

Parish realities and a Doritos Eucharist

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By now you've heard the uproar about the [Dorito's "Crash the Super Bowl" contest](#) entry that featured a Eucharist of Coke and chips. In the Mennonite church our communal meals are often treated as Eucharist so I don't feel any particular discomfort about Jesus' body and blood being represented by something other than wafer and wine. (If anything, my concern issues from the conviction that where our food comes from and what it does to our bodies is of profound theological importance.) What's really interested me as a potential-future-pastor is the reality of parish ministry portrayed in the commercial.

The truth is that a lot of churches suffer from low attendance. And before we start to scoff and sneer at the priest saying the words of institution over a Cheeto we need to take a step back and remember that people's lives depend on the church budget. This is not limited to the minister's salary (which as a possible-future-minister I think is vastly important), and includes funding for mission groups, individual missionaries, the church's corporate structure, the lights, the heat and (ahem) the scholarship funds allocated to seminarians. Maybe Doritos is not the way we want to go. But let's be honest enough to say that not meeting your budget is a serious crisis.

That isn't the only reality a minister must face. This commercial could have featured an elderly parishoner waving her fat checkbook tauntingly over the head over her cowering pastor. It could have pictured an elder's council meeting stretching into a third hour as the discussion about Christmas carols in Advent reaches a fevered pitch. Parish ministry isn't always, or maybe ever, just about theological scruples. It's about pastoral concern/care meeting theological decision

again and again and again.

Seminarians are hilarious about pastoral realities. In just one semester I've been in several situations where the suggestion of compromise was met with shock and disapproval. The first was when a pastoral counseling professor made the comment that there would inevitably be pastoral care situations where we would have to pretend to listen to the parishoner (the point being that pretending to listen almost always leads to actual listening). Several students were appalled. Shouldn't they *just* listen? They assured the professor that they would always be "on."

The other instance came out of a class on baptism when a group of students created a teaching demonstration where one of the characters in a role play was identified as "a wealthy parishoner who makes large contributions to the church." One student wanted to know why we consider this a significant characteristic? Shouldn't we treat all our flock the same, regardless of how much they give?

I must say, I really do appreciate the optimism of my classmates. But it does make me nervous about the time when they find themselves in these difficult situations of negotiation. I wonder if they will have put the time into working through their response while still in school to figure out how to move their ministry forward. What are you willing to lose your job over? What are you willing to give? When are you willing to die?

I don't say this because I've been beaten down by an under-appreciated, under-resourced children's ministry job in a dwindling, conservative church. Okay, all that is true. But in addition to my "lived experience" my classes at Princeton have helped me to see that leadership in the church always emerges from a nexus of pastoral, political, missional, ecclesial, theological and financial realities. For instance, this semester I learned that the tradition of sprinkling baptism is rooted in the pastoral concern that dunking babies, especially fragile or premature babies, could hasten their demise.

The development of our church practices, even of our theology, is never about purity in the name of an ultimate truth. Ministry is about living into the contingency of human sinfulness, life in community and meeting theology anew in every generation. I say *semper reformanda*, baby. And pass the chips.

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