**Superintendents in the Church: Casting Theological Vision**, Jeren Rowell.

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Superintendency in the Church of the Nazarene finds its roots in American Methodism. John Wesley, a priest in the Church of England, laid hands on

Thomas Coke and ordained him *superintendent*. He instructed Coke then to ordain Francis Asbury superintendent and the two were to be general superintendents of the Methodists in North America. Only a short time later, much to Wesley’s disappointment, the two began to use the term *bishop* rather than general superintendent. They did so from a firm basis, understanding both the terms to be rooted in the biblical idea of episcopacy. When Phineas Bresee chose the term general superintendent, he knew well that this was the Methodist term for bishop. It may be that Bresee chose this term to distance his people from perceived abuses of power by Methodist Episcopal bishops.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I lay this foundation so that we know where to turn when seeking to understand and define the role of superintendents in the Church. Too often this role has been conceived and executed in practical terms around the ideas of judicial administration, business management, or organizational leadership. However, in order to do this work in ways that are faithful to Scripture and the historic Christian faith, superintendents must be clear about identity. We must know who we are and what in the world we are trying to do in response to the call of God through the Church.

***The Role of Overseers***

William H. Willimon noted recently that the Bible “seldom bothers with bishops.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is true in terms of the handful of occurrences in the New Testament, but even a brief survey of the texts suggests that the idea of *episkope*, like other ideas borrowed from the culture of the time, finds its way into the language of the church with special application. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 give the fullest descriptions of an overseer but focus especially on the character and lifestyle of persons who would hold the office. Most other references not only make mention of the role of overseer but do so in a way that presses the weight of responsibility in on those who would take this place of service in the church.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The texts that may be most shaping in terms of a theology of superintendency are those that attach the idea of *episkope* not to an office in the church, nor to a particular Christian, but to God. 1 Peter 2:25 uses the word in reference to the crucified and risen Jesus, saying to the church, “ . . . but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer [*episkopon*] of your souls.” Earlier in that passage Peter exhorts the church, using a verb form of the word: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits [*episkopes*] us” (v. 12). Additionally, a verb form is used in Luke 19:44 as Jesus weeps over Jerusalem saying, “ . . . you did not recognize the time of God’s coming [*episkopes*] to you.

These texts give some motion to the idea of *episkope* as it is used to describe overseers, suggesting that the actions of *going*, *visiting*, and *seeing* may be viewed not only in terms of the practices of oversight and accountability but especially in terms of an oversight that is informed by God’s initiating movement toward us in love. As God moves toward us in love, so those called to and charged with oversight in God’s church should move toward the people of God in love rather than employing models of leadership that become only hierarchical and deferential.

***Superintendents as Pastors***

In current conversations one way the whole idea of superintendency seems to be justified goes something like, “Well, even pastors need a pastor.” This is certainly true. However, it is critical to understand clearly what this actually means. Without biblical moorings the idea of oversight can either soften to a rather bland form of cheerleading or harden to the all-too-common notions of superintendents whose job it is to put the squeeze on pastors and congregations to grow more and pay more or suffer the unceremonious closing of the local church.

Unfortunately the modern idol of church growth (which too often had little to do with mission) placed superintendents as middle managers who were to spend their time primarily as organizational consultants and human resource administrators. These are not necessarily bad activities and at times are very much needed in a particular context. The problem becomes acute when superintendents are not able or willing to offer much more than this.

In my own recent study of the relationship between pastors and superintendents[[4]](#footnote-4), it was clear that pastors desire deeply the pastoral leadership of the person(s) who have been placed by the Church in authority over them. Unfortunately, this relationship is fraught with peril given that superintendents often exercise their ministries in times of conflict between pastor and congregation or in times when discipline must be applied to the ill-advised or sinful actions of a pastor. Consequently, the superintendent often finds herself or himself in a tension between the responsibility to pastor the pastor and yet the equal responsibility to care for the congregation. When emotions run high and facts elude clear focus, this can be something of a tight-rope on which the overseer seeks to navigate the relational chasm of a conflicted congregation.

So what does it mean for superintendents to function as pastors? Some argue that this cannot be done, suggesting that the entire notion of the superintendent as “pastor to the pastors” is misplaced and dangerous. This may be true when the idea of pastor is coming from recent domesticated notions of what pastors are to be and do. By this I mean to critique the common contemporary image of the pastor as not much more than an experience director, a kind of religious concierge serving up events that dazzle and an empathetic posture that soothes the troubled soul. Good pastoral life and work means living from rich and prayerful study of the Scriptures so as to become in the whole of one’s life a sign of the presence of the Good Shepherd in the midst of God’s people. This living sign is known not only through the activities of presence, listening, and counsel but especially through the pastor’s ability to articulate and model a biblical vision for discipleship and mission.

The thoughts of N. T. Wright on this point, who knows the life of episcopacy personally, continue to challenge me in the exercise of my calling. Bishop Wright recognizes and models in his own work that the essential role of bishops is found not in administrative leadership but in the study and teaching of the Bible. He rightly notes that ecclesial leaders are often so consumed with the relentless tasks of administration that, “ . . . though they still preach sermons and perhaps even give lectures, *they do not give the church the benefit of fresh, careful, and prayerful study of the text . . . “[[5]](#footnote-5)* As this happens not only is the church robbed of this teaching but also the pastoral office suffers from the poor modeling of its leaders.

A truly functional theology of superintendency must begin with the core identity of superintendents or bishops as pastors and not first as organizational managers or chief executive officers. In our denomination all of the superintendents have been local pastors and most move directly from parish ministry to the superintendency. We know the rhythms of pastoral work especially of moving each week from text to sermon. And yet in the role of overseer, that motion of biblical study to teaching and proclamation often gives way to the urgencies of polity and program. This is not an either/or proposition. I am simply arguing that we need superintendents to be less *managers* and more *teachers*. Whether it is a church/pastoral review, meeting with a board in pastoral transition, preaching to a congregation, or seeking to guide church leaders through a time of conflict, the role of the bishop is to try and call out a community that orders its life around the values and priorities, not of this world, but of the kingdom of God as expressed when God’s people live together in a covenant of self-sacrificing love.

***Casting Theological Vision***

If indeed this is the essential work of overseers (superintendents), then in particular how could a district superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene go about this work in ways that reflect a biblical pastoral theology?

*Worship and Sacraments*

The teaching and modeling of the superintendent is nowhere more important than in the gathered Christian community for worship. We witness week by week the relative diversity of how worship is ordered and executed in our various congregations. This diversity is a welcome characteristic as it reflects the intention of local congregations to contextualize their ministries. However, there are some essential components to authentic Christian worship that can and should be significantly influenced through the teaching of superintendents. Worship has fallen on hard times in contemporary, evangelical Christianity. Like many other aspects of Christian experience, worship has been seriously co-opted by entertainment culture. Superintendents have opportunity to cast clear biblical and theological vision for what constitutes Christian worship in any contextualization. A thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this short paper, but there are four key elements in Christian worship that cannot be casually dismissed in favor of “what people want” or some other marketing criterion.

The first essential movement of Christian worship is *gathering*. I have grown immensely weary of services of Christian worship being initiated with the inane greeting, “Good morning!” And to make matters worse, if the people do not sufficiently return the greeting they are often chided into repeating it louder, “Good morning!” The first words of Christian gathering for worship should be greeting in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Paul Bassett recently said, “What makes worship Christian is its deliberate focus on the Lord Jesus Christ.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The first words should be announcement that we are here today not because we simply decided to come but because we have been gathered by the Spirit in the name of our Lord Jesus. Superintendents can be influential in pressing this teaching into the minds of our pastors. It is important because it weekly reminds our people that our identity is located in our connection to God in Christ and to one another by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The second key movement in worship is to *hear from Scripture*. Evangelical tradition, especially as rooted in revivalism, has tended to view this almost exclusively as the sermon. Gladly, there seems to be a resurgence of emphasis upon a broader hearing of Scripture in worship. Some pastors are finding value in the lectionary for this, which is nothing about being formally *liturgical*, it is simply using a good tool to make sure we hear from the whole counsel of God. As part of this, Christians need to be taught that we mark time differently than does the world. Our life together finds its moorings not so much in the rhythms of the lunar or civil calendars, but in the story of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. This is a significant place of teaching and resourcing for superintendents with their pastors.

The third movement in Christian worship is *response to the Word*. No sermon should ever be preached without a call to respond. In our tradition, this is often a call to prayer at the altar. Throughout Christian history, the main response involves the grace of the Lord’s Table. One of the most critical of all pastoral works is to set the Table well. Far too often I have witnessed the offering of the Lord’s Supper in haphazard and careless ways. Communion must be approached with prayerful reverence and disciplined attention to the preparation, blessing, and offering of the elements to the people of God in ways that are truly Christian. Again, this is a great opportunity for the superintendent to be teacher in this regard. And teaching regarding the sacraments should, of course, include helping our pastors to offer the sacrament of Christian baptism in ways that are faithful to the Scriptures and to the historic Christian faith. Our tradition is woefully lacking in an understanding of baptism that puts the emphasis on grace rather than on testimony.

The fourth movement is the *sending of the people* of God into the world in mission. This can be done in a variety of ways, but some form of intentional benediction or blessing should not be neglected. Again, this has nothing to do with embracing a particular style of worship (e.g. liturgical). It is about keeping worship rooted in Christ and keeping the people attentive to God rather than to an event. Certainly, overseers in the Church should model these components well in our leading of worship and we should also give ourselves to teach them.

Resourcing our pastors in these ways may include:

* Regular articles in newsletters, blogs, where we give voice to these issues.
* Facebook group (closed, pastors only) that facilitates conversation and invites the input and teaching of others.
* Resource Days and Conferences (e.g., Rob Staples on Sacramental Theology; David Busic on Pastoral Theology; District pastors on their areas of expertise)
* Suggesting books, articles from our own reading (e.g., Tom Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*; Howard Snyder, *Yes in Christ!*; Jason Vickers, *Minding the Good Ground*; N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*; Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*)

*Preaching and Teaching*

My growing conviction is that we superintendents should view our work less in terms of management or even strategic planning, and more in the essential role of preachers and teachers. This is not an either/or proposition, just a matter of emphasis and that for the sake of the Church, not based in our preferences. We all know that itinerant preaching is whole different thing than pastoral preaching. And the relentless complexity of our assignment has us reaching to sermons we have preached several times. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We do, however, need to model not only excellence in preaching but also clear examples of what biblical preaching looks and sounds like.

My experience in the churches tells me that there is deep hunger among our people for sound, biblical preaching from their pastors. To speak of biblical preaching is not to focus on a particular method. Sound biblical preaching can be expositional, narrative, topical, inductive, or deductive. These choices are not incidental and nearly any homiletical approach may or may not be biblical preaching. Biblical preaching happens as a work of the Holy Spirit, who inspires the preacher in prayerful study of the text and then in the crafting, delivery, and hearing of the sermon in ways that inspire the response of God’s people to the inspired Word of God. My emphasis here is on *prayerful study*. I want to be growing in my faith and in my ability to teach sound doctrine. When I am growing in these ways, I just cannot help but offer these discoveries to the Church through the work of sound preaching and teaching.

The teaching component comes into play in nearly every interaction I have with pastors and laity alike. I find the church/pastoral review process to be a great opportunity for pointed teaching about the nature of the church, spiritual leadership, pastoral authority, evangelism, discipleship, and the list goes on. Working with congregations in pastoral transition is another profound opportunity to shape the theological vision of lay leaders in terms of what it really means for us to join the mission of God in this world. There are also the regular opportunities in our work to turn table conversations into significant teachable moments, especially through the use of intentional questions that draw people into thinking carefully about our mission in these days.

Resourcing our pastors in these ways may include:

* The Assembly DS report as model of biblical preaching.
* Online idea exchange groups working on common sermon texts.
* Choosing Retreat/Conference speakers who understand and model pastoral, biblical preaching.
* Suggesting books, articles from our own reading (e.g., Dan Boone, *Preaching the Story that Shapes Us*; Tom Long, *The Witness of Preaching*; Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*)

*Christian Conference*

Wesley’s idea of Christian conference as a means of grace seems to be catching on in our circles, having heard this reference now many times. It would be nice to know exactly what Wesley meant by this. The truth is, Wesley never really defined it much. We can discern from his comments in the “Large Minutes” that he was generally talking about how Christians ought to converse with one another. There he wrote,

Are we convinced how important and how difficult it is to order our conversation right? Is it always in grace? Seasoned with salt? Meet to minister grace to the hearers? Do we not converse too long at a time? Is not an hour at a time commonly enough? Would it not be well to plan our conversation beforehand? To pray before and after it?[[7]](#footnote-7)

We see that Wesley spoke of conferencing more with questions than with answers, but his concern comes through. When we come together as God’s people for the purposes of prayer and discipleship, are we truly “bearing one another’s burdens” and “speaking the truth in love?” The purpose of Christian conference as Wesley practiced it among his preachers seems to be first that those in the connection might grow in holiness and second, that they might be of one mind in terms of doctrine and practice.

I bring this into our discussion as we think about one of the most significant tools we have at our disposal as superintendents: the power to convene. We can call a meeting and for the most part, our pastors and our people will come to the meeting. Whether a Pastor’s Resource Day, a District TEAM Day, or District Assembly, we have the ability to gather the District for whatever purpose we deem to be important. And therein is the task of theological leadership. We need to be using this influence to help our pastors and people grow in holiness and to foster a “clear and coherent theological identity”

Another element of Christian conference that seems important in this regard is that the communication is not one-way lecture, but dialogue. It is discerning conversation, bathed in prayer and active listening. This seems especially important when we are dealing with some of the most difficult issues of our time. Rather than making pronouncements of our positions (which may be important to do sometimes), what about gathering our pastors for authentic, open, grace-filled, and discerning conversations? This is about how we pastors can help our people to navigate issues like:

* crisis and process in the theology of sanctification
* holiness and social issues like alcohol consumption
* our mission to the LGBT community
* Scripture interpretation (esp. on an issue like creation)

Resourcing our pastors in these ways may include:

* Enhancing Mission Area (Zone) gatherings to become Christian conference.
* Framing Assembly as a teaching and resourcing time more than a business/voting time.

***Connectional Integrity***

To speak of connectional integrity is to try and say something about the major factor of trust between pastors and overseers. A significant study of pastors by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wegner noted that “half of our respondents said they could not speak openly with their denominational officials”[[8]](#footnote-8) In their study, just 39% of currently active pastors report that they felt supported by their overseers, while only 18% of those who recently left active ministry felt that they were supported. They also noted that “many ex-pastors speak with considerable passion about . . . the insensitivity and lack of support that they received from the denominational officials.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

No matter how much an overseer may desire to function pastorally for those under his or her charge, there is no escaping the fact that in most church groups there is a hierarchical reality. There is also the consuming administrative work that typically defines much of the role of superintendent. Consequently, pastors looking for help from their leaders are often looking to people who are as stressed out and overloaded as they are. This observation only deepens the sense of urgency for superintendents to learn how to avoid getting utterly swamped by the details and to keep first focus on the core pastoral works of prayer, Scripture study, and theological reflection. The real work of the office is to cast a biblical and theological framework for the work of the church. This is not to suggest that certain metrics and systems for accountability to the measures of mission effectiveness are not important. To the degree, however, that pastors believe these are the things superintendents *really* care about, we have our work before us to help the church re-imagine the role of overseer as *pastor* in the truest sense of the word.

1. Historical summary from Todd A. Stepp. Retrieved from <http://wesleyananglican.blogspot.com/2011/08/nazarene-superintendencyepiscopacy.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Willimon, W. (2012) *Bishop*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note especially Paul’s charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rowell. J. (2010). *Clergy retention in the Church of the Nazarene, the role of the district superintendent in clergy decision making regarding persistence in active vocational ministry*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Bourbonnais, IL: Olivet Nazarene University. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wright, N. (2005), *Scripture and the authority of God*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers. p. 137 (Emphasis mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.graceandpeacemagazine.org/videos/mediaitem/323-paul-m-bassett-discusses-what-makes-worship-christian> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wesley, J. *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 10: The Methodist Societies, The Minutes of Conference.* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), pp. 856-857. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hoge, D. R. & Wenger, J. (2005). *Pastors in transition: why clergy leave local church ministry.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing. p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)