



## INTRODUCTION

# Ministry in Difficult Times

On the first Monday morning of the year 2000, two faculty colleagues and I met in a conference room at North Park Theological Seminary. We were there to plan a memorial service for Jackson Blanchard, a staff member and friend who had died the previous day after a long battle with cancer. Jackson's brothers, who lived some distance away, had arranged for the cremation of their sister's body but had left the service entirely in our hands. The only directive Jackson herself had given was that her former pastor, along with Professor Klyne Snodgrass, one of the three people at this morning's meeting, was to "do" her funeral.

Klyne began our planning session by putting forth three questions for our consideration:

1. What do we want to accomplish?
2. Who should be involved?
3. What are we going to do?

The first question was the most crucial, for it would largely determine our answers to the second and third questions. Unfortunately, the first question was also the one most likely to be skipped by funeral home directors, by mourners still reeling from their loss, and by ministers as they schedule yet another obligation into the week. What *did* we want to accomplish? Each of us answered the question in turn. Klyne, a New Testament professor, said that

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the memorial service should offer comfort, hope, and challenge to those present. John Weborg, a professor of theology at North Park, answered that it should be a service of thanksgiving for our friend's life, and it should acknowledge that we grieve, but not as those without hope (1 Thess. 4:13). My own response was that the service should be primarily an act of worship, giving thanks for the ways in which Jackson's life revealed the nature and work of Jesus Christ. I wrote down our answers and we used them to guide us through the many questions that followed: What Scriptures would be read? Would the choir from our friend's church sing? Should we have a photo of her on display? Should there be another memorial service later on, when students returned for spring semester? Should we print bulletins? Who would host the reception afterward? In what ways could we show hospitality to Jackson's family, most of whom did not know the seminary community?

Our relationship to the person whose memorial service we were planning was in many ways like the relationships experienced by ministers and laity in a local church. Pastors, after all, become close to members of the congregations they serve and must deal with their own grief even as they minister to others. In our situation, we had the dimension of realizing that our seminary students would be watching us to see "how things ought to be done." But this expectation can also be claimed by parish ministers, whose church members look to them to model "good grief" and offer direction in times of loss.

Not all crises are directly related to bereavement, of course. Priests and ministers are called to speak words of comfort and hope in a variety of other situations. Sometimes we can anticipate people's pastoral needs; at other times, we are taken by surprise. In December 1995, the pastor of the church I was attending suggested that we have a special service on the 21st, the winter solstice. I smiled and asked, "Is this going to be *Christian* worship or an interfaith venture with the local pagans?" He said it was neither a non-Christian service nor an observance of the feast of St. Thomas, but rather an acknowledgment, on the darkest day of the year, that for many people it is hard to be merry as Christmas approaches. He named some of the burdens carried by families in the congregation: divorce, unemployment, difficulty adjusting to retirement, a first Christmas away from home, having to care for a parent with Alzheimer's disease, and so on. All of these situations represented different kinds of grief. The worship service he had in mind would speak particularly to those who were in dark times as it announced the Light of the World in whom we hope. The pastor, like the little committee now planning a coworker's memorial service, began with the question, What do we want to accomplish? The answer to that primary question led naturally to the questions of who should be involved and what exactly should be done.

In the pages that follow, I address the three questions put to us by our colleague that morning and attempt to answer them in a way that provides theo-

logically sound and pastorally sensitive guidelines for clergy in times of crisis and sorrow. Although the book's primary focus is on worship as a means of extending pastoral care to those who mourn, it also addresses other losses besides death and suggests strategies for ministry.

The book is organized into two parts. Part One contains five chapters. The first chapter is the starting point for addressing the question, What are we trying to accomplish? As Christian clergy, our *raison d'être* is not necessarily the same as that of a funeral director, a newspaper reporter, or a relief organization. Each of these providers may be well-intentioned and give much-needed help, but the identity and mission of clergy are distinct from those of other providers. It is essential that we understand these distinctions and let them guide our decisions in offering pastoral care through worship.

Our theological foundations are the cornerstone for determining what we are called to do and say in the various crises faced by the congregations entrusted to our care. To proclaim our faith intelligibly, however, we must speak the language of the culture in which we minister. The second chapter discusses denominational, socioeconomic, generational, and other contexts that must be taken into account when striving for effective ministry. The culture and history of a congregation not only present the pastor with one or more dialects to learn, but also present implicit answers to the questions, Who should be involved? and What are we going to do? To assist the seminary graduate who is just beginning full-time parish work or the minister moving to a new church, the chapter discusses steps for learning the congregational culture, suggests local resources that may help the pastor address pastoral needs in crisis situations, and offers a pre-need funeral-planning sheet.

The third chapter explains four basic types of services that Christian clergy may conduct following the death of an individual. In addition to these basic types, paraliturgical acts and postfuneral services and gatherings may enter the picture, and the pastor must be equipped to deal with these.

The fourth chapter outlines four kinds of service for other times of crisis. Each service accomplishes something slightly different, so naturally the people who should be involved and the things that should be done will vary accordingly. Some crises and times of sorrow, such as natural calamities, scandals, volatile social or political issues, or crises that affect the community both inside and outside the church, require extra sensitivity and an unusual liturgy.

The fifth chapter gives an overview of pastoral issues, such as ministry to the dying and their caregivers, follow-up care of the bereaved and those in the aftermath of crisis, dealing with cultural and social pressures that may work against individual and congregational health, and issues of self-care. A pastor, after all, is not immune to the grief and sorrow experienced by parishioners. How we acknowledge our own neediness and receive ministry teaches those we serve as surely as our sermons and prayers do.

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Part Two contains guidelines for writing sermons and designing worship services that are appropriate to the pastoral situations considered in the first five chapters. It also provides resources for funerals and other times of distress drawn from the best of more than seventy-five years of *The Minister's Manual*, a yearly publication that reflects and serves worship traditions across the English-speaking world. The resources presented in each edition are offered by pastors currently serving culturally and theologically diverse congregations. They include hymns, Scripture readings, prayers and litanies, quotations and illustrations, and sermons. Three types of homiletical resources are included in this section of the book: sermon briefs, or outlines, that may be adapted for local use; sermons that have actually been used in particular crises or funerals; and sermons about death, resurrection, and the ground of Christian hope. The latter may help the pastor teach a congregation the beliefs that can sustain them when crises come.

The chapters in Part One contain cross-references to the resources presented in Part Two so that readers will know where to look for material relevant to various services and pastoral care situations that can be adapted to the particular circumstances in their local church. The aim here is not to defend a single paradigm for ministry and worship in times of crisis and sorrow but to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12) in whatever contexts God calls us to serve him.