Called to account: The importance of pastoral evaluations

by Peter W. Marty in the July 22, 2015 issue

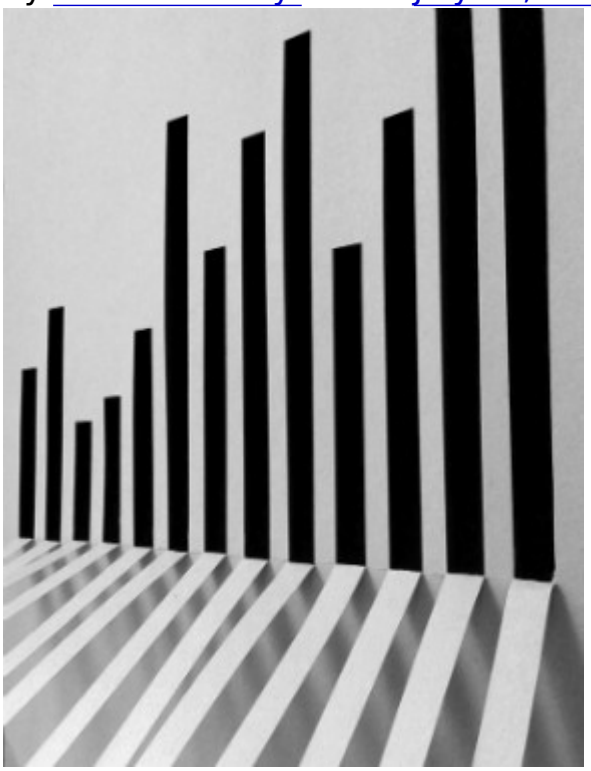

Image by Daniel Richardson

Of the three historic professions—law, medicine, and ministry—ministry is the only one that functions without a regulatory body overseeing its practitioners.

My primary care physician, who has operated his practice for 35 years, must pass certification exams every seven years if he wants to stay in business. That hurdle involves weeks and even months of late night studying. My attorney must meet mandatory continuing education and certifying requirements each year and report to a State Supreme Court commission.

Pastors of congregations are in a different league. They aren't required to have a license to perform or retain their position. No federal or state examiners drop in for site visits. No certification exams are required. Continuing education is recommended but typically optional. A pastor can even obtain an ordination certificate online.

On one level, pastoral ministry is about as free-floating an enterprise as hang gliding. Pastors get to make up most of the details of their weeks by designing their hours, deciding which commitments to undertake, and choosing tasks that fit their moods and schedules. My own observation is that when personal initiative fails to take hold in a pastor's early self-identity, trouble usually lies ahead. Very little fruitful ministry emerges when a pastor spends his day cruising the Internet, reading e-mail, and waiting for the phone to ring. This doesn't even take into account the clergy self-care movement, which makes its own demands on the self.

Woody Allen's old adage about "showing up being 80 percent of life" doesn't serve a pastor well, at least not as one's highest work principle. Where showing up is the extent of a pastor's vocational depth, a congregation can expect to flounder.

In his commentary on the First Epistle of John, Augustine includes the line, "Love God and do what you will." More than a few clergy have co-opted this idea, whether they are aware of Augustine's words or not. Augustine was suggesting that when our love for God is complete, we know what we must do with our lives. But twisting this idea to shape a freewheeling concept of ministry provides license for pastors to do pretty much whatever they please. When judicatory leaders get called in to mediate congregational crises, sometimes a "love God and do what you will" leadership style is a big part of the problem.

If there is a relaxed attitude on oversight within the profession of ministry, it's partly a result of the way the church and its pastors historically have viewed the concept of call. One's call or vocation in life may indeed be what Martin Luther liked to refer to as *gift*. But the interpretation of an individual's call to parish ministry should not be in private, untouchable territory. There are public responsibilities that accompany this gift of vocation.

Admittedly, an inner call from God can inspire one's soul. Deployed wrongly, however, it can function as a distancing mechanism between a pastor and her congregation. This is especially true when a pastor likes to refer to this call frequently, believing that his flock can't wait to hear all about it.

I once received a call from a congregational president who was seeking advice after her pastor responded to her with these testy words: "Please do not question my effectiveness or decisions as your pastor. I feel like you are doubting my call. You are challenging what God has summoned me to do." This kind of thinking is a

disservice to the church.

A byproduct of the largely unregulated environment surrounding the ministry is a highly uneven pattern of clergy and staff evaluation. Some congregations have well-developed processes of assessment, support, and goal setting. Others have no review mechanisms whatsoever. Most congregations are somewhere in the middle; they rely mostly on informal comments that do not helpfully assess or nurture job performance.

Congregations with these loose or informal arrangements may have a pastoral relations committee, and denominational leaders typically encourage the formation of such teams. As the committee name suggests, its primary work involves the pastor. For congregations with more staff than just the pastoral leader, there may be a mutual ministry committee, staff support committee, personnel committee, or some similarly named team of church members.

A pastoral relations committee can play a pivotal role in advising and supporting the pastor. In fact, its typical job responsibility is to give focused and consistent support to the pastor or pastoral team. Confidentiality in this work is essential. Given the stress factors that clergy often face, a pastoral relations committee that embodies a nurturing spirit can be indispensable. Loneliness, work imbalance, absence of confidants, overwhelming expectations, financial worries, and fatigue can make ministry exceedingly tough.

A well-functioning pastoral relations committee remains sensitive to the dynamics of the clergy-congregation relationship. It aims, in its best moments at least, to create a climate that Paul described to the Galatians: “Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (6:10).

But support for a pastor is not the same thing as reviewing a pastor’s performance. A committee’s advisory role can easily hide the need for critical reflection and important feedback. Family systems consultant Peter Steinke refers to issues of “emotionality” when “a pastor is not measured well, but loved regardless.” Love is wonderful, but an organization needs more than love to operate effectively. It’s a good idea to measure accountability and competence. It’s invaluable for a pastor to be able to meet deadlines, tell the truth, and avoid confusing busyness with effectiveness.

So what keeps congregations and clergy from establishing healthy practices for evaluation? Why are we reluctant to develop dependable processes that would strengthen employees' performance and increase the congregation's confidence in its staff? A number of realities thwart good practice.

First, there's the kindness dilemma. People who love their pastor often have a hard time offering critical evaluation of him. "Most people are too nice when it comes to evaluating their minister," says Ron Bockhaus, pastor of Shepherd of the Mountains Lutheran Church in Estes Park, Colorado. "I don't want someone with an axe to grind coming at me, but some candid observations can be extremely helpful."

Like someone who's reluctant to grade the behavior or activity of her spouse, congregation members are often not thrilled about measuring the performance of a church employee whom they love. When one adds to this the belief that God has sent their pastor specifically to them, members of the mutual ministry committee may prefer to avoid conducting a review. "Who are we to assume an evaluative role? This one came to us from God."

A quick peek at Paul's writings may slow the committee even further. Paul appeals to people in Christian community to "respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord . . . esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12–13). He cautions against letting "evil talk come out of your mouths" (Eph. 4:29), and counsels, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another" (4:32). Of course good evaluative work does not have to include evil talk, hard-heartedness, or an unforgiving spirit. But when they are reviewing paid staff, people in the pews are often afraid of coming up short with "words that give grace to those who hear them" (4:29).

Second, pastors and congregations confuse affirmation with feedback. Most pastors experience an abundance of affirmation and a shortage of constructive feedback. The praise that clergy hear is often quite general in nature—"Good sermon, Pastor"—but the plaudits are still more numerous than in most other workplaces. Even churches experiencing low morale or significant struggle usually have people who love to compliment their pastor.

Collecting compliments feels good. Who doesn't desire the respect and approval of others, especially when it leads to love and embrace? But there's a seductive element to praise. When friends stroke our ego or pour on the verbal applause, it's

easy to convince ourselves that we are better than we really are.

The gift of a compliment, as rewarding as it may be, is no substitute for constructive feedback. Praise may even mask troubled areas of job performance that need serious attention. Sometimes there are big gaps in a pastor's work life that must be unearthed. Helpful feedback loops assist clergy and other staff in fashioning the nitty-gritty details of ordinary days and lessons in how to be disciplined in their work habits. A pastor has to desire feedback, of course.

This brings us to the third point. When solid evaluation processes do not exist, clergy themselves are often reluctant to set them up. This apprehension stems from a range of anxieties. Sometimes clergy are bewildered because they don't have a basic template for a review process or firsthand experience with work reviews. In other situations, pastors worry about losing control. New assessment strategies feel like a threat to their leadership instincts. Having others size up their work performance and character seems scary.

But avoiding staff evaluations is not a prescription for building healthy congregations. When pastors drag their feet in getting a review procedure under way for their own work, they discourage a dependable process for other staff too.

Then there are clergy who want nothing to do with the word *job*. It's a debased concept, they insist, one that's offensive to their vocational self-understanding. "How can you give me a job performance review when I am not even in a job? I have answered a *call*." But odds are high that the job isn't getting done when an attitude of "my work standards are off limits" prevails.

"One of the churches I served went through a crisis where the pastor was asked to leave," notes Selah Covenant Church pastor Brad Hill in Selah, Washington. "The pastoral relations committee had not been meeting . . . The pastor himself had disbanded it ten years earlier." When the congregation finally recognized the extent of the pastor's performance issues, his least disgraceful option was to resign.

Some clergy, and often a few key leaders within a congregation, fear that the introduction of staff evaluations will prompt some in the church to "run it like a business." Many in the ecclesiastical world dread the emergence of what they call "a corporate mind-set." In my experience, pastors who have the least amount of secular work experience are usually the most nervous about personnel policies "being conformed to this world." Yet the influence on church governance of certain

tried and true business practices does not have to infiltrate preaching or Bible studies. The adaptation of thoughtful and well-tested organizational strategies can be invaluable for growing congregational trust.

In reading the Gospel accounts, Larry Wood, pastor of St. Andrew by the Sea Church in Gulf Shores, Alabama, wonders if we shouldn't view Jesus' disciples as a staff. The scriptures teach accountability, he argues, and "the Gospels serve as a kind of manual for how a staff might be groomed and entrusted."

Sometimes church employees are their own worst enemy. Lewis Galloway, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, says, "We used to use a numbered ranking system on one part of our old evaluation forms. But we found that with a whole lot of perfectionists and overachievers on staff, receiving anything less than a 5 proved traumatic. Open conversation ended once a 4 or less came into play." Galloway has moved to a more narrative approach these days, with good results.

Finally, an intimidation factor can prevent the creation of a regular evaluation system. A congregational board doesn't always understand everything a pastor does, says Carol Pinkham Oak, rector at St. John's Episcopal Church in Ellicott City, Maryland. "Even though I've asked for a formal review, the vestry doesn't feel particularly qualified to do it. So I do my own internal evaluation."

John Horn, dean at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Davenport, Iowa, has had a similar experience. "If I didn't push the vestry, they'd never review me. Staff evaluation in churches is an interesting phenomenon. If the church is running smoothly, the leadership may figure that staff evaluations are unnecessary. If the church runs into trouble, it's too late to have established good habits of annual review. The hasty set-up of a review process during a crisis suddenly feels like an investigation, a politically motivated maneuver. That's not good."

In some traditions the entire congregation is invited to be a part of the pastor's review. If ever there were truth to the tired claim that a pastor has as many bosses as members in the congregation, this would be it. One Mennonite church pastoral review form elicits congregational feedback by asking notably subjective questions. "Are you proud of your pastor?" "Does he/she approach your image of what a pastor should be?" "Does he/she demonstrate a positive, congenial, and hopeful spirit?" Clergy dwelling in this kind of habitat can only hope that the Holy Spirit will work overtime to infuse a charitable spirit among parishioners.

For his part, the apostle Paul received plenty of critique for his ministry, some of it harsh and biting. Some Christians at Corinth found him to be double-faced (2 Cor. 10:1); others found his letters weighty, his body weak, and his preaching contemptible (10:10); still others accused him of overstepping certain boundaries (10:14). A number of “super-apostles” questioned his general competency (11:5–6).

Pastors today can turn to a variety of methods for evaluating their own and others’ job performances. If you belong to a church where a system of reflective feedback is in place, be thankful. If your congregation lacks the mechanisms that allow for thoughtful review, it may be time to light a fire under someone’s imagination—perhaps your own. As a seasoned pastor in my company put it to me recently, “Praise is wonderful. I can’t deny I love the boost. But it is short-term. Constructive feedback has staying power. That’s where I receive the gift of learning what my strengths and weaknesses are actually doing to my ministry.”

Read the sidebar article on evaluation essentials.