

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, November 22, 2009 based on Isaiah 6:1-8 and Mark 1:9-11

## Where Do Ministers Come From?

Play the song "The Perfect Pastor" by Bryan Sirchio –

Now that Flossmoor Community Church has elected its Senior Pastor Search Committee, I thought it was time to play the search committee theme song. How did you like that song? In many ways, it is the song of every search committee – finding the best person for the congregation's future with the best possible qualities and abilities. But what are the qualities and abilities of the best person?

I have been an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ for 33 years now. When I say that out loud, I always try to emphasize the "gospel of Jesus Christ" part - gospel meaning "good news." I am an ordained person for the good news of Jesus Christ.

Like our song said, I have enjoyed being a pastor, but it is not the easiest thing in the world to do. Being a church pastor is sort of like being the mayor of a small town or the principle of a high school – everybody has an opinion about what is important and how things should be done. Parish ministry is an interesting profession.

Core value #4 of your congregation proclaims that "All are ministers - *Using our God-given gifts, each of us contributes to the mission and ministry of our church, that the kingdom of God on earth might more resemble the one in heaven..*" And I believe that. We are all called to ministry in Jesus' name. All the church does is take a few of its ministers and gives them additional training so that they can teach and lead the other ministers of the congregation.

It is a privilege to wear the robe of learning, the stripes of higher education and the yoke of service in Jesus' name. It's all about Jesus and bringing his vision of God's ways on earth. Salvation is more than about personal connection. It is also about healing and fairness in the world. So, ordained ministry is about both about personal faith and sense of justice in the world.

As I said, I have been an ordained minister of the good news of Jesus Christ for 33 years. For 30 years I was a settled pastor called to serve as the pastor or lead pastor of a congregation. I served 4 congregations during those 30 years. The last 3 years I have been doing transitional work where as an intentional interim, I serve the congregation as temporary pastor and take them through a discernment process of discovery, prayer, and vision as the congregation imagines where God is leading them and the kind of leadership they need to get there.

It has been a privilege to be an ordained minister for Jesus. I have had many joys and some sorrows. It is a joy to preach and teach the good news of Jesus Christ and see people and congregations come alive with the possibilities of Christ in their midst. Jesus does have good news to help us, and we are called to learn it and live it. The first followers of Jesus called themselves the followers of "the way." And we are invited to learn this way and live it. It is exciting to see people come alive for Christ.

But I have also had my sorrows. Ordained ministry is also about leadership, and sometimes that leadership is ignored or rejected or devalued, and that is hard and frustrating.

My sermon title today is "Where Do Ministers Come From?" Ministers come from the pew. Most clergy start out in the pew as parishioners that are about listening, learning, and serving. Somewhere along the way these people feel a sense of call to ordained ministry. Like Isaiah and Jesus in scripture today, ministry is about a sense of call. Ordained ministers are ministers set apart for a particular task or role. What denominations do is evaluate a person's sense of call and determines if that call requires ordination and then mentors the person for ordained ministry.

There is a discipline and an expectation of conduct that comes from ordained ministry, but ordained ministers are still people. One of the hardest things we fight as ordained clergy is the imagines that other people have of us. Sometimes, I wonder if people think is all we do is pray and then show up on Sundays to preach.

Ordained ministers are just people. We don't give up our citizenship when we get ordained. We don't give up our humanity. We have hopes and dreams and obligations and faults just like everyone else. We have mortgages to pay and children to raise and spouses to love and interests to pursue and temptations to resist just like everyone else. Hopefully, our discipline of ministry and our love of God and others helps us make right choices and helps us be better people. But we are just human beings answering a call to Christian service and trusting the good news of Jesus Christ.

With the Senior Pastor Search Committee having its first meeting soon, I have been thinking quite a bit about what it means to be the Senior

Pastor of Flossmoor Community Church. You call yourself an independent Christian church, and I have been thinking about what that means when it comes the Senior Pastor.

First of all, what it means is that the person you elect as Senior Pastor becomes the pope. You are not connected to any other organization. So, in a way you are your own denomination. You believe that all are ministers. But the one you elect to be Senior Pastor becomes the lead minister, and that person becomes very important in the life of the congregation.

Now you can have a lot of fun with the imagery of the Senior Pastor being the pope. If the Senior Pastor is the pope of FCC, that makes the Governing Board the College of Cardinals, and the standing Elders the Bishops, and the Diaconate the priests. There are all kinds of things I can do with this imagery.

This congregation is more in the Protestant tradition of Christianity of clergy coming out of the pew and one of the people with a designated task and role, but it is fun to play with the imagery. What I mean by the word "pope" is that whoever you elect as Senior Pastor becomes the head theologian and interpreter of faith for the congregation. Theology drives the understanding of every congregation or denomination. So a clear theology that excites and informs a congregation helps it grow and have something to talk about.

Next, a Senior Pastor is like a spark plug. It takes many programs and ministries to run a major congregation, and one of the things that an ordained pastor does is spark ways for people to grow in their faith and

grow in their service for Christ. Ordained ministers are always about sparking existing and new ways for people to be connected to God and bringing the ways of God into the world.

Finally, a Senior Pastor is about shepherding. Pastoral care of the ministers is a vital role in any congregation. One of the most fulfilling parts of ministry for me is pastoring to the membership. It is very humbling for people to let you into their lives and be their spiritual guide and resource both in good times and stressful times in their lives. Pastoral care is a very intimate and valuable part of ordained ministry.

So there you have it – 3 roles for a Senior Pastor – head theologian (interpreter) of the faith, spark plug for programs and ministry, and pastoral care. Of course, one person can not do all of these things by themselves well and can't be perfect at all three. This is why congregations are smart when they have more than one ordained minister. It gives them variety. It gives them different people to work with. It gives the clergy the opportunity to use their gifts in creative ways and have a colleague to work with and share the preaching, teaching, pastoring, and community involvement with. You are in a good place to continue to blossom and grow as a Christian body for Christ because you have more than one pastor. There is much potential here!

The final image I have for you today about ordained ministry is a bag of poker chips. Starting a new ministry is like being given a bag of (poker) chips when the person begins. These are the chips of good will and expectation as you and the minister begin your life together. Everyone will come "check out" the new minister when he or she arrives, and based

on what they say or do will add to their stack of chips or take some away as some might say, "that's not the kind of minister that ministers to me." As she or he engages you and reveals their gifts and interests, they will add to or take away from that original stack of chips. Usually most ministers are able to add to their chips as they get to know you and earn your trust and respect.

Then sometimes things happen that diminish the stack of chips for some people - a new program or initiative is started that reaches a different segment of the congregation or the community but is not appreciated by some in the congregation. Sometimes, so much attention is paid in certain ministries that some in the congregation feel neglected and they drift away – fewer chips. Sometimes, a minister is willing to bet a bunch of their chips of good will to move the congregation in a new direction or to speak out on a political or social issue or to take stand on a religious issue that is important to them. There are always one or two issues that ministers are willing to bet their chips on.

A successful ministry is when a minister over time keeps acquiring more chips of good will, trust, and respect with a wider circle of people. A less successful ministry is about losing more chips per year than gained so that there is less goodwill to move out in different directions as times change. Ministry is an interesting profession!

A young person by the name of Bryan Fischer of Pennsylvania writes – *"In 1994, a new pastor came to my church. He seemed like a nice guy, and his sermons held my attention. This minister spent a little more than ten years at my congregation in Harrisburg, PA, and every moment I spent*

*with him, I knew that I was with a good person. God spoke to all the youth at the church through the pastor. He helped us learn to know and love God at our own level. He explained to us that God loved us no matter what and we should be happy with who we were, no matter what. We took trips to our church camp in the winter and around the Northeast in the spring. We had so much fun, and we learned about God the whole time.*

*The minister left the congregation to become our area conference minister. I was devastated when I heard he was leaving. Later that evening, I went to the minister's house to talk to him about it. He told me that this was the direction he felt that God was pointing him and that it was not that he was unhappy at our church. God just wanted him to move on. That made it okay for me. I trusted that God needed him elsewhere, and I had to accept that whether I liked it or not. He still was the counselor at the church camp's Music and Drama Camp, which I attended every year. He also spoke to me a lot about going into the ministry. I never really felt called and am currently at Penn State University studying mechanical engineering, but I am glad that he saw something in me and thought that I had potential. Because of the minister's influence now and then, I will always feel that I need to be involved in the church. The church is a part of me, and he helped make it that way.*

*This year, the minister called me one night to say he was the candidate for a conference minister position in Missouri. I was upset, but I remembered what he said to me when he left our church. It was time for God to use him to help other people. I know that I will not get to see him*

*often, but I know that this pastor has helped me become the person I am today through his actions and words.*

No, there is no such thing as a perfect pastor, but with God's help the teaching, pastoring, and leading brings in the ways of God and helps all the ministers for who - the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.