

Clerical Error: CLERICALISM, LEADERSHIP, AND PASTORAL CARE

BY HELEN PEARSON

For fifty years, I have lived, worked, and socialized in the Newbold community—both in a paid and a voluntary capacity—as salaried teacher and PR Director, as contracted consultant, counselor, and in the church with various leadership roles. My husband, Michael, was, for fourteen years vice-principal of the college and, for over twenty years before that, member and then Head of the Theology Department (as it was called). Michael retired in 2013. We continue to live and worship in the community and together run the Newbold Diversity Lectures.

When Bonnie Dwyer invited me to reflect on Reinder Bruinsma’s Spectrum account of the conflict between the TED (Trans-European Division) and the college, I eventually decided that my reflections centered around three subjects: clericalism, theology, and healing.

Clericalism

Officially, the TED-Newbold dispute concerns the training of “front-line pastors.” Both in content and direction, I believe the process manifests a kind clericalism—a policy of maintaining or upholding the power of a religious hierarchy at the expense, in this case, of academics, and professional lay people in general.

When the pandemic came and organizational and financial constraints threatened more than ever before, the leaders in the TED resorted to a “clerical” model of the church’s needs, privileging “front-line pastors.” When the organizational cake needed to be cut (and the need for it to be smaller has been mooted for years), leaders have eliminated Newbold’s work for the development of the lay church. Newbold in all departments has always trained loyal, thoughtful Adventist lay people with a passion for making a difference in the world. Newbold alumni work as valued scholars, teachers, accountants, business managers, musicians, principals, aid workers. Many of them are lay leaders. They support and enrich the churches to whom the “front-line pastors” bring new converts.

By all accounts, the process of reorganization has, in the name of “front-line mission,” similarly discounted the insights of Newbold professionals. As I understand it, the frustration among various staff members is rooted in their own experience of proposing changes pre-October 2020 and finding their proposals left unconsidered, and they themselves being ignored or characterized as disgruntled obstacles to TED ideas for progress. Such attitudes breed

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discouragement. They also suggest an elite, clericalist thinking among the TED leadership, of which there were hints in Bruinsma’s article.

My understanding is that this conflict has some of its deep roots in top-down approaches to change. Reports from many Newbold sources have painted a picture of an uncommunicative culture, superficial bonhomie covering an unwillingness to consult, exclusive meetings in closed groups, side-lining of anyone who questioned the process or asked, “what’s next?” and little personnel support, alongside over-reliance on legal processes. Accounts of the process echo a recent legal judgment in an employment tribunal in one of the TED’s territories, which described the approach of the church to its employees as “focused on confidentiality at the expense of transparency.”¹ We heard little or no evidence of the sort of behavior we all long to find in followers of the One who said “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you.”²

And that was all before Reinder Bruinsma’s *Spectrum* article was published. When Bonnie Dwyer sent an invitation to friends of Newbold to contribute to the conversation on the *Spectrum* website, I was intrigued. I forwarded Bonnie’s invitation to those of my Facebook friends for whom I had emails. Some of them contributed to the *Spectrum* conversation. A significant number of others expressed an unwillingness to do so.

I was surprised at how many staff, students, and recent alumni wrote back citing their experience of the unwillingness of people in power at the TED and the college to listen to dissent or questions. They harbored fears for their own or others’ employment prospects if

they were to comment on the article. A current student whose permission I have for an anonymous quote said,

I wish I would know that this church institution supports us enough to have and voice an opinion different from what the authority dictates, but what is happening at Newbold is the biggest proof of the opposite. Hence, regardless of the great pain, without strong support I don’t think I can fight this battle.

For many people involved, the Newbold changes were being carried out in the same spirit as the administrators now wish their pastors to be trained—with unquestioning loyalty. Somehow, it seems, those who work for the TED and the college feel they are simply required to “do as they are told.”

Theology

The TED rationale for the change seems to derive from its role as “the owners” of the college—a corporate conception of organizations derived from a secular profit-making model. In a community-based model, a consultation between all the stakeholders and all those who invest and participate in an organization is called for—or at the very least, with the teaching faculty and staff! As the New Testament puts it, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”³ To have worked out this principle at Newbold, and to imagine *together* ways of continuing the college’s long tradition of training leaders of *all* kinds, might have built community rather than dividing it.

Other models from the Bible are important in reflecting on this decision. What kind of God is modeled in the interaction between the two groups? It is an oft-forgotten biblical truth that we become like what we worship.⁴ What kind of God does the TED process model? Many preferred Adventist pictures of God are of dominant power relationships. Thinking of God as king, ruler, judge, father can be a source of strength and courage, but such a model can also encourage, or at least act as a rationale for, resorting to power-based relationships between pastors and congregations—and between the TED and Newbold.

Many Adventists are asking, “Is the Old Testament God really an authoritarian patriarchal ruler who requires unquestioning obedience?” The late chief Rabbi in the UK, Jonathan Sacks, didn’t seem to think so! In his book on Genesis,⁵ he observed that, while there are 613 commands to “obey” in the Torah, the Hebrew has no word for “obey.” Sacks suggests that what God asks of people is, “a greater virtue than obedience.” What God seeks to develop in us is commitment and responsibility. To worship and follow God involves first paying attention and developing understanding. Discipleship involves a two-way learning relationship where we respond like Abraham and Jacob, by dialoguing with God.

Such a model has implications—both for leaders and followers. Adventists have tended to follow an “heroic” Western model of leadership, where a leader “solves” a problem and leads a co-dependent group of individuals who have minimal personal vision or ability to master the process of change. Newbold’s theologians may have many faults, but lack of vision or ability are not among them.

An alternative non-European, and more biblical, model derives from the Zulu word, *ubuntu*—defined as “I am because you are.” Administrators and theologians need each other, front-line pastors will fail without their

insights and those of trained lay members—able-bodied and disabled, black and white, female and male, old and young, etc. etc. The TED claims its process has been consultative. But the breadth of the spectrum of those consulted, the transparency of the process and most importantly, the numbers of people involved in those consultations and in the resolving of any disagreements, are undisclosed.

Nobody pretends that church leadership in the twenty-first century is a walk in the park. But the extent to which leadership is relational, collaborative, and negotiated depends very much on the depth of leaders’ commitment to community, together with the imaginative, spiritual, and facilitative gifts and skills of both leader and led. Guiding the discernment of the “mind of God” is not the same as guarding traditional understandings or telling people what “the truth” is. Post-heroic leadership has been described by some as “building the bridge while you walk over it”—for that, much community work is vital. Many Adventist leaders seem to believe that heroic nineteenth-century theological bridges are the only ones to support them in today’s global pandemic.

Healing

So, what can be done to heal this situation of family breakdown between these two groups of committed people who seem to share so many common values and goals—and among whom we count some personal friends?

I suggest that there are two healing strategies available; one strategy may include the other. Adventists are not the only Christians in conflict. That may be why La Sierra University has set up its own Center for Conflict Resolution. The roots of all conflict are complex but the idea of mediation and facilitation *between* Christians is biblical,⁶ as the Mennonite “Bridge-builders” and the

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Anglican LLLF (Living in Love and Faith process)⁷ both recognize. These two religious groups are heavily invested in their own challenging community-building processes.

They recognize that facilitation is a useful organizational strategy. As a neutral process, where participants are enabled to look at their values and preconceptions, skilled facilitation helps to identify the roots of conflict. At the very least, it can slowly rebuild trust between individuals and groups. Understanding and forgiveness may follow.

The second strategy—maybe part of the facilitation—is to discuss the issue at the heart of the conflict—the integration of “front-line pastoring” and ongoing pastoral care throughout the church. Questions like, what different kinds of care do different types of twenty-first-century people need?—and, perhaps most of all, how can we as a church create organizations where there is a balance between proclamation and pastoral care? How can we nurture each other and contemporary people with what is truly needed for spiritual growth rather than what we think people ought to need?

From my observation, the biggest irony in this conflict over pastoral training is that many TED workers and Newbold theologians lack pastoral care themselves. Individually, many of them recognize that. I know them all as committed and passionate and hard-working. They are also stressed and stretched with scant opportunity to receive as well as give.

So, who pastors the theologians and the Newbold staff in general? The budget for college chaplaincy has been repeatedly pared. Formal pastoral care on campus has been in shorter and shorter supply throughout our time at the college.

The pastoral deficit equally applies to TED personnel and union leaders. The TED is a multi-national, multi-cultural division with 90,000 members in fourteen fields and twenty-two countries. Much that is demanded of personnel in any multi-national corporation is required of the seventeen people who work in this huge territory, *plus* they need time to develop themselves spiritually and professionally. Pre-pandemic traveling for many was about 130 days a year. What sort of ongoing pastoral care is available to these traveling souls of whom super-human resilience is required?

In both groups, the culture of the church at all levels

tends to favor action rather than reflective prayer, and “toughing it out” over “bearing and sharing one another’s burdens.” All needs tend to be side-lined in the pressure to “save the world.”

The two strategies I describe will not overcome the challenge the Church faces as it shares the faith of the Second Advent described as “soon” now for 177 years. But led by the Spirit, they will certainly help to develop a group characterized by something that transcends hierarchy and clericalism. A group described in the words, “How these Christians love one another.” One former staff member commented with the words, “Only beloved people can pass on belovedness.” It’s the heart of the matter!

Endnotes

1. <https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions?keywords=Adventist&fbclid=IwAR20O3Ho-3gpEjhPv1org1GS2YUqK62mX8WJ4Qkmh6vjH34GIyHXxA1tL5Q>
2. Matthew 20:25–26.
3. 1 Corinthians 12:21.
4. Psalm 15.
5. Jonathan Sacks, *Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).
6. Matthew 18.
7. <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-learning-hub>



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