Four Intersections:
Family, Friends, Faith, and Culture

by

Robert W. Henderson
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

The Situation

Standing in the Areopagus, the Apostle Paul engaged in a little bantam-weight boxing with popular philosophy, quoting the slogan, “‘In God we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:28). He was on one of his missionary journeys, doing what missionaries do: meeting the people where they are, sharing core convictions of the gospel, inviting others into a life of Christian discipleship. Yet hidden in this seemingly mundane account is a fascinating – and, for me, life-changing – example of the relationship between gospel and culture. In Paul’s effort to communicate the gospel, he employed his intimate familiarity with the culture, in this case probably a saying of Epimenides, toward gospel ends. Specifically, he used the poet’s claim to point to Jesus Christ -- without apology and with remarkable success.

This apostolic practice – evident throughout the New Testament – has long raised many questions about ministry in the 21st century. What is the relationship between faith and culture, tradition and trend, theology and current custom? How might I use the tools of contemporary culture – its messaging, media, and mechanisms – toward gospel ends? What criteria should I use to evaluate the
integrity of such decisions? After nearly 20 years of working in the church – 16 of them in an ordained capacity – it seemed that some critical thinking about these matters was in order.

Meanwhile, a parallel issue was developing. After years of weekend work, advanced degrees, marriage, and child-rearing, many of the important relationships in my life had slowly drifted into distant memory. Missed along the way were all high school and college reunions, friends’ weddings, weekend camping trips, three-day holiday weekends, all promoting the kind of isolation often associated with the life of ministry. This development was subtle but sinister, masked as it was by an exorbitant number of congregational relationships. Nonetheless, over the course of years, the gift of relaxed friendship became more distant memory than current practice.

The Proposal

When I read the criteria for the Lilly Clergy Renewal Grant, I found it difficult to believe: *What would make my heart sing? Approval will be based on an alternating rhythm of rest and renewal? Time to reflect, rest, and be with family and loved ones is a key component of this endeavor?* It sounded like a dream come true. And in many ways it was. I made a fairly simple proposal: I wanted to explore the intersection of faith and culture while renewing relationships with friends and family. Specifically, I proposed taking our family to visit dear college friends serving as missionaries in Kenya, then to Egypt to visit graduate school friends serving there as missionaries, and then to Jerusalem to study at Tantur Ecumenical Institute while our children attended a Palestinian Christian camp in neighboring Bethlehem. It seemed the perfect combination, and my family and I were elated when it was approved.

The Endeavor

Within our first five minutes on African soil, my assumptions were challenged. Nairobi, a thriving international city, seemed to have a church on every corner and a steeple in every sight-line. My missionary friends, George and Martha, were “church-planters,” but how could they plant churches when Kenya already made the American South look secular? I should have known then that many of my assumptions about Christian belief and practice would be teased apart during our sabbatic journey.

Our friends were magnificent hosts and carted us across the Kenyan landscape to share their life and ministry. We started in Masai land, a vast tribal grassland that was primitive in every way. Natives donned tribal dress of bright reds and subtle yellows. Single room, low ceilinged huts – arranged in groups of six or
eight – dotted the landscape, usually sheltering the extended family of a polygamous patriarch. Ancient cultic rites involving blood sacrifice, dance, fire, and sex – including prostitution – were prevalent. Most men spent their days herding animals out on the “Mara,” while women raised children and did the hard work required to sustain village life.

We stayed in a small – and very simple – mission station. Our hosts introduced us to members of the community, joined us for chai in one of the huts, and included us in the great celebration surrounding the slaughter of a rogue elephant, even allowing our younger daughter to stand atop its massive dead body. It was quite an experience.

I had been invited to preach in the local church the next morning, an experience I approached with some trepidation. We awoke that morning to the sound of more elephants in our back yard (standing, most unfortunately, between our hut and the outhouse!) and got ourselves prepared for worship. As we strolled over to the small sanctuary, we could see people across the wide expanse of grassland approaching on foot, walking many miles with children in tow and meals on their backs. It was a humbling sight: native Masai making the lengthy pilgrimage to worship a god recently introduced by western missionaries. I was concerned that the service would feel imported, and quietly hoped we would not be singing Eurocentric hymns or offering western-style prayers out on Masai tribal lands.

A young man opened the service with a welcome, a prayer, and a few community announcements, most of which revolved around A.I.D.S treatment and prevention. Then came numerous songs of praise, a time of confession, the sermon, and more songs to express commitment to faithful discipleship. The order of the service followed closely traditional Christian worship practices from the West.

However, customs important to the Masai people also shaped the service. The local tribal chieftain had not converted to Christian faith, but many of his family members had. In honor of the chieftain, one of his sons “presided” over the service. The songs in the service were “baptized” tribal songs, with tribal tunes, rhythms, and instrumentation, but explicitly Christian content. Most songs evoked spontaneous dance and high-pitched “warrior” calls unique to tribes, including the Masai, affiliated with the larger Dinka population of that region. The intersection of faith and culture was on full display, as local expression served as a vessel to affirm an ancient faith.

More delicate – and perhaps important – than matters of worship was the relationship of Christian faith to the cultural practice of polygamy. Did conversion to Christian faith require monogamy? If so, was that monogamy to be imposed retroactively? Would Christian conversion jeopardize marriage? The
consequences for men would be minimal, but for women they would be catastrophic. How do Christian conviction and social custom intersect on a matter like monogamy?

This particular village struck a seemingly reasonable compromise, though one with little biblical precedent. Its leaders and missionaries agreed that new converts already in polygamous marriages would remain in those marriages. However, as part of their Christian discipleship they would commit to taking on no additional spouses. If the convert were single or monogamous at the time of conversion, then s/he would commit to a monogamous future. This agreement struck a surprising accommodation of Christian conviction to the realities of cultural custom, hinging on compassion for the lives of those involved.

Needless to say, these experiences led to penetrating conversations with our missionary friends, delicate conversations with our children, and deepened appreciation for the complex relationship between faith and culture. It also reminded me why these friends were so dear: I admired their Christian commitment, their intellectual fortitude in complex matters of faith, their integrity in mission, and their clear love for the people they served.

It had been a long time since we had spent any time with these friends, and this was the perfect circumstance for the renewal of our bonds. Both families had long ago committed to ministry and mission. Both families had children the other family had not met. Both families had endured losses, faced traumas, and celebrated milestones since last sharing any time together. Though we were in the rather unfamiliar land of Africa, our reunion felt more like a homecoming, as it seemed only appropriate for our entire family to share the joy of knowing people we so treasured in the context of the ministry to which they had dedicated their adult lives.

Glimpses from our time together remain indelible memories: my children’s delighted laughter as they heard their father’s college stories (something the demands of ministry had previously prevented); the safety of old friends, where regrets could be shared without judgment and failures confessed without fear; the power of spending time in prayer for one another, a deeply personal activity that had been largely relegated to a professional role. We all found deep joy in spending unhurried time with these loved ones, laughing until it hurt and sharing our pain until it felt good.

Grateful for our time in Kenya, we next moved up and across the African continent to Egypt, where we were greeted by denominational missionaries and good friends, Dusty and Sherri. Dusty is a professor of New Testament at an Egyptian seminary that trains Arab Christian pastors from across the Middle East.
The cultural landscape of Egypt and the church’s role in it differ vastly from Kenya’s but provided equally worthwhile insights.

The Christian population finds itself in the rather odd circumstance of being ancient, indigenous, and systematically oppressed. In recent years, Egypt’s majority Muslim population has drifted toward a more conservative expression, both politically and religiously, with considerable implications for the Christian population. Businesses are closed on Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, forcing Christians to choose a new Sabbath day or to sacrifice the majority of employment opportunities, including most government posts. Any effort to proselytize Muslims has been outlawed and is treated as a serious crime. Orthodox (ancient) Christian churches continue to enjoy substantial freedom of expression, but Evangelical (Protestant) congregations endure regular, if subtle, persecution.

This cultural context has exerted considerable influence on the expression of Christian faith in Egypt. Christians freely worship, baptize, train, and teach their own, but points of intersection with the larger – primarily Muslim – culture are more restricted.

Christians and Muslims we encountered have built close relationships on a foundation of mutual respect, even as matters of right belief and conversion have been relegated to secondary status. The ability to affirm particular Christian convictions without assuming a proselytizing posture toward Muslims has become a matter of survival.

For some, this re-calibration of Christian mission would be an unfaithful compromise, a short-selling of the gospel’s demands. Yet I saw it – as did some portions of the Egyptian Christian population – as an essential refinement, a faithful customization of a tradition whose adaptability has long been one of its leading strengths. The crucible for this refinement has included (mostly passive) persecution, diminishment, and the disestablishment of a historic faith, a crucible in which the Western church finds itself with greater frequency. These adaptive strategies in Egypt suggest valuable models for the mainline church in America, and offered me implicit permission to begin experimenting with them upon my return.

The friendship factor of our endeavor once again produced sweet fruit. We enjoyed all the recreational and relational dimensions of our time with the Ellington’s, but our deeper understanding of their ministry brought lasting participation in their work. The congregation I was serving at the time hired one of the seminary’s Iraqi students; Dusty has since preached at our church; congregants have visited them on site; and we have kept in close touch with these much-loved friends through the inevitable trials of their mission work.
Even now, four years later, we correspond regularly and have a spiritual stake in each others’ lives.

The final segment of our overseas adventure included a residency at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, a Roman Catholic study center on the present border of Palestine and Israel, just outside Bethlehem. This was supposed to be a time of reading, relaxation, and writing. Instead, it was relationally intense and busy, mostly because our eyes were opened to the plight of the Palestinians.

Tantur is adjacent to the wall Israel was constructing at the time, a wall which blocked off whole sections of Palestine – including Bethlehem – from the rest of the world. Every day I took our children around the Israeli military checkpoint, through the partially constructed wall, to our Palestinian cab driver, Samer. For three weeks, our daily route took us to the other side of Bethlehem, past the bombed-out police headquarters (courtesy of an American-supplied F-16), the bullet-riddled hotels, churches, and businesses, to the Bright Stars Christian Camp, a ministry of the International Bethlehem Center. This ritual, and its resulting friendships, caused a figure-ground reversal in our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We spent many days listening to horrific stories of land confiscation, personal degradation, and bombings and were even close eye-witnesses to two Israeli military raids inside Palestine. Needless to say, these accounts and experiences have dramatically influenced our lives and ministries.

Capturing on paper all we learned in these few weeks is beyond the scope of this endeavor, but one consistent thread deserves mention. When asked what could be done about their situation, what an appropriate response might be, every Palestinian we met asked us to tell their story. “Tell the world about our situation,” said the Dean of Bethlehem Bible College. “Help people understand what’s happening here,” said a student at Bethlehem University. “Be our friends and tell our story,” said a local pastor and school principal. Grocer and chef, janitor and Archbishop, every Palestinian we met encouraged us to embrace the power of story-telling to inform and inspire. It reminded me of something Jesus knew: stories have a way of opening us to truth we might not otherwise hear. They sneak into our hearts and minds and turn us inside out. They contain a subtle power not reliant on the might of the empire. We promised our new friends we would tell their story and tell it well, trusting that the innate power of their story would help people understand.

Observations from the Perspective of Time

First, I am deeply grateful to the Lilly Endowment for initiating such an endeavor. The grant’s combination of vision and generosity has wrought tremendous results and serves as an inspiring example of faithful stewardship. Even four
years later, our family marvels at the life-changing experience this was for all of us.

My most personal observation from this experience has to do with the life-giving nature of friendship. I am still surprised by the deleterious effect ministry can have on personal friendship. Certainly it is due, in part, to the ministerial role, but it is also a simple matter of time. Friendship cannot be done in a hurry; relationships are not nurtured on a schedule; and the kind of life-giving relationships needed to stay healthy in ministry are often the first ones pressed out by ministry’s demands.

Since our return, I have purposely cultivated friendships, both inside – and especially outside – the context of my ministry. These friendships remind me of my value outside my professional role. They anchor my perspective in a world beyond my congregation and counterbalance the constant beckoning of work and family. Time with personal friends functions almost as a mini-sabbatical, reframing my perspective and re-calibrating my values.

In addition to re-shaping the terrain of my personal life, the sabbatical brought important rubrics for decision-making in mission and ministry. In all three contexts, ministries were carefully customized in relationship to the particular culture. This customization embraced the surprising adaptability of Christian faith and served to make the ministry more effective. There was no “dumbing down,” no easy accommodation, no equivocating about the sacrificial nature of Christian discipleship. When compromises were struck (e.g., polygamy), they were done on the basis of compassion. When limits were set (e.g., no proselytizing), other facets of the faith were emphasized (e.g., humility). When specific acts of compassion were impossible, the life-giving powers of story and relationship stood in their stead.

These adaptive models challenge the mainline church’s sometimes monolithic understanding of ministry, and hold tremendous promise for our future. They call us to embrace the dynamic nature of faith’s expression and trust the integrity of those on the vanguard of this customizing work. They invite us to rely on God’s faithful presence to shape a compelling message that can meet today’s realities. They compel us to reexamine our often false associations of faithfulness with tradition, integrity with orthodoxy, and instead marvel at God’s ability to express the Good News in new ways.

One other powerful lesson about ministry emerged not overseas but from our home congregation. From the initial proposal of a sabbatical, our family and our congregation saw this journey as a partnership in which we would learn and grow together. Therefore, my wife (Suzanne) and I wrote regular reflection pieces and posted them on a blog, a medium rarely used at that time. We were shocked by
our readership. People of all ages were hungry to know what we were learning, to hear our reflections, and to understand our experiences. Those back home without computer access created a daily delivery system (akin to a newspaper) in which the church staff would print hard copies and a designated deliverer would distribute them to “subscribers.” If we missed posting for a day or two, people began to worry and even complain a bit!

This interest continued upon our return. Large groups attended classes in which we shared our observations. Significant ministries to Kenya and Egypt emerged, all with little debate and much enthusiasm. Even participation in denominationally-based mission endeavors bucked their long-term downward trend and discovered new life and energy.

The most surprising dimension of all this enthusiasm and interest was its source. Suzanne and I had no intention of “doing more” about all we saw on sabbatical. We didn’t intend to start new ministries and make ourselves busy with more work as a result of our time off. Instead, these new ministries seemed to be a natural outgrowth of our growth as people and as Christians. As we grew in our understanding of God’s activity in the world, so did the congregation. As we participated in exciting new venues of ministry, so did the congregation. As we expanded our hearts, minds, and lives, so did the congregation.

This experience has drawn me to a defining conclusion about ministry. Congregations certainly want and need pastors who work hard, attend meetings, and perform the traditional pastoral functions such as visiting hospitals, writing sermons, and leading staffs. But more importantly, congregations want and need pastors who are growing and alive, expanding their understanding of God’s activity in this world and their participation in it. In ministry, the tyranny of the urgent often claims the space required for this growth, but it’s a fool’s bargain. I “accomplished” more on sabbatical by taking time to grow, love, rest, pray, and come to life than I ever would have by attending to the tasks of ministry that surely would have crowded my schedule that summer. The good news of the gospel is first and foremost about a God who brings life, and the best learning to come out of my sabbatical is that I am more effective in ministry when I embrace that life for myself and model for others what it means to be alive in Christ.