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Pastoral Epistle - Rev. J. Elise Brown, Ph.D.

Theological Concept: Incarnational Theology

Pastoral Concept: The Congregation/Assembly/Gathered People

*John 1:14 - The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.*

Central to our faith and the pastoral work we do is living out an incarnational theology. We profess faith in an incarnational God, One who chose to touch down in the midst of our earthly realm and dwell among us. This is the Word, the Logos embodying one of the most profound realities of our Christian faith - the God we proclaim is not “out there,” living in a divine stratosphere far removed from everyday human life. Rather, the Word became **flesh** and dwells among us. God touched down in our human life and “set up a tent among us.” (John 1:14) God is right here - God is with us.

Your call includes a commitment to proclaiming the counter-cultural message that God has turned the world upside down through the incarnation. A great leveling happened with this divine action. All people stand equally before a God who chose to take on human flesh. No one has special access to God. Everyone has equal ability to turn back to the God who has never turned the divine back on them. In the midst of these human realities, God stands with us.

Jesus embodied this incarnational reality in a flesh and blood ministry with flesh and blood people. He spoke to the crowds from a boat off the shores of Lake Gennesaret (Luke 5:1-11). He went up a hill and preached to crowds hungry for good news (Matthew 5). A shunned tax collector climbed a tree to see him (Luke 19). A woman living on the margins mustered the courage to come out of the crowds, reach out and touch the hem of his garment (Matthew 9, Mark 5, Luke 8). When people were hungry, Jesus fed their physical needs. When people were sick and dying, Jesus healed their flesh and blood bodies. Scripture is filled with examples of incarnational theology at work. It is with flesh and blood people you are called to minister.

In 1962, Karl Barth visited Princeton Theological Seminary. During a Q&A session following one of his Warfield Lectures, a student asked Barth the question: “If you were asked, what one thing, sir, would you tell a young pastor today is necessary in this day and age to pastor a church?”

Barth answered: “Are you willing now to deal with humanity as it is? Humanity in this twentieth century with all its passions, sufferings, errors, and so on? Do you like them, these people? Not only the good Christians, but do you like people as they are? People in their weaknesses? Do you like them? Do you love them? And are you willing to tell them the message that God is not against them, but for them? That’s the one real thing in pastoral service and that is the question for you. If you go into ministry to do that work, pray earnestly. You’ll do difficult work, but beautiful work. (<https://barth.ptsem.edu/in-his-own-words/>)

That same question applies to ministry in every time and every place: are you willing to go deep into the heart and soul, flesh and blood lives of the people you are called to serve?

Elizabeth Johnson in her book, Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril (2018), extends the notion of God's incarnation in human flesh to be an act for all of creation, all flesh, not just human flesh. In a review of Johnson's book, Marian Ronan writes, "The culmination of this accompaniment theology is something Johnson calls "deep incarnation." The creator God is, she explains, the God of all flesh, with flesh not signifying only sin, as the dualism between spirit and matter suggests, but the finitude and death suffered by all creation, including God's own son. With the resurrection, this "flesh was called to life again in transformed glory."

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/environment/deep-incarnation-liberates-all-creation>

With the climate crisis God's earthly creation is experiencing, our incarnational theology and pastoral work extends beyond flesh and blood people to all the world's flesh.

To a seasoned clergyperson:

You were likely trained for "flesh and blood" ministry with flesh and blood people. You learned how to visit them in the hospital when sick and take Holy Communion to the homebound. You were trained in how to lead Worship and preach sermons to people sitting right in front of you. Maybe your congregation puts services up on the website afterwards or pushes out sermons through e-blasts or social media. But the overall core of your training and pastoral ministry was with people whose names you learned over time, whose stories you came to know by being with them through life's greatest joys and challenges.

You probably see fewer people sitting in the pews each week. You might be discouraged by the slow drop in numbers, or the even dramatic change you have experienced in a short time. This is a reality clergy are experiencing all across the country. And it's not your fault.

Some say the global pandemic of 2020 caused much of this. Yet that historic event hastened what was already happening before the pandemic - people were engaging with ministries in whole new ways, if at all. While it is true that television evangelists and radio preachers have been around for a long time, the rapid shift congregations had to make in 2020 moved the boundaries far beyond TV sets and radios.

You may be wondering who your "congregation" is now. What happened to the days when you knew your congregants well, painstakingly learning names and earning trust through your caring and reliable presence with them? Now people are engaging your congregation through live streaming Sunday services on laptops or phones from the comfort of their home, while at work or walking down the street. They watch services after they have been conducted, now found in web archives and accessible any time they want to view them - day or night. People from around the world can "participate" in your ministry, signing up for Zoom or web-based offerings from whatever time zone they are in.

Incarnational ministry has expanded and we now must think about **who** our congregation is in a new way. When you preach a sermon that is live streamed or recorded to be put up in a web-based archive, your congregation has automatically expanded to include people who will listen to that sermon half-way around the world, living in an entirely different context from the one in which you preach. These people now part of your congregation are real people - they are flesh and blood people who experience all of the realities of this flesh and blood human life. They are not merely “views.” They are not just “screens” or “devices.”

To the new clergyperson:

You have used tools of modern technology for most of your life. Social media, blogs, and on-line groups are a natural part of your community. You might not even think there is a difference between the community you engage on-line and the people you interact with in real time. This is a benefit for you as we see the reality of technology and our congregational footprint intersecting and expanding to include people who will never step foot into the door of your physical church building.

Yet these people “step into the door” of your church through live streaming of services, participating in offerings of your ministry they are able to engage electronically. You may already know that, and you might be very well-equipped and adept at engaging people in these spaces.

Yet, while doing this, don’t neglect the flesh and blood people who are in your building, those who are present at your worship services in person. These are the people who sit right in front of you, whose eyes you look into while preaching or administering the sacraments. You can see in their eyes, the expressions on their faces or their postures what they might be going through.

Meet with them. Visit them. Be present for them in times of joy and times of crisis. Through ministering to these flesh and blood people, you will speak words that resonate with those “viewing” your services and hearing your words because human life has stunning consistencies experienced by people wherever they may be. This is incarnational theology in practice, and in real time.

The congregation today is no longer a local parish, designated by geographical boundaries set by people decades ago. Our congregations, the assemblies of people who gather together, extend in ways we could never have imagined, encompassing ministry for which we might not have been trained. But throughout the centuries, congregations and pastors have adapted and changed, working hard to minister to the community in which they find themselves. The community today is global in a way we have not experienced before.

The great challenge before you is how to rise to this moment, bringing incarnational theology to a congregation/assembly/gathered people who are gathered in a whole new way. They might be scattered around the globe, but they are gathered nonetheless with the same hunger to hear good news as the people who gathered around Jesus long ago on hillsides and river banks.