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Sustainable church: Practices that make for a lifetime of service

R. Robert Creech
Truett Seminary, Baylor University, USA

Abstract
Since the 1970s, the sustainable agriculture movement has challenged conventional agricultural practices dominating U.S. food production after World War II. These modern practices have demonstrated themselves to be unsustainable. Land and soil are destroyed, farmers abandon their farms, and the life of rural communities is eroded. Wendell Berry and other new agrarian voices call for an ecologically sound food system that takes into account the quality of life of the farmer, the land, and the community. Similarly, conventional ministry practices have taken their toll on both congregations and clergy as the heavy programmatic nature of church life has taken hold during that same period. Pastors and congregations interested in more sustainable ways of ministry might learn from the agricultural metaphor. What are those practices churches and ministers are finding to be good for the clergy, good for the congregation, and good for the communities in which they serve? What might sustainable church life look like? This article investigates the particular needs that must be addressed for clergy to serve in an effective and healthy manner over the course of a lifetime in ministry while sustaining healthy congregational life in the midst of the community served by the church.

Keywords
accountability, affection, competence, equipping, health, long-tenure

Pastors learning from farmers

No writer has influenced my thinking about pastoral ministry, and about long-tenured pastoral ministry in particular, more than Eugene Peterson. Peterson, in turn, introduced me to the thinking of farmer/poet/novelist/philosopher Wendell Berry. In the mid-1990s, ten years into what would be a twenty-two-year pastorate, I encountered this passage in Peterson's *The Contemplative Pastor*:

> [Wendell Berry] takes a small piece of land in Kentucky, respects it, cares for it, submits himself to it just as an artist submits himself to his materials. I read Berry, and every time he speaks of "farm" and "land," I insert "parish." As he talks about his farm, he talks about what I've tried to practice in my congregation, because one of the genius aspects of pastoral work is locality.

Corresponding author:
R. Robert Creech, Truett Seminary, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97126, Waco, TX 76798, USA.
Email: robert_creech@baylor.edu

> The pastor's question is, "Who are these particular people, and how can I be with them in such a way that they can become what God is making them?" My job is simply to be there, teaching, preaching Scripture as well as I can, and being honest with them, not doing anything to interfere with what the Spirit is shaping in them. Could God be doing something that I never even thought of? Am I willing to be quiet for a day, a week, a year? Like Wendell Berry, am I willing to spend fifty years reclaiming this land? With these people?[1]

Berry pays attention to sustainable practices in farming that respect the land and the community in which it resides, while providing a healthy quality of life for the farmer. He has been a voice for "sustainable agriculture" for almost five decades.[2]

Sustainable agriculture describes a set of practices that make possible three desirable outcomes: the farmer can make a living, the land is cared for, and the community is served. These outcomes are good for the farmer, good for the land, and good for the community in which the farm exists.[3] Sustainable agriculture is usually contrasted with another set of practices that have dominated the landscape since World War II, labeled "conventional" or "industrial" agriculture.[4] Industrial agriculture relies extensively on large-scale farming, monocultures, heavy tillage, and an abundant use of chemical pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Earl L. Butz's oft-cited mantra as United States Secretary of Agriculture in the early 1970s was "get big or get out."[5] This approach led to the loss of thousands of U.S. farms in the last forty years.[6] Sustainable agriculture, on the other hand, focuses on healthy soil biology rather than depending on chemical inputs. It attends to biodiversity, low tillage, and an economy of scale that makes economic viability possible for even the small farm.

Industrial agricultural practices have made farming a non-sustainable enterprise for many. The farmer finds it difficult, sometimes impossible, to make a living on the farm alone. The soil is abused and depleted, and the community is offended by the presence of industrial feedlots, poultry farms, and the water pollution resulting from conventional practices. This is not sustainable.[7]

When congregational practices are not sustainable

Sustainability is an important topic for vocations and ways of living beyond the agricultural realm, including pastoral ministry, congregational leadership, and the Christian life. Dorothy Bass, Craig Dykstra, and other theologians have identified practices for personal and congregational spiritual

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 3–4.
2. Berry's "new agrarianism" can be explored in his early book of essays, first published in 1977, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996) and in the more recent collection, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003).
3. James E. Horne and Maura McDermott, *The Next Green Revolution: Essential Steps to a Healthy, Sustainable Agriculture* (New York: CRC Press, 2001), 37.
4. For a comparison of sustainable and industrial agricultural practices, see Figure 10.1 in Horne and McDermott (ibid., 261–63).
5. Heather H. Scholar, "Federal Farm Policies Hit," October 23, 1973, *Reading Eagle – Google News Archive Search*, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19731023&id=iQ9XAAAAIBAJ&sjid=PUMNAAAAIBAJ&pg=2654,2153427&hl=en (accessed March 1, 2016).
6. The number of family farms decreased from 6.8 million in 1935 to 2.1 million in 2012: "USDA – NASS, Census of Agriculture – 2012 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: U.S. National Level Data," http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/st99_1_001_001.pdfUSDA (accessed February 8, 2016) and "Census of Agriculture Historical Archive," http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/AgCensusImages/1935/03/01/1522/Table-01.pdf (accessed February 8, 2016).
7. Ibid., 3.

formation that support sustainability.[8] Bringing their work into conversation with insights from agricultural practices raises several questions. What might the metaphor of sustainable agriculture have to say to the church? Are there identifiable sustainable church practices that make it possible for a pastor to plant him/herself in a congregation for years? Can a congregation minister fruitfully in a community over the course of several decades? What parallels to conventional or industrial approaches in church life might render ministry unsustainable over time?

Clearly, all that we are currently doing is not sustainable. Although attrition in professional ministry is apparently not at the epidemic level often reported, men and women experience burnout in ministry far too frequently.[9] Congregations and congregants are too often the compliant "victims" of abuse of money, sex, and power. The presence of mega-churches that draw from huge geographic areas and ignore their immediate neighbors offends communities.[10] Other communities are not so much offended as ignored by churches in their midst. These practices are unsustainable as well. If the metaphor holds, then sustainable church practices should be good for the pastor, good for the congregation, and good for the community.[11]

Finally, it is helpful to note that sustainable practices are just that—they are practices or ways of doing ministry. One size does not fit all in congregational life any more than one agricultural practice fits every piece of land. This understanding of practices is, in fact, one of the differences between the industrial and the sustainable model in agriculture. Horne and McDermott write:

> Sustainable agriculture does not mandate a specific set of farming practices. There are a myriad of approaches to farming that may be sustainable. Because sustainable agriculture will continue to be defined farm by farm and individual by individual, it diverges sharply from industrial agriculture, which claims to

8. Bass writes: "Practices are borne by social groups over time and are constantly negotiated in the midst of changing circumstances. As clusters of activities within which meaning and doing are inextricably interwoven, practices shape behavior while also fostering practice-specific knowledge, capacities, dispositions, and virtues. Those who participate in practices are formed in particular ways of thinking about and living in the world" (Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008], 30).
9. A frequently cited statistic claims that 1,500 pastors a month are abandoning ministry, although that number could not be traced to any known study. Barna, Fuller Seminary, and Focus on the Family were sometimes offered as the sources of that number, but this is apparently an "urban legend." More recent studies done by *LifeWay Research* indicate that only about 1% of Protestant evangelical pastors are leaving the ministry for reasons other than retirement: "New Study of Pastor Attrition and Pastoral Ministry," *LifeWay Research*, September 1, 2015, http://www.lifewayresearch.com/pastorprotection/ (accessed February 8, 2016). A study of Wesleyan clergy indicates that five years following ordination, 86% were still in ministry (Russ Gunsalus, " Shocking News about Wesleyan Pastor Washout: Wesleyan Clergy Retention Study," *The Wesleyan* Church, February 25, 2016, https://www.wesleyan.org/2686/wesleyan-clergy-retention-study (accessed March 1, 2016). For studies indicating the pressures facing contemporary clergy, see H. B. London, Neil B. Wiseman, and James C. Dobson, *Pastors at Greater Risk: Real Help for Pastors from Pastors Who Have Been There*, 4th rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light Publications, 2003). See also the review of literature on clergy burnout by Elizabeth Ann Jackson-Jordan ("Clergy Burnout and Resilience: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 67 [March 2013]: 1–5).
10. "Neighbors Balk at Nashville Megachurch's Building Plans," *The Tennessean*, http://www.tennessean.com/story/money/real-estate/2015/03/30/neighbors-balk-nashville-megachurchs-building-plans/70691292/ (accessed February 8, 2016).
11. Kyle Childress has been serving the Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacadoches, Texas, for more than 25 years. Berry's concept of place has been one of his guiding principles. (Kyle Childress, "Good Work: Learning about Ministry from Wendell Berry," *Christian Century* [March 8, 2005]: 28–33).

be appropriate everywhere. Sustainable agriculture, on the other hand, holds that sustainable practices will vary from site to site.[12]

Compare this to the pre-packaged programming offered to churches by denominational agencies, church consultants, and "successful" congregations, with the implication that any congregation that follows their practices or engages their programs will be similarly successful. The practices discussed below are meant to be suggestive of methods that have the potential to increase the sustainability of ministry for clergy and congregations within a community. Leaders must reflect prayerfully upon the unique places where they serve to identify what their communities require of them.

Practices that are good for the congregation

In *Pleasant Valley*, Louis Bromfield narrates his experience of buying a thousand acres of burned-out farmland in Ohio in the 1940s and restoring it to health.[13] Bromfield does not write from a Christian perspective and gives no evidence of ever having reflected on Jesus' parable of the soils (Matt 13:1–9, 18–23). However, in the chapter entitled "The World Within the Earth," he describes the soil in the various sections of his land. He identifies fields that were initially hard-packed and rocky, with hardly any topsoil for plants to grow. Abuse of the soil by planting it again and again without replenishing it led to poor conditions. Unable to sustain plant life, it was subject to erosion by rain and wind. The land eventually became more and more rocky, retaining less and less topsoil.

Bromfield describes a field taken over by weeds and thorns after it was subject to neglect for a season. He also tells of the good fields found on one of the farms he purchased, fields that were still alive after being farmed for more than a hundred years. They were cared for by generations of farmers who loved their land and nurtured it—"live farmers," he calls them.[14] These farmers replaced and replenished organic material. They planted crops like clover and rye to serve as "green manure" that was plowed back into the soil.

Like Bromfield, those who first heard Jesus' parables had agrarian minds. They would have understood details that escape the urban mind. Those peasants knew that good soil did not simply happen. It came from farmers who loved and respected it, who tended it, who cared for it, who fed it as it fed them, and who left it fallow every seventh year according to the levitical law. Good soil was not a given; it was the product of an intentional process. Poor soil, on the other hand, was the product of an unintentional one.

Pastors interested in the health of the congregation would do well to hear both Jesus and Bromfield. The quality of the soil is everything if we intend a field to be productive. Soil is the source of our life, but soil quality is not a given. It is the product of an intentional process. To neglect the process and to expect results is to be disappointed or disillusioned. The congregation, like the soil, must be equipped, fed, nurtured, cared for, and rested if it is to be a sustainable locus for ministry over time. Equipping ministry and spiritual formation are to the congregation what careful tillage, composting, and cover crops are to the soil on a sustainable farm. This raises the question: What practices keep the congregational soil healthy and productive?

Authentic affection

Wendell Berry turns to the word "affection" to describe the appropriate relationship between the farmer and the land, and also between human beings in a community. People take care of that

12. Horne and McDermott, *The Next Green Revolution*, 59.
13. Louis Bromfield and Gene Logsdon, *Pleasant Valley* (Wooster, OH: Wooster Book Co., 2008).
14. Ibid., 157–58.

which they hold in affection. He says, "The problem simply is that land users are using people, places, and things that cannot be well used without affection. To be well used, creatures and places must be used sympathetically, just as they must be known sympathetically to be well known."[15] In his 2012 Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities, "It All Turns on Affection," Berry borrowed categories from his mentor Wallace Stegner to describe the two kinds of people who settled the frontier—"boomers" and "stickers." In Stegner's words, "[The indigenous western culture] is the product not of the boomers but of the stickers, not of those who pillage and run but of those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in."[16] Berry characterized his grandfather as a "sticker" who settled in Henry County, Kentucky. "In keeping with the sticker's commitment, he neither left behind the damage he had done nor forgot about it, but stayed to repair it, insofar as soil loss can be repaired."[17] Affection for the place and for the way of life lived there characterized the sticker. The boomer on the other hand, treated the land like a mine to be exploited and then abandoned.

Affection is also a necessary practice for sustainability in ministry. The apostle Paul frequently and unashamedly declared his affection for his brothers and sisters in his congregations. He told those in Philippi, "For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:8; cf. 1 Thess 2:7–8; Gal 4:19–20). "Affection" is related to "pleasure" in Berry's mind. Pleasure is "affection in action."[18] The relationship between pastor and congregation, as well as between pastor and the community in which the ministry is offered, is healthiest when marked by a genuine affection for the people and the place. In this affection, one finds pleasure in the work despite the challenges it may offer. Affection is nurtured through the personal and detailed knowledge of the people and the place over time.

Martin Copenhaver served one congregation for more than twenty years. He testifies to the reality of this kind of appreciation for a community of faith:

> The affection I have for my parishioners has only grown over time. That affection extends to those members of the congregation who can be quite difficult. If I were to encounter these individuals in another setting, I might not be as devoted to them, but there is something about being entrusted with the care of someone over time that can soften the heart.[19]

In his Doctor of Ministry project examining key factors for long-term ministry, Robert A. Sizemore discovered that affection for the congregation (as an aspect of "affinity") was one of the factors mentioned most frequently by project participants. As one participant stated, "The honest truth is I love the people here and they love me. Sometimes ministers are told not to get too emotionally involved in the people's lives but some of that love that I have for our members and our members have for me and my family has kept me here so long."[20] Another participant offered this suggestion, "Love your congregation—If you don't love the people you work with and if you are

15. Wendell Berry, "An Argument for Diversity," in *What Are People For? Essays* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2010), 116.
16. Wallace Stegner and T. H. Watkins, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), xxvii.
17. Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 12.
18. Wendell Berry, "Economy and Pleasure," in *What Are People For? Essays* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2010), 136.
19. Martin B. Copenhaver, "Staying Power: Reflections on a Long Pastorate," *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2013, 29.
20. Robert A. Sizemore, "Calling, Affinity, and Personal Growth: Key Factors in Long-Term Ministries" (DMin, Trinity International University, 2014), 121.

upset and angry with them you will not have a long pastorate."[21] A third summarized his perspective with the sentiment, "The pastor needs to love the work and love the people."[22]

Moral and spiritual examples

The congregation deserves to see a solid example of discipleship in its ministers. Paul boldly urges his congregations to imitate his own example (1 Cor 4:16; 2 Thess 3:9). He instructs Timothy to accept this aspect of his ministry, that he may serve "an example of those who believe" (1 Tim 4:12). Sustainable ministry takes this admonition seriously. The fact is that the congregation will frequently look to the pastor in hopes of seeing a follower of Jesus living life in the kingdom of God. That does not imply that pastors must be perfect, but it does call them to offer their best effort in modeling Christian speech, attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Pastors who do not "practice what they preach" will find it difficult to sustain ministry in a congregation over time. The integrity gap between words and deeds will eventually render them incapable of serving and they will be forced to move on or to leave ministry altogether.

The annual Gallup Honesty and Ethics ranking has charted the decline of public trust in the clergy. In December 2015, the survey indicated that less than half (45%) of Americans regarded clergy as highly ethical, the lowest percentage since 1977.[23]

Glenn E. Ludwig affirms that

> Without soundness of character, a pastor's credibility is seriously threatened. I would contend that a pastor who lacks integrity will not have the emotional and psychological maturity to survive over the long haul. When lack of integrity is exposed, any trust that had been developed between a pastor and a congregation is seriously threatened. And when trust does not exist, the opportunities for future ministry will be limited.[24]

Moral and ethical integrity and an authentic spirituality become a means to sustain ministry over the long haul.

Pastoral competence

Congregations thrive in the care of pastors who are able to deliver competent proclamation, pastoral care, and leadership. Church consultant Kennon Callahan asserts that these pastoral abilities help congregations minister effectively in their communities.[25] In a similar vein, Lyle Schaller describes the importance of "paying the rent" during the first year of ministry in a new congregation, something ministers accomplish by performing pastoral tasks competently.[26] That "rent" continues to be due in the years that follow as well.

These three primary pastoral tasks interlock and support each other. Competent preaching week after week allows worshippers to come to know and trust their pastor. When they are interacting with the pastor in church committees or ministries, they have a basis from which to work together. Competent and compassionate pastoral care increases trust and affection, reduces conflict in the

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. "Americans' Faith in Honesty, Ethics of Police Rebounds," *Gallup.com*, http://www.gallup.com/poll/187874/americans-faith-honesty-ethics-police-rebounds.aspx (accessed February 9, 2016).
24. Glenn E. Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul: Building Effective Long-Term Pastorates* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2002), 24.
25. Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church: Strong, Healthy Congregations Living in the Grace of God*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 100, 127.
26. Lyle E. Schaller, *The Pastor and the People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 88.

congregation, and makes other tasks of leadership more effective. At times, pastoral care and leadership are aspects of the pastor's proclamation. Just as farmers who know how to care for soil are able to grow healthy food, deliver products to market, and maintain sustainable farms, so pastors who devote themselves to the competent completion of pastoral tasks maintain sustainable congregational ministry.

A farmer learns what the land needs and how it responds by tending it over the seasons. Similarly, the competent pastor sustains ministry by learning from the congregation. Sustainability results in part from the pastor becoming a "reflective practitioner" of ministry.[27] The cycle of acting and reflecting becomes automatic, so that the one doing ministry is constantly being taught by the work of ministry. Over the years, one acquires wisdom through experience—a kind of "pastoral imagination."[28] Congregations need pastors who maintain a life-long-learning posture, and they are wise if they support that effort on the part of their pastors with funding and allowance for time away. This developing competence in ministry permits a pastor to remain in place and serve over decades without growing stale or losing his or her edge.

Servant leadership

"Servant leadership" conjures up a variety of images in the minds of pastors and congregants. To some, the concept sounds weak and passive, as if the pastor is to be a doormat or an over-functioner who attempts to do everything for the congregation. This is a misunderstanding of the concept and is itself an unsustainable approach to ministry. Robert Greenleaf, who popularized the notion of servant leadership in the corporate world in the 1970s, defined the servant leader as one whose first inclination is to *serve*, not to *lead*.[29] Servant leaders offer themselves to a purpose higher than themselves when they devote their gifts, abilities, time, and efforts to serving. If the congregation needs someone with gifts of leadership, then leading, too, is an act of service. Jesus' example of washing the feet of the disciples is often cited as the model of servant leadership—he performed the tasks of a servant or slave (John 13:1–17). As far as we know, however, washing the feet of others was not his habit. Servant leadership took other forms in Jesus' life as well. On occasion he confronted the disciples in their unbelief and challenged their faith (Matt 16:8–11, 22–23). He demonstrated servanthood through his willingness to do whatever was needed most in order to develop these disciples in their faith. Along the way, he served them by empowering them and sending them out (Matt 10:1–5).

Servant leaders take responsibility for providing two vital elements necessary for sustainable congregational life: a missional focus and a clear vision. First, the missional focus involves concrete engagement with the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) and the Great Commandments (Matt 22:34–40). The pastor thoughtfully engages the congregation by exploring Scripture and thinking through a clear understanding of what it means to be the church, keeping the church's mission before them as they worship weekly and perform the quotidian tasks of conducting church business. A missional focus makes ministry sustainable because it keeps both pastor and congregation from being diverted from their fundamental calling. Although the pastor may not be the one who defines the mission, as a servant leader the pastor takes initiative to see that the missional focus remains central to the congregation's life.

27. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
28. Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008).
29. Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Cambridge: Center for Applied Studies, 1973).

Second, the servant leader assumes responsibility for engaging the congregation in conversation about its vision. Leadership is inherently about the future, and a leader, like a midwife, assists the congregation in giving birth to it. "Vision" may be understood as the preferred future that the congregation comes to believe God offers them. Such a vision is not usually given to the pastor on a mountain to be brought down to the congregation waiting passively in the valley. Rather, the pastor guides the congregation to discern a shared vision under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Such a vision, as it becomes clear, provides direction, guidance, and hope. In the absence of such a vision, congregational life can erode into conflicting individual agendas, traditionalism, or religious shopkeeping.[30] Clear vision supplies the forward direction that sustainable ministry requires.

Sustainable farms do not remain so by accident. Plans are constantly developed and implemented. The future of a field or enterprise must be considered in advance. The farmer develops a vision for the land, but always in conversation with the land itself. Berry advises that agriculture should be based on nature as a standard. He says that if it were:

> On all farms, farmers would undertake to know responsibly where they are and to "consult the genius of the place." They would ask what nature would be doing there if no one were farming there. They would ask what nature would permit them to do there, and what they could do there with the least harm to the place and to their natural and human neighbors. And they would ask what nature would help them do there. And after each asking, knowing that nature will respond, they would attend carefully to her response. The use of the place would necessarily change, and the response of the place to that use would necessarily change the user. The conversation itself would thus assume a kind of creaturely life, binding the place and its inhabitants together, changing and growing to no end, no final accomplishment, that can be conceived or foreseen.[31]

This practice, or something like it, is how vision is discerned in a sustainable way within a congregation as well. One must approach the congregation with the hope of unearthing "the genius of the place."[32]

Equipping ministry

In *Leadership is an Art*, Max De Pree asserts, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader."[33] If a partnership between clergy leaders and congregational members is to be sustainable, clergy leaders owe congregational members both a debt and a service. Pastors pay their debt by sharing the privilege of ministry with the congregation, training disciples who understand that they, too, are called to ministry (Eph 4:11–13). All of God's people have gifts to contribute to the body of Christ, and they have a part to play in its ministry. Pastors practicing sustainable ministry help these believer-priests understand both theologically and practically that they are ministers—that their baptism includes ordination to service.[34]

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30. I am indebted to Eugene H. Peterson for this metaphor (*Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987], 2).
31. Wendell Berry, "Nature as Measure," in *What Are People For? Essays* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2010), 208–209.
32. Wes Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2010).
33. Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Crown Business, 2004), 11.
34. For practical insight into equipping ministry, see Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). For theological and theoretical background see Findley B. Edge, *The Greening of the Church* (Waco: Word Books, 1971) and R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor : A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993).

Sustainable ministry operates out of a vision of congregational life in which church members are built up rather than depleted by the service and ministry they offer. The congregation (soil) must be enriched to endure season after season of productive ministry. Church programs can easily become the end or goal and the congregation the means to the end. Some industrial agricultural practices treat soil like dirt, regarding it merely as medium to hold plants upright while chemicals are pumped into them. Eventually, the soil is depleted and is subject to erosion, becoming the "rocky soil" Jesus spoke of that does not permit the Word of God to grow and bear fruit. Conventional church practices, like conventional agricultural practices, can deplete the congregation as well, eroding or burning out the available volunteers who serve in its ministries. This is simply not sustainable.

Imagine a congregational member who has just experienced a challenging and tiring week of Vacation Bible School saying, "That was the richest spiritual experience of my life. Sign me up for next year!" Envision someone coming off a three-year term on a church board confessing, "I don't know when I have grown so much spiritually. I'm sorry to be rotating off the board." What practices would make such scenarios credible? Sustainable ministry requires that clergy equip believers to fill important volunteer roles in ways that enable personal spiritual growth for all, including those who serve.

Equipping ministry is not a ruse for recruiting volunteers to the church's programs. Rather it is the effort to help disciples discover a fit for ministry and empower them to engage it effectively. It is a process of making space for the Spirit's work of forming people as disciples and ministers of Jesus Christ. Church members do not help the pastor and staff accomplish *their ministry as leaders*; rather, the pastor and staff help church members exercise *the layperson's ministry*. Equipping ministry is a vital practice for congregational sustainability.

Practices that are good for the clergy

The farmer who sinks ever deeper into debt to purchase and maintain expensive equipment, secure costly seed and fertilizer, and make payments for the mortgage and taxes on a large section of land, is often only one season away from bankruptcy. Small farms that focus on monoculture crops often fail to produce enough for the farming family to live on, and one or both spouses must secure supplemental employment elsewhere. Consequently, small farmers have been selling out to agribusiness conglomerates and moving to the cities for decades, abandoning rural areas and small towns.[35] Wendell Berry cites his father's wisdom: it is futile to attempt to "plow your way out of debt."[36] This is not sustainable farming.

Joel Salatin, an outspoken and successful Virginia farmer, insists that farming, done sustainably, can provide one's livelihood and enrich one's life: "A whole world exists out there about which the average farmer doesn't have a clue. Your opportunity to be a farmer entrepreneur with a quality of life that would make a white-collar worker envious is directly proportional to your acquaintance with approaches that run opposite mainstream thought for the previous half century."[37] Salatin's own experience with Polyface Farms bears witness to the truth of his claim.[38]

The life of ministry shares some alarming parallels to the farmer's plight. The difference is that the pastor often makes emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual payments at an unsustainable

35. Wendell Berry, "As Farmers Fade, Who Will Care For the American Landscape?" *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/farmland-without-farmers/388282/?utm_source=btn-email-pckt (accessed February 10, 2016).
36. Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 11.
37. Joel Salatin, *You Can Farm: The Entrepreneur's Guide to Start & Succeed in a Farming Enterprise* (Swoope, VA: Polyface, 1998), 6.
38. Ibid., 7–22.

rate. Despite a sense of calling to the work, the pastor's lifestyle can erode the ability to sustain ministry over a lifetime. The pastor may be writing hot checks in the attempt to pay these bills. Such pastors are only a season away from internal bankruptcy: it is futile to attempt to "minister your way out of this debt" as well. This is not sustainable ministry.

Farmers who engage sustainable practices these days often do so from a philosophical stance. They hold convictions about soil, food, and their responsibilities as stewards of the land. They operate out of a knowledge base. They understand something about the ecology of their context. They know that healthy soil is a combination of both chemistry and biology. The microorganisms found in healthy soil play a part in the health and productivity of the plants and, indirectly, the animals and people that draw their life from them. Animals and plants make their contributions to the soil as well. Like Sir Albert Howard in the 1940s, these sustainable farmers understand that the health of soil, humans, animals, and plants depends on an entire ecological system.[39]

Similarly, pastors who want to practice sustainable ministry will do well to gain an understanding of the ecology of their congregations as family structures. Three interlocking natural systems provide the ecological context for pastoral ministry: the families of the congregation, the family that is the congregation, and the pastor's own family.[40] An approach to leadership and ministry based on natural systems thinking allows congregational leaders to sustain themselves through crisis, conflict, and chaos and to extend influence into their congregations through thoughtful care and leadership. This influence involves a particular way of thinking about human relationships and managing oneself through the emotional processes of a congregation's life, giving pastors a place to stand during times of drought as well as fruitfulness.[41]

What do congregations contribute to the relationship with their clergy leaders that will make possible a sustainable ministry partnership over decades? What do pastors need from their congregations in order to do ministry over the long haul? Encouragement, mutual cooperation, a spirit of unity, opportunities for sabbatical and renewal, respect for the pastor's family, and adequate financial support are among the many components that congregations can bring to the table to create a more supportive system.

Personal wholeness

Unlike some professional roles, pastors bring every dimension of their lives to the work they do. When an important aspect of the pastor's life is unhealthy, ministry is deeply affected. We may assume that the pastor's relationship with God must remain vital (even though this is not always the case). The pastor's physical well-being also greatly affects the energy brought to the work. Emotional and relational health impacts the degree to which one is able to manage conflict, persevere through crises, and survive challenges in congregational and personal life. A lack of financial provision can saddle the pastor with frustration, anxiety, and resentment, and it may contribute to destructive conflict within the clergy marriage. Sustainable church practices require that both pastors and congregations attend to these many facets of life in ministry.

Relationship with God is the center out of which pastoral ministry radiates. Preaching, caring, and leading are vitally connected to the pastor's sense of God's presence and power. Yet, ironically,

39. Albert Howard, *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

40. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 1.

41. For an approach to pastoral leadership based on natural systems theory, see Jim Herrington, Robert Creech, and Trisha L. Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

the spiritual dimension can erode quickly in the day in and day out work of ministry. One who handles holy things continually may soon find them routine. Glenn Ludwig notes that laypeople engage three primary spiritual practices: Scripture, prayer, and worship. The same may be true for a pastor, but there are inherent risks. "When a pastor becomes ordained, there is the danger of losing all three of those. Scripture can become preparation, prayer can become a task, and worship can become a performance."[42] Sustainability in ministry requires the disciplined practice of engaging in those "holy habits" that keep one attentive to God.

Roy M. Oswald devotes a chapter to spiritual practices in his description of clergy self-care. He speaks directly to pastors when he suggests that "we may not always find spiritual nurture in our churches, so rediscovering some spiritual practices that help us deal with stress and burnout may take us beyond the organized church."[43] The gospel accounts are clear that Jesus made such practices part of his life. Solitude, fasting, prayer, corporate worship, and Scripture reading and meditation are evident alongside his active ministry activities. Sizemore's study of key factors in long-term ministry identifies spiritual disciplines as one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of personal growth.[44] Sustainable church requires that pastors practice those disciplines that help them attend to God in the course of ministry.

The importance of tending to the physical well-being of pastors has gained an increasing amount of attention in recent years. In the 1950s, "Protestant clergy had the lowest rates of disease for every major diagnosis and lived longer and healthier lives than people in any other profession."[45] However, by the early 1980s they had the highest overall work-related stress among religious professionals and next to the lowest amount of personal resources to cope with the strain. A 1999 study indicated that clergy had one of the highest death rates from heart disease of any occupation.[46] A 2003 Pulpit and Pew survey found that "76 percent of the clergy surveyed were either overweight (46 percent) or obese (30 percent), a significantly higher percentage than the population as whole (61 percent)."[47] Men struggled with this more than women, with eight out of ten being overweight compared to just over half of the women.[48]

Clearly pastors must take responsibility for their own physical health. Those who study the problem, however, increasingly recognize that the congregation has a role to play in this issue as well. Besides offering adequate medical insurance with wellness benefits, churches might also include a program of physical exercise in the pastor's job description or in their covenant with their pastors. Stephanie Paulsell, author of *Honoring the Body*,[49] puts it this way:

> Clergy can't do it by themselves. They need to have the whole church and whole congregations behind them to say that honoring the body is important. Both clergy and laity need to understand that the body is a precious gift from God that has to be cherished. People need to understand that ministry isn't done by the disembodied mind, but by the whole embodied self.[50]

42. Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul*, 60.
43. Roy M. Oswald, *New Visions for the Long Pastorate* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1983), 91.
44. Sizemore, "Calling, Affinity, and Personal Growth," 115.
45. Janet Maycus, "Condition: Critical: Exploring the Causes of Poor Clergy Health," *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence*, https://www.faithandleadership.com/programs/spe/articles/200601/critical.html?printable=true (accessed January 16, 2016).
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).
50. Bob Wells, "Which Way to Clergy Health?" *Pulpit and Pew*, 2002, http://pulpitandpew.org/which-way-clergy-health (accessed January 16, 2016).

Sustainable ministry requires attending to the physical well-being of pastors, not just to their spiritual health.

A focus on clergy health includes the emotions as well as the body. Depression and other mental health issues affect pastors just as they do others. Kathryn Greene-McCreight, an Episcopal pastor, describes in detail her own struggle with bipolar disorder and the help she sought and received that allowed her to continue in ministry.[51] Suicide has ended the ministries of competent and caring pastors who might possibly have been helped had they and their congregations been more sensitive to indications of depression and burnout.[52] Congregations can encourage pastors to lead healthier lives and to seek regular health checkups and other support as needed. Adequate health insurance and other resources help to make this possible.

Joel Salatin makes the case that sustainable farming can support a family without requiring off-the-farm incomes.[53] This is part of the definition of sustainable agriculture; the farmer must be able to earn a living through the work.[54] Sustainable church entails similar requirements: clergy want to be financially responsible—to support a family, manage healthcare costs, plan for a college education for their children, anticipate retirement, and eliminate their own educational debts.

Clergy face issues related to financial well-being on two fronts: (i) the amount of salary provided by the congregation; and (ii) their own skill and discipline in effective money management. Seminary graduates enter ministry with an average student debt burden of more than $35,000 from their undergraduate and graduate studies. Moreover, unlike their colleagues in many other professions, they enter a calling that will make the amortization of those loans a challenge. In a study reported by Auburn Theological Seminary, theological school graduates in 2011 still carried an average debt of $18,542 from undergraduate student loans. By the time they financed their graduate education, one-quarter of theological graduates had personal debt in excess of $40,000.[55] The burden of debt creates a litany of issues that can affect the sustainability of ministry. The necessity of taking on additional work may leave pastors tired and with less energy for their congregations, or may send them looking for higher-paying positions. Pastors who cannot manage personal finances often find it challenging to oversee a congregation's affairs well. Additionally, guilt over debt and ambivalent attitudes concerning money may hinder their leadership in congregational fundraising efforts.[56] The Auburn study calls for a collaboration of students, theological schools, denominations, congregations, and laypeople to address these issues so that ministry can be more sustainable for clergy.

The issue of clergy compensation typically affects the life of the congregation as well. The Pew & Pulpit study on pastors' salaries argued that, besides transforming ministry from a calling into a professional career by pushing pastors to "move up the ladder" in order to meet family financial needs, local churches can also be affected negatively by market approaches to clergy compensation.[57] Sustainable ministry demands attending to the financial well-being of pastors, which necessitates a just and generous approach from congregational leaders.

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51. Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness is my Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).
52. Lewis Brogdon, *Dying to Lead: The Disturbing Trend of Clergy Suicide* (Bowie, MD: Seymour Press, 2015).
53. Salatin, *You Can Farm*, 6.
54. Horne and McDermott, *The Next Green Revolution*, 37.
55. Sharon L. Miller, Kim Maphis Early, and Anthony Ruger, *Taming the Tempest: A Team Approach to Reducing and Managing Student Debt*, Auburn Studies 19 (New York: Auburn Theological Seminary, 2014), 5–6.
56. Ibid., 18.
57. Becky R. McMillan and Matthew J. Price, *How Much Should We Pay the Pastor? A Fresh Look at Clergy Salaries in the 21st Century*, vol. 2, Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership (Duke Divinity School, 2003), 3.

Accountability structures

Pastors often lead lives with little accountability. As a result, the trust congregations afford them can be taken for granted and abused. A pastor in a large city may leave the office to visit the local medical center and be gone half a day with no questions asked. Ministerial meetings associated with the local or state denominational offices might necessitate being away from home and the church for a day or more. People trust their pastors to act with integrity in the use of their time for such activities. With the lack of accountability in most settings, pastors might easily be tempted to take advantage of such situations, generally with disastrous results. Sustainable ministry requires personal accountability.

In addition, people tend to assume that the pastor's life with God is richly maintained. Parishioners may not feel comfortable (or feel it necessary) to routinely inquire about the pastor's life of prayer, study of Scripture, engagement in worship, or practice of other spiritual disciplines. These are simply assumed. Consequently, pastors are accountable to no one and may find themselves in perilous situations regarding their inner lives and patterns of thought.

Prudent pastors and caring congregations will not leave such matters to chance. If the congregation does not already have in place some means for professional, moral, and spiritual accountability for its staff, pastors are wise to build such relational structures for themselves. A personally developed code of ethics shared with the congregation, with other staff members, and with the congregation's governing board is one way to establish a form of accountability.[58] Other accountability practices might include participation in a pastoral peer group, meeting with a spiritual director, or having some form of accountability with certain members of the congregation. Such arrangements can be helpful if they are approached with transparency, support, confidentiality, and mutuality. The possibility of a sustainable ministry is greatly enhanced by the use of accountability structures to assist the pastor to maintain integrity with God, self, family, colleagues, peers, congregants, and the community.

Healthy social support systems

One can make a living as a pastor while having life drained from the soul if the context does not provide the needed sustenance. Like a farmer attempting to survive without sufficient support from family and neighbors, the pastor who lacks an adequate support system serves in a tenuous setting. Angela Reed and I conducted interviews with ten Texas Baptist clergy engaged in congregational ministry for more than twenty years to identify factors that contributed to their support and well-being over time. One variable for longevity in ministry that was mentioned frequently is the presence of mentors in their lives.[59] These relationships and their connections with ministry peers have proven to be significant resources for sustainability. Along the same lines, Elizabeth Ann Jackson-Jordan's review of literature on clergy burnout identifies at least three studies pointing to the importance of such support.[60] Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger found that a perceived *lack* of support from denominational workers, from other clergy,

58. For examples and guidance in writing a code of ethics for pastors, see Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). A covenant form of such a code is offered by Texas Baptists, which recognizes that both the clergy and the congregation have ethical responsibilities in the relationship. See Clergy Ethics Committee, "Ministerial Ethics: A Covenant of Trust" (Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission, 2005).
59. Angela H. Reed and R. Robert Creech, "Sustainability in Congregational Vocational Ministry Among Texas Baptists: An Oral History Research Project" (Baylor University: Department of Oral History), Transcript, 2014.
60. Jackson-Jordan, "Clergy Burnout and Resilience," 1–5.

and from the congregation played a key role in the loneliness experienced by Protestant pastors who left ministry.[61] Adequate, healthy social support systems can help a minister continue through difficulties and challenges at work. Congregations would be wise to make sure their leaders have this kind of support.

A family-friendly environment

Family pressures resulting from financial struggles, personal time, and role expectations for the pastor's spouse and children make ministry unviable for some. A sustainable church intentionally develops an environment that supports the pastor's marriage and family. Although pastors bear responsibility for managing their time and schedule, congregations can engage in family-friendly practices in order to help sustain ministry. Fewer evening meetings, adequate vacation time, and sufficient financial support would be among the practices congregations might put into place. Pastors and their families certainly need to make their own efforts to set appropriate boundaries related to time and role to guard against burnout. At the same time, thoughtful congregational leaders with a vision for a long-term pastoral ministry in their churches can play a role in creating such an environment as well.

Opportunities for renewal

A congregation that desires to do ministry sustainably must take into account the pastor's need for personal renewal. Few public speakers are expected to address the same audience forty-five to fifty times a year and still have something fresh to say. In the case of churches that hold Sunday evening or Wednesday evening services, pastors may be speaking to the same people as many as a hundred and fifty times a year. Pastors need intellectual and spiritual renewal in order to sustain this pace over time. Additionally, like others in "helping professions," pastors may find that the constant demand to be giving leaves them depleted spiritually and emotionally. Congregations that desire to keep effective preachers and teachers will see to it that their pastors have opportunities to attend conferences, to take annual study leaves, to purchase helpful resources, and to have a regular sabbatical experience. Sabbaticals are not vacations; they are necessary opportunities for renewal. They are good for both the pastor and the congregation.

Practices that are good for the community

The notion of the "sustainable church" embodies a vision of congregational life in which churches are places that welcome others to life in community. Conventional agricultural processes often do not make for good neighbors. People do not want to live near a feedlot, a poultry "concentration camp," or a farm whose chemical fertilizers and pesticides seep into the water supply. They would, however, value living near a place where fresh, clean, organic fruits and vegetables are produced and sold, where humanely-raised and cleanly-processed beef, pork, and poultry is available, and where fresh eggs and dairy products are accessible. In Salatin's book for startup sustainable farmers, he devotes an entire chapter to the topic of "being neighborly."[62]

No one wants a "foul-smelling church" in their neighborhood either. Churches that remain internally focused, create parking and traffic problems every Sunday, fail to maintain their property, or develop programs merely for themselves cannot be considered neighborly. Churches that fail to share their land and facilities with the community or discourage their members from participating

61. Hoge and Wenger, *Pastors in Transition*, 198–99.
62. Salatin, *You Can Farm*, 160–71.

in community life by over-scheduling congregational life are sometimes considered to be a stench in their neighborhoods, whether they realize it or not. But who would not want to have a congregation in the community that humbly seeks to be the body of the Messiah there, representing Christ's presence in a variety of ways?

Communities point to a number of aspects of church life they find unappealing, such as parking problems and church bells. Unfortunately, they sometimes also resent the church's social programs, such as ministries to alcoholics or soup kitchens for the hungry. One pastor cited in a *New York Times* article said, "Churches are no longer seen as assets to the community. Now it's 'There goes the neighborhood.'"[63] Increasingly, churches fall victim to changes in zoning laws that impede their ability to operate their ministries and programs. Pressure from neighborhood associations is in part a product of a changing landscape in which churches are no longer valued. What part might congregations play in creating a greater sense of "neighborliness" between themselves and the communities in which they serve?

This cultural change in perspective regarding churches in communities has prompted congregations to examine more closely what it means for them to be good neighbors in order to sustain ministry in their communities. Eric Swanson puts it this way:

> A growing number of churches have realized that church has got to be more than growing attendance, seeker sensitivity, and small groups. They're fighting the perception that churches are isolated, insulated, and uninvolved with the life of the neighborhood. Seeking to be transformational salt, light, and leaven, they're taking ministry outside their four walls, and thinking about themselves and their neighborhoods differently.[64]

Putting into place church practices that are good for the community in which the church serves is a vital component of truly sustainable ministry.

Good neighbor practices

Congregations that determine to sustain ministry in their communities do so by intentionally engaging in good neighbor practices. Depending upon the context, neighborly behavior may require taking responsibility for the physical impact of the church's presence on the community. Streets clogged by church parking on Sunday mornings may require a thoughtful parking plan worked out in conversation with those neighbors most affected. Church bells or carillons that were appreciated in decades past may no longer be welcome. Church properties, like those of any good neighbor, will need to be well-maintained, landscaped, and appropriately lit at night for security or aesthetics. Yet bright church parking lot lights shining through a neighbor's window at night is not a friendly practice. Church signage needs to be appealing and updated. In certain communities, such as smaller towns, relying on local small businesses for various services, even when they are more expensive, might be a wise investment of church resources. Goodwill is a priceless commodity.

Neighbors usually hear from churches only when the church wants something from them, such as their attendance or participation in an event. John Beukema, pastor of Village Church in Western Springs, Illinois, recommends finding ways of taking something *to them*, "[We] had some of our people go door-to-door offering to fix, clean, paint, or haul stuff away. Recently, our junior high

63. Karen De Witt, "Cold Shoulder to Churches that Practice Preachings," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1994, sec. U.S., http://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/27/us/cold-shoulder-to-churches-that-practice-preachings.html (accessed February 8, 2016).

64. Eric Swanson, "Is Your Church a Good Neighbor? Why Some Communities Resist Churches—and Other Welcome Them," *Leadership* 23 (Spring 2002): 79.

students stood out in the cold, handing cups of hot chocolate to commuters on their way to the train."[65] Simple acts of service can go a long way toward building goodwill.

Good neighbor practices become especially important during construction projects. Whenever possible, neighbors may be invited in during the design phase to listen or even to contribute. Neighbors will have questions about how a permanent structure will affect their lives and their property. They may want to know what sorts of activities will be associated with the facility and when it will be operating. When it is time for trucks to roll through the neighborhood and for the noise of construction to begin, the implications for neighbors must be on the church's mind. Reasonable work hours should be considered. Having a concrete truck backing onto the property with its loud warning sounds at six in the morning might be a problem for those next door. Offering gifts or letters from the church expressing genuine concern for those most affected by the interruption of peace and quiet might be one way of easing the tension. An open house when the construction is done with invitations offered throughout the neighborhood might also help to build goodwill.

Generous service

In a similar vein, Swanson recommends a move from "serve us" to "service," as one step in sustainable ministry to a community. Congregations that identify needs in their communities and find ways to address them are far more often welcomed than resented. He cites the example of the Lighthouse Ministries of the Mariner's Church in Costa Mesa, California, that flourished when it raised the questions, "What could we do?" and "What should we do?"[66] The church's willingness to follow up on their answers with action may determine how sustainable its ministry is in that community for decades to come.

Vital partnerships

Churches can take the lead in establishing vital partnerships between themselves and local agencies in the community that are providing human services. Such agencies are often underfunded and in need of dependable volunteer service. A church in Houston, Texas determined to partner with a local elementary school. The pastor met with the principal, who seemed suspicious at first. The church discovered that the school educated a population of children from lower income apartment units, many from single parent homes. The plight of these working mothers meant that the school's administrators and faculty lacked the support of a strong PTA and volunteer system. The church recruited members to help with tutoring, reading programs, judging student art shows, and providing backpacks and school supplies. The congregation partnered with other local churches and gave the campus a free face-lift, adding new playground equipment and landscaping around the building. In two years, the church was chosen as the school's "Partner of the Year."[67]

A group of Colorado pastors investigated the needs of city and community service organizations that they thought their congregations could help or partner with in meeting local needs. They took what Swanson calls a "Magic Bus Tour," meeting with leaders of those services to learn about what they offer and to discover ways their congregations could help. Their tour included the local

65. John Beukema, "Like a Good Neighbor: Six Keys to Improve Your Church's Reputation within the Community," *Leadership* 24 (Spring 2003): 56.
66. Swanson, "Is Your Church a Good Neighbor?," 80.
67. This is the story of the University Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, where the author served as senior pastor from 1987–2009.

homeless shelter, the food bank, a day-care facility, a women's safe house, a home for runaway youth, and an AIDS project. The initial skepticism they encountered eventually gave way to important relationships between those congregations and the community they serve.[68] Vital partnerships among congregations also change the witness of the church in the community, increasing the likelihood of sustainable ministry for multiple churches.[69]

Occasionally, civic issues surface in a particular community—issues such as justice for a specific group of people, environmental concerns, economic matters, or moral issues. For the church to remain silent and distant during such times is to fail in its role as neighbor. Pastors and church leaders may need to weigh in and offer what influence they can for the protection of the communities in which they serve, or for protection of the most vulnerable in their neighborhoods. In Waco, Texas, a group of pastors raised their voices in concert with others to lessen the impact of payday lending businesses on the poor in the community.[70] Another group of pastors in a small Texas town contributed to the closing of game rooms with "eight-liners," a form of gambling that was negatively affecting their community.[71] A vital partnership between church and community can have a profound impact.

Dependable responsiveness

Congregations who seek to minister sustainably in a community need a reputation for dependability and responsiveness. By making church facilities available for community association meetings, polling places, athletic practice fields, scouting programs, and other community-focused events, congregations respond to community needs. Mobilizing to meet needs during times of community crisis is one powerful demonstration of dependability. Fires that leave neighbors homeless and without basic needs, natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornadoes that require extensive clean-up, or tragic deaths in the community that require a caring response are opportunities for a church to demonstrate its dependability and responsiveness as well as its compassion. Wise congregations anticipate such events and prepare a plan of response ahead of time. Additionally, churches can take initiatives to know the resources available to people who come to their doors seeking help. Communities and individuals need to know that they can depend on the congregation's response during times of personal or community crisis.

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68. Swanson, "Is Your Church a Good Neighbor?", 80.
69. Swanson recounts the experience of churches in Little Rock, Arkansas, who cooperated to serve their city: "For the past four years, more than 100 Little Rock congregations and over 5,000 volunteers have served their communities by building parks and playgrounds and refurbishing nearly 50 schools. They set records for Red Cross blood donations and have signed up thousands of new organ donors. They began reaching out to the community through 'life skill' classes (on marriage, finances, wellness, aging, etc.) in meeting rooms at banks, hotels, and other public forums (with more than 5,000 people attending). Together the churches have donated nearly a million dollars to community human service organizations that are particularly effective in meeting the needs of at-risk youth. They have renovated homes and provided school uniforms, school supplies, winter coats, and Christmas toys for hundreds of children." Ibid., 81.
70. J. B. Smith, "Group Calls for Waco Payday Loan Regulations," *WacoTrib.com*, November 17, 2015, http://www.wacotrib.com/news/city_of_waco/group-calls-for-waco-payday-loan-regulations/article_b1687cb7-28e0-54b4-837c-5921b33765d8.html (accessed February 20, 2016).
71. Gregory Ripps, "Eight-liner opponents face deadline," *Wilson County News*, February 3, 2016, http://www.wilsoncountynews.com/article.php?id=70548&n=section-general-news-eight-liner-opponents-face-deadline (accessed March 1, 2016), and William J. Gibbs, "Eight-liners: 'Game Over,'" *Wilson County News*, February 24, 2016, http://www.wilsoncountynews.com/article.php?id=71015&n=section-general-news-eight-liners-game-over (accessed March 1, 2016).

Consistent witness

In the effort to respond with service, kindness, generosity, collaboration, and dependability to its community, the sustainable church keeps in mind that it serves a unique purpose in the local social ecology. Although the church may offer a variety of ministries addressing crucial human needs or collaborate with others who are doing so, the church's ultimate and distinctive task is to bear witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Ministries of compassion and justice do not have to stand in contrast to gospel proclamation and discipleship. They were not separate in Jesus' ministry and need not be discrete in the life of the body of Christ. Sustainable ministry will stay close to the heart of the church's purpose: proclaiming the good news of God's reign in Jesus Christ and helping people learn to follow him.

To do otherwise would be like a farmer focusing on everything but the production of food. This would obviously be an unsustainable approach to farming. It would be no less untenable for the congregation. Ultimately, people need to have a church among them that offers resources for serious spiritual issues—the meaning of human existence and hope for life eternal. In order to live meaningful lives, people need to know how to deal practically with all aspects of daily living, including issues related to relationships, work, politics, and money. They must know how to pray, worship, and understand Scripture, and they need opportunities to serve others. They must learn to deal with a wide variety of moral and ethical issues that affect their personal lives and the world beyond their doors. They must have resources to face suffering and death. The church has a decisive role to play in bringing the gospel to bear upon these real human hurts and hopes. Sustainability requires that congregations attend to the most important issues in the life of their communities in light of God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Sustainability in ministry begins with a vision for long-term ministry, an imagination that can entertain the possibility of a pastor and congregation working together for dozens of years, and a hope for a congregation serving its community effectively for generations. This vision translates locally into the specific practices required for it to become reality. Although particular practices may vary from one ministry context to another, congregations and clergy who imagine this possibility will find ways of serving together that support the wholeness and health of the pastor and the pastor's family. Clergy will learn to offer the congregation the affection and the moral and spiritual example they need and deserve. They will deliver to the congregation competent pastoral care and ministry, lead with integrity, and equip congregations for a shared ministry to their communities. Those congregations will become legendary locally for their neighborliness, generous service, willingness to become partners in the community's life, and consistent dependability while retaining a core commitment to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The future of the land and of productive agriculture in our world calls for farmers to engage in those practices that are most sustainable over time. In the same way, the future of the church and its clergy calls for pastors and congregations to work together in sustainable ways, forging partnerships in ministry that can last for decades.

Author biography

Since 2009, R. Robert Creech, PhD, has been the Hubert H. and Gladys S. Raborn Professor of Pastoral Leadership and the Director of Pastoral Ministries at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University. Before joining the Truett faculty, he served for twenty-two years as senior pastor of the University Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. He has published widely on Bowen Family Systems Theory, including, most recently, "Generations to Come: The Future of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Congregational Ministry," *Journal of Family and Community Ministry* (2015) and "Family Systems 1000 BCE: A Natural Systems Reading of the Davidic Narratives," *Family Systems Forum* 15 (2013).