A week of signs: The first seven days of a pastor

by Richard Lischer in the May 9, 2001 issue

In his memoir Open Secrets, *Richard Lischer tells of his search for a pastoral vocation in "New Cana," a small town in southern Illinois. When he reconnoitered the site of his first call, the bleached November landscape reminded him of an Ingmar Bergman movie—"Swedish winterlight exposing rot and depression in rural Lutherans." He was fresh from graduate school, a child of the '60s who had "skimmed Augustine's City of God but devoured Harvey Cox's best-seller The Secular City." Two minutes on the lonely road in New Cana proved to be a "clarifying experience. The spiritual heroics of the secular city had passed me by." Open Secrets is the story of how, as Lischer puts it, "I apprenticed myself to a community, and this odd little warren of friendships, stories, rivalries and rumors turned out to be my ministry itself."*

The first week in my new parish brought a tumble of pastoral duties. Although I had yet to preach my first sermon or celebrate my first public Eucharist, I brought communion to one of my parishioners in the hospital. His name was Alfred Semanns and he was dying of complications resulting from admission to the dingiest American hospital I had ever seen, Prairieview General. Its only ward reminded me of a dorm I had slept in as a boy at summer camp. There were 12 beds, one nurse, and no private or semiprivate rooms.

Alfred and I had the place pretty much to ourselves as I prepared for the momentous event of my first Eucharist. Only the community rightly celebrates communion, and when private distribution is necessary the pastor should bring the consecrated elements from the community's Sunday meal. But Alfred was sick, dying, and through his daughters and son he had asked for the Eucharist. He apparently didn't mind that it was a stranger who would bring him the Bread of Life.

I brought my kit, which included a tiny paten and a screw-together chalice, a seminary graduation gift. We made the confession and absolution together and

recited Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.” His gruff voice betrayed no emotion as he recited the words, which he uttered like a man breaking rocks with a sledge.

We were making Eucharist on a hospital tray on wheels. I poured some wine into my little chalice and set it before him, but when I reached farther into the kit I discovered to my horror that I had forgotten the wafers. “I don’t have any bread,” I said. Then, as if he were deaf as well as dying, I repeated myself more loudly, “No bread.”

Alfred looked deeply into my face and sighed. His eyes quickly surveyed the ward, as mine had done a split second earlier, in hopes of spotting a stray scrap of bread on a lunch tray. No such luck. He said in his same rough voice, “Well, why don’t you get some bread . . . Pastor.” He stressed the last word of the sentence in order to remind me of something about me. “I’ll be here.”

The hospital kitchen was closed until 5 p.m., so I drove into town to the nearest Lutheran church where I humiliated myself before one of the old men who had helped install me and borrowed a few communion wafers. I then sped back to the hospital and entered as though nothing had happened.

Take eat. This is my body given in death for you, I said for the first time in my life. Receive this host. Jesus is the host at every sacramental meal, no matter if it is celebrated at the high altar of a great cathedral or in the deserted ward of a country hospital. Jesus hosted our little meal, too, and did not forsake Alfred. I was his stand-in on this bleak occasion, but I had proved less than hospitable. With ten years of theology under my belt, and a passing acquaintance with many mysteries and much knowledge, I had scrambled awkwardly to produce a scrap of God’s body for a dying man.

On Wednesday, one of Billy Semanns’s daughters (75 percent of my parishioners were named Semanns) was waiting for the new pastor. She was ready to have a proper wedding. This word was only relayed to me by telephone, as Billy himself, who was perennially between jobs and wives and lived alone in a camper east of Prairieview, had had nothing to do with the church ever since someone from Cana had asked him for a financial pledge. That had been 14 years ago.

“The church is only interested in my money,” he had complained, implying that this church, like all the rest of them, was preying on his vast wealth in order, say, to

build a marble campanile in the parking lot or to support the voluptuous lifestyle of a missionary in East St. Louis. According to the grapevine, the previous pastor had offended him by saying, “Billy, you don’t have any money. What would we want with you?”

The daughter and her intended arrived at the parsonage promptly at five, he having taken off a few minutes early from his job as an asphalt man on the county’s roads. Leeta and Shane were 17 and 18 years old respectively. Aside from the family’s trademark smile, she bore no resemblance to my imaginary picture of her oafish father or to anyone I had already met in the family. She was darkly, even beautifully, beetle-browed, a feature that lent determination to her young face from the first hello. Shane was a serious sort of young man with close-set eyes and a curly page boy that was already thinning on top. Thirty seconds into the interview she seemed strong, he seemed weak. Together they were so nervous that they couldn’t even slouch. Teenagers simply do not sit as straight as those two were sitting in front of my desk.

“Shane and I want to get married, and Shane wants to take adult instructions, don’t you, hon? I’d come with him every time. I promise,” she said to Shane, and smiled sweetly at both of us. “We want to do everything right. Same goes for Shane’s baptism. We won’t wait forever to have that done, will we, hon? We could start studying up on the baptism anytime soon.”

Then, in a move that seemed rehearsed, she opened her pea coat to reveal what I’d known was in there the moment she had entered the room, a little Semanns about six months along. She pulled her coat back the way an amateur stickup man flashes his piece in a 7-Eleven. Leeta was wearing a white polyester shift, awkwardly high on her legs and tight across the midriff. The two of them had come to rehab what little they had of a past and to begin a new future. They wanted to get off on the right foot—two poor, uneducated teenagers, one of them pregnant, the other unbaptized, both of them scared and excited at the same time. It appeared that I could combine premarital counseling with adult membership instruction along with some lessons in baptism for both of them. These two would be the first beneficiaries of several semesters of training in pastoral care and counseling.

“My practice is to meet at least six times with the couple before the wedding, so that we can go over the service and discuss all the issues pertinent to Christian marriage. We’ll do a modified version of the Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory. At the

rehearsal . . .” Why I said, “My practice” I have no idea, since I had never performed a marriage, had no “practice,” and did not understand the futility of trying to prepare anybody for marriage, let alone two teenagers:

> You can’t imagine this, Shane and Leeta, but let me tell you a little about your future: at 28, Shane is drinking eight or ten beers a day and already daydreaming about retiring from his job on the second shift at the glassworks. Leeta is so exhausted from caring for a little boy with cystic fibrosis that she is making desperate plans. Your parents are all dead, including Billy, who got drunk and burned up in his camper one night. You two don’t say grace at meals, or kiss each other good morning, good night or good-bye. You do not engage in the ritual tendernesses that make an ordinary day endurable. And did I mention that Leeta thinks she’s pregnant again, and is seriously considering a trip to Chicago where something can be done about it? Yes, let wise Pastor Lischer prepare you for married life.

Leeta stood up in front of the desk, this time in an unrehearsed way, and gave me a distinctly un-Semannslike smile, as if to say, “I have news for you.” (She really was determined.) “Honey, give the pastor the license.”

Shane and I stood up, as two men will do when they are about to close a business deal or fight a dual. In a voice that a boy might use when asking a girl’s father for her hand, he said, “Could you do it tonight? This here’s the license. We done passed the blood test with fly’n colors, didn’t we, babe? We can’t wait no longer, Pastor. It’s time.”

I thought of my own mother and father, she in her best organdy dress, he in his double-breasted olive suit, both of them trembling as they made their vows in the parlor of another Lutheran parsonage. I bet it was like mine, with dark woodwork and lace curtains and the smell of diapers. Still, I felt years of training slipping away from me in a matter of minutes as I agreed to the “wedding.” All my pastoral actions were occurring outside the lines and away from the sanctuary—an unauthorized Eucharist in a hospital, a pickup wedding in my house. I invited them to walk over to the church, but they politely but firmly declined on the tacit grounds of their own unworthiness.

“Witnesses,” I said, “we must have witnesses,” again, with no earthly idea of the truth or falsity of the statement. I walked down the short hall to the kitchen where my own pregnant wife was fixing supper with Sarah wrapped around one of her legs.

“I need you,” I said.

Soon our little tableau was in place. Leeta and Shane stood before me, Tracy at Leeta’s side, our Sarah gazing in from the doorway, trying not to smile at the strange goings-on.

The bride, six months pregnant, in her white Venture Mart shift, looked dark-eyed and radiant. The matron of honor, eight and a half months pregnant in a Carnaby Street mini-maternity dress, nervously brushed her long blond hair away from her face. The women were smiling and blooming with life; the men were trying not to make a mistake. The groom appeared pale but steady, a little moist beneath the nose. The minister was wearing bell-bottomed corduroys and a wool sweater over which he had draped a white stole. He kept his eyes in his book. To an outsider peering through one of the large windows in the study, the scene might have seemed borrowed from a French farce or a Monty Python skit.

At the book-appointed time, I laid the stole across Leeta and Shane’s clutched hands and onto her belly, read the right words, and the deed was done. Shane and Leeta got themselves married. They left in a rusted El Camino, seated well apart from one another like an old married couple. They looked sad beyond knowing.

Two nights later in that same interminable week the telephone rang at about 3 a.m. “Pastor,” the voice on the other end said, pronouncing it Pestur, “Ed Franco. My Doral is here in St. Joe’s. Gall bladder’s rupturin’. It ain’t good. It ain’t good at all. We’re goin’ to have surgery in 30, 40 minutes. We need you here—if you can.”

“Of course,” I said. “St. Joe’s?” Did I understand the difference between the Front Way and the Back Way out of town, he asked. I didn’t, and he explained. He gave me clear directions from the driveway of the parsonage over the Back Way to the hard road, then to 140 directly into Upper Alton and to St. Joseph’s Hospital. I was into my clerical gear and out of the house in five minutes.

The leafless trees along the canopied Back Way were dripping with fog and deep darkness. I caught only glimpses of the Davidson place and the Gunthers’ peeling outbuildings as I flew by. An ancient haying machine was eerily backlit by the

Gunthers' security light; propane tanks stood awkwardly like foals on skinny struts. But in the night and fog everything had become strange to me again. A time for goblins to shriek out of the forest. As I slowed near the Felders' curve an enormous German shepherd roared out of nowhere and scared the hell out of me. I felt like a spy or an astronaut on a dangerous mission. Of course, if it was dangerous, it was only because I was driving like a maniac on unfamiliar roads, and my mind was racing with yet another adventure in ministry.

At three-thirty in the morning one does not easily walk into a small-town hospital. The doors were locked, and it appeared that everyone had turned in for the night. This was an unassuming place, more like a neighborhood B&B than a full-service, Ramada-type hospital. My clerical collar finally got me into the building, but by the time I arrived at Doral's room she was nowhere to be found.

I raced down toward the OR, passing through a couple of no admittance doors, and found the Francos strangely alone in a laundry alcove next to the operating room. Through the crack of the OR door the light blazed harshly, but in the alcove the light was mercifully dim. The only decoration on the wall was a picture of Joseph the Carpenter with the boy Jesus, who was lighting his father's workplace with a candle. A red fire extinguisher was hung in an arrangement beside the picture. Doral and her gurney were parked to one side. Ed hovered above her, nervously petting and patting her.

The Francos were a childless, middle-aged couple who, although she was a Semanns and they never missed a Sunday, were not prominent members of the church, perhaps because Ed not only came from Blaydon but was (according to my Tuesday rundown with the elders and with Leonard Semanns, the president of the congregation) of "foreign extraction." Doral was as thick and bouffant as Ed was skinny and bald. You could feel their love for one another in the shadows of the alcove.

"Are we glad to see you," Ed said, as though I was about to make a difference.

Once I came face to face with them I realized that I hadn't brought a little book or any other tools for ministry. I wasn't sure what was expected of me. If there was a ritual for this sort of situation, I didn't know it. But I did take a good look at Doral, her hair slightly undone, expressive eyes moving from my face to Ed's and back, her face and arms pasty with sweat. She was the most frightened person I had ever

seen.

They looked at me expectantly, but I didn’t know what to say or how to open a conversation. I didn’t know the Francos. They corresponded to a type of parishioner I had in my head, but nothing more. I must have known people like them in my boyhood congregation. Surely, we had a great deal in common, but at the moment what we had was silence. It was very quiet in the alcove.

What came, finally, was a fragment of a shared script. I said, "The Lord be with you."

To which Ed and Doral replied in unison, "And with thy spirit."

I said, "Lift up your hearts."

They said, "We lift them to the Lord."

And suddenly the Lord became as palpable as Ed’s love for Doral. What was disheveled and panicky recomposed itself. The Lord assumed His rightful place as Lord of the Alcove, and the three of us wordlessly acknowledged the presence. It was as if Ed and Doral and I had begun humming the same melody from our separate childhoods.

This was no longer me alone desperately talking toward the treetops in prep school. That night the Spirit moved like a gentle breeze among us and created something ineffable and real. We prayed together, then recited the Lord’s Prayer; and whatever it was that happened came to an end as quickly as it had begun. My little part in the drama was over.

My first week as pastor had been a week of signs.

I took the drive home from the hospital at a more leisurely rate of speed, returning via the Front Way through town. A delicate line of pink neon extended across the eastern horizon. Each pasture gently overlapped its neighbor like a becalmed, gray-green sea until the folded pastures met the sky. The town was silhouetted against this dawn with a narrative sweep. At least one light shone in every home place. The little houses, in which the old folks were stealing an extra hour’s sleep, remained dark.

Soon I entered my own dark house, slipped into my own bed warmed like an oven by my pregnant wife, and stole an extra hour myself.