



# THEOLOGIES FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

AN ATS PROJECT FUNDED BY LILLY ENDOWMENT INC.

## Project Synopsis

### **The Challenge**

Pastoral ministry is in critical need of a new working theology. The calling of a pastor has always been difficult, when done well, but today it has become even more challenging due to the rapid social changes enveloping the congregations they serve. The questions of ministry today are no longer about time management, growing congregations, worship wars, or new programs. Those twentieth century issues are now an unaffordable luxury to the pastor scrambling to respond to the current storms of change, which are altering the landscape of pastoral ministry.

The pressing demand to respond as rapidly as these social changes emerge has placed congregations in a reactive mode. Their leaders, most of all the pastors, are anxious and uncertain about how to guide their churches into an unknown future. While many are experimenting with new technical changes for delivering ministry, these efforts are suffering from a lack of theological wisdom that is both practical and faithful to the deep traditions of the church. As a result, pastors feel like they have lost sight of any north star to guide the way and are now engaged in ministry by the seat of their pants. Many feel a sense of anomie and deep agitation in their souls as they respond to their fretful congregations, and they are quickly becoming depleted. Some question their calling to persevere as pastors. What they need is not another seminar on marketing strategies, but a steady theological rudder that can guide them through the churning seas of ecclesiastical life today.

As an organic entity, the church has always had to navigate change. What is unique today is the speed at which unavoidable social forces are blowing through congregations, and the need to make immediate responses. Among the new dynamics within the last ten years that are leaving a permanent effect on local churches are the following:

- a social polarization that has divided congregations between red and blue factions, and the increasingly uncompromising positions of each side on political and social issues,
- the Covid pandemic and the ongoing need to maintain virtual worship and other forms of ministry while many pews remain empty and overbuilt facilities are under-utilized,
- the rise in racial-ethnic identities within the American consciousness that affirm not a melting-pot but justice and equality and inclusion, as is evident in #Black Lives Matter,
- the ecological crisis through which creation is now groaning in travail,
- militarization in Europe, the Middle East, and a renewed threat of global nuclear war,
- the decline in denominations that has forced pastors to reach out as broadly as possible to invite new participants into community, which has led to complex questions about maintaining theological traditions ,
- many in Generation Z know nothing of the church but have an open and unformed orientation to transcendence,
- significant financial pressures that are making it hard for many congregations to pay their pastors and maintain their aging buildings,

- and, relatedly, the growing number of pastors serving multiple congregations, or in bi-vocational ministry.

While there have been heroic efforts from pastors and their denominational leaders to trim the sails of the churches for this storm of change, most of the counsel is tactical in orientation. Very little is being offered that draws confessional insight from the deep well of our theological tradition. For example, most Protestant traditions quickly authorized online celebrations of the Lord's Supper. But what is the theological rationale for sitting at home in front of your screen with a cracker and glass of juice to celebrate the Lord's presence with the gathered Body of Christ? Or another example: in response to the decline in church attendance, many denominations are reactively forming new "churches" in places like coffee shops, RV parks, corporate lunchrooms, and even under bridges - all with an emphasis on creativity but without theological clarity about what exactly constitutes a church.

While it is true that substantive theology often emerges in the wake of necessary adjustments in the church's ministry, pastors cannot wait any longer for theological guidance as they steer their congregations into the future. Without theology tethering us to the truth and mission of Jesus Christ, while propelling us forward, all the pastor's efforts at ministry digress into reactive and desperate flailing in the wind.

As is often the case in times of ecclesiastical change, if not turmoil, the church is finding new ways not only of engaging in ministry but also in forming its pastors. While many traditions continue to look to seminaries and divinity schools for clerical formation, even their alumni who are looking for the theological wisdom emerging from this Kairos moment that may be found within the congregations themselves. This is not so much a turning away from the academies as much as an embracing of the questions and theological insights now arising out of diverse local communities of faith and practice. And the pastors are eager to engage scholars in this conversation with them. But what is missing is an inclusive platform that pulls pastors and scholars together for theological discourse, discovery, and affirmations that can guide the church through the overwhelming winds of change. And hopefully, reformation.

### **A Response**

The current challenge, if not crisis, in pastoral ministry requires a multifaceted response from denominational leaders, theological schools, ministry organizations and networks, and significant internal work on the part of the pastors themselves. This project can also provide a substantive contribution by offering new theologies for pastoral ministry in the contemporary church.

This project will develop a series of approximately ten new books focused on offering practical theological wisdom for pastoral ministry today. These theology books will arise out of a series of five in person gatherings of working pastors, totally about 60 people, representing the church's diversity of traditions, race, generations, genders, and socio-economic settings. In these gatherings we will work in community and focus on the pressing questions of pastoral identity and mission today, and then develop theological affirmations about the contemporary calling of the clergy. The themes for the books, as well as the ten authors, will arise out of these gatherings.

The pastor-scholars who will write the theological books will contribute to a new ecclesiology and, thus, a new theological identity for the pastor who serves the church. The pastoral office

exists for the church and cannot be theologically understood apart from it. Thus, while the focus of these books will be on pastoral ministry each of them will inevitably have to place that ministry in the changing context of the congregations they serve and the larger church of which they are a part.

The effort here is not to develop a single comprehensive ecclesiology or theology of ministry, but to develop diverse theologies of the church and pastoral identity that can form the life and work of Christian ministry in America today. It is also for this reason that the project will publish ten separate small theological books rather than a single edited version. Edited books have an encyclopedic feel, which sacrifices either a unifying theme or prohibits any one theme from being fully explored. A series of separate books authored by diverse authors allows each to build their own arena of theological formation on the foundations their various traditions.

The primary audience for this work is the working pastor who has been valiantly trying to navigate the torrents of change along with the lay leaders of congregations. Most of them don't need to be convinced that dramatic change is upon us, and they have tried to keep up with the latest advice about adaptive transformation from business models, as well as the best practices of their peers. But what the seminaries hear repeatedly is that pastors are yearning for theological guidance that can renew their sense of calling for the challenges of this hour. Thus secondary, but critical, audiences for these books will also be found in theological schools and ministry organizations that strive to train and support church leaders.

As the books are being published, we will begin to disseminate the insights that have been gleaned through seminars sponsored by seminaries, divinity schools, denominational judicatories, and organizations dedicated to pastoral flourishing. The project will also present its insights through a dedicated website and through essays and articles published along the way.

The hope of this project is that it will be used by the Holy Spirit in the ongoing renewal of the church through the leadership of its clergy. Historically, the church was transformed as pastors carried relevant expressions of theology into their pulpits and ministries. But the transformation began with the pastors themselves whose sense of calling was renewed for the challenges they faced. And that renewal cannot only come through new strategic plans, forming networks, or even personal spiritual disciplines. It also requires grounding in a compelling theology that engages in exegesis of both our sacred tradition and the congregations the pastors serve.

This project can help meet that great need.

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