

Gifts for excellence

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For several years, I directed the Center for Pastoral Excellence at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. The center hosts five initiatives that together address and support the long arc of ministry through a variety of resources and research projects. Its name--the Center for Pastoral Excellence--has been somewhat controversial. "Excellence" is a tricky word that might suggest elitist expectations for pastors who follow a savior with revolutionary ideas. Why use a word with so much baggage to describe ministry?

And so, over the years, I've been asked to explain what we mean when we say "pastoral excellence." I've written about it on the center's blog, discussed it in innumerable meetings and conversations. Last year, I was asked to help develop a curriculum about what it means to nurture excellence in pastoral ministry. Each time I'm asked, I find myself returning to 1 Corinthians 12:31. Paul urges the people of the church in Corinth to love one another: "Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way."

Just before this, Paul writes about the diversity of spiritual gifts that God bestows. "You are the body of Christ," he says, "and individually members of it." They are, at the same time, one in the Spirit *and* possessing different skills. Some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some teachers, and some to other tasks.

Then we get to verse 31: "Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." In chapter 13, Paul seeks to balance the differentiation of gifts by

claiming that the most important task of all is love.

It's not too much of a leap to suggest that excellence in pastoral ministry should also arise from love, from a fundamental love for God, for people, and for the call to ministry placed on the hearts of some in the community. If love is not present, how could a pastor be anything more than noisy gong or clanging symbol?

Even though it arises from love, living in "a still more excellent way" as a pastor takes time and attention. It must be cultivated. "It is a beautiful thing to see a good pastor at work," writes Craig Dykstra. But it doesn't just happen: "The pastoral imagination emerges over time and through the influence of many forces." Dykstra continues, "Ironically, even though ministry is hard work that requires considerable preparation and enormous discipline, the pastoral imagination that emerges within it comes not as an achievement but as a gift."

A gift. One body, many members. One Spirit, many gifts.

Excellence in ministry arises from a fundamental love that comes to us as a gift. Not something earned, like a degree or a credential or an award. Not something elite or rarified or exclusionary. And not something that can ultimately be pushed away, either. A gift.

And so, if this is a gift, and if the gift is rooted in love, and if the gift is a trustworthy promise of God, then wouldn't pastors *long* to lean wholly into it, *long* to lean into practices of excellence and strive for a still more excellent way?