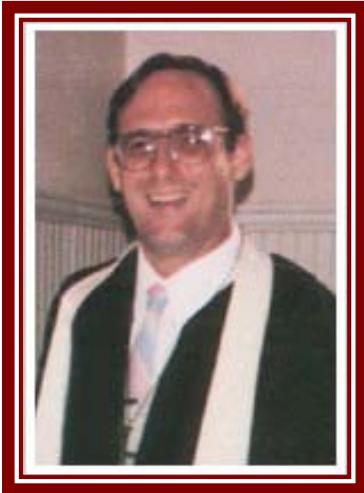


A Joyful Calling: Mentoring Young Adults for the Ministry

by

Peter A. Luckey

Plymouth Congregational Church, Lawrence, Kansas



Regan's Story

Their faces beaming with pride and love, twelve lay leaders listened with rapt attention. Twenty-three old Regan Doyle proceeded to tell her faith journey. “I’ve decided to go to seminary and become a minister” she told Plymouth Church’s Board of Deacons.

“I owe a lot to my grandmother” Regan said, “Coming from a Missouri Synod background, she is very pious, devout. When I went to college, I found myself questioning much of what I received from her, but I never lost my interest in religion. I am very indebted to what she has given to me.”

During her college years, Regan discovered a passion for science and issues of environmental justice. New ways of thinking caused her to challenge her childhood faith. She yearned for a path that would integrate her faith and her questions.

Upon graduation from college, Regan found herself in Lawrence, Kansas. One day she came through the doors of Plymouth Church (UCC). She came out of curiosity about the church and ended up with a full time job. For the next three years, Regan would be the church’s full time administrative assistant. This position became an opportunity for Regan to explore her call.

She organized a young adult group at the church. She signed up for and completed the fifty hours of training to become a Stephen Minister.¹

The congregation took Regan into their hearts! After Regan finished sharing her faith journey with the Board of Deacons, the chairperson thanked her for coming and

¹ Stephen Ministry is a lay led and lay run program offering one on one friendship and support for persons going through sickness, divorce, loss of a loved one, etc.

dismissed her. Everyone around the table that night was quite moved by Regan's story. A motion was made and enthusiastically adopted, "that Plymouth Church pay \$4,000 for a one time scholarship grant for her first year of seminary through the Fund for Theological Education's Congregational Fellowship Program."² The church had already raised these funds through direct appeals to the congregation.

Now, a year later, Regan is in her second semester at Eden Theological Seminary, a St. Louis based seminary related to the United Church of Christ. In February of this year, Regan came back to Plymouth on a long weekend. Once again, she spoke in front of an appreciative audience—this time the entire congregation. Regan shared stories of seminary life. In closing she thanked the church for their support. Regan was visibly moved as she shared what having a home church meant to her. As if wanting a way to repay the compliment, the congregation raised an additional \$1,000 for the seminary scholarship fund that very morning.

Many churches may not have the financial resources to come up with a \$4,000 scholarship for a seminary student. However, all congregations can take to heart Jesus' words "to make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and nurture someone's call to ministry.

The Crisis in the Mainline Church

The mainline church³ is in desperate need of young leaders like Regan. These days there is a great hunger for God, for answers and comfort beyond what the material world can provide. At the same time, many wonder whether our churches are up to the task. The much-discussed decline in the mainline churches manifests itself not only in membership decline but also in a loss of vitality and energy in our congregations.

The key to a revitalized mainline church—churches that exhibit vibrant worship, a strengthening and deepening of the faith of congregation—will be raising up talented, committed pastors. While there is a need for exceptionally gifted pastors of all ages, there is a particular need in the church these days for the energy, idealism and fresh ideas of young adults.

The lack of young pastors in the ministry today is both a symptom of the overall mainline decline and a harbinger of further decline to come. The statistics are sobering. In my own denomination of the United Church of Christ, only 6.3 percent of all UCC clergy are under the age of 40.⁴ The picture is as bleak in the Episcopal Church where 303 out of 7,721 clergy are under 35. As distressing as the raw numbers is the rate of decline. In the past 25 years, the relative number of young attorneys had changed little;

² This Scholarship is a three way partnership between FTE, the local church and the seminary of the grantee. Room, board and tuition are covered for one full year.

³ Often referred to these days as the oldline church, these are the long-standing protestant congregations including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, United Church of Christ and others.

⁴ 2003 Statistical handbook of the United Church of Christ.

23% were under 35. However, in roughly the same time period, the number of young Presbyterian ministers fell to just 7% of the denomination's total, a 71.4% drop.⁵

How I could make a difference?

The longer I have been in ministry, the more I have wondered about "passing on" parish ministry to the next generation. Would the church have an ample supply of pastors for the church's future needs? Where will these pastors come from? As I had been active in my local church as a youth (my father was a Congregational minister) I realized my experience there helped to shape and form my own call to ministry. This experience, coupled with common sense, told me that the local church has been and will continue to be the place that "plants the seed" for people to hear a call to ministry. Further, I realized God has placed me in a congregation that is particularly suited for identifying young men and women of talent and nurturing in them a desire to consider ministry as their vocation. Plymouth has much to offer. First, Plymouth has a capacity to raise scholarship funds. Second, the church has a strong children's and youth program. Third, Plymouth is located a stone's throw from the state university (KU). Plymouth has a very active campus ministry on the KU campus.

The Study Grant for Pastoral Leaders

My deepening enthusiasm for such an intentional effort to raise up more ministers of my congregation came just at the right time. Having been at Plymouth for six years, I was now eligible for a three-month sabbatical. In the meantime, I had come to learn that the Lilly-funded Louisville Institute was offering Sabbatical Grants for Pastoral Leaders.

I asked myself, "What if I spoke to seminary presidents, young pastors and other church leaders about how they understood this crisis facing the mainline church? And what if I convened 6 or 7 UCC pastors who shared my passion and invited them to each make a commitment to equip their congregations to become more effective at identifying and nurturing young people for the ministry?" Happily, I was awarded a \$12,000 grant from the Louisville Institute and was released from my duties at Plymouth Church for the three summer months of 2001.

The most satisfying outcome of this whole sabbatical experience was in meeting people throughout the country who themselves felt that the mainline church was headed "down the tubes" if we did not become more proactive about raising up future leadership. Thanks to the sabbatical grant, I was able to travel to Chicago and St. Louis and meet with seminary leaders. To my delight, I discovered that people were eager to talk. Most felt that the denomination (The UCC) had "missed the mark" by not making this issue a higher priority.

I also met young women like Jocelyn Emerson and Jamie Washam, both seminary graduates serving as resident pastors at Hyde Park Union Church on Chicago's Southside. Jocelyn recalled that she knew she was going to be a pastor since she was

⁵ Hillary Wicai, "Clergy by the Numbers" (Congregations, April-May 2001 issue), p. 6.

eight years old. As a teenager, she ran retreats and served on the diaconate at her church.

Jocelyn remembers how significant it was for her when her home church gave her the opportunity to preach. The experience of being in the pulpit moved her deeply. Jocelyn said, “My home church helped me to find the power of my own voice.”

My sabbatical grant also brought me into contact with people like Melissa Wiginton and Kevin Spears of the Lilly-funded Fund for Theological Education (F.T.E.). Through Melissa’s and Kevin’s efforts, FTE is encouraging local congregations to become more effective instruments at calling young people into ministry through offering fellowship grants.⁶ The high point of my sabbatical was the bringing together of seven United Church of Christ pastors⁷ for a two-day conference in Western Springs, IL.⁸ The fact that these pastors, some of whom I had never met, were willing to come from as far away as Colorado and Massachusetts confirmed my hunch: pastors are deeply concerned about “passing on” the tradition of ministry to the next generation. We had hoped to be able to meet on an annual basis to “check-in” on our efforts in our respective congregations. Thanks to the generosity of the Louisville Institute, our pastors’ working group re-convened for a two-day gathering at the Institute in the fall of 2002. There we met with leaders from the Fund For Theological Education, the Lilly Endowment, the Institute and a Seminary President all who shared their deep concern for the future leadership of the church. The pastors’ working group identified six strategies local churches could pursue that would equip congregations to be more effective in helping young people discern a call to the ministry. Following is a brief explanation of these strategies and the success or lack thereof I have had in implementing them in my own congregation.

Reclaiming the radical notion of call

The three years after my sabbatical has only re-confirmed what the pastors’ working group confirmed: our success in raising up future leaders for the church will depend, in part, upon our capability to articulate a radical idea of call—that is a call shaped by and surrendered to God. Parish ministers by virtue of their leadership position in a church have a unique opportunity to transform the congregation’s culture, to help the church see itself as a “calling body”.

Having a young person receive a “special call” to ordained ministry is more likely in a congregation that celebrates all persons by their baptisms as having a purpose, a

⁶ Thanks to the sabbatical project, I have become involved in the FTE’s work. Most recently, I have been asked to serve along with 7 other pastors on an advisory panel overseeing their congregation based recruitment program.

⁷ The attending pastors were: Verlee Copeland, Senior Pastor, First Congregational, Greeley, CO; Rev. Martin Copenhaver, Senior Pastor, Wellesley Congregational Church, Wellesley, MA; Lillian Daniel, Senior Pastor, Church of the Redeemer UCC, New Haven, CT; Richard Kirchherr, Senior Pastor, First Congregational, Western Springs, IL; Don Longbottom, Senior Pastor, Countryside UCC, Omaha, NE, Dale Rosenberg, First Congregational, Ridgefield, CT, Peter Luckey, Senior Pastor, Plymouth Congregational Church, Lawrence, KS.

⁸ We met on Sept 9-10, 2001. Several of my colleagues were delayed in getting home due to the terrorist attack of September 11th.

vocation for their lives. A senior high youth group in their ten day summer mission trip to West Virginia adopted as the trip's theme, "Finding your Vocation: What do I want my life to say?" After a day of painting and construction work for a poor family living in an Appalachian hollow, our youth minister, Lisa Wilkinson, age 21, asked the youth to meditate on the following words from Frederick Buechner.

Your vocation is the place the world's deep hunger and your deep gladness meet.

As with youth, so with any age, engagement is key. The Gallup organization, for instance, has conducted studies that bears out a strong correlation between a member's level of involvement in their church and their spiritual growth. Obviously, people become "engaged" in different ways. For some this happens through music, for others it is in the hearing of the sermon, still others look for ways to be engaged beyond Sunday morning. At Plymouth, small groups whether it be the Stephen Ministers, a bible study or a Men's lunch fellowship, or serving at the soup kitchen have all been the means through which our people hear a call to a life of radical grace and discipleship. A recent college graduate, twenty-three year old Mike Lee, discovered that his experience as a Stephen Minister helped solidify his conviction to attend seminary this fall.

Along with the opportunities for promoting a radical notion of call, I am also aware of the obstacles that lie in the way. At the top of my list is the pervasiveness of secular culture and its encroachment upon church life. Our church families may not look up to the ministry as a potential vocational choice for their sons and daughters the way previous generations might have. Parents worry about their children being financially secure. Parents tell me, "We are just not sure ministry is right for my daughter." Beyond the challenges of living in this secular materialistic culture, the greatest challenge to reviving a radical culture of call in the congregation is the pastor's own spirit. The longer I am in ministry (now 22 years) the more I realize how the demands of running a parish can wear down my own sense of this radical call.

Offering leadership opportunities for youth and young adults

The pastors I spoke with in their twenties, like Jocelyn and James, credit their home congregations with giving them significant leadership opportunities. Congregations nurture leadership potential by conferring upon them responsibility and leadership, particularly in worship, preaching, and pastoral care. At Plymouth we have two women seminarians, Regan Doyle and Jennifer Parson, both in their twenties and attending Eden and Chicago Theological Seminary respectively. I have given each of them opportunities to preach to our congregation. I am committed in general to offer as many opportunities as possible for young people to speak in front of the congregation. Our senior high youth, for instance, are always given a Sunday worship service to convey to the congregation what impact the summer mission trip had on their lives. Overall, we have been blessed with a supportive congregation when it comes to providing young people opportunities for leadership in our church.

Creating catalytic experiences

Local churches that have a propensity for raising up pastors create programs such as work tours, mission trips and retreats with and for youth, set the scene for epiphany experiences. This past year, for instance, I accompanied our youth on a work trip to El Paso, TX, and Juarez, Mexico. The goal of the trip was two-fold: to do hands-on painting of a home in a poor neighborhood of Juarez and to learn about the social issues of immigration, and the economic disparity between Mexico and the U.S. After seeing the poverty and desperation up close, several of the youth wrote in their journals about how the experience changed forever how they would view their own comfortable middle class lives.

In my experience with youth, these times of being away from their normal routines and being engaged with helping other people can be the optimal setting for a catalytic experience: a sudden epiphany where they feel gripped by God's call.

Michael Yaconelli in his book Dangerous Wonder tells of his daughter's experience while headed to South Africa on the Mercy Ship. Jill, his daughter, and a group of others were the first white people to live in a shantytown just outside of Durban. She describes her catalytic moment:

It was around midnight and my friend Carolyn and I were sitting on top of a jungle gym talking about how quickly our time in South Africa had gone. The moon was shining....the wind was blowing some Eucalyptus trees, and Carolyn and I were bundled up in sweatshirts and dirt covered skirts. "I've fallen in love," I told Carolyn. "I've fallen in love and I am never falling out." I will never forget that night, the trees, the wind, the smells. I had broken out of my eggshell, emerged from my cocoon, and I was ready to tell the world that I had fallen in love....He (God) just embraced me and said, "Thank you, thank you. I have loved you all along, Jill. All this time I loved you first". What an amazing love.⁹

These are the experiences in a young person's life where the ground is fertile, the propitious moment to plant the seed.

Planting the Seed: "You seem to have the gifts for ministry!"

A young person can discover God while in a moonlit night in South Africa or while painting a house in poor barrio in Juarez, Mexico. Yet, that youth needs "God with skin on," the human voice of the trusted older person to validate what he feels. This is the moment when the minister's or other leader's words, "you seem to have the gifts for ministry" might become the seed that could take root in the young person's imagination.

⁹ Michael Yaconelli, Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998) p. 104.

Many in ministry today have said that ministry as a life choice had never occurred to them until someone had spoken to them directly about it. That someone had often been a pastor themselves.

This conversation cannot happen unless pastors intentionally make the time to be involved in the young person's life. Every summer since receiving the grant I have accompanied our youth on their summer trip. While driving across country in a van or simply in a reflection time, I look for the right moment to slide into the conversation: "What do you suppose God is calling you to do with your life?" The seed, once planted, must be cultivated. This strategy of "planting the seed" is not a quick fix gimmick. Over time I am finding that as a leader of a congregation I can encourage our lay leaders and all who work with youth to become more comfortable with popping the big question to our youth.

The Mentoring Community: Shaping the Call

One can hardly think of a calling without thinking of the significant role played by others in helping to shape the call. A calling presumes there is first a "Caller" who is God, as well as people who aid in shaping the call over time. During my sabbatical, all the pastors in their 20s spoke of the crucial role played by mentors in leading them into the ministry. In her work with young adults, Sharon Parks found:

How frequently it is the case that when people in later life reflect on how religious communities have been part of their formation, they identify someone, lay or ordained, who singled them out in their young adult years and conferred a deepened sense of trust in their own potential.¹⁰

Currently at Plymouth, we have two young adults in seminary now and one planning on attending in the fall of 2004. For the two away at seminary, I stay in touch through email, phone calls, and when they are in town, get caught up over a cup of coffee. In the coming months, I will visit them at their seminaries. The lay leaders at Plymouth take great delight in cultivating a relationship with our seminarians by sending notes, emails and care packages.

As is always the case when it comes to giving in the local church: where the heart leads, money follows. That Plymouth has raised over \$15,000 in scholarship funds over the past three years is an indication of the level of connection the church feels to *their* seminarians. As rewarding as our accomplishments have been, I am convinced we could do an even better job of offering mentoring opportunities and support. I would like to create an ongoing committee of lay people whose task it would be to offer ongoing guidance, support and care.¹¹ Second, I would like to create a permanently endowed fund which would not only provide scholarship assistance but would also provide for

¹⁰ Sharon Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) p. 204

¹¹ This function is done now currently by the Board of Deacons who have responsibility for the spiritual life of the church.

summer internships for seminarians to do the work of ministry during the summer months.

Celebrating a healthy and positive regard for the pastoral ministry

Through my research I have discovered that seed congregations (congregations that have a high number of persons going on to seminary) uniformly exude a high regard for pastoral ministry. These congregations respect and admire their pastors. The culture of respect for the ordained leadership is no accident. It is nurtured by ministers who communicate to their congregations their deep satisfaction and joy in what they do. Rev. Robert G. Kemper, former Senior Pastor at First Congregational, Western Springs, IL, would often say ministry was the most fulfilling thing he could be doing.¹²

The longer I am serving in the local church, the more I come to find my own positive attitude a goal to shoot for instead of an everyday given. The great challenge in parish work—and what I want to communicate to my three seminarians—is how important it is to hold onto the moments of joy and deep meaning while at the same time being realistic about the internal fortitude that being a pastoral leader requires. Being a pastor of a local church requires being a spiritual leader, guide and manager all in one. The roles inevitably conflict. As with all leadership positions, one of the most important requirements in being a pastor is emotional intelligence. I have learned—through some recent conflict in our own congregation—that pastors and congregations alike communicate louder by their actions than their words. My hope and prayer is not that our young people should be shielded from the harder aspects of parish life, but that they would come to see adversity and conflict in the local church not as a source of disillusionment but as a challenge to trust even more in the God who forgives, heals, loves and raises us all from death to new life.

Closing Thoughts: What ultimately Matters

Pastors, lay leaders, denominational officials and seminary presidents—all who are involved in or concerned about the future of the mainline church—know this is a critical time in the life of the church. Denominational headquarters, seminaries and local churches are all stretched financially. The mainline church seems less “relevant” in an increasingly secular and religiously diverse American society. There is a tendency, therefore, to view the whole challenge of reviving a culture of call in our churches through the lens of an institutional crisis. We might be prone to shout, “Here is a problem. Quick! Find young people and talk them into becoming pastors!”

As church leaders, we need to remember young people don’t want to be pawns in solving someone else’s problem. Gen X’ers and the generation behind them are not going to be primarily motivated to save the institutional church.

What is on their radar screen is a search for authentic spirituality, for making a difference in the world, and for discerning how God could be calling forth their gifts. At

¹² Conversation with Rich Kirchherr, July 17, 2001

the same time, they are pragmatic. They are concerned about potential seminary debt and the low salaries of ministers compared to other careers. They are worried about having enough income to have a family, to help pay for their children's college education and to have some left over for their own retirement.

I believe that if ministry is pitched as just another option between other career options such as being a doctor or a lawyer, ministry will not stand a chance. The sacrifice—financial and otherwise—is simply too high.

It needs to be said that the rewards that come with being in ministry are not so much less as other professions, they are just different. Being involved in people's lives, bringing a message of grace to a hurting world is deeply satisfying work, but the rewards do not show up in the paycheck.

What will speak to young people, indeed to people of all ages, are congregations which exude, through their worship, singing, prayer life, small group life, a richly textured immersion into the Biblical narrative. By this I do not mean necessarily a church that takes the bible literally. I do mean a church which believes and lives a confidence that the story of God's saving grace through Christ is a real and present reality.

In this day and age, to be a pastor is a peculiar profession. More and more, to be a churchgoer is a peculiar way to live. Being asked to say "yes" to the peculiar is not out of the question provided that the peculiar is the real thing.

A Generative Spirit

At my middle age of 51, I find my own spirit rejuvenated when I am around my three seminarians: Regan, Jennifer and Mike. To spend time with them, to listen as they share their intellectual challenges and the emotional rollercoaster that is seminary life is to be brought back in touch with my own heady days as a seminary student.

A Pastor is a teacher and like all teachers we delight in our students. We want to be there to support them, to share in their highs, and to commiserate with them in their lows. What comes most deeply to me is the joy and delight in witnessing how God's gifts blossom and flourish in the life of another human being.

However dim and quiet, I believe there is a "voice" in each and everyone of us who calls us to a life beyond ourselves. There is no call without first a "Caller" who is God. My passion, beyond solving an institutional crisis, is to help the Regans of the world hear that voice, to trust in their own call.