

That Some Would be Pastors

Sermon by John Schrock

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I thought I would start by introducing myself for those who may not know me. I'm from Iowa, went to a private college in Iowa before coming to Associated Mennonite (now Anabaptist Mennonite) Biblical Seminary in Elkhart where I met and married my wife, Missy Kauffman Schrock – who, now works for AMBS. Since seminary I have done two years of Clinical Pastoral Education – one in Iowa where I grew up, and one in Charlottesville, Virginia where Missy is from, I've served as a pastor in three congregations – one in Illinois, one in Ohio, and one in Indiana, and I also worked for a year at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center – something I have in common with Dan Schrock and also with Melba Graber of this congregation who was helping out in the office during my time in Lombard. For the past year I have worked as a chaplain with Harbor Light Hospice, a for-profit hospice that serves five counties out of our office in Mishawaka. I also work with my cousin in his art business, which means travelling to arts and crafts shows many weekends, which unfortunately means that I am often unable to worship with you here at Berkey.

In addition, since 2009 I have been working on a Doctor of Ministry program through Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. In January I defended my Doctor of Ministry dissertation on a cold and stormy day in Holland. The defense before a committee happened in the morning. This was supposed to be followed by a public presentation in the afternoon, but with near blizzard-like conditions outside—do we remember last winter or have we repressed it now that spring is here—the director of the program decided to

postpone the public presentation. There was talk at that about rescheduling the presentation on graduation day – which is tomorrow. But they then decided there were too many other things already planned so the presentation won't happen. In a way, this sermon is something of my dissertation presentation in the form of a sermon, although what I have to share this morning is much different than what I had prepared to present in January.

Well when I started the Doctor of Ministry program I was serving as pastor of Bonneyville Mennonite Church, which – for those of you who don't know – is located on State Road 120 east of Bristol. It's the congregation where Dale Shenk now serves as one of the pastors. This is a church that started in the 1960s as a split off the First Mennonite Church in Middlebury. (Was it a church plant or a congregational split – as is true for how many Mennonite churches started, which it was depends on your perspective.)

Bonneyville started largely due to issues that members of the congregation had with the pastor at First Mennonite Church at that time. When I talked to Galen Johns, who was the congregation's first pastor, he shared how the church was made up of people who had a vision for something new that included outreach to the community where the church house was built. But a downside of the way this congregation started is that in this congregation's DNA seems to have been issues with pastoral authority – which has resulted in oftentimes difficult relations between the congregation and its pastoral leadership. I don't know if this is still true, but it certainly was during my time with the congregation.

Before I arrived at Bonneyville, the previous settled pastor, Ken Livengood, had led the congregation through an organizational restructuring process. Toward the end of that process, Ken left an emotionally intense meeting with congregational leadership and somehow crashed his motorcycle into a guardrail

along State Road 120 a few miles from the church building, an accident that resulted in Ken's death. An interim pastor served the congregation for two years after Ken's death, until my arrival in 2005.

When I arrived, I was surprised at how the congregational structure was designed. The structure was based on a model that has been developed for Mennonite congregations to use called the Congregational Discipling Model. But the way the Bonneyville structure was organized seemed to me to be intentionally designed in order to not allow pastors to have authority or the ability to provide meaningful leadership.

For some time I had been interested in going back and getting a Doctor of Ministry degree. In 2008 it seemed to me that the timing was right for me to do this. After some looking around, I decided that Western Theological Seminary's program would work best for me. So I enrolled there; eventually I decided to study this Congregational Discipling Model that Bonneyville's structure was supposed to be based upon.

The Congregational Discipling Model was developed in the 1980s, beginning with some work that Christian educators in the Mennonite Church were doing. Some people may remember the three-petaled flower of worship, community, and mission that was the visual representation of the model. These three areas of church life revolved around the center of the flower which was "discipleship" or "disciple-making." The model was based on the idea that everything the church did should revolve around this main focus on discipleship.

So why was a new organizational structure for Mennonite congregations necessary? Was there something wrong with the old model? In a word: YES.

Permit me to engage in a bit of a Mennonite history lesson here: How many grew up in a Mennonite congregation where the pastor was not trained for ministry and mostly unpaid for what he (and prior to the 70s, Mennonite pastors were almost exclusively men) did? Often these pastors were chosen from within the congregation by means of the lot—and were expected to serve for life. This model was known as the plural or threefold model, or sometimes it was more simply referred to as the bench because there was a benchful of men that sat in front of congregations who served as the leaders of the church. This model also was known as the bishop model because it included a bishop, a person with lots of authority who often provided leadership over a number of congregations.

Beginning after World War II, this model started to change. It was during this time that Mennonite seminaries began as places to train pastors for the work of pastoral ministry. This led to the professional clergy model being embraced by most Mennonite churches--pastors were called from outside the congregation and were paid a salary for the service that they provided. In addition, lay members were enlisted to help lead the church by serving on Church Councils that provided governance oversight and boards of Elders that were responsible for what was often called “spiritual oversight” of the life of the congregation.

This was the model that my home congregation, Sugar Creek Mennonite at Wayland, Iowa, had during my growing up years. The last of the pastors called from within the congregation was still part of the church and would fill in at times if the paid pastor was gone. But the pastor of the church that I remember growing up was the first professional pastor to have been called to that congregation from somewhere else.

Unfortunately the lines of authority and responsibility were not always clear between the Church Council and Elder groups in congregations which used this

model—and this could lead to conflict between these groups. Also unclear was the role of the pastor. Oftentimes what ended up happening is that the pastor got caught up in the issues that arose between Church Councils and Elder Groups. This happened at my home congregation; I remember my mother going to sit with the pastor and his wife at the same time that the leadership of the church was meeting to decide the pastor's future with the congregation. Eventually the pastor was asked to leave and a new paid pastor was brought in.

Former AMBS professor Erick Sawatzky notes that in this era, as Mennonite congregations began dividing ministry into the two areas of spiritual ministry and program ministry with groups identified to provide leadership for each of these areas, the role of the pastor became increasingly hard to define. Where did pastors fit in this Council and Elders model? Erick writes: “Pastors were presumably called to something and were located somewhere in congregational life, but what they were called for and where they fit was not evident. The lines of accountability and authority were not apparent.”¹ Noting similar dynamics from his perspective, another AMBS professor, Walter Sawatzky, has written about how in the 1960s and 1970s, “American Mennonites began fostering the image of the pastor as salaried and trained, but not as congregational leader.”²

Well the Congregational Discipling Model can be seen as an attempt to address the problems that existed with the Church Council and Elders model. Included in this structural change was the desire to clarify the role that pastors play in the life of the congregation.

So my main point this morning is a simple one: There is such a thing as proper spiritual authority in congregations—and for things to run smoothly, this

¹ Sawatzky, *Heart*, 229.

² Sawatzky, *Heart*, 45.

authority needs to be recognized and respected. This does not mean that pastoral authority cannot be questioned and even resisted when that authority is being exercised inappropriately. Pastors aren't perfect. They make mistakes. Yet they have an important role to play in the life of congregations.

This is not a sermon that pastors can preach in their own congregations because it would be seen as being self-serving. But as a hospice chaplain who is not currently involved in congregational pastoral leadership, I feel I have the freedom to preach such a sermon.

We see this understanding of a specific pastoral role functioning in the New Testament church. This morning we are looking specifically at Ephesians 4. In this passage, we see where Paul first admonishes the members of the church in Ephesians that they are to live a life worthy of the calling they have received. Notice that this admonition is not for particular people in the congregation: all have a calling they are to fulfill, according to Paul.

Paul talks about how Jesus gave gifts to the members of God's church in order to enable them to minister to one another and so to promote unity and maturity in the faith community, in the body of Christ. Then in verse 11, Paul writes "It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers" And why is this? "To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith."

Earlier Paul has said that all believers are called "to live a life worthy of the calling that you have received." Now he lists particular roles that people are to play in the faith community, including that of pastor.

An interesting observation regarding the need for Anabaptist faith communities to recognize the important role that pastoral leaders play comes from a book written last year by David Janzen, who was involved in a Mennonite intentional community that began in the 1970s. These intentional communities sought to be egalitarian and to use a consensus model of decision-making as a way of doing away with power differences. But David Janzen writes: “At New Creation Fellowship we soon wore ourselves out trying to make all our decisions by consensus. By God's grace, the weariness set in about the time we learned to trust the pastoral gifts of those who could conduct our meetings in peaceful and orderly ways. We began to function more like a body where each one had gifts to exercise for the good of all.” So even in this intentional community that sought to be egalitarian, they realized the need to look to specific people with pastoral gifts for leadership in the faith community.

Conrad Kanagy has done extensive research on Mennonite congregations that he reported on in his book called “Roadsigns for the Journey.” In the introduction to his book, Kanagy identifies this issue of confusion over the role of pastoral leadership as an important one in Mennonite Church USA. He writes:

Pastors and members differ in their understanding of their respective roles. Pastors believe that they should be preaching, casting vision, and equipping members for ministry. Members on the other hand, believe that pastors should primarily preach and take care of the members. Unless these differences are negotiated, we will continue to see frustrated pastors leaving their congregations and frustrated congregations in continual search for the ideal pastor. Congregations must empower pastors to lead and to equip the members for ministry.³

At Bonneyville, there was a longstanding distrust of pastoral leadership. This has caused problems throughout the church’s existence. Changing structures, as the congregation did before I came to the church, does not make much difference when the church culture does not change.

This congregation, Berkey Avenue, restructured shortly before my family and I started attending in the fall of 2010. The restructuring that you did was shaped by the Congregational Discipling Model, although not based entirely on it. I remember interviewing Dale Stoltzfus about the model and his mentioning the Berkey restructuring as a creative new approach to the model. I also remember receiving a folder outlining the new structure at Berkey when we went through the membership class here that described the rationale behind the structure and being impressed with how the structure was designed.

From what I have seen, at Berkey the pastors are looked to for leadership in the life of this congregation, which is good to see. So perhaps the sermon this

³ Kanagy, *Road Signs*, 182.

morning was one that you did not need to hear. But this has been what I have been thinking about and focusing on in the D. Min. work over the past five years; so thanks for allowing me to share these reflections with you this morning.

I do believe that, as Paul writes to the Ephesians, the church is called to a special role in society; it is to be an agent of God's healing and hope that seeks to demonstrate the love of Christ to all. I also believe that good pastoral leadership is important for the church to be able to play its redemptive role effectively.

Paul indicates that some people are indeed called to serve in this pastoral leadership role. Others have other roles to play, important roles to play, as the church engages the world with God's good news. But until we in the Mennonite Church become clearer about these different roles that people are called to play, and until members learn to trust and respect the pastoral leadership role, it is likely that the church will continue to struggle to provide the authentic witness that our world so desperately needs.

Paul closes this passage in Ephesians by returning to the image of the faith community as the body of Christ, with Christ as its head, and I will close the sermon this morning by reading again these words from Paul where he writes: "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

May it be so—here at Berkey, and in the broader Mennonite Church as well.