feelings involved even more difficult. One respondent admitted that he/she did not follow through with termination even though “the woman wasn’t doing her job well,” because “she was also recently diagnosed with a chronic disease.” There are often a lot of emotional dynamics at play, and the pastor is expected to navigate them with wisdom and grace. The pressure of dealing with the livelihoods of others is enough to understandably stymie

many a compassionate clergy. A minister can take special care in helping an employee in this kind of difficult situation find his or her next option, but sentimentality should not prevent the minister from making the necessary difficult decisions. Clergy must allow their compassion to take into consideration the organization and its people as a whole. Peter Steinke cautions that, "Being an emotional system, the church family is tempted to submerge its anxiety in a sentimental swamp."³⁰ A pastor cannot avoid the fact that emotions are going to come to the surface in the church regarding any decision that is made. It is natural. However, as Steinke points out, the church is often content to be consumed by the anxiety and emotions of the situation and it is incumbent on the pastor to be well-differentiated enough to move beyond sentimentality.

In addition to the internal conflicts involved for the pastor, though, the emotions of the church leadership and congregation often create significant external barriers, and this was the case for many of the pastors surveyed. One pastor stated that a termination he/she attempted to carry out "was a painful process particularly because some in the congregation liked this individual. My decision was questioned by some." Another painted an even bleaker picture where he/she felt completely trapped by the emotions of the congregation, stating: "I have another staff member now who has been there for 40 years [...] and one who has been there for 10. I have been here for two and would have

³⁰ Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 59.

fired them both immediately if I thought I could do so without significant ramifications and blowback from the congregation.” This person again stated, “I felt like I could not terminate her and keep relationships.” Another clergyperson told a similar story of feeling trapped: “I did not terminate a secretary who had a good deal of power but was becoming too controlling because [...] she had many friends among the many people with whom we worked, and I felt they would all ‘come to her rescue’ if she would be fired. I’m afraid our efficiency as an organization declined because of this, but I feel we did not have any choice but to keep her.” The frustration of these two pastors is palpable. One desired to terminate immediately, but thought the congregation would be in an uproar, and so did not move forward with what he/she thought was the best management plan, and the other realized that the efficiency of the organization was suffering but felt like there was nothing he/she could do.

These same sentiments were repeated so often by the clergy who participated in the survey that it is important to highlight more of them to demonstrate how pervasive these emotional external barriers are for clergy who are attempting to use termination as a management technique. For many, it prevented them from acting at all. One pastor wrote, “On one occasion where I could have terminated someone, but did not, the reason was to avoid unrest.” Another confessed, “I did not follow through [with termination]. The person is a member of the church and the family has a large influence on the church.” One pastor argued that, “Weighing the fall-out and the consequences to

the community relationships sometimes has out-weighted the benefit from termination. This is especially true if the employee is also a member of the congregation." Still another wrote, "A staff member was divisive, loved by some members, detested by others. The main reason for not terminating was a group of senior highs that were very connected and very happy with this person."

For many pastors who were able to follow-through with firing their staff member, they still reported that there were emotional challenges in the aftermath that they had to confront. A Roman Catholic parish pastor wrote, "It was difficult to terminate the individual since the person was an active member of the church. The [...] barrier for me was dealing with the backlash from other staff members and church-goers." Another pastor reported, "I followed through with termination because of insubordination of the employee [...] though some church members were not pleased." A non-denominational minister lamented that, "Terminating someone who has, at least on some level, invested in the lives of people spiritually and emotionally can have negative consequences on the body at large. [...] I have served at two churches where pastors [...] were terminated. It was a gut wrenching and difficult process, and many people were impacted by these decisions." Still another said, "I have terminated four people in the past ten years. The last person was terminated against the will of my two senior lay leaders which was very painful and costly." The sheer number of respondents who wrote about external emotional barriers demonstrates how pervasive this problem

is for clergy trying to navigate the emotional systems of their congregation in an attempt to manage their congregations.

The most egregious example reported was narrated by a United Church of Christ employee. He wrote that the employee he wanted to terminate “was the church secretary. She resisted having any kind of proofreading of her work even though it was the most public thing about her job. The rest of the story: She had a major mental health breakdown in her prior job. The church council and in particular the council president saw it as part of their mission to help her feel needed and to provide an income until she was able to retire and receive Social Security. Because she had grown up in the congregation, the church family shared in this mission.” This church has decided that using church resources to fund an ineffective church secretary was part of the overall mission of the church. While it is difficult to know the specifics of the emotions involved in this congregation, this seems like a clear example of empathy and anxiety taking hold of a church and preventing them from making wise management choices on behalf of the entire congregation. They are paying an employee simply to help her feel needed! Church consultant Lovett Weems recognizes that emotional barriers are a reality in the church. He writes that in churches there “is often inaction because of the leader’s fear of moving forward beyond what others may deem appropriate.”³¹ Many clergy serve at the

³¹ Weems, 6.

discretion of the congregation, and it can be dangerous to lead the church to places where they are not ready to go. These emotional barriers must be recognized. Pastor John Wimberly echoes this observation from his own experience serving congregations for decades. He states that, "Church members want their congregation to be a place of warmth and love. Firings don't fit neatly into such a vision."³² The previous chapter spent so much time discussing the need for a well-differentiated leader who can help lead an anxious congregation through change precisely because of the inevitable emotional issues that arise when a church goes through a staff termination. All of the strategies outlined above must come into play when we are hindered by the emotional needs of our congregation and searching for a path forward.

It is tempting to try to create emotional consensus in the church, but most church leaders know that it is impossible. Even though pastors can lay the groundwork to help their congregation navigate the anxiety of losing a staff member, Peter Steinke provides a reminder that the church must stay focused on its vision rather than become restrained by the emotional condition of a subsection of the congregation. McFayden writes, "Strategic leaders are aware, however, that they cannot wait until everyone is finished grieving before the congregation casts a vision for the future. To do so would immobilize a congregation and generate a high degree of passivity and inactivity. To

³² Wimberly, 60.

overcome this impediment, leaders must assess the presence and power of unresolved grief and determine when it is time to move forward, with the knowledge that some members will not support them or the new vision.”³³ So many of the clergy surveyed who were hindered by emotional barriers have truly become halted in their ministry efforts altogether because they are afraid of how the congregation will react. Instead, these pastors need to be able to cast a vision and lead their congregation toward it while understanding that not everyone will move forward with them and that is okay. The last chapter will outline why having a vision is essential, especially when it is time to help the congregation sort through its emotions. People need to know where they are going, and a clear vision can help with that. The vision cannot be that everyone in the church will remain complacent and unchanged.

Another respondent assented that, “I do feel it is appropriate for clergy to terminate employees,” yet, he/she lamented, “My church culture, however, is resistant. It may be that the congregation is conflict avoidant.” I am reminded of the insight from McFayden in the previous chapter that sometimes congregations are trying to save themselves from having to deal with any hard emotions and so they do not take any action at all. Bishop Willimon argues that leaders must “fall in love with tough decisions—especially challenging in an organization with a culture of niceness, that is, a

³³ McFayden, 73.

culture of avoidance of painful conversations.”³⁴ With a vision for the future in mind, a well-differentiated leader is able to lead the congregation into necessary emotional conflict and then help lead them out. Again, this is the hard work of ministry: to lead our congregations into places where sometimes they do not know they need to go. As Bishop Will Willimon states, “Opposition, resistance, and negative response come with the job. [...] We must be detached enough from the church to be heavily invested in the church in Jesus’ name.”³⁵ There is no ministry position that is going to be without opposition. A well-differentiated leader can step outside of the church and all of the negativity that comes from the anxiety within the system and can help lead people through opposition and resistance into becoming the church that Jesus calls them to be. Pastor Dana Fearon suggests that, “Differences in a church are not only inevitable, they are also often the pathway to improvement.”³⁶ When we face resistance for our management decisions, it gives us an opportunity to teach our congregation about how staff changes can help us better achieve our collective mission. It gives people an opportunity to be focused on what is truly important, and consequently, it might help us in our spiritual development as well.

³⁴ Willimon, 139.

³⁵ Ibid., 86.

³⁶ H. Dana Fearon III with Gordon S. Mikoski, *Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), pg. 57.

At the same time, management guru Marshall Goldsmith writes that “We rarely get credit for ceasing to do something bad,”³⁷ and this sentiment is often true in the church as well. We would experience much less emotional turmoil if we ignored the problems among our church staff, if we allowed our church to fall into complacency, and if we did not have to deal with the emotions and anxiety within our church system. Our work would be much easier! However, it would not be faithful. Channeling the words of Goldsmith, allowing our staff to fail to meet the expectations established for them is bad. Allowing our congregation to hold itself hostage with anxiety and fear is bad. We may not get credit for lulling our congregation out of its false contentment and challenging it to take risks on behalf of the mission of the church, in fact we will inevitably face opposition, but at least we will be following the calling that God has placed on our work.

Getting the Timing Right

Another common theme among clergy respondents was that they wanted to make sure to get the timing right for any staff termination. Pastors were not only concerned about the emotional response of the congregation, they also didn’t want to have to deal with the repercussion of a staff termination at the wrong time in the

³⁷ Marshall Goldsmith with Mark Reiter, *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful!* (London, England: Profile Books, 2013), pg. 44.

liturgical calendar, at a difficult time in the life of the employee, or during a particularly busy moment in the life of the church. A minister in the United Church of Christ wrote, "I was serving as an institutional chaplain and institutional leadership prevented me from terminating her as I had planned due to a major upcoming event that would have been harmed by the negative press." Another pastor wrote about the timing of her choice by saying, "When I have considered termination with one particular underperforming staff member, but have not followed through with it, it was because I was in a small town where I was not sure if I could find someone better who would also have the commitment to what was a very part-time position (10 hours/week). I weighed the things this staff member had already learned to do against the amount of time it would take to train someone again, and decided it was better to keep this staff member on." When a leader becomes consumed with worrying about timing, the result is that the termination can be postponed indefinitely when more immediate action is necessary. This second minister allowed his/her uncertainty of the talent pool and his/ her worry about the time needed to train a new staff person to prevent him/her from moving on from an underperforming employee. If not now, then when would the talent pool ever be sufficient for this pastor? When would he/she ever have enough time to train a new employee?

Several of the pastors surveyed admitted that they dealt with their fear of the bad timing of the termination by attempting to restructure job descriptions and positions

rather than letting someone go outright. A Presbyterian minister wrote, “We had an employee who really needed to go a long time ago, but we also needed to do some restructuring of our staff positions, so we did the restructuring knowing full well that the job description for her job was going to change significantly in a way she would not want. She was offered the chance to apply for the new position and opted to retire instead.” Another pastor stated, “In the end, we chose to eliminate the position rather than terminate the employee. He did lose his job, but it was a lay off instead of a termination. This was an easier decision to explain to the congregation, and the council was supportive. [However,] I still believe the employee should have been fired before I began work.” This approach can certainly be strategic and, like these ministers suggest, can avoid some of the harder conversations around layoffs. However, the pastor needs to have a clear vision in place for what the staff restructuring will accomplish, otherwise it is possible to continually reorganize for the sole purpose of shuffling troublesome people around rather than for the purpose of achieving a particular goal. Bossidy and Charan caution that leaders who are not considering what is best for their organization when dealing with a troubled employee often “procrastinate, sugarcoat, and rationalize. Leaders even create new jobs for nonperformers. As a result, the organization below is totally confused.”³⁸ So while a staff restructuring might be the best approach, it is

³⁸ Bossidy, 92.

absolutely essential that the leader be well-differentiated enough to assess the motivations for the restructuring. Is the leader trying to procrastinate by retaining an employee who would be better off elsewhere? Unless the leader demonstrates consistency in this type of decision-making, it damages the organization and its potential for developing other staff. Wimberly makes it clear that, “instead of employing a short-term solution that ultimately will fail, managers need to apply, from the beginning, long-term systemic solutions to fundamental problems.”³⁹ This thesis is trying to suggest that one long-term solution is to always make decisions with the mission of the church in mind rather than the more provincial practice of making staff decisions that are focused on the needs of a single employee and thereby implementing short-term solutions that will hinder the church.

Several other pastors also expressed that they felt like some terminations should have been handled in the interim period before their arrival. A Methodist minister remarked, “I began a new solo pastor job and was informed by my predecessor that a lay staff person ought to be terminated, but they had waited for me to start work instead of taking action. This was not a helpful choice, but rather put me in a difficult position in my first days as pastor.” Another clergyperson spoke of a similarly troubled beginning, “One of the challenges I have in my current system is attempting to renegotiate the staff

³⁹ Wimberly 28.

positions themselves, which I am unwilling to do because of morale and newness on the job until my staff resign or retire.” To the credit of these pastors, the interim period between called pastors is designed for the interim minister to intentionally help create a healthy staff environment by terminating troublesome employees if necessary or doing the requisite restructuring. However, while not knowing the specifics of these pastors’ situations, there does seem to be a universal tendency for clergy to bemoan the mistakes of their predecessors and attribute to them the hardships of the present. I am guilty of this as well. We make excuses, we deflect, we blame, and assert that we are stymied only because those who came before us did not put us in the right position. Whatever truth there may be to those assertions, it is still the responsibility of any clergy to move forward and do the hard work that has yet to be done. No staffing situation can be purely blamed on the past; it must be handled in the present.

In the last section, a pastor was wrestling with the emotions of letting an employee go who had recently been diagnosed with a chronic illness. A second minister wrote about a similar issue by stating, “I have a situation now where a part-time employee with a progressive chronic illness plans to retire next year, so with a clear end date and all of the emotions that would be wrapped up, it seems easier to persist now and look at ways to craft a better position description and hire someone who can handle it.” Once again, clergy have to be able to weigh all of the complicated emotions that are involved in the church and be able to demonstrate compassion when the situation calls

for it, all while still doing what is best for the overall mission of the church. It is understandable why this pastor would want to wait a year to avoid the messy situation of terminating someone who might not be able to find alternative employment. This pastor must be able to answer the question of whether the mission of the church is served by financing an employee who is not a good fit for her position until she is able to retire, or whether it is served by moving forward with hiring someone who can better fulfill the job description. This is not an easy process, because even a year in the life of the church makes a big difference. Any delay in taking the right path can be problematic, but this clergy person seems to have a clear vision for the future.

Another respondent spoke of a situation where it was obvious that the delays had to end. He/she exclaimed about his secretary, "When I was the one typing the church bulletin...I realized she had to go!" When it is clear that a staff termination needs to happen, then the best timing is always the present moment. Too many delays will only perpetuate dysfunction in the working environment as other staff, including the pastor in this instance, try to make up for the shortcomings of the troubled employee. Hammer reflects on a leader who continued to delay a termination that was inevitable, writing, "He definitely struggles with letting people go, and he kept employees longer than he should have. [...] Had he let the offending employee go earlier, he could have avoided a lot of dramatic and harmful situations that prevented his business from being

as successful as possible.”⁴⁰ There is never a perfect moment for a staff termination.

There will never be an instance when firing an employee will be free from emotional stress and potential repercussions. Yet, we are deceiving ourselves as leaders if we think that there will be a moment in the future that will be better. Accepting this lie will only hurt ourselves, the rest of the staff, and the entire church.

In fact, more often than not, when a leader is waiting for the right time to address a problem, he or she is truly just hoping that the problem will go away by itself. Steinke calls this benign neglect and says that benign neglect is like “treating a virus by hoping that it will go away by itself or by sweeping its presence under the rug and out of awareness. Benign neglect only gives opportunity to malignant processes. It is an escape from taking responsibility.”⁴¹ In the next chapter, I will try to explain why power and authority, two concepts that are often in tension with servant leadership, are necessary and vital for a pastor to be able to be of service to the mission of the church. The reason that people bestow power and authority upon a minister is because the minister has responsibility for the church. Sadly, failing to address staffing issues in the moment and hoping that they will resolve independently is a dereliction of duty and a failure to uphold one’s responsibility. That is why we must confront this issue openly.

⁴⁰ Hammer, 13.

⁴¹ Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 81.

Sometimes we delay because we think that it will be better for the employee. However, business consultants Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman argue against such an approach. They say that when it becomes apparent that a termination is necessary, then “do it fast, the faster the better. If someone is consistently underperforming, you might think that you are doing them a favor by waiting. You aren’t. You’re actually making matters worse.”⁴² Buckingham and Coffman even bring ethics into the equation by suggesting that, “If the person is struggling, it is actively uncaring to allow him to keep playing a part that doesn’t fit. By this definition, firing the person is a caring act.”⁴³ As has already been established, it is essential to help employees who are struggling to find another place of employment where they might flourish. More time will not help the employee, it will only delay this persons’ opportunity to find alternative work. This is another situation where our empathy gets us into trouble because we assume we are caring for the person by delaying the inevitable. Not only is it more caring to terminate the employee, but we are confused if we think that pastoral care is the purpose of our role as manager.

⁴² Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999), pg. 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 210.

This is Not Pastoral Care

As mentioned earlier, many of the pastors surveyed *believed* that it was appropriate for clergy to use termination as a management technique, but they still felt prevented by various internal and external barriers from actually following through with what they felt was best. However, there was a common theme among those clergy who both believed in the necessity of pastors firing their employees in the right circumstances and those who successfully navigated the barriers in order to effectively terminate a staff member. These clergy all touched on the fact that too often Christian leaders conflate management of a staff with the pastoral care of their congregation when they need to be two separate facets of ministry. These clergy recognized that it is easy to exercise the unconditional grace and acceptance that is the mark of servant leadership toward staff members, but that such practice ultimately hinders their ministry. They needed to move beyond positivity to make the hard decisions necessitated by their leadership.

One minister in the United Church of Christ stated forthrightly, “I believe that churches too often confuse pastoral care with staff members. While I believe I am a compassionate employer and supervisor, I am absolutely willing to terminate an employee who cannot do the job well. After all, they are being paid by the generosity of the members; I don’t take that generosity for granted, nor do I want to abuse the trust of the members by throwing good money at a bad employee. [...] It is hard and painful

and it is done with careful process, but it is done.” This minister identifies an important dynamic that is too often ignored in the church. Congregants contribute financially to the work of the church but rarely are privy to whether the staff whose salaries they fund are effective on a day-to-day basis. There is an implicit trust that the church will shepherd the resources of the congregation wisely and the misplaced empathy of servant leadership may cause a minister to be derelict in his or her duty to appropriately manage the congregation’s finances.

In addition to properly stewarding the congregation’s resources, those pastors who followed through with termination also did so because they felt that they were doing what would ultimately help the employee flourish. One pastor wrote, “I followed through on termination because it was in the best interest of the church—and frankly, of the employee as well. Too often in church we enable bad behavior with our “niceness” and unwillingness to challenge people to do better. This does them no good. [...] It does not support them in living into the fullness of their gifts and demonstrates little regard for the congregation which is supporting their salaries and has a right to expect a certain amount of effort.” This pastor clearly understands what it means to be a well-differentiated leader who is able to step outside of any anxiety in the system and do the hard work of termination knowing that it is best for both the employee and the congregation, even if it may be a difficult or unpopular choice. Another pastor put it succinctly, “It is not only ‘appropriate’ to terminate employees, it is sometimes the most

faithful decision a clergy leader can make.” This minister echoes the sentiments expressed earlier in this thesis that true service to an employee is often helping an ineffective one find a new place to thrive.

Interestingly, there was one respondent who wrote about his or her experience working outside the church before discerning a call to ministry. This pastor was able to bring his or her experience in another sector into managing the church to fruitful results. This pastor wrote, “I am a second-career pastor and worked as a yard manager for a construction company. I turned that yard around and had to fire a few folks to get there. We must have the right people in the right positions. Go with the strengths and focus on the gifts. If someone isn’t gifted and can’t or won’t do the job, then it is appropriate to fire.” As mentioned previously, many in the church believe there should be a marked difference between management in the church and management outside of the church, but this participant exemplifies how proper management techniques can be applied across various occupational sectors. Ministers cannot hide behind theological claims in order to remain complacent through difficult circumstances in the congregation. The church needs the minister to exhibit strength in leadership.

Bishop Willimon identifies that often our focus on pastoral care stems from bad theology. He clarifies that “Grace is not a sappy, ‘I love you just as you are; promise me you won’t change a thing,’ divine forbearance of our status quo. Grace is the power of God that miraculously enables us to live better lives than if we had not been given

transformative grace.”⁴⁴ We belittle the power of God when we assume that our staff members need our comfort and coddling rather than being challenged to “live lives worthy of their calling” in the words of Paul.⁴⁵ If we want to serve our staff it does not mean that we allow them to flounder, but we care enough about God and the way God wants to use our staff and our church to require our staff to grow and change or move on to a place where they can do so. Willimon boldly asserts that, “Our pastors must be trained and held accountable as mission leaders rather than as caregivers,” because “The Body of Christ atrophies when it is a parochial, static body in residence, preoccupied with self-care.”⁴⁶ The final chapter of this thesis will incorporate Willimon’s call to be focused on mission into the new model of servant leadership that is being proposed. Suffice it to say, the clergy highlighted in this section are right. Our ultimate allegiance is not to self-care in the church. That is too small, too insular of a mission. We must be able to lead our congregations into something greater.

Part of the skepticism toward strength in pastoral leadership and management has been suspicion of the role of such concepts as authority and power in ministry. So many authors on the subject of servant leadership quote the passage from Mark 10 that opened this thesis when Jesus tells his disciples that they must not lord their leadership over others but must instead be servants of all. Clergy and congregants alike reason that

⁴⁴ Willimon, 80.

⁴⁵ Ephesians 4:1

⁴⁶ Willimon, 95-96.

in order to be a servant, one must forego any claims to authority and power. This type of leadership *kenosis*, however, is what often leads to clergy being frozen by inaction. The next chapter will turn to the concepts of power and authority and attempt to reframe them in order to demonstrate how they are not only integral to pastoral leadership, but they are also integral to the new model of servant leadership being proposed in this thesis.

4. Redeeming Strong Leadership: Power and Authority

As mentioned previously, the goal of this thesis is not to dismantle the servant leadership philosophy entirely, but to provide a new model for servant leadership that allows for more effective management of church staff while retaining the core theological aspects of the approach. However, there are a few important concepts that are used often in leadership literature that at first blush seem to be in tension with the views of servant leadership. As a result, pastors try to avoid claiming these concepts as part of their own leadership style. The avoidance of these terms was obvious in the responses that clergy provided to the surveys. This chapter will try to redeem some of these terms and demonstrate why they are so valuable for leaders and how they can still be integrated into effective pastoral leadership, indeed, even into servant leadership. The final chapter will then try to provide a synthesis of all of these concepts in order to provide a new model for servant leadership in the church. Consequently, we turn our attention to an explication first of power, and then of authority.

The Use of Power

In a book written for The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, Kent Keith begins his book on servant leadership by claiming that “there does not have to be so much pain and suffering,” in the world, and “one reason the world is like this is that people are using the power model of leadership. The purpose of this book is to make the case for the service model of leadership. [...] I have no doubt that the world will be a

better place when more leaders and organizations practice servant leadership.”¹ Keith creates a dichotomy between leadership that is centered in power and leadership that is centered in service. The reasoning behind such a distinction makes sense: power has been used in religious history to perpetrate great evil. Jews and Muslims have been forced to convert to Christianity at pain of death, political leaders have claimed God for their own agendas, people are told by religious leaders that their eternal salvation or damnation depends on believing the right doctrine, sacred texts are manipulated to force people to believe certain interpretations by those who claim to hold interpretative authority. Religion is used to declare that God wants some people to be in power while others are to be servants, that God wants women to be subject to their husbands, and that God wants believers to kill infidels. Religion is a potent tool in the hands of the powerful to control others. Similar abuses of power are evident in history across government, law, business, and other domains.

On a much smaller scale, power can be easily abused in the workplace in hierarchical structures where those at the top behave in totalitarian ways by demanding the blind obedience of employees, verbally abusing staff, and practicing nepotism. It is understandable to be skeptical of power. Moreover, the terms “service” and “power”, function connotatively as antonyms: to have power is to exert control and influence over

¹ Keith, ix.

another person, while to be of service is to submit oneself to the needs of another person. One who has power tends not to serve, and one who serves does not exercise power over another. However, this chapter will demonstrate that possessing power and using it appropriately is a key aspect of service. Ironically, despite starting his book by critiquing all notions of power-centered leadership, Keith admits that even servant-leaders possess power whether they seek it out or not. He says, "The paradox is that a servant-leader can gain power without seeking it. People trust servant leaders, and give them power, because they know that servant leaders use power to benefit everyone."² If leaders naturally acquire power, then the subsequent question is how that power will be used. Theologian Kyle Pasewark states it this way, "If being is saturated with power inevitably, a fundamental choice appears immediately: is the power of being ultimately and finally destructive of beings or is it fundamentally supportive of them."³ Ministers have the potential to exercise a kind of power that brings life and even more power to the people they lead.

Interestingly, authors in both the business and theological sectors agree that power is a necessary component of leadership, but that the power retained by those at the top should be given away to others. To begin with, power is necessary because it allows the leader to accomplish his or her work when people are willing to follow and

² Ibid., 26.

³ Kyle A. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), pg. 1.

when they grant permission to the leader to make decisions and set the vision for the organization. Harvard Business School professor John Kotter writes that leaders need “sufficient power to make up for the power gap inherent in leadership jobs and then, second, the willingness to use that power to manage all the interdependences in as responsible a way as possible.”⁴ Kotter uses the phrase “power gap” to refer to the fact that people in leadership and management positions do not always naturally have enough clout in the eyes of their employees to cause them to follow. Leaders need a certain amount of power for anyone to follow their direction. Kotter recognizes that sometimes leaders “find themselves in the incredibly frustrating position of not being powerful enough to execute their duties in an effective and responsible way, and to provide the leadership that is needed.”⁵ This was certainly the case in the previous chapter when many clergy did not know how to navigate the institutional structures of their churches and felt as if they did not have enough power to make management choices. As a result, they did nothing and their churches suffered. Consultant Gil Rendle goes so far as to argue that, “Surplus powerlessness invites people to expect failure, in fact to plan for it.”⁶ Too many pastors and leaders have surrendered their power and created an environment of inertia that perpetuates anxious systems. Some degree of power to be able to faithfully and effectively execute one’s responsibilities is essential.

⁴ John P. Kotter, *Power and Influence: Beyond Formal Authority* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1985), pg. 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶ Rendle, 201.

However, when there is enough power in the position to make up for that gap, the leader then has the *responsibility* to use that power. This same sentiment is expressed by Biblical Scholar Efrain Agosto who writes about the servant leadership of Jesus and Paul. Agosto recognizes that Paul relied on power to accomplish his mission in the church, noting, “We have seen how Paul’s letters go to considerable lengths to demonstrate Paul’s leadership over his congregations. [...] He defends his right to exercise leadership because these churches were founded by him and his immediate co-workers, or others in his network, or as in the case of the Roman churches not founded by him, because he needs them for his ongoing Gentile mission.”⁷ Paul, like all leaders, was not automatically given power by the churches he established, but he needed some form of power if the people in these churches were going to follow him in the mission work that he felt called to do.

Consequently, power is necessary in any position of leadership, but again, writers in both the business and theological field agree that any effective leader knows how to disperse that power to others. In their book, *Force for Good*, Leslie Crutchfield and Heather Grant analyze what makes non-profit organizations in the social sector successful. One of the main characteristics they identify in the leaders of the organizations they evaluated is the ability to disseminate power to others. They write

⁷ Efrain Agosto, *Servant Leadership: Jesus and Paul* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), pg. 119.

about Edwin Feulner of the Heritage Foundation and say that his “strength as a leader [was] his ability to share power with others. [...] He gives power away, rather than hoards it.”⁸ The authors continue by saying, “No single dictator could possibly have as much impact by hoarding power, relationships, or information. [...] In fact, only by giving power away and empowering others do these groups develop networks and movements large enough to catalyze wide-spread change.”⁹ Finally, Crutchfield and Grant synthesis their larger point by unequivocally stating that these successful leaders of the social sector “put the interests of their organizations ahead of their personal egos,” and “they shared power and leadership in their quest to be a great force for good,” because, “they all now recognize that they cannot increase their impact by hoarding power. The only way to get to the top in the social sector is to give away power.”¹⁰

Those who desire to embody the love and service of Christ might be wary of allowing power into the church. However, a pastor cannot lead a congregation without some degree of power to enable him or her to make decisions and guide the church forward. Yet, Grant and Crutchfield make it abundantly clear that the greatest leaders in the social sector know how to take their power and distribute it to as many people as possible. When church leaders are able to freely share their power with others in the church, then it allows the impact and ministry of the church to multiply. Good leaders

⁸ Crutchfield, 176.

⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰ Ibid., 181, 183.

recognize that their own personal advancement is secondary to the progression of the overall mission of the church. This understanding will form the crux of the new model of servant leadership that will be presented in the next chapter, but suffice it to say for now, that power in the hands of everyone is a key component of equipping the wider congregation to do ministry together. But power must first be placed in the hands of the leader so that the leader can empower others to take up pursuit of a common vision and mission. Pastor Arthur Boers argues that, “Power is a fact, a reality, whether recognized or not. When we do not acknowledge it, power grows less accountable and more hazardous.”¹¹ The reality is that power exists in the church, and if we try to ignore it we will only do damage to our worship communities. Instead we need to have conversations about how to properly use power in the church.

The fact that great leaders know how to disburse power helps counter one of the greatest concerns about power in the church: that the minister will hoard power and not allow lay leadership to have any input. Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society at Duke Divinity School, Jackson Carroll suggests that, “Power in the church is not what game theorists call a ‘zero-sum’ game,” and “because power is not limited, a pastor who believes in shared ministry can, therefore, be a strong leader without being authoritarian and paternalistic, without keeping laity in a dependent and secondary role. [...] One

¹¹ Arthur Boers, *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), pg. 138.

need not be a nondirective, laissez-faire facilitator—a rather wimpish image—in order to share ministry.”¹² One can still exert power in the church without falling into one of two extremes. The first extreme is the one we are most fearful of, which is the dictatorial, authoritarian leader who wields power in order to get his or her own way and who forces others to follow along. A wise leader knows that such a leadership style is not effective. It is why the best leaders know how to disseminate power. However, we should be just as fearful of the opposite extreme whereby in the quest to be a servant leader we exert no authority at all and allow our churches to fall into a malaise. Our congregations need leaders strong enough to help everyone harness our collective power to make a difference in the world by advancing Christ’s mission.

This reframing of power is echoed in the realms of theology as well as in the business sectors. Pastor Andy Crouch asserts that, “If we are to do God’s work—fight injustice, bring peace, create beauty, and allow the image of God to thrive in those around us—how are we to do these things if not by power?”¹³ Crouch redeems the notion of power by saying that “the deepest form of power is creation,” and that “power is for flourishing.”¹⁴ Everything that God does in the world is through God’s power. Many Christians believe in the omnipotence of God—that God is all-powerful. We

¹² Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pgs. 89-90.

¹³ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), insert.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10, 13.

attribute only positive characteristics to a God who is constantly demonstrating power. God has the power to create, the power to resurrect, the power to redeem, the power to enact justice, and more. As theologian Kyle Pasewark states, "Power itself is neutral and formal, almost indifferent. It becomes good, bad, necessary, excessive, or abusive only through the object to which it is applied."¹⁵ God exhibits how the neutral concept of power can be harnessed for positive ends. Christians are called to use power as well, not relinquish it completely. It is true in theological discourse that power has risks. Crouch argues that "power at it best is resurrection to life, to full humanity," and that "power at its worst is the unmaker of humanity."¹⁶ Humans can use power to strip others of their humanity, but despite the potential dangers, we need power in order to bring life to others.

Crouch and Pasewark echo the argument that power used wisely can actually work to bring more power to others. Crouch writes that, "True power multiplies when it is shared," and it "bequeaths power to others, making room for more power," and "makes room for more agents."¹⁷ Furthermore, Pasewark argues that, "The more participants in the community of saints there are, the more power is generated. [...]. Power's aim is not exclusivity but universality."¹⁸ If the minister is focused not on the

¹⁵ Pasewark, 3.

¹⁶ Crouch, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32, 41.

¹⁸ Pasewark, 61-62.

rehabilitation of a single troubled employee, but on the wider mission of the church, then it actually results in power being disseminated to more people. The key to church leadership is getting more people, more disciples, to be invested in the work of the church. The minister, by his or her own power, subsequently empowers others to join the work of the church. The church can then subsequently bring life to more people, creating more agents, but only if the minister is able to exercise power and focus on the right aspects of ministry. If the pastor is mired in management issues, leadership suffers. That is why Kotter argues that even though a good supervisor wields power in the most humane way possible, “when push comes to shove, effective supervision demands that one be willing to use one’s power in a hard way.”¹⁹ An adept leader knows how to reserve the use of power for the appropriate situations, but also knows that power must be employed at the right times for the sake of the organization.

The Theological Basis for Power

In the conversation on power, it is important to recognize that even though power is bestowed upon the leader of an organization who then must give some of that power away or share it with others, the church also believes that the power we all possess has a divine origin. We are given power by God for God’s purposes, and we simultaneously rely on God’s power. Agosto writes that “Paul’s Corinthian

¹⁹ Kotter, *Power and Influence*, 88.

correspondence shows how gospel leadership must be defined in terms of both human humility and divine power. If the power of God and not just human ability did not lie behind Paul's missionary efforts [...] the enterprise would fail."²⁰ Everything that we do is a result of divine power, and Andy Crouch writes that becoming "participants of the divine nature—this is the ultimate goal of the divine power."²¹ Consequently, we are to use power as God intends for it to be used, to create and redeem. Crouch clarifies, though, what happens when God uses his divine power, saying that "When the true God acts in history, no one and no thing is left unchanged."²² So if we are to be participants in the divine nature, we cannot hide our power, we cannot be scarred of the change that will result from the exercise of power, and we cannot allow the anxiety and fear within our congregations to prevent us from using power. Instead, we must invite the congregation to boldly claim power for themselves as the church collectively shapes its future and allows God to change them.

The Necessity of Authority

Just as power can be easily exploited, so too can authority. Scripture offers some of its most scathing critiques from both the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus in the New Testament for those who abuse their authority.²³ We have seen in modern news

²⁰ Agosto, 202.

²¹ Crouch, 91.

²² Ibid., 77.

²³ Cf. Jeremiah 23:1-4, Matthew 23:1-36.

the dangers of authority with the Catholic Sex Abuse Scandal. When someone is given authority, it is because they have been deemed trustworthy and responsible for guiding those that follow them. The indicted Catholic leaders who were bestowed with authority to lead Christ's church betrayed that trust when they sexually abused young children in their parishes. They were able to gain access to these children and to garner their trust because of the authority that they possessed. Authority can also be abused when leaders make demands on others, not for their own good, but for the self-serving interests of the person in authority. People listen to those with authority, but that means that these leaders then have the added responsibility to ensure that their authority is exercised for the benefit of all. Clergy who adopt the mantle of servant leadership criticize the concept of authority because of its association with authoritarians who make decisions in a vacuum with no input from others and with no regard for how their choices impact those below. Servant leaders seek out teamwork rather than the authority that might raise them above others in a hierarchical structure. But pastor Dana Fearon argues that, "Pastoral authority should be used to build up the body of Christ, not destroy it."²⁴ Thus, this section will evaluate how authority can be properly used in the church, especially since social institutions cannot exist without some sort of authority.

²⁴ Fearon and Mikoski, 22.

Theologian Victor Lee Austin argues that because we are by nature relational beings, any human relationship requires some degree of authority. He writes that, “Authority is built into what it means to be human, and we will never escape from needing it for flourishing.”²⁵ He explains his reasoning by arguing that, “It is the complexities of social organization, with their attendant localizations and focusing of authority, that make possible large-scale coordinated actions of human creativity.”²⁶ Basically, we can be organized and work together only because there is some degree of authority in any human system. Someone is always responsible for directing others, even if the person possessing authority is constantly shifting. For example, when we go to the grocery store, the manager possesses the authority to determine what products to stock, and the cashier possess the authority to give us our selections in exchange for monetary payment. We could not fulfill an act as seemingly simple as the purchase of food unless we imbued someone with authority in that relational exchange. Consequently, there are times every day when we possess authority and when we are subject to the authority of others. Once again, just as in our discussion of power, the real question becomes what are we supposed to do with authority once we are in possession of it? Austin suggests that true authority “is held by a person or persons who lead

²⁵ Victor Lee Austin, *Up with Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human* (London, England: T&T Clark, 2010), pg. 2

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

humans to a fuller exercise of their freedom to accomplish human tasks.”²⁷ By necessity, humans need authority to function, but all authority should be employed in a way that allows other people to flourish and to fully function as humans.

However, congregations often have a leadership crisis as a result of not fully understanding the purpose of authority in the church. Jackson Carroll writes that, “Authority and leadership issues continue to be both difficult and often painful for clergy and their congregations,” mostly because congregations live “in an age that generally rejects older, hierarchical notions of authority,” and clergy, “for a host of reasons, are unsure of their authority as leaders in the church.”²⁸ In a world where authority is being questioned across various domains, rather than attempt to carve out a new and legitimate basis for authority within the church, church leaders seem to have retreated into an understanding of servant leadership whereby clergy do not need authority because they are busy serving. This withdrawal cannot possibly constitute servant leadership because it completely jettisons any semblance of the leadership portion of the phrase “servant leadership”. As Austin identified, authority is a prerequisite for leadership. Carroll too provides a better definition of what authority should be, stating that, “To exercise authority involves influencing, coordinating, or otherwise guiding the thoughts and behavior of persons and groups in ways that they

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Carroll, ix-1.

consider legitimate. This is what clergy are called to do as they lead their congregations.”²⁹ When a leader has a mission and vision in mind that they have formulated in conjunction with the people that they are leading, then those leaders are given legitimate authority by their followers who expect the leader to help them achieve their collective vision. That summarizes the purpose of pastoral leadership in the church. Congregations have granted ministers authority so that they might lead them to achieve the mission that the church has set together. Unless the minister assumes the authority granted to the role, then leadership is not possible. Carroll affirms in the same way as Austin the absolute necessity of authority if a church is going to have community in the first place: “I believe that our need for authority and authorities is not illusory or diminished. We may question authority [...] but we cannot live together for long in any human community without submitting ourselves to the authority of the community’s deepest values and norms and the leadership of those charged with their articulation, interpretation, and realization.”³⁰

Consequently, if the minister is granted authority and tasked with the advancement of the mission of the church, then the minister needs to be able to use whatever leadership and management techniques are at his or her disposal. As Carroll declares, “What is a pastor’s authority for if not ultimately for giving leadership to the

²⁹ Carroll, 1-2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

life and mission of the church?"³¹ Leaders are not given authority so that they can maintain the status quo and prevent the church from taking any risks, they are not given authority so that they can demonstrate endless grace to troublesome employees who they may or may not have even hired, they are given authority so that they can advance the life and mission of the church. In the previous chapter, the section on institutional barriers in the church demonstrated that pastors become inept when the church takes away their authority to make staffing decisions. Both those churches that had too many hurdles and those that had no structure at all to support the pastor's authority caused their pastors to feel unable to move forward with staff terminations when they were necessary. Part of the responsibility falls with the ministers who need to carve out a path for the exercise of their authority, but also part of the issue lies with the congregation because it is incumbent upon the congregation to grant *legitimate* authority to the minister. Both sides may be contributing to the problem when conversations regarding the role and use of authority in the church are not taking place. Current Dean of Duke Divinity, L. Gregory Jones, argues that in order for church leaders to be able to be effective witnesses of the Gospel, then these "visionary leaders need to be able to exercise authority wisely for the sake of the whole community or institution," and once they are given that authority, "such leaders are not afraid of exercising that authority

³¹ Ibid., 71.

and that power for the sake of the institution.”³² Our churches need us to use the power and authority that we have been naturally given by both the congregation and by God.

The Theological Basis for Authority

Just as the proper use of power is rooted in a proper understanding of God, so too does the concept of authority find its basis in the actions of God. Austin contends that, “All authority comes from God and no thing, no being, no realm is outside [God’s] dominion. God’s authority bestows power and freedom.”³³ God is the perfect example of authority properly utilized. God possesses all authority in heaven and on earth and yet God disseminates that authority to others so that they might exercise power and freedom in their individual lives. Rather than create us to be unthinking automatons, God has given us the ability to make choices for ourselves. Indeed, authority appears to be the basis for our very humanity. Without the ability to have any sort of authority, as a gift from God, we could not function. The theology of the Christ hymn comes readily to mind as well. Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”³⁴ Christ did not take advantage of his own authority either, but was willing to become human and share authority with those that he came to heal. This passage uses the language of servanthood and

³² Gregory L. Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), pg. 134.

³³ Austin, 20.

³⁴ Philippians 2:6-7

demonstrates that service itself must be rooted in authority, otherwise we would never willingly make the decision to serve another person.

Carroll also echoes these same sentiments that authority is rooted in our understanding of God. Carroll proclaims that, "Authority to lead in the church is grounded ultimately in the church's convictions about God and God's purposes," and the only "purpose for exercising one's authority in leading a congregation is to preserve and ensure its identity as the body of Christ."³⁵ Carroll's words seem like the perfect summary of the church's understanding of The Great Commission.³⁶ In his death and resurrection, Christ was given authority to achieve God's purposes here on earth of redemption and reconciliation. To that end, rooted in authority, Christ has given us the command to make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything that Jesus has taught us. Christ in his own authority shared his authority with all of his followers. Through the course of the development of the church, we have created the role of pastor to be one who has authority to teach God's Word and to create disciples. We have not developed authority in the church as a human construction, but because Christ first gave us authority for the advancement of God's purposes. We thus have a theological basis for leading with authority, including doing whatever is best, staff terminations included, to ensure the care of Christ's body, the church. Church consultant Lovett Weems also

³⁵ Carroll, 34, 37.

³⁶ Cf. Matthew 28:16-20.

argues that authority for clergy is rooted in God's call on their lives, saying, "There are, indeed, multiple sources of pastoral authority and power for pastoral leadership," and that "for Christian leaders, authority and calling cannot be separated."³⁷ He goes on to suggest that, "Proper authority is essential to carry out God's vision for the church and the world."³⁸ We have been given a mission as pastors to serve Christ's church and we have been bestowed with the proper authority to carry out that mission. Authority, while easily abused, should not be avoided, but should be properly channeled in the name of Christ.

On a final note, in addition to the concepts of power and authority, people often question whether clergy should exhibit ambition in their leadership. Once again, much like power and authority, it is less a question about whether or not a leader should have ambition, because of course any leader of any value will have some form of ambition, the more important question is what that ambition is motivated toward. Ambition should not necessarily be toward the personal success and glory of the minister or toward securing the highest salary possible, but a minister should have a holy ambition toward advancing the mission of the church. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes what he refers to as a "Level 5 Leader," which is someone who possesses the qualities necessary to help an organization thrive. One characteristic he identifies for Level 5

³⁷ Weems, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

Leaders is that they “channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—*but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.*³⁹ Collins’ description certainly applies to the work of the church. All of the power, authority, and ambition that the minister possesses should always be directed toward the institution, the church, and the mission it is trying to achieve. This belief is affirmed by current Dean of Duke Divinity, L. Gregory Jones, who writes that “a variety of forces has led us too often to lower our sights and to turn away from being ambitious for the gospel. In order to be about the work of resurrecting excellence, we cannot afford to settle for less than the best that God has entrusted to us.”⁴⁰ God has entrusted to us the care of God’s church and the advancement of God’s mission in the world. Ambition should not be directed toward the advancement of the self, but we cannot allow ourselves to be afraid of ambition simply because, like power and authority, it can be misused. Imagine a world where ministers were wholly ambitious to do the work that God has called us to do—what an incredible *service* that would be to God’s church. Since our power, authority, and ambition should all be directed toward fulfilling the mission of the church, it is time to turn our attention

³⁹ Collins, *Good to Great*, 21.

⁴⁰ Jones and Armstrong, 4.

toward building a new framework for servant leadership that is rooted in the mission of the church.

5. A New Model of Servant Leadership

After evaluating some of the shortfalls of the common understanding of servant leadership as outlined by Robert Greenleaf and other scholars in chapter two, and after understanding how the model of servant leadership presents both internal and external barriers to the ministry of modern clergy in chapter three, and after redeeming in the previous chapter some of the aspects of leadership that seem to be in tension with servant leadership, it is now time to outline a new model of servant leadership. So many of the clergy who participated in the survey responded positively to the concept of servant leadership because of their commitment to the characteristics of Christ: humility, service to others, putting the needs of others before our own, grace, compassion, etc. In fact, one participant, right after indicating that he/she believed that terminating an employee was acceptable, wrote in response to the third survey question regarding servant leadership, "Yes, of course I try to embody servant leadership. Greenleaf's book is very important." Another minister responded to the first question by saying, "It is not only appropriate for clergy to terminate employees, it is sometimes the most faithful decision a clergy leader can make," but then answered the third question regarding servant leadership by saying, "A servant leader is first a servant—to even those whom they supervise—and second a leader. [...] I do try to embody servant leadership." Clergy desire to be known as servant leaders because they feel service is the appropriate posture for faith leaders. These ministers know that they should use termination as a

management technique when they need to, however they are not ready to jettison the concept of servant leadership entirely. Today's ministers are hungry for a way to reconcile this conflict between management and theology.

So, what if we were to exhibit all of the qualities of servant leadership that appeal to clergy, but put them to use in our commitment to the mission to the church, rather than in our commitment to a specific group of employees who are temporarily part of our staff? Each chapter has already highlighted the importance of staying focused on the mission of the church in order to mitigate anxiety in the congregation. Consequently, this new model of servant leadership calls for us to be devoted to the service of Christ's mission as carried out by the church first and foremost. Sometimes that mission involves investing in our staff, but sometimes that mission involves removing someone from their position because their presence on the staff is hindering the congregation from doing effective ministry. This chapter will demonstrate that such action is not an abandonment of the values of servant leadership but is instead pursuing service to an even higher authority.

The Positives of Servant Leadership

To begin, it is worthwhile to outline the positive aspects of servant leadership that this new model wishes to retain. First, I would like to evaluate the reasons why almost all of the survey participants responded so positively to the concept of servant leadership and understand further why the concept of service is an appealing one for

pastors, and then I would like to assess some of the literature on servant leadership to draw out why some of the aspects of this approach can still be beneficial.

The first characteristic that was consistently highlighted by survey respondents was a commitment to doing whatever work is needed for the advancement of the church. One pastor expressed, “I understand servant leadership to mean, as demonstrated by Jesus in washing the feet of his disciples, that there should be no task that is ‘beneath’ the most powerful person in any system. I try to embody it by modeling myself that I am willing to do dirty work—from scrubbing toilets to staying late to clean up.” Scripture often depicts Jesus doing lowly tasks to meet the needs of others, and because we are called to imitate Christ, Christian leaders are often drawn to the idea of service. Several other clergy expressed the same sentiment with one saying, “I try not to ask of others what I would not be willing to do myself,” and another, “I never ask anyone to do something I have not already or would not be willing to do. I join with those who are serving and emphasize our need for each other as we walk in our relationship with God.” How wonderful would it be, though, if ministers were truly dedicated to doing whatever was necessary to help accomplish the vision of the church. Ministers should be willing to do the lowly, difficult tasks if it means that Christ’s ministry will be propelled forward. They should be willing to serve others in the name of our faith. However, many ministers do not show this kind of dedication to pursuing the mission of the church. Instead, ministers seem more devoted to coddling their

congregation, managing their emotions, avoiding risks and hard decisions, and maintaining the status quo. Being subservient to the anxiety and fears of our members should not be the definition of servant leadership. Rather, we should be pouring ourselves into serving the church that Christ calls us to become, not the church that our anxious members want to maintain.

Participants also noted that the phrase servant leadership does not constitute only service but must also demonstrate aspects of leadership. One pastor said, “Servant leadership is becoming part of a community of God’s children as an equal partner yet set apart.” While ministers should never think that they are fundamentally better than the people in their congregation, it is still important to understand that the pastor is intentionally called and set-apart for the purpose of leading and casting a vision for the organization. In order to be an effective servant *leader*, a pastor must fulfill the responsibilities of leadership. As another minister wrote, “I do not let the ‘leadership’ be subsumed by the ‘servant.’ Both are important. The servant part is not just physically doing things—it is an attitude, that embodies love for those we are called to serve AND lead. That leadership is vital—without that, churches flounder.” One of the major risks of servant leadership explored in the last chapter is that a servant sometimes eschews different aspects of leadership because they feel that they must operate from a position of service, but service does not have to be characterized by a weakness and timidity to lead, instead service can come from a place of strength and conviction regarding the

importance of leadership and the importance of the congregation's shared mission. Servant leadership cannot exist without leadership. Just as one minister wrote, "A servant leader is a person in charge, who's shaping the vision, calling people into action, and leading the way to enact the vision." How exciting to envision someone with the strength and awareness to shape a vision, call people to join, and then lead the way into realizing that vision together. One minister combined the imagery of servanthood and shepherding that are common in depictions of servant leadership with a mature understanding of what is needed to actually lead: "I felt it was my responsibility as leader and servant of this congregation to do what was best for all and moved to termination. Servant leadership, in my understanding, is taking the role of shepherd seriously which is to watch over carefully and lead congregants to carry out the mission of the church." This pastor is an embodiment of what this new model of servant leadership is attempting to create: a person who is motivated by a commitment to the mission of the church and is willing to both serve and lead in order to accomplish that mission.

Humility and intentional listening were also repeatedly identified by clergy as important marks of servant leadership. One argued that "there is no room for arrogance, and listening is always of primary importance." Still another that, "leaders best lead by recognizing the efforts and contribution of others and motivating them to achieve goals," while one pastor expressed, "Servant leadership means working for the good of

the whole congregation and modeling humility and gratitude,” and finally, another, “I believe the most important (and perhaps most defining) quality of a servant leader is one who is willing to listen with discernment to the people being served; listening whole-heartedly to individuals, while remaining attentive to the larger picture, continually discerning a right path forward given the needs and gifts of a congregation.”

The characteristic of humility that attracts many clergy to the concept of servant leadership can still be pursued in the new model being proposed here. Humility should not constitute a fear of boldly leading a congregation into the future, humility should instead mean that the leader is not attempting to cultivate followers of his or her own personality. Instead, a true servant leader is able to help develop a vision and then call people to pursue a common mission together, suppressing one’s own ego in dedication to the shared mission. Furthermore, a good leader also understands that any vision cannot be developed in isolation. The leader needs to be able to listen to the ideas and concerns of those he or she leads and incorporate them into the vision so that people can be passionate about the mission that they are pursuing together. Humility and the ability to listen are important aspects of this new model of servant leadership as well.

Several of the respondents attempted to define servant leadership in ways that coincide with this new model. One minister wrote that servant leadership “means leading so that the organization is lifted and enriched, rather than pursuing my own goals at the cost of the congregation’s growth.” This minister identified the organization

itself as the object of servant leadership. Sometimes the pursuit of a perfect and harmonious staff environment in the name of servant leadership where no one has to be terminated or held accountable for their actions is the byproduct of the ego of the leader who cannot accept the fact that he or she may have made a wrong hire in the first place. The goal of keeping a staff intact cannot supersede the overall goals of the church. A United Church of Christ minister identified the fact that his definition of servant leadership “includes the imperative of care for the institution as well as for the staff.” Indeed, this new model of servant leadership does not mean that the staff should be neglected. They should be nurtured, and developed, and challenged to grow. However, service to the staff does not take priority over the larger needs of the institution. Another clergy captured this sentiment perfectly by writing, “I understand the phrase ‘servant leadership’ to refer to the kind of leadership appropriate for those who value the persons who work for them and also undertake their own jobs with a sense of responsibility for the integrity of the institution with ample energy, enthusiasm, and clear thinking to move the institution in a positive and creative direction.” This minister captures the essence of this new model of servant leadership. Our staff people are valued, but our responsibility is to the forward movement of the congregation. As another minister wrote, “Above all, for us as people of faith, servant leadership is about being of service to God’s kingdom.” We have a high calling and we need to ensure that

our calling remains to God's kingdom rather than to more provincial aspects of our work.

One pastor, who has worked across multiple denominations, wrote extensively about several terminations he has pursued, but ended his responses by stating that, "Christian leaders need Mark 10 emblazoned on our hearts." This pastor felt strongly that any Christian leader must be defined by his or her service and dedication to the ministry of Jesus. That is why this new model does not dispose of the concept of servant leadership entirely but attempts to redeem it for greater purposes—we can be the servant of all in the vein of Mark 10 by the way we are fully invested in the mission of the church. Therefore, I will turn now to explaining why it is critical that the church's mission is the main focus for Christian leaders.

The Power of a Mission

Part of the fear of the power-based models of leadership that Kent Keith critiques in his book on servant leadership is that the pursuit of power can often become self-centered and tyrannical, rather than focused on the wider needs of the community. The ability to focus on a larger mission is part of the appeal of servant-leadership for Keith. He argues that, "Servant leaders know that the mission of the organization is bigger than any one person. By developing their colleagues, servant-leaders improve not only the organization's performance today, but far into the future. This is the servant-leader's

legacy.”¹ Keith is contending that the servant-leader should spend considerable effort developing colleagues because doing so invests in the larger impact of the organization. But contrast Keith’s sentiments with those expressed by him in another part of the book: “The servant-leader is by far the best leader to take an organization through a period of change. The reason is that a servant-leader will not use organizational change as the excuse for building his or her own power and position. [...] The servant-leader will be focused instead on meeting the needs of the organization and those it serves.”² The tension that I see between Keith’s two statements is that the servant-leader does not need to focus exclusively on the development of employees to the neglect of the rest of the organization. A troubled employee somehow made better by the devotion of the leader is not what will create a lasting impact. Instead, it is the leaders’ devotion to meeting the needs of the organization itself that will benefit the organization in the long-term, and sometimes the needs of the organization require the termination of an employee.

In his book, Keith defines the mission of a servant leader by saying, “The mission of a servant-leader is therefore to identify and meet the needs of others. Loving and helping others gives a servant-leader meaning and satisfaction in life.”³ Proponents of the old view of servant leadership make their approach sound so endearing. The servant

¹ Keith, 45.

² Ibid., 27.

³ Ibid., 9.

leader does nothing other than serve and help meet the needs of others. That seems harmless and praise-worthy. However, I hope that this thesis has demonstrated how insular of a mission Keith is proposing. Nowhere in Scripture does it call for us to sit around and try to help meet everyone's needs. Most of the time, the needs that people express are shallow and un-Christlike anyway. We are not called to meet needs, we are called to inspire our congregation into pursuing something bigger than having all of our needs met. Our employees do not need us to simply focus on meeting all of their needs either. Just as Keith contends that the servant-leader is able to look beyond the self, the servant-leader should also look beyond the employees to what is best for the institution as a whole.

Keith even quotes one of the texts used elsewhere in this thesis, Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*. Drucker maintains that, "The effective executive focuses on contribution. [...] He asks: 'What can I contribute that will significantly affect the performance and the results of the institution I serve?' [...] The focus on contribution turns the executive's attention away from his own specialty, his own narrow skills, [...] and toward the performance of the whole, [...] to the entire organization and its purpose."⁴ It should not only be the effective executive that is focused on contribution to the organization and its purpose, instead that should be the goal of every employee and

⁴ Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, 52-53

the executive helps the employees understand their purpose. If the employee is not substantially contributing to the mission of the organization, then the answer to the question of what will significantly affect the performance and the results of the institution will sometimes be a staffing change.

There are actually other books on servant leadership, though, that help articulate how much more can be accomplished when our service is turned from the needs of individual people to a far greater mission. One such book is centered on the example of servant leadership set by both Jesus and Paul. It is quite powerful how Jesus' and Paul's examples coincide with this new model of servant leadership rather than with Greenleaf's model. Theologian Efraim Agosto points out that, "Jesus identified his mission with a prophetic call to preach good news to the poor and oppressed,"⁵ and everything that Jesus did was performed with that prophetic call in mind. There is an important distinction to make here, however. One might presume that preaching good news to the poor and the oppressed is a similar mission to meeting the needs of others, and so perhaps Greenleaf's model actually does characterize the life and work of Jesus. Agosto demonstrates, though, how Jesus' mission went beyond simply serving people's needs.

⁵ Agosto, 36.

When Jesus calls his disciples, Agosto writes that, “The call to discipleship includes leaving everything behind, following Jesus, and accepting a mission.”⁶ Agosto continues that, “Jesus chose disciples, who, despite their humble background and significant flaws, would eventually best serve the target audience of Jesus’ ministry.”⁷ The disciples, who we might think of analogously to his staff, were not catered to and ensured that all of their needs were met. Instead, they were asked deliberately to sacrifice by leaving all of their worldly possessions behind so that they could follow someone with authority who was calling them to focus on a particular mission. In fact, Jesus was intentional about choosing the people who would best help him fulfill his mission. To that end, we see that Jesus rejects those who cannot participate in the mission. Agosto points out that when Jesus encounters the rich young ruler, the ruler “does not understand the connection between ‘inheriting the kingdom of God,’ and paying attention to the poorest of the poor in his society,” and as a result, “His potential for gospel leadership [...] has thus been thwarted.”⁸ The rich young ruler cannot be part of the team that Jesus is constructing because he does not understand that devotion to the mission demands everything, and because he cannot get on board with the overall mission, he is not fit for leadership. Jesus demonstrates this same discerning quality in his interactions with the Pharisees. He does not tend to their needs, he does not coddle

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁸ Ibid., 54.

them, he does not invite them into co-ministry, instead, he points out that they are not fit for Christian leadership because they completely misunderstand the mission and ministry of Jesus.⁹

Agosto highlights that this distinction between simply serving someone's needs and being part of a greater mission is actually rooted in the definition of the ancient Greek word for servant. "Studies have shown," he writes, "that *diakoneo*, the Greek verb behind 'one who serves,' may have referred not to 'table service' as such, but to a task or office of high status in which the servant is authorized to act as an emissary for a ruler or a divinity."¹⁰ Truly, the kind of service that Christ' calls us to, indeed the kind he exemplified, is a form of service so intense and so focused on the mission that it will end in death because the mission is that important. Agosto writes that, "Jesus must go to Jerusalem and confront the entrenched leadership of the nation with his message of hope for the oppressed masses for the countryside, even though he will pay for such an act of sacrificial leadership with his death."¹¹ The servant leadership of Christ calls not for our needs, or the needs of our co-laborers, to be met, but actually for us to sacrifice everything.

Agosto demonstrates that Paul had this same commitment to a greater mission when the early Christian churches were first being established. Agosto writes that, "Paul

⁹ Cf. Matthew 2:7-10.

¹⁰ Agosto, 48-49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

viewed his calling and mission as a *diakonia*—a ministry of service that entailed sacrifice and commitment. By commending leaders who practiced *diakonia* on behalf of the gospel communities, Paul highlights the very focus of his calling, that is, he interprets his proclamation of the gospel and all that follows as his *diakonia* to God. Gospel leaders,” Agosto argues,” must have a similar sense of calling, and ministry, a similar *diakonia*.”¹² Paul understood his entire ministry to be based in service, he would certainly characterize himself as a servant leader, but his service, once again, was not to particular people, it was not even to a particular congregation, his service was to God.

As one of the first leaders of the burgeoning Christian communities, Paul could have set a precedent as to what constitutes clerical leadership. Paul could have been someone who was satisfied with the status quo. He could have stayed at one church and made sure that all of the needs of the people in that congregation were tended to. He could have been held captive by the anxiety of the new followers of Christ who did not want to change and who wanted to force all Gentiles to adopt their Jewish practices and he could have relented to their demands. He could have delegated everything to lay leaders and been simply a cheerleader. Instead, “Paul uses every available resource in this world [...] to advance his cause, the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Paul challenged, stretched, directed, grew, and led his churches with power and authority in

¹² Ibid., 163.

the name of the Gospel, and quite naturally, faced much opposition and resistance, but he was never deterred from advancing the mission of Christ. As Agosto exclaims, Paul and those he labored with would “sacrifice, get sick, get well, and try again.”¹³ They were unrelenting in their dedication.

As mentioned previously, one of the main fears of the “power-centered” model of leadership is that power can be used for personal gain. That was certainly the ethos of the Roman Empire in which Paul operated where “typical Greco-Roman commendations promoted credentials related to family ties, economic status, and patronage connections.”¹⁴ In the Empire, it did not matter how hard you worked so much as who you were connected to. The rich and powerful retained their wealth and status rather than sharing it among the people. As central as Paul was to the development of early Christianity, he could have easily been tempted to take the same approach. In fact, many of the earliest churches fell into this pattern of affiliating themselves with a powerful leader in the church and creating divisions as a result. In 1 Corinthians, Paul must respond to these divisions and instruct the church to maintain unity in mission rather than division by affiliating with particular leaders. This is exactly what happens in a modern context when congregations become anxious because a certain staff member has been terminated, and they confuse the mission of the church

¹³ Ibid., 144.

¹⁴ Ibid., 160.

with the staff itself. The mission remains the same even if the employees on the staff change. Our allegiance is to the mission. Paul had to instruct his communities that their power should not be directed toward self-advancement, but rather toward “*ergos* (work), *kopos* (hard work, labor) and *diakonia* (service, ministry).”¹⁵ Paul wanted everyone to be working toward the same mission and be united in service to the cause of Christ. He was not afraid to stir up controversy and challenge the early Christians if they lost sight of that vision and that is why Paul was so successful in his ministry.

The second chapter of this thesis evaluated the negative consequences that result from a congregation beset by anxiety. Pastor and church consultant Peter Steinke explains that the anxiety in the system is compounded whenever the leader does not have a clear vision. He states that clergy should “focus on challenge, not comfort,” because “where there is an unclear vision, the people perish in their own anxious reactivity.”¹⁶ One of the recurring themes of the thesis is that congregations often need to be pushed outside of their own comfort zones and the pastor should be concerned less with comfort and more about challenging the church to be focused on Christ’s vision. Without a mission, then the church can spiral out of control because they have no sense of what is important. They allow their emotions to be channeled into worry about a single employee or about a simple aspect of worship, because no one is drawing their

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 113, 116.

attention to a higher purpose. Steinke adds that, “By articulating a sense of where a group is going, the leader gives it a direction and destiny,” and Steinke warns that, “The vision that defines the group must be forged and safeguarded by leaders who are themselves well-differentiated.”¹⁷ The importance of being well-differentiated comes up again here because the leader must be able to step outside of him or herself and outside of the shallow concerns of the congregation to maintain an unwavering focus on the mission. Doing so gives the congregation a sense of direction. It allows the pastor to make tough staffing decisions because the congregation trusts that those choices are part of moving in the direction of the vision. Steinke makes it clear why having a mission as a church is so essential: “What is at stake may be the very vocation to which God has called and gathered these people together—their ministry and mission.”¹⁸ We do a great disservice to the congregation if we do not help them focus on the mission of the church because that is the very reason why God has called us into community as a church.

The third chapter evaluated the claim that many make in the church that the church should not function like a business. The fear is that by focusing on performance, such as the achievement of a specific mission, it makes the church too businesslike. Management guru Peter Drucker agrees that “what the service institutions [like the church] need is not to be more businesslike,” but he does argue that the church still

¹⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 14.

needs to be focused on performance, it's just that performance needs to be narrowly defined as the "specific functions, purposes, and missions," for which the church was built."¹⁹ He goes on to passionately contend that, "We have no choice but to learn to manage the public service institutions for performance," and "they need to define 'what our business is and what it should be'," by defining "clear objectives and goals from their definition of function and mission."²⁰ Drucker's argument is that performance is not based on financial profit like it is in businesses, but there is still a purpose behind a social institution like the church, and the church should be held accountable for pursuing that purpose. That is why performance is measured in the church. That is also why it is essential for the church to have a clear understanding of what the mission is so that the congregation can collectively establish objectives and goals for how to achieve the mission. However, without the mission, the church loses sight of the entire point for its existence.

It is important to note that the title of Drucker's book wherein he outlines the importance of a clear mission is *Management*. When we manage staff within the church, we do so with the mission of the church in mind. Even more relevant, Drucker supports the idea that, "The manager is a servant."²¹ However, Drucker imagines the same redefinition of servanthood as this thesis supports. He writes that, "His master is the

¹⁹ Drucker, *Management*, 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

institution he manages, and his first responsibility must therefore be to it. His first task is to make the institution [...] perform the function and make the contribution for the sake of which it exists."²² We are indeed servants but to a much higher ideal than any one person. We are servants to the mission that guides our institution. Drucker puts this responsibility in very stark terms by saying that, "Society does not stand to gain but stands to lose if the performance capacity of the institution in its own specific task is diminished or impaired," and therefore, "the institutions' performance of its specific mission is also society's first need and interest," and "the manager's first duty is to preserve the performance capacity of the institution in his care. To jeopardize it, no matter how noble the motive, is irresponsibility."²³ The pastor has a social responsibility to serve the mission of the church and doing anything that might hinder or impair that mission is a dereliction of duty.

Steinke's explanation above regarding how a focused mission can help motivate a congregation is echoed in the business world. Business consultants David Bradford and Allan Cohen write that, "One of the key components for [...] reaching excellence is the establishment of an overarching goal for the unit, which serves to give coherence, excitement, and meaning. [...] An overarching goal can motivate, provide direction, and

²² Ibid., 217-218.

²³ Ibid., 218.

serve as a focus for change.”²⁴ A sense of mission can be vital to both the staff and the congregation. It also gives the minister a greater sense of direction as well, because then the minister can measure all choices against whether or not it advances the mission. When making difficult staffing decisions, the minister can determine if an employee is helping the cause of the mission, and if not, then it makes it easier to decide to terminate. It's actually impossible to have the right people without a clear vision and vice versa. Businessmen Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan argue that, “You can't craft a worthwhile strategy if you don't at the same time make sure your organization has or can get what's required to execute it, including the right resources and the right people.”²⁵ Being of service to your employees cannot happen unless the leader is first committed to serving the overall mission of the church. The two are intimately intertwined. And when the leader is focused on the mission, then it becomes apparent which staff members are helping propel the mission forward and which ones are hindering the mission. The leader is then empowered to do the hard work of staff management on behalf of the mission.

Jim Collins suggests that the best leaders he surveyed “demonstrate an unwavering resolve to do whatever must be done to produce the best-long-term results,

²⁴ David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen, *Managing for Excellence: The Guide to Developing High Performance in Contemporary Organizations* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1984), pg. 100.

²⁵ Bossidy, 7.

no matter how difficult.”²⁶ Collins better helps define this type of approach for organizations in the social sector, such as churches, by explaining Level 5 leaders in the social sector should think, “It is my responsibility to ensure that the right decisions happen. [...] The only way I can achieve that is if people know I’m motivated first and always for the greatness of our work, not myself [...] Level 5 leadership is not about being ‘soft’ or ‘nice’ or purely ‘inclusive’ or ‘consensus-building.’ The whole point of Level 5 is to make sure the *right* decisions happen—no matter how difficult or painful—for the long-term greatness of the institution and the achievement of its mission, independent of consensus or popularity.”²⁷ Collins does a good job of explaining what this thesis is calling on church leaders to pursue. Christ does not ask us to be consensus-builders among our staff, Christ does not command us to develop a reputation as being “nice” because we do not ask anything of our employees or our congregation, Christ asks for us to lead our congregations in the ways of God. As the leader of the church it is our responsibility to make the difficult decisions about what will best help us pursue that mission. We should not worry about egos, we should not worry about reputations, we should not worry about popularity. Servant-leadership is defined by humility, and so we should humbly make decisions based on what furthers the mission of the church.

²⁶ Collins, *Good to Great*, 36.

²⁷ Collins, *Good to Great in the Social Sectors*, 11.

When the pastor is able to humbly submit to the hard work needed to single-mindedly focus on the mission of the church, it allows for the rest of the congregation to come along as well. In his own book on servanthood, Pastor Arthur Boers defines Christian leadership as “inspiring, challenging, or empowering people or groups to join God’s mission for redemption and healing.”²⁸ Boers’ definition is a far cry from the one put forth by Kent Keith who argued for brokenness and being a cheerleader. The church needs leaders who will challenge and inspire. Boers captures the very essence of what this new model of servant leadership is trying to communicate: “All Christian leadership should concern itself primarily with whether or not it directs attention to God and God’s kingdom,” because leadership “is not for one’s own benefit or self-promotion, but is at the service [...] of God’s priorities, purposes, vision, values, and mission.”²⁹ It is exciting to imagine a world of church leaders who will dedicate themselves to the mission of God and do whatever it takes to see that vision come to fruition. Lovett Weems echoes this same excitement. He writes that, “When there is a powerful and compelling vision, people look to the future with hope. Such a vision can lift people out of their ordinary and conventional ways of thinking and working. It gives a boost to morale and a lift to the spirits.”³⁰ The best course of action that we can take as clergy is to develop a clear

²⁸ Boers, 161.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159, 162.

³⁰ Weems, 45.

vision and invite our congregation to participate, being inspired by the promise of a better future.

Of course, as hard as we might work to unify our congregations around a singular mission, we will still face challenges. Pastor Arthur DeKruyter argues that “in spite of thoughtful procedure and compassionate management, things sometimes go wrong.” We “may end up with an angry member who leaves the church over a personnel decision,” or “we may end up hiring a staff member who turns out to be incompetent,” so “in the midst of these tough personnel decisions, [we should] try to do what is best for all concerned, [...] make the best decisions [we] can, and trust that God, in the long run, will use them to build [God’s] kingdom.”³¹ Again and again in this thesis, leaders in both the church and the business world have recognized that when a leader makes a difficult decision, even one rooted in what will propel the organization forward, there is often resistance and pushback. Such a response is natural. However, clergy who are passionate about being of service to the mission of the church and to God’s kingdom must keep in mind what is best for the long-term health of the organization and be able to help reduce the anxiety that comes from resistance rather than be caught up in it or stifled by it.

³¹ DeKruyter, “Hiring and Firing”.

Collins argues that this ultimate pursuit of the mission of God will actually lead to the church finding the right employees anyway. He writes that the “purity of mission [...] connecting people to God [...] has the power to ignite passion and commitment,” and that “the number-one resource for a great social sector organization is having enough of the right people willing to commit themselves to the mission.”³² When people see that we are dedicated to one goal, the mission of the church, they will be excited by that mission and want to join in its pursuit. Clergy are meant to help their congregations become passionate about their collective mission. When people have a purity of goal, they will become more committed to what they are doing. The same can be true for the staff. If we focus on finding people who can be devoted to the mission, then it helps us know what sort of employees to hire, it gives us a sense of direction. It also unifies the staff because they know that they are working toward the same goals. Collins actually argues that for social sector organizations like churches it is not enough to get the right people on the bus, the church first needs to understand its sense of mission so that it can find people who will be loyal to the mission; those are the right people for the bus. So, when we terminate an employee, it is because we know that this person is not the right fit for creating a team that is collectively committed to the mission of the church. John Kotter suggests that, “Effectiveness in a supervisory role means having some reasonably

³² Collins, *Good to Great in the Social Sector*, 16-17.

clear sense of what you are trying to accomplish, and an organizational structure below you that fits that mission. It means getting the right people into the right jobs in that structure."³³ We cannot be effective in our work as a supervisor, or servant, unless we understand our mission, and then find employees who can help achieve that mission.

This position is affirmed by Crutchfield and Grant who write that, "In the nonprofit world, it's actually 'first what, then who.' All the organizations we studied are guided first and foremost by their mission, and this purpose is the primary reason a person will take the job. These groups look for new hires with a passion for their mission, and strong cultural fit. In other words, they already know where the bus is headed; they're looking for good people who are going in the same direction."³⁴ Having a mission in mind helps in the hiring process because clergy need people who are just as committed to the mission of the church. As DeKruyter acknowledges, though, that does not mean we don't make hiring mistakes even when we have a clear sense of the mission. Crutchfield and Grant maintain that for nonprofit organizations like churches, their "programs and services are only as good as they people they hire and retain."³⁵ It is vital that if the wrong person is hired, the clergy tries again until the right fit is found. The ability of the church to function properly depends on getting the right people.

³³ Kotter, *Power and Influence*, 81.

³⁴ Crutchfield, 211.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

Clergy can get so caught up in worrying about their reputation or what other people will think that they lose sight of the fact that there is a much larger picture at stake. Isaac Hammer in his book outlining how to properly terminate an employee writes that, “You have to remember it’s not just about you,” and in fact, “Nor is it just about the employee and his job.” Instead, “It’s about putting the entire business ahead of that underperforming employee. It’s about all those other jobs and all the other people whose production or morale is being hampered. It’s about those people not getting full satisfaction out of the job that you’re offering them. It’s about the rest of the people who work for you being able to better themselves.”³⁶ The model of servant leadership that Greenleaf and others offer is one where the focus is on serving each individual employee. But when we allow our attention to become so insular, we lose sight of the fact that the rest of our staff, the rest of the congregation, and the entire mission of the church suffer. However, when we all devote ourselves to serving the mission of the church, then we are able to capture the best parts of servant leadership, and we are able to be unified toward a common goal. In the end, everyone, the employees included, are better able to flourish.

³⁶ Hammer, 33.

Putting the Mission into Action

It should be evident by now that first developing a clear mission should be the primary focus of any clergy person. Being able to pursue a common mission with the congregation and having that mission inform what decisions are made can change everything for a pastor. First, it gives the minister a sense of purpose to know why he or she is doing the work of ministry. The mission can motivate and inspire the work that the minister does, and when the minister has a clear sense of that mission and where the congregation should go in the future, then that mission can be communicated to the congregation who can be invited to join the work. Thus, a mission can help rally the congregation together and move parishioners out of the malaise that so easily settles over our congregations. When people understand that the future can hold so much more than the status quo, then they too can be inspired to do the work of the church. The mission helps everyone understand the “why” — why we gather together on Sundays, why we invest in worship, why we seek to challenge ourselves, why we pool together our financial resources, why we reach out to the community. Every “why” should be rooted in and informed by the mission.

Of course, as noted above, there are always parishioners who are resistant and anxious. It is so easy for pastors to become mired in the anxiety of others, to become deflated, to give up hope that change is possible, to relent to the strongest voices in the congregation. However, having a strong sense of mission can help the pastor navigate

these difficult situations. Having a mission can help the pastor to more easily become well-differentiated. The minister stands outside the anxiety of the congregation because the minister is not trying to manage emotions, the minister is instead trying to remain committed to and focused on the mission. The pastor can then articulate that mission again and again and highlight the benefits that will result in the hopes that the anxious people will be swayed by the clear communication. However, if they are not, the pastor can remain steadfast knowing that the mission of the church will be served and not compromised by the anxiety of a few. This approach is not callous or unfeeling, the pastor still loves and cares for the parishioners who are anxious, but the minister will keep in mind that ministry is greater than the emotions of any one person. Clergy need to help their congregants be committed to something bigger than themselves or else the clergy will become emotionally drained by meeting the provincial concerns of parishioners who may be worried more about their comfort than the mission of Christ. Change in any congregation is immensely difficult, but the mission helps the minister know what change is necessary and propels the minister to pursue those changes even in the midst of potential conflict.

Because pursuing a common mission along with the congregation should be the thrust of the minister's work, it makes it very clear that the pastor needs employees whose sole focus is also going to be carrying the mission of the church forward in their specific work. As several authors remarked above, knowing the "why" helps illuminate

“who” should be part of the staff. Hiring and termination decisions become much easier because these choices are filtered through the question of whether or not someone is benefiting or hindering the overall mission. If employees are not a good fit for their position, if they are overwhelmed by their work, if other staff members have to neglect their own responsibilities to cover for them, if employees don’t agree with the mission, if they are creating discord with other staff members, if their position no longer aligns with the direction the church is going, if there is any reason that a specific person or position is not directly benefiting the mission, then the answer is clear: termination is necessary. Again, such a forthright statement might sound callous, but in actuality it is the most servant-hearted decision that the minister might make. Keeping someone in a position where they are not advancing the mission of the church prevents the employee from being in a work environment where they might flourish, it hurts the rest of the staff, it takes away time that the pastor can be doing other ministry work, it mismanages the resources of the congregation, and it stymies the church’s mission.

Despite how many dire consequences can result from not terminating an ineffective employee at the appropriate time, the survey results analyzed above demonstrate that the internal and external barriers that clergy face are real and substantial. However, staying focused on the mission of the church can help the minister navigate all of these barriers. If there are institutional barriers in place because a congregation does not have clear policies on how an employee can be terminated, or if a

church is on the opposite extreme and has overly burdensome policies that prevent adept decision-making, rather than be defeated by these institutional challenges, the pastor can remember that the mission is served by doing the hard work of making sure that expectations are clear. When the emotions involved in a termination are overwhelming, both personally and collectively among the congregation, keeping the mission in mind can help the pastor go beyond just serving emotions. It is easy for the minister to delay, to rationalize, to reorganize, to become complacent, to be stifled by anxiety, but the mission assists the pastor in remembering that there is something greater at stake. The mission can also stimulate the minister when there is worry about the timing of the termination. The mission of Christ should not delay, should not be set aside, should not be subsumed by other concerns. The mission of the church must always be the top priority, and so the mission helps prevent a necessary termination from being inappropriately deferred.

The clergy surveyed wanted to be known as servant-leaders, though. Pastors want to exhibit the characteristics of Christ, they want to demonstrate humility, they want to demonstrate that no work or service is beneath them, they want to be collaborative, and they want to work alongside their congregation. These are all such noble endeavors! But if Greenleaf's model of servant leadership were to be pursued, the unconditional grace and acceptance for employees and congregants that he calls for would lead us to become servants to individual emotional demands and needs that

might have nothing to do with the mission of the church. Serving our employees, even if they are hindering the overall mission, is such a provincial calling. As clergy we are called to so much more than serving single individuals, to so much more than managing emotions, we are called to serve God and God's church. That is why we desperately need a new model in the church of servant leadership that allows us to embody the best qualities of servant leaders but that sets our sight on the important work of the church. If we want to be the servant of all from Matthew 10, then let us give everything we have and everything that we are to the mission of the church.

Greenleaf's model leads so many clergy to relinquish all power and authority in their roles and causes them to fail to properly manage their employees or to challenge their congregations to change because ministers are so worried about serving everyone around them, even if that means serving their demands and anxieties. Clergy in these situations do not feel empowered to lead their congregation into the future especially if that means they will have to take risks and be uncomfortable in the name of the mission. But we worship and serve a God who is the ultimate source of all power and authority and who has bestowed that power and authority on us in his Great Commission, telling us to make *disciples* of all people. In our service to that mission, let us embrace our power and authority as clergy to lead our staff and our congregations to greater heights where they can deepen their spirituality, renew their commitment to justice, and be challenged to be part of the work of God which is always much bigger than ourselves.

Our world needs clergy who will not lose sight of that mission. So, as servant-leaders, let us do the hard work of serving God's great mission.

Appendix A: Study Design

The Duke University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research protocol of this survey on July 2nd, 2018.

1. Survey Design

The following survey was administrated to clergy across denominations in the United States:

Please think of a time or times when you considered terminating an employee that you directly supervised. Please feel free to write about more than one experience.

1. If you did not follow-through with termination, why not? Were there any internal or external barriers that prevented you from doing so? Do you feel as if it is appropriate for clergy to terminate employees?
2. If you did follow-through with termination, why did you do so? Why did you feel like this was the best course of action? Did you feel that you had the support of your church council or congregation?
3. How do you understand the phrase “servant leadership”? Do you try to embody servant leadership?
4. What is your denomination?

2. Subject Selection

Clergy were recruited using direct recruitment and through social media.

3. Risks and Benefits

There were no risks or benefits for participating in this survey.

4. Confidentiality

The survey responses were completely confidential. No names were attached to survey responses and clergy were asked not to use any personal identifiers when talking about other individuals in their responses.

5. Compensation

No compensation was given.

6. Informed Consent

Before taking the survey, participants were asked to read the following material in order to provide their informed consent:

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Rev. Jacob Buchholz, a graduate student at Duke Divinity School. The purpose of the study is to examine the emotional and practical barriers that prevent clergy from using employee termination as a management technique. Participation in the study involves completing a survey that will ask you questions about the management of your staff and whether you have considered terminating employees. The total time for completing the survey should not exceed 10 minutes. If you choose to participate, your name will not be linked to your survey responses at any time. Please do not use any identifiable information when talking about other individuals. The research will not benefit you personally. We

know of no risks resulting from participating in the study. If you have any questions about me or the research, feel free to email me at jarbuchholz@gmail.com. If you are interested in taking part in this survey, please click to the next page.

7. Deception

No deception was used.

8. Debriefing

No debriefing was needed due to lack of deception.

Appendix B: Study Results

The below tables outline the denominational affiliations of the sixty survey respondents. The participants represent ten different denominations with the majority coming from the United Church of Christ and Presbyterian Church (USA). The third column represents with an “X” whether a respondent indicated on the first question that they had indeed desired to terminate someone but were prevented from doing so because of a specific internal or external barrier. Over half of the participants, 35 out of 60, did not follow through with a termination during the course of their ministry. The fourth column represents with an “X” whether a respondent indicated on the second question that they had indeed followed through with a termination. Again, a majority of the respondents, 39 out of 60, had been able to effectively terminate an employee during the course of their ministry. What is interesting from this data is that 14 participants have been in both situations and have had occasions where barriers prevented them from terminating an employee, but then also occasions when they were able to terminate someone. 21 of the clergy had never terminated someone, and 25 had never had barriers prevent them from terminating when they felt it was necessary.

The fifth column indicates with an “X” whether a participant gave a positive assessment of servant leadership in their response to the third question. As shown below, only five respondents criticized the concept of servant leadership. Interestingly, those five individuals represent all three groups: those who had been prevented from

terminating someone, those who had effectively terminated someone, and those who had experienced both situations. There was really no correlation in the survey results between those who had followed through with termination and a person's opinion on servant leadership. It became clear in the survey results that pastors hold a high estimation of the concept of servant leadership and so it was necessary to provide a new model of servant leadership that redirected ministers from service to employees to service to the wider mission of the church.

	Denomination	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
1	Roman Catholic	X		X
2	Presbyterian	X	X	X
3	UCC		X	X
4	UCC	X		X
5	UCC	X		X
6	UCC		X	X
7	UCC		X	X
8	American Baptist	X	X	X
9	PCUSA	X	X	X
10	UCC	X	X	X
11	Congregationalist		X	X
12	UCC	X	X	X
13	PCUSA	X	X	
14	UCC		X	X
15	UCC		X	
16	Unspecified		X	X
17	UCC	X		X
18	UCC	X	X	X
19	PCUSA	X		X
20	UCC		X	X
21	Methodist		X	X
22	UCC	X		X
23	UCC		X	
24	Presbyterian	X		X

25	Methodist	X		X
26	UCC		X	X
27	PCUSA		X	X
28	PCUSA		X	X
29	Many		X	X
30	PCUSA	X		X
31	PCUSA		X	X
32	PCUSA	X		X
33	UCC	X		X
34	Non-Denom		X	X
35	ECC	X		X
36	UCC	X		X
37	UCC		X	X
38	Lutheran	X		X
39	UCC	X	X	X
40	UCC	X	X	X
41	DOC		X	X
42	UCC	X		X
43	UCC	X		X
44	UCC		X	X
45	PCA	X	X	X
46	UCC	X	X	X
47	UMC	X		X
48	UCC		X	X
49	UCC		X	X
50	UCC		X	X
51	UCC		X	X
52	UCC	X	X	
53	UCC	X		X
54	UCC	X		
55	UCC		X	X
56	PCUSA	X	X	X
57	PUCSA	X	X	X
58	UCC		X	X
59	UCC	X		X
60	PCUSA	X		X

Abbreviation	Denomination
UCC	United Church of Christ
PCA	Presbyterian Church of America
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church USA
UMC	United Methodist Church
DOC	Disciples of Christ
ECC	Evangelical Covenant Church

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