

Pastoral Letter, Theologies for Pastoral Ministry Gathering in Chicago
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Dear Adam,¹

Congratulations on your call to ABC Church! After so much time in seminary learning the aorist and the imperfect, history and theology—both clarifying and obscure—after years of following faithfully this sense of call—a call shared with you by God’s voice echoing among those beloved saints in your life who have loved you into being—after years of wondering what is next, I hope you have a sense of awe, expectation, and perhaps just a little fear in this moment. But even more, I hope you feel confidence in God’s promise to you and to the community you have been called to love.

When we last chatted, you asked me what you should know, what you should think about, what questions you should have in mind as you begin this ministry. As you are probably sensing already, seminary can only teach you so much; this is a feature not a bug of education. The truth is that your teachers could not have possibly taught you everything you need to know, and this letter will only be yet another small bit of the lifetime of learning set out before you. Nonetheless, I want to share some hopes I have for you and your ministry.

The pastor today needs to be someone who nurtures faithful trust. As collective trust in our political leaders and institutions crumble, part of your task is to help restitch those bonds of love, grace, and discernment that have been pecked at and torn asunder by mistrust and hatred, caricature and resentment, politicians and preachers alike. The politics and economics of division are profitable and deadly at the same time. They teach us to mistrust our neighbors, to assume their stories are ignorant or incomplete or so-self interested that we have nothing from which we can learn. These systems are (mis)forming us by nurturing in us suspicion, resentment, and grievance. Thus, our neighbors become competitors rather than partners, enemies rather than friends, intruders rather than gifts. Your work helping to form a community where folks yearn for and work for the restitching of bonds of trust will make it possible for us to bear witness to God’s goodness, of course, but even more to hear hope verbalized by our neighbors too. As it turns out, our imagination for God’s goodness is stilted by what we have seen, narrowed by our worries, constrained by our hopelessness.

In my classroom, I consistently encouraged you to think of Scripture as a vital source of imagination about who God has been, who God is today, and who God promises to be in the future. Left to our own devices, we are prone to see death and scarcity and lack around every corner, especially in this moment of the church’s life when doom and division seem to stalk us relentlessly. In Scripture, we can learn anew about God’s ordinary yet surprising, life-giving and disruptive activity among our predecessors in faith; that same activity continues to work among us today. Amid the grief you and your community will face, the deaths you will experience, the

¹ I’ve decided to address here a recent seminary grad who is a composite of the various students I have been teaching over years. Here, I’m aiming this letter at the common challenges and opportunities I see young ministers needing to face, even as they are still learning how to be the pastors they are called to be.

disappointments you will face, your call as a pastor is to nurture an imagination that sees the possibilities of life wherever death reigns. This is not a call to naïveté or positivity or cheap hope; no, the kind of hope Scripture helps us imagine is a hard-won hope, a hope that looks at the grave and yearns for life, a hope that demands justice when oppression seems to reign, a hope that sees a future when expectation has waned.

In short, Adam, my friend, we are called to be witnesses. This is the call Jesus places on the shoulders of disciples who had seen him strung up on an instrument of Roman cruelty and terror, friends who had seen their hopes dashed. “You shall be my witnesses,” Jesus says, “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In the tradition where I was nurtured, we knew for certain what it meant to be a witness. It meant that we had a call to share what Jesus has done for us, for me. The stakes of witnessing were oh so high too because were we not to share our witness, others may face the ultimate judgment. But I have come to see that such is an incomplete picture of witness, the witness we are called to bear in light of the witness Jesus’ disciples bear in Acts is far more exciting and thrilling and, yes, scary. After all, the disciples do not just proclaim how Jesus has moved in their midst; they come to know afresh and anew the many ways God, Jesus, and the Spirit alike have moved far ahead of them in ways they did not anticipate but, it turns out, God promised while they remained unaware. The work of witnessing to God’s goodness is always and inevitably the work of catching up to the relentless Spirit.

In recent days, I have been thinking of witness alongside the tragic succession of the deadly responses of police to black folk. Black communities have been sharing for a long time the dehumanizing and too often deadly encounters with police that shaped how children are taught and how communities struggle. These are old, old stories. And yet so many others did not believe the witness of black communities until smartphones proliferated, until such encounters could be captured on film. For too many communities, the testimony of a community was insufficient. Too many demanded proof, proof that too often took on the form of a public performance of the death of black folk.

Witness is an act of trust in a God who sends us to see and tell of all the things God has been doing all along. It is also an act of trust that God will be present in places I have never been and among peoples not my own. It is an act of trust that the stories our neighbors tell are true, reliable, transformative.

Witness, it turns out, is not a unilateral declaration. Witness is not just a series of words or propositions we share with others. Witness is not the sharing of all truth to those who completely lack it. Witness does not happen only when my lips are moving but also when my ears are listening carefully, when my eyes search for grace, when my body is in spaces where I can notice how God has already acted, how God has already spoken well before I was able to begin to witness. That is, our witness is fundamentally a response to God’s activity, to God’s call, to the manifesting of God’s grace even unto the ends of the earth.

And here, I think, is the root of such faithful trust: Scripture teaches us that God’s grace is always wider and broader and greater and more expansive than we had previously imagined. Whether it is Peter’s surprise at Cornelius’s home or Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian

eunuch in the middle of nowhere or Jesus' reminder in Luke 4 that the prophets of God were sent to heal outsiders, God is continually teaching us to expect that—however widely we understand God's grace today—it will be wider tomorrow. If you can help a community orient themselves around this theological and Scriptural truth, then the community you serve might just be primed for God's perpetual surprise, a surprise not because God's promises have changed but because we are always catching up to the Spirit's leading, always lagging in our understanding of God's promises.

Last is this encouragement, this exhortation. Sometimes, I find that pastors hope that the work of change can begin and end with persuasion, that strong arguments will win the day; I fall for this false hope regularly! Alas, there is not a single sermon or adult education session or pastoral visit that will effect the change I know you want to see, that God calls us to lead, for which a desperate world should—but perhaps is not able to—yearn. Instead, the work of faithful change is seasonal and relational and long-standing. Moreover, we rarely get to see the fruits of our work; instead, we have to trust that the work we do will flourish in ways we may not see or even imagine. Plus, of course, transformation is truly and ultimately the work of the Spirit as Acts tells us again and again. And so the work of change begins and ends with love. Love the people you are called to serve. Love their stories and their joys and their foibles. Love them as the Lord loves them. There you will find the heartbeat of your call, the center of your vocation.

With hope and love and great admiration,

Eric