

Poet in residence: Listening for the sacred subtext

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

When Bob and Carol Stratton arrived at my study for their appointment, all of the air in the room immediately disappeared. It was clear that this was going to be a hard hour. Before he even sat down, Bob began his now-familiar litany of complaints about the choir director, and Carol was already fishing around in her purse for a Kleenex. (*Why are you already crying? What does that mean?*)

“I just don’t understand why you keep that woman here,” Bob said as he finally settled back into his chair. “She has absolutely no regard for the wonderful heritage of worship in this church, and she insists on driving people away. I’ve heard from members of your choir, and they’re so unhappy that I’d be surprised if there even is a choir in another month. You’ve got to do something, and do it now.”

I was already rubbing my temples as I asked, “What do you want me to do, Bob?”

“Well, I think we all know what needs to be done. What we don’t know is if our pastor is a strong enough leader to do it.”

“Ah, yes, I understand, but I don’t think your concerns are really about me,” I responded. (*I’m not biting on that.*) “Let’s get back to the issue that brought you here. What exactly is it about our music that has you so upset?”

After blowing her nose, Carol joined in. “She never uses the anthems our previous director of music, Dr. Adams, wrote. You know he was here for over 25 years, and in those days our church was highly regarded in this community. People came just to hear him play the organ. (*Is that true? Should it be?*) Now it’s an embarrassment when that woman gets up there and starts waving her arms in front of the choir.”

“So you don’t like the way she conducts the choir?” I asked. “No, it isn’t just that,” Bob said quickly. “She plays the organ too loudly, she’s thrown out all of the music Dr. Adams wrote, and it seems to us that she’s just up there performing. Frankly, the music just isn’t as good as it should be. You know, pastor, we’re a sophisticated

congregation (*That can't be good*), and we're not going to be able to worship with all of this noise she produces."

I sat forward in my chair and as quietly as possible said, "I've noticed that both of you mentioned Ted Adams. He was clearly a great musician, and I know he was also a very close friend of yours. You must miss him a great deal."

They both looked down at the floor, silent, for a very long time.

Every pastor knows this kind of conversation all too well. Seldom do people make an appointment just to tell us that they're overwhelmed with gratitude. If there isn't a problem in their personal life, then it's usually a problem they have with the church that has brought them to the pastor's study. It has taken me too long to figure this out, but most of the time, even when they're talking about a complaint with the church, the true issue is closer to home.

Complaining is usually a veiled lament about deeper issues of the soul. Since people are unaccustomed to exploring the mystery of their own souls, they will often work out their spiritual anxieties by attempting to rearrange something external, like a church's music program. But it doesn't matter how many changes they make to the environment around them. They will never succeed in finding peace for the angst of the soul until they attend directly to it. This is why people have pastors.

To be of service to the Holy Spirit, who is at work in human lives, the pastor can never reduce ministry to servicing parishioners' complaints about the church. In my conversation with the Strattons, that would have resulted in my trying to prove that I was a strong leader by firing the staff member upon whom they had transferred their anger over the loss of a friend. Even if I had been insecure in my identity and allowed them to tell me what I had to do to be a leader, it would have done nothing to contribute to the Strattons' need to grieve the loss of their friend who had left them. That would have resulted only in furthering both their and my illusions of control, and nothing remotely redemptive would have come of it.

I am often unsure that redemption occurs in parishioners' lives even when I do direct them to the true issue. I would have loved to hear Bob or Carol say to me, "I just can't believe Ted Adams left us." But that was more truth than they were prepared to confess at the time. What was clear to me, though, was that unless I invited them to look beneath their complaint to their personal loss, I would only be part of the distraction that was keeping them from ever finding healing for their hurt.

The only way a pastor can function with the integrity necessary to do this deeper work well is to remain clear about his or her identity in the church. The Bible is filled with enduring, healthy images of pastoral ministry. Some of us are attracted to the image of the shepherd who has sacrificed alternative plans for life and is now willing to lay life down for the sake of the sheep. Others are drawn to the notion of the pastor as priest who stands between God and the people. Still others are attracted to the New Testament notion of the pastor being the witness of the redemptive activity of the ascended and reigning Christ. Some pastors prefer to think of themselves as fulfilling Christ's call to be prophet, priest and king, but only to the degree that they themselves live in Christ, who alone fulfills his holy offices. And of course, the calling to be ministers of word and sacrament can center any pastor. All of these depictions of pastoral identity are more helpful than anything that either congregations or pastors are going to develop without the aid of biblical insights.

I want to suggest still another image: that of the poet. I present this not as the normative or even preferred image, but simply as another biblical description of the calling of those who have been blessed with a vision that allows them to explore and express the truth behind the reality. Poets see the despair and heartache as well as the beauty and miracle that lie just beneath the thin veneer of the ordinary, and they describe this in ways that are recognized not only in the mind, but more profoundly in the soul.

In a day in which people are so profoundly confused about fundamental identity issues and are desperately trying to construct life as best they can, it is critically necessary for pastors to recover this poetic dimension of their ministries. What the congregation needs is not a strategist to help them form another plan for achieving a desired image of life, but a poet who looks beneath the desperation to recover the mystery of what it means to be made in God's image.

I believe that all who are called by the Holy Spirit to serve the church as pastors have this poetic vision. It's a necessary ingredient in the mix God uses in creating pastors. Some have cultivated the gift more than others, but all pastors have it, and it's actually impossible to be a pastor without being a poet devoted to making sense of the work of God in human lives. This does not mean that the pastor should end a meeting of the board of trustees by whipping out a few lyrical lines that try to make eternal sense of the budget. Nor does it mean that the pastor torments the congregation with sermons that rhyme. It certainly doesn't mean that pastoral ministry is best understood as a subset of that larger discipline of the humanities

called poetry.

My interest in the term *poet* is analogical. Substantive explanations of the ecclesiastical office of the minister are best found in the biblical and theological traditions of the church. There is no shortage of thoughtful, systematic theologies that depict who pastors are called to be and what they are called to do by God. Every denominational tradition develops these. Typically, the early leaders of the various traditions provide the foundational explanations of pastoral ministry. Contemporary theologians then interpret the implications of their theological tradition for the new context in which ministry occurs today. I'm not challenging any of that. Theology is first-order reflection, and it is necessary for every pastor to go to school, literally, on this substantive theology. But to gain a fresh perspective on the nature of the person and work of those who sit in the ecclesiastical office or study, it is helpful to come at the biblical tradition slant, which is the nature of poets.

This is second-order thinking about the pastor, but that does not make it less critical. When an exhausted pastor is entertaining serious thoughts about applying to law school, it's usually not because the theology failed. Often it's because somewhere along the way it became impossible to make sense of that theology in the midst of the ordinary and relentless messiness of congregational life.

When I left seminary, I expected that my new parishioners would be sitting in the pews with their souls in torment over the existential issues of life, but they were actually sitting there wondering why their teenagers wouldn't talk to them, if it was time to freshen up their résumés, or if they could afford a new boat this year. I thought my committee meetings would be communities of brothers and sisters in Christ who wanted only to lead a mission-oriented church, but more often I encountered bureaucratically oriented volunteers who were in a lather over small things. Like every new pastor, I soon hit upon the dismaying discovery that this congregation wasn't just dying to hear what Karl Barth had to say to them. That didn't mean Barth was irrelevant. It meant that his first-order writing had to be not simply translated but carried to a realm beneath the presenting issues.

That is how I learned to think poetically about my work and myself. It allowed me to dig beneath all of the talk about budgets, personnel, the recruiting of Sunday school teachers and who was mad at whom, as well as the more personal concerns about relationships and work, in order to enter the deeper realm where theology makes sense. Only then could I speak to the soul of the congregation about the real choices

that make an eternity of difference. To my delight, I discovered that most people eventually become eager to listen with their souls, even if it takes some practice before they are accustomed to it. Like the appreciation of any art, the appreciation of poetry has to be learned. But that's hardly surprising in a society that has been inculcated with the mythology that anyone's existential crisis really can be resolved with a new boat.

Poets are devoted more to truth than to reality; they are not unaware of reality, but they never accept it at face value. The value of reality is found only by peeling back its appearance to discover the underlying truth. This is why poets care about the text, what is said or done, but only in order to reveal subtext, which reveals what it means. They value the reality they see primarily as a portal that invites them into a more mysterious encounter with truth. This is what distinguishes poets from those whose contributions to society are focused simply on following a particular text. Engineers, for example, follow their textbooks in constructing bridges that lead across deep ravines. And one hopes that they have been very, very devoted to those texts. By contrast, a poet who crosses the engineer's bridge will go home and spend all day constructing verse that reveals the longing of the soul to find such an overpass when we stand on the banks of a disaster and peer down into the valley of death.

The last thing anyone sitting in a church pew needs is for the preacher to give advice on following the necessary algorithms for engineering better bridges. Or lessons in economics, politics or how to raise children. This doesn't mean that any of these topics are out of bounds for the pastor-poet. But to be faithful to our particular calling, we need to get beneath the reality of what is being said and done to explore the often mysterious truth of what this means. In making interpretations of this mystery, the pastor is not a free agent but a faithful devotee to his or her biblical and theological tradition of interpretation. This tradition is filled with poetic insights that guide the contemporary pastor into a particular way of uncovering reality to expose eternal truth. Both the realist and the truth teller are necessary, but they are seldom found in the same office of leadership.

For example, the effort to enact the civil rights legislation of the 1960s was led largely by President Lyndon Johnson, who often battled a hesitant Congress to secure the passage of more just laws. He was a political realist, and he did what it took to get the votes he needed. Whatever one may think of President Johnson or the other policies of his administration, clearly history has already awarded him with

the tribute of being a leader through this significant legislation. But it fell to someone else, a poet, to inspire the nation to accept the dream of a color-blind society. Without the dream, the legislation would never have passed. Martin Luther King Jr. led the country into that dream only by taking us into a painful discovery of the injustice that lurked in the corners of our hearts.

Pastors are not the only ones working on the kingdom of God. But they don't help by abandoning their specific call to be poets and taking on the work of the realists and the engineers. Someone has to teach people how to dream.

This is new language to describe the art of pastoral ministry, but it's not a new concept. It's as old as the Old Testament. The biblical poets have expressed the fundamental struggle of all human life, which is alienation from God and the desperate need for redemption. This tradition of speaking poetically is carried into the New Testament as well. The apostle Paul, not typically thought of as a poet, provides the most hopeful stanzas of the gospel sonnet in presenting Christ as the restoration of our alienated communion with God: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (Eph. 1:7-8). None of these biblical authors accept the realists' explanations that life would be better if only we had a tower that reached to heaven, kings like the other nations, wealth, fewer laws, and a religion that didn't call for so much sacrifice. All of them dig beneath our addiction to the things that keep us from receiving "the riches of his grace."

The church's historic theological poets have drawn from this fundamental biblical drama by providing confessional insights about our lives with and without God. None have done it better than St. Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." There is a reason this is Augustine's most famous sentence: there has never been a generation for which it is not descriptive of the human heart. This, then, is the function of first-order theological thinking that interprets and expounds upon the meaning of the biblical poetry. The best theologians have done this with a focus more on the eternal truth than on the symptomatic realities that express this truth. So they do not explain how we find success in the workplace, but explore the restless heart that cannot find its peace.

In contrast to the biblical and theological poets, the pastoral poet has the unique calling of making sense of their words in light of the dust and grit of daily life in a parish. And unlike those whom society has traditionally revered as poets, whose

vision of the deeper reality is nurtured through quiet sanctuary, if not isolation, the pastor-poet lives with a crowded and noisy soul. Central to what it means to be ordained is to open the doors of one's soul to the complexities, pathos, longings and even sins of those the pastor has vowed to serve.

At the same time, the pastor is even more attentive to the unapparent presence of God among the people of the congregation. One of the reasons that people need pastors is precisely that God is always present but usually not apparent. It takes a poet to find that presence beneath the layers of strategy for coping with the feeling of its absence. Thus, the parish minister's soul becomes a crucible in which sacred visions are ground together with the common and at times profane experiences of human life. Out of this sacred mix, pastors find their deep poetry, not only for the pulpit but also for making eternal sense out of the ordinary routines of the congregation.

Pastors' days are filled with committee meetings that never end and accomplish little; confirmation classes with kids who can't be cool unless they look bored; races across town to make a hospital call, only to discover that the patient was just discharged (*You're not getting credit for this one*); counseling sessions with people who don't like their jobs but can't afford to quit them because they need them to afford lifestyles they don't really like either; funerals where they fight back their tears long enough to lead worship; weddings where they fight back aggressive photographers; conflicts with people who just won't leave the church; and the relentless return of Sundays that demand another profound sermon. And through it all, the attentive pastor is constantly spinning the poetry, helping the congregation to see the sacred subtext of their lives.

As poets, pastors are always looking for a portal that invites passage into a deeper, more mysterious—and thus true—understanding of what is seen. They do this not only in their study of sacred texts but also in their study of the common events of the culture in which we live and in their pastoral conversations, always looking for the mystery that lies just below the surface: What does it really mean to be “running late”? Is “orderly” an ironic title for someone who pushes you around? The Strattons couldn't possibly be that angry about music. The parenthetical observations of the poet provide the narrow gate into the truth of our lives.

This means that the pastor-poet does his or her best work not with presenting issues, which are seldom the real issue. This is the fallacy of those who try to define

the pastor as a manager, an entrepreneur, or a service provider who is only in need of more skills to be a success in handling the many issues that have presented themselves. Most presenting issues are merely symptomatic of underlying theological issues. Even those who treat the pastor as a spiritual leader often reduce his or her work to treating symptoms. Seldom does a day go by without another advertisement appearing in my mail that offers a new product “guaranteed” to make our congregation better at giving, Bible study and prayer. But if people are not praying, it’s the pastor-poet’s job to discern why they are hesitant to enter God’s presence. And if they are praying, then the question is: Do they really understand what is happening in such sacred communion?

For example, a woman who recently stopped at the door following worship to shake my hand asked me to pray for her in the coming week. “They’re deciding if I’m going to make partner in the law firm,” she explained. “I’ve worked really hard for this, so please pray that I get it.” My real job at this point is to know that this promotion means too much to her, that she is never going to be satisfied even if she does make partner, that the real source of her identity is her life in Christ, and that if she only prayed to see the sufficiency of this, then she could approach this vote about her status at work with much less anxiety. It is even possible that not making partner will be better for her restless heart than getting what she so desperately wants.

But I didn’t say any of this. The line is long at the door following worship, and there’s no time for such counsel. So I say again, “Sure, I’ll be praying for you.” If I were faithful to my calling, though, the next day I would set up an appointment to have a conversation with her about what is really going on within her.

The same thing is true about the legion of church conflicts that are a part of every pastor’s life. No amount of good conflict-management skill is going to make us faithful to our real calling. The father of a 17-year-old daughter who comes to see me to say he’s furious with the youth director for taking the teenagers to the Dominican Republic because “it just isn’t safe” is not going to be satisfied even if the trip is moved to Shangri-la. That’s because his real worry is that he’s about to lose his baby, who’s growing up and will soon leave home and his watchful control over her. It doesn’t matter if the youth group meets in his basement every week; she’s still going to leave him. It’s a necessary loss, part of the created order, and I at least need to know that.

Similarly, when the church board becomes anxious about the budget that's in the red, the pastor cannot react anxiously by taking on the role of a fund-raiser who fixes the problem. What is called for are the strange poetic statements to the congregation that it needs to give its money not because the church has needs, but because we need to be givers. "Fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?" (Luke 12:20, KJV).

What if, instead of working so hard at omnicompetence, pastors were free to work hard simply at being better poets? And is it possible that the call to parish ministry can come not at the expense of our souls, but at their delight—the joy known only by those who can behold mystery and truth at work just beneath the surface of all the belief and all the reality of parish life?

This article is excerpted from M. Craig Barnes's book The Pastor as Minor Poet, just published by Eerdmans.