

Remarks to the Region Executive Ministers Council
Joe Kutter
Acting Executive Director
American Baptist Ministers Council
November 20, 2009

First I want to say thank you for giving me this time in your very busy schedule. I have visited many of you in your regions and in your offices and you have received me with hospitality and grace and I am grateful.

As a Ministers Council, what is our focus? Our focus is:

- Ministers and Ministry
- The person and the vocation
- Healthy people and a vibrant sense of God's call

Our focus is on the practice of ministry, on the women and men who are called to that practice, and on the building of a community of ministerial leaders that is essential to the effectiveness of that practice.

In our purpose statement, you will find three key elements. It says that we “covenant together to deepen our spiritual journeys and to increase our effectiveness. . . .”

1. To covenant together speaks to our call to community
2. Deepening our spiritual journeys speaks to our focus on Christ centered spirituality
3. Increasing our effectiveness speaks to the focus on leadership.

Community, spirituality and leadership are the three foci of our work together.

That being our focus, it is important to identify the context within which we work.

Our first priority is to preach the gospel and to continue the ministries of Christ. That sets the context for everything that we do.

Second, we assert that the primary instrument for God's mission in this world, preaching the gospel and continuing the ministries of Christ, is the church – the Body of Christ. The church is a really “big deal” in the New Testament and in fact it says somewhere that it was for the church that Christ died.

This brings us to ministerial leaders including pastors. The consensus is that he or she is the key player in effective church life.

I believe in the “Priesthood of Believers.” But this is my experience. The critical person in most churches in empowering the “Priesthood of Believers” is the pastoral leader. Ineffective pastoral leaders tend to create an ineffective and dysfunctional “priesthood of believers.”

This much is certain: In an effective church, the pastor may get a little credit. But when the church fails, the pastoral leader will almost certainly bear the blame.

After 39 years of congregational ministry, I can testify that it is a great life, if you're called to it. But it is also a tough job.

The regenerate membership about which our Baptist forbearers dreamed doesn't always happen. Within the church we do not always see Christ-like, Spirit-led decision making. Instead too often it happens that within the church broken people working within broken systems make decisions that make pastoral leadership really hard.

Whatever consensus we may have once had about "Pastoral Authority" has evaporated and too many of our pastors have a hard time exercising the authority that is theirs.

We are a people of the book and in our current culture, the authority of the book is under enormous pressure. We can virtually guarantee television shows this Christmas that will challenge the facts of the New Testament narratives and many who see will have renewed doubts about the ability of scripture to bear witness to the gospel. If the pastor's authority is grounded in his or her mastery of the book and the book is suspect, so too is the pastor's authority.

The culture that supported one style of church life has gone away and we are struggling to adapt to a new culture without sacrificing the core truth of the gospel. No matter what a pastor does, she or he will inevitably disappoint somebody.

Being a ministerial leader, a pastor, can be tough work. Last week, Paul Stevens, the mature director of Central Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program said it simply and cleanly, "It is not the same job as it was when I began."

To increase the complexity, the pastor has a role that sets us apart. There are few, if any, analogous jobs in our society. I speak specifically of the priestly nature of our calling. In our tradition the pastor is the one who most often serves as the mediator between God and God's people. Even with our doctrine of "The Priesthood of All Believers" it is the pastor who is most often called to stand in the priestly role.

Every Sunday morning the pastor gathers the hopes and fears and dreams and sorrows of the people together and offers them to God in the "Pastoral Prayer." The pastor becomes, in that moment, the voice of the people to God. And then the pastor reads from scripture and preaches the sermon and the preaching becomes the voice of God to the people. The pastor stands between, being in one moment the voice of the people and in the next moment the voice of God. It's a priestly thing and it is distinctive to ministerial leaders. But it can also be complex and confusing.

One person offered this image. Remember the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where God is reaching down to Adam and Adam is reaching up to God but their fingers never quiet

touch. The pastor moves in that space between the finger of God and the outstretched hand of humanity.

It is a distinctive, a unique, and sometime a difficult role.

It invites a thousand psychological projections and a thousand expectations and they never line up with one another. And, they can kill you! For those who try to meet all of the expectations and adjust to all of the psychological projections, emotional and spiritual death is inevitable.

In our time many people just don't know what to expect from the priestly pastor" What does the pastor really know or not know? What special powers does she or he have or not have. We make jokes about walking on water or having a special pipe-line to God but for some folk, in the church and out, they are not quite really jokes.

Most people love their pastor. They just don't know what to do with their pastor!

Here is what we know. The people who best walk alongside ministerial leaders are other ministerial leaders. Those who best understand this distinctive life are those who share it. Those who offer the best counsel and guidance are those who offer it from within the vocation. Those who offer the correction that is most likely to be received are those who have faced the same decisions and similar circumstances.

Craig Dykstra is adamant about this. He says that one thing that all effective ministers have in common is that they have networks of clergy friendships. Walking together is essential to spiritual and vocational wholeness!

And that brings us to the Ministers Council. In this environment what is our strategy to support ministerial leaders?

1. Our web site: Between January and October 8, 2009, we had more than 25,000 visits to the Ministers Council web page. It is an effective resource for ministry.
2. Together in Ministry groups continue to be strong. They are the networks of clergy relationships that strengthen ministers and ministry. We have had about 1500 participants through the years and the result has been both the nurture of ministers and the strengthening of ministry for the sake of Christ's church.
3. Strengthening our constituent councils is critical if we are to continue to support ministers and ministry. We are using insights of "Communities of Practice" in workshops that are being offered across the country. Let me be clear. We are not teaching Community of Practice for the sake of teaching the latest and greatest program. We are using it to strengthen local councils who will build, sustain, and encourage the life-giving networks of clergy relationships. The workshops have already been offered in several formats and the response has been positive. We have another 5 or 6 scheduled and are talking with several other regions.
4. It is a new day for the Ministers Council Senate. The summer camp -- show and tell experience is going away and through the process of worshipful work, we are

asking our senators to assume a new level of responsibility for the well-being our shared ministry as a Ministers Council

So Joe, why are you here and what do you want? I'm glad that you asked.

I am looking for partnerships with you, both the REMC and with each of you as the Executive Minister of your region. As a part of that partnership I am asking something of our ministerial leaders and I am asking something of you.

I am asking pastoral leaders to step up in new ways to our responsibilities for our shared vocation and for our life together. As ministerial leaders we are too often dependant upon other experts and leaders. We want regional leaders, professors and consultants to do for us things that we need to do for ourselves.

Given the realities of the day (I doubt that any of you will have larger staffs this year than you had last year) it is essential that we learn to teach one another and to take care of one another as ministerial leaders.

And it is about more than shrinking resources. It is about spiritual, emotional, and personal maturity. It is about assuming responsibility as faithful stewards of this blessed vocation that is ours.

What am I asking from you? I am asking for your support and encouragement. When we are having COP workshops, I invite you to work together with the ministerial leaders of your region to enhance the depth and quality of our ministry.

I am asking you, not to do it for us, but to enhance ministry with us. I am not you to do what belongs to the councils nor to rescue poor behavior but I am asking you to partner with us for effective ministry. I am asking you to support and encourage your regional council and its participation in our national group.

It helps when you do something as simple as sending forward our magazine or monthly newsletter.

I suspect that this may call for a new kind of maturity from both ministerial leaders and regional staff. For some pastors it will mean moving from a "what have you done for me recently" pattern of dependency into a mature partnership with ministerial colleagues including regional staff that asks, "how can we work together to improve our ministry?" And for staff, forgive me if this is harsh, the dependency of your ministerial leaders may often feels like "job security" and it may provide a sense of control. If I can do it for you then I can control what is done! It is one way to stay in charge.

The bottom line is this: In the senate, in workshops, in what I write, and when I am invited to speak, I am advocating and teaching "better ministry through creative partnerships." And genuine partnership happens best among peers.

I am here to say, for all you do, for who you are, thanks. And I pray and hope that together we'll enhance our shared ministry.

Thank you.