Competency, Spirituality, and
Core-Identity in Pastors

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*I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future
is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to
offer but his or her own vulnerable self."*
Henri Nouwen

The academic pursuit of leadership produces knowledge. Personal and spiritual experience cultivates wisdom. This paper combines both. I have taught and guided 78 pastors the process of producing a personal plan of competency development. Moreover, I have faced and continue to face personal challenges as the executive director of a leadership center. This paper is a reflection on the spiritual needs of pastors who are developing as leaders.

Pastors require spiritual help when developing effective leadership competencies. The spiritual challenge for pastors is to minister out of authenticity. Competent spiritual leaders minister out of a core-identity in Christ. For pastors, effective self-learning is grounded in spiritual practices and resources. The spiritual practice of the desert fathers and mothers is a powerful resource that can lead to authentic core-identity

The Spiritual Challenge – To Minister Out of Authenticity

In the past 3 years, my colleague, Terry Wardle, and I have conducted in-depth assessments of 47 pastors. These pastors demonstrate a hunger for deeper spirituality and a desire to depend upon spiritual resources. They want to live authentically in Christ. But these pastors also want to be effective in ministry. They desire to make a difference in the lives of others, the community of faith, and society as a whole.

The pastors demonstrate a tendency to exchange personal authenticity for ministry effectiveness. They tie self-identity to people pleasing and performance based self-assessment. Such behavior is dysfunctional for the spiritual leader. It thwarts spiritual hunger and distances spiritual resources. It

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displaces the motive for ministry from genuineness to success.

I am conducting a study of 68 pastors deemed excellent by their peers. They report their greatest fear in ministry is being "irrelevant." They fear that they "will not make a difference," "the changes won't last," "church is out of touch," "I will not finish well," "be rejected," "people will go back into old patterns" or "fall out of the will of God." To appear "irrelevant" seems to be a primary test of spiritual leadership. Scott Rodin calls this the challenge to be a "leader of no reputation" (Rodin, 2002).

To become a leader of no reputation is the first step in overcoming leadership gaps. This is a difficult and spiritual moment. I find the spiritual process demands setting aside the desire for effectiveness in ministry in quest of authenticity in Christ. It is choosing authenticity as a pre-requisite for effectiveness. In simple heart language, I choose to be real and deal with my warts rather than put on a front and pretend I am successful.

Effective Competency – The Expression of Authenticity

The competency movement was launched in 1973 when David McClelland published a paper, "Testing for Competency Rather than Intelligence" (McClelland, 1973). Competency is an *underlying characteristic* that predicts behavior (Spencer and Spencer, 93, page 9). These characteristics indicate "ways of behaving or thinking, generalizing across situations, and enduring for a reasonably long period of time" (Guion, 1991).

The study of competency and the church has been advanced by Father David Nygren and sister Mariam Ukeritis and also the work of D. Martin Butler and Robert D. Herman. Nygren and Ukeritis conclude that exceptional leaders of faith communities are:

> "...grounded in faith, able to acknowledge the centrality of God in their lives. They have a high need to achieve personally and have a clear sense of the impact the congregation could have. They are characterized by objectivity and compassion. With all these attributes, the outstanding leaders do not have a strong need to belong to the very groups they are attempting to lead, yet they find meaning precisely in that context of faith, membership and impact. The outstanding leader has a clear vision of the future and successfully employs the means to both gain the support of the congregation for the direction and to implement the decisions of the group" (Nygren and Ukeritis, 1999)

The exceptional minister of a congregation exhibits patterns of behavior that are distinct from mediocre ministers (Butler and Herman, 1999). The behaviors of exceptional minister are as follows:

- The exceptional minister checks work progress against plans to see if it works.
- The exceptional minister handles church-related problems and crises in a confident and decisive manner
- The exceptional minister plans in detail how to accomplish a task or project.
- The exceptional minister presents a policy or strategy in general terms and then asks you to determine specific action steps for implementing it.
- The exceptional minister develops enthusiasm for a task or project by appealing to your pride in accomplishing a challenging task or doing something never done before.
- The exceptional minister has been able to help this church adapt to changing conditions.
- The exceptional minister shows that s/he really cares about people.
- The exceptional minister uses a style of leadership that is flexible and responsible.
- The exceptional minister demonstrates a style of lifelong learning through continual education, research, and study.
- The exceptional minister does not frighten people with his/her dominating superior attitude.
- The exceptional minister's lifestyle does not involve illicit sexual activity and/or gambling.

The pastors I have worked with hastily grasp at competency theory as a means of producing effectiveness. Yet a plan of imitating exceptional ministers is a tempting but false invitation to greatness. Furthermore, this shallow interpretation of competency theory plays into the pastors' dysfunctional behaviors of people pleasing and performance-based identity.

For pastors with a hunger for spirituality and a desire to depend upon spiritual resources, the results are empty and demanding. These pastors need a bridge from social-science theory to spiritual experience. They yearn to understand the inner processes of change and leadership development.

Competency is founded in a person's underlying characteristics and core identity. True competency is an expression of authenticity.

For spiritual leaders, core identity is the foundation. For the Christian minister, core-identity is in Christ. This core-identity influences the inner characteristics which are expressed through calling in predictable patterns of thinking and behaving. In my work with pastors and other spiritual leaders, I teach that inward competency is expressed outwardly in *"a pattern of effective behavior that flows out of core identity, character and calling, enabling you to fulfill your role with excellence by meeting the needs of the present situation to the glory of Christ and for the good of others."* [1]

Christian Spirituality – The Path of Core-identity

Internal change begins with core identity which impacts characteristics and calling. "We don't change because it is a good idea; we change because we are in love or in crisis" (Quinn, Seminar notes, 1999). New love and new loss challenge identity. Embracing change is a self-identity issue.

Leadership literature introduces self-identity as answering the question, "Who am I?" (Gollwitzer and Kirchhof, 1998). Schein posits the leader's identity as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Schein, 1978). The motive to develop or alter self identity has been attributed to fear of death (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986), the fear of social exclusion (Baumeister and Tice, 1990), the need for self-completion (Gollwitzer and Wicklund, 1985) or the pervasive need to see oneself in a positive light (Greenwald, 1980).

Fear, overt or covert, drives the need for self identity. Fear driven self-identity is enacted in the lives of the pastors I have interviewed. The pastors reported being fear driven in the need for acceptance and accomplishment. They give evidence to experiences when they forfeited authentic self-identity to present a more effective career-identity (for this phenomenon in a secular setting, see Baumeister, 1982).

Leadership theories are predisposed to anchor self-identity in career performance. Strong career identity, a hallmark in career motivation theory (London, 1983; London and Noe, 1997), is "to *define oneself by work.* It consists of job, organizational, and professional involvement, as well as the needs for advancement, recognition, and being a leader. Viewing oneself as a leader is one form of career identity" (London, 2002, *italics* mine).

Pastors need a deeper foundation than career identity or self identity. My colleague, Terry Wardle, uses the term "core-identity" (Wardle, 2000). Self-identity refers to "how individuals view themselves in relationship to others" (London, 2002). Christian core-identity is who I am in relationship to Christ.

The pastors I have worked with need and respond to core identity centered in Christ. The basis of core identity is not performance but position. It is not fear driven but secured in the experience of Divine love. It is the spiritual pattern of change found in the desert fathers and mothers of the second and third centuries. It is a way of change that descends before it ascends (Ephesians 4:9). The way of the desert is a step down to authenticity.

Anselm Gruen, O.S.B. is a Benedictine monk of the abbey of Muensterschwarzachy in Germany. He regularly offers workshops for European executives and professionals on the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers. His approach is to help leaders resist the temptation to climb the heights of effectiveness. Rather, he teaches the way of the desert where one enters spirituality from below:

> "The desert fathers teach us a spirituality from below. They show us that we have to begin with ourselves and our passions. The way to God, for the desert fathers, always passes through self-knowledge. Evagrius Ponticus puts it this way: 'If you want to know God, learn to know yourself first.' Without self-knowledge we are always in danger of having our ideas of God turn into mere projections. There are pious individuals who take flight from their own reality into religion. They aren't transformed by their prayer and piety; they simply use it to lift themselves over others, to confirm their own infallibility.
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> In the desert fathers we meet an entirely different from of piety. The goals here are, above all, sincerity and authenticity." (Gruen, 1999)

This is the spirituality of a "leader of no reputation" (Rodin, 2002). This is the path of leadership that leaves nothing to offer but the vulnerability of an authentic self in Christ (Nouwen, 1996). To define self out of authentic relationship in Christ rather than relative effectiveness with others is the spiritual foundation for developing competency.

To experience core identity "in Christ" (Paul's oft used phrase) is to follow the spiritual path of Christ (Philippians 2:5-8). My own expression of the journey is to move from "hut" to "wilderness" to "mountain." The *hut* is the

inward positioning of the soul in anticipation of experiencing the presence of Christ. Father Moses instructed a young recruit, "Out, go to your *kellion* (hut), and sit down, and the *kellion* will teach you everything." The hut is the place where I rediscover in fresh experience the love of Christ for me and the power of Christ in me. It is not theological presuppositions, but inward experience that transforms.

The movement from hut to *wilderness* produces anxiety. It is the experience of self-insight. Inward work is re-examining story, wounds, strength, motives, and traits. The desert fathers called this "fighting the demons." The fathers and mothers of the desert did not believe battling demons was a personal endeavor. The monk fought demons on behalf of society (see Jesus in the Desert, Matthew 4:1-11). A minister encounters his or her personal demons on behalf of the congregation. What a leader gleans from this battle will be precisely what the congregation needs.

The journey leads to the *mountain*. The scriptures often identify a mountain as a place of calling (see Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 5:1-12). Calling is partnership with God. It is establishing and reaffirming your relationship with the purpose of God in the world. Calling is fulfilled in many roles and places.

The spiritual work done in the "*hut*," the "*wilderness*," and the "*mountain*," bears fruit in patterns of effective behavior. The patterns are effective precisely because they are authentic.

Self-directed Learning – The Need for Spiritual Empowerment

Authenticity must be translated into effective behavior. Richard Boyatzis, during three decades of work in leadership development, outlines the process of self-directed learning (Boyatzis, 1994). The process involves five discoveries: 1) Who I want to be, 2) what are my strengths and gaps, 3) my learning agenda, 4) experimenting with new and practicing new behavior, thoughts and feelings to the point of mastery, and 5) developing supportive and trusting relationships that make change possible.

I learned this process by team teaching a Doctor of Ministry class with Dr. Lisa Berlinger in the spring of 1999. Since then, I have helped 78 pastors and 54 community leaders develop self-learning plans. I have learned that the pastors I work with need a clear spiritual emphasis as they develop learning plans. I accomplish this in three ways:

First, *root the plan in a personal quest for authenticity*. Writing a plan is a lesson in strategic thinking. I ground learning plans in a clear articulation of

personal call and core values. Revisiting the "call story" and discovering core values anchors the plan for behavioral change in a quest for authenticity.

Second, *encourage empowerment through the Holy Spirit.* The learning plan explicitly names and utilizes spiritual resources. Pastors welcome and need this emphasis. I encourage action steps that include spiritual disciplines and exercises, especially prayer.

Third, *depend on "moments of grace."* This is a simple exercise that increases spiritual confidence, motivation, and transformation. Look for moments when the inward movement of Christ's Spirit confirms the process of transformation. Moments of grace include those inward assurances that evoke the response, "I'm needed," or "I'm changing," or "I'm effective" or "I'm authentic." These are moments to be celebrated and remembered.

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