

“Butterfly-leadership” – Stories of hope for church leaders

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ABSTRACT

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In a time of increasingly demanding pressures and expectations being experienced by Pastors, questions can be asked as to how do they as leaders keep their hopes alive. This article explores the stories of many of these pastors, listening for unique outcomes of hoping in often difficult and desperate circumstances. We conclude that the new styles of leadership, skills and organisational structures need to be developed so that leaders can become guardians of hope in a human and relaxed leadership style, which we call “butterfly-leadership”.

1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Many church leaders are experiencing identity crises in their traditional role as church and religious leaders. This article has the purpose of exploring new ways of dealing with church leadership, as it is developing within two mainline denominations in South Africa namely the Dutch Reformed Church and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

In two previous articles that were published recently, I (Julian Müller), together with others, have started to explore the changes in expectations about religious and church leadership. The first article (Bisschoff, Müller & Vos 2001) was based on an empirical research project that involved 494 ministers of two mainline Afrikaans churches. Especially two of the conclusions in that article need further investigation (2001:55):

- This survey has taken the unchallenged leadership role of the minister as an assumption. Is that correct? If it is the case, what are the factors

¹ Rev. Terry Howell, a Methodist minister, currently working on a PhD under prof Julian Müller, Head of the Department Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, contributed to this research article. This research by prof Müller under the Dutch Reformed ministers, was conducted along similar lines by Rev. Howell under Methodist ministers.

maintaining this role and in what sense is the leadership of ministers changing?

- Is the idea of Giddens that leaders in society are the “guardians of tradition” in accordance with the perceptions and expectations of leadership within the community of faith? How does this aspect of leadership function in a situation where there is a growing scepticism about religious leadership?
- The second article (De Koker & Müller 2002), was based on empirical research about spirituality and church involvement in the affluent and successful sub-culture of the eastern suburbs of Pretoria. The one conclusion we want to link this article to, is:
- It became clear that leaders play a critical role in the spirituality of congregations. Carrol (2000:82) asks for a reflective type of leadership: “...leaders who have been able to discern a need by listening to folks inside and outside the church express their spiritual yearnings; who have been able to imagine new ways of responding to those needs that they believe are consistent with the gospel; and who have been able to coalesce others around that vision, mobilize the congregation's resources, and help the congregation embody the vision in congregational practices”.

2 METHOD OF STUDY

We as researchers and authors of this article have conducted several interviews with ministers of the two different denominations. This was accomplished on a narrative basis, because we have chosen for a social-constructionist research paradigm (see also the article by Müller, Van Deventer & Human, 2001 and the recently written dissertations by Bosman and De Jager). The methodological implications of a narrative approach are that we didn't go to our conversational partners with fixed questions. We conducted unstructured interviews in which we asked them to share their stories about coping and hoping as pastors. We prefer to refer to them as co-researchers, and do not see them as “objects” of our research. When we refer to someone by name it is a fictional name, because we would like to guard for the privacy of our co-researchers.

During the time that we were conducting this research and were working on the article, we also attended a workshop by David Epston in Pretoria (12-13 August 2002). We were impressed and inspired by his framework, which put the emphasis on “hoping”. Therefore, we have decided to use the framework as a perspective, from which we revisited the stories that we have gathered. We retell the stories on the basis of:

- Histories of hoping
- Guardians of hoping
- Causes for the hoping
- Prospects for the hoping

We had to hunt for stories of “hoping” about the leadership role of the pastor. Many of the stories to which we listened are stories of anxiety and even despair. One pastor described his situation with the metaphor of a lifeguard, someone who is in a continuous struggle not to be drowned by those he is trying to save. He said: “The lifeguard should be firm in his conduct, or else he will go under himself”. It is as if he felt under a threat and that he has the obligation to defend his leadership with firm conduct.

There is also the confusion and tension between, on the one hand expectations of a definite leadership role, and on the other, the perceptions of the same people about the happy-go-lucky, unstructured daily life of the pastor. This was illustrated by one story of a pastor’s wife who took their little daughter to school for the first time. On the very same morning the family were also concerned about a new puppy dog alone at home. The father-pastor volunteered to stay at home to take care of the puppy, while the mother took the little one to school. When the teacher, later during that morning, asked each member of the class to say what their fathers do (meaning what their occupations are?), the pastor’s daughter said her father is looking after the puppy! The story became the joke of the school and the community. This pastor’s perception was that the congregation’s perception of him is one of a man without any serious business. He is the only one in the community with time to look after dogs. And still they expect him to be a leader! The story verbalises something of the confusion and even the identity crisis of the pastor in terms of his/her leadership role.

Pastors often have quite opposite experiences. They have feelings of guilt towards their families because of the many hours of potential good family time; they have to spend solving the problems of others. One of the ministers, Reon, said that he overheard his son of 4 years saying to a friend: “My father is seeing people again”. This was said with a sadness and accusation, while he pointed to the closed door of the study. The pastor said that he often feels that the “church is stealing his children’s time”.

The majority of the pastors we have interviewed feel that their leadership roles are threatened by the demands of church members and of church councils. As the person on the congregation’s payroll, they are expected to perform the uninspiring administrative functions. One pastor

used the metaphor of a father standing behind his child and “making” the swing. When performing such a task, you can perhaps take a rest for one or two movements, but then you have to continue. There is no room for creativity and for inspiring leadership. You just have to keep the “swing” going.

Against this background of frustration and confusion of leadership roles in the congregation and in the community, we also looked for, and listened to stories of “hoping” and “coping”. And the majority of them shared such stories with us.

2.1 Histories of hoping

The concept “histories of hoping” refers to stories not dominated by problems. Stories of “unique outcomes”, stories that inspire and give hope for the future of the minister as leader.

To us, the most beautiful story told in these interviews was on the “pastor and the butterflies”. I (JM) was sitting in the study of Ferdinand, and made a remark on the remarkable collection of butterflies displayed on the wall. He then shared the story of how, in a previous congregation in the countryside, he was totally devastated by the reaction on his work by the church council. After two years of uninterrupted, relentless work, during which he disregarded his family and wife, the church council called him in one night and said to him that they were not satisfied with his work and leadership. He was shocked and saddened.

It took him a few days to reconsider his position, and then he took a very interesting and bold decision. He found the wisdom to take a paradoxical move, which later proved to be an unique outcome. Instead of trying harder to satisfy everybody, he decided to start living. He took up old hobbies and developed a new one. He started to paint again, and he began to make a study of the butterflies in the vicinity. The butterflies became a focal point. He spent hours in the fields around town. All at once he was available to his family and his marriage returned to the enriching relationship it used to be.

After another two years he was again summoned to appear before the church council. This time they were more than positive. They told him that they were very satisfied with the work he was doing in the congregation!

How is that possible? What happened? The pastor became a person. He moved closer to his own humanness, and therefore closer to his congregation. Through the grace that he received in order to make this paradoxical decision, he was able to relax and return to being an ordinary person. While he was trying so hard to be a leader and role model, he moved further and further from his people. They translated their discomfort with him into complaints about his work.

The butterfly-story provides a “history of hoping” for this pastor and his family. The frame with the display of butterflies in his study became for them a symbol of something unique and good that happened in their past. It still guides them in moments of high expectations and crises.

We as researchers would like to “catch this butterfly”² and use this as a metaphor of good leadership by the pastor. We can refer to this human and relaxed leadership as “butterfly-leadership”.

2.2 Guardians of hoping

In an age of ever increasing change, people are struggling to cope with a future, which seems to be becoming more and more fragile. Richard Rohr (2001:6) argues:

“If we cannot trust in what we thought was logic and reason, if science is not able to create a totally predictable universe, then maybe there are no patterns. Suddenly we live in a very scary and even ‘disenchanted universe’. A world starved for meaning, grasping at anything and everything”. Rohr then refers to a sentence in Yeats’s poem *The Second Coming* “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

The pastor lives and works in his new world. In this world Lester (1995:1) argues: “...the pastor represents hope to persons who face the unattainable, the unknown or the frightening”. The pastoral leaders thus have a responsibility to guard their hope, while they also have the task of being guardians of hope for others.

The pastoral leaders have to find ways of coping with these high expectations to be a guardian of hope for people, and at the same time finding guardians of hope in their own struggle.

Two of our co-researchers’ experiences have taught them that there is an expectation placed on pastors that one should be able to cope with all situations and that after a while one comes to believe oneself. When people realise that one is not coping, it comes as a great shock to them and oneself. Edwin & Joan experienced this shock when they moved to a new appointment with their family. They found it difficult to fit into their new neighbourhood, as it was mostly Muslim. Edwin also found that many of the people in the congregation did not accept him and wanted him to submit to their agenda. The tension, stress and rejection that Edwin felt in the situation became so bad that he decided

² With reference to Michael White’s use of the metaphor of “catching butterflies” for the therapist always on the lookout for metaphors to use.

that the only response left for himself was to flee. He did this by taking an overdose of pills. Upon recovering, through counselling and reading, he came to the realisation that he was ultimately in control of his life. He had the power to choose what to do and what not to do. His situation was complicated by a diagnosis of depression, which he describes as a kind of sense of helplessness, an inability to answer the question, “where am I going now”? He found this depression very difficult to cope with, only medication helping him to cope. The feeling of being total outsiders in the community and the congregation had a strong affect on the family. Joan said that she spent most of the time not coping, as she felt totally unsupported by Edwin, who was spending most of his time trying to fix the congregation, and by the community, with its huge problem of gossiping and confidences not being kept. They then moved from this community to another, where they were accepted easier. Edwin still has to contain depression, which is controlled through medication. The family is very open with everybody, and receives loving support when depression moves nearer. This support group helps them cope with the expectations placed on them.

Pastors who are surviving in difficult circumstances, can be identified as those with a support system consisting of family and friends. There is a real need among the leaders to beign part of a peer group where they can be themselves and where they can feel accepted. One pastor told about a person in the congregation who became like a father to him, someone he could really trust and in whose presence he could be truly honest.

In many cases family members of the pastor acted as guardians of hoping. They were the people who encouraged in moments of despair. Pastors who have coped for many years, have all managed to give regular and good time to their spouses and families. It is as if they have allowed the people closest to them to become their guardians of hoping.

All our co-researchers expressed their appreciation for the conversation we had with them. We as pastor-researchers became their guardians of hoping. This emphasizes the great need for a system of care for the caregivers. Gerben Heitink, like other authors, expressed this need in his remarkable book, *Biografie van de Dominee* (2001:304). He wrote about his own experiences as a young pastor. He talked about his hate-love relationship with the ministry and said (my translation): “What I missed was a mentor with whom I could talk about my work... Fortunately I found a wise member in the congregation, who has steered me through many rocks”.

Our impression is that the ministers who are content with their situation are those who have managed to escape from the rigid and small boundaries of their own congregations. Those with ecumenical contacts

were the happiest. One pastor plays golf every week with a colleague of another denomination. Some others join in ecumenical fraternities. A pastor who is a “lone ranger” cannot be a good and effective leader. Those who define themselves as part of a larger system and community of faith feel less restricted by the denomination sub-culture.

In order to preach hope, and in order to guide with hope and anticipation, the pastor as leader needs to have guardians of hope in his or her life.

2.3 Causes for the hoping

People are looking at the pastor that take the lead in creating new structures for new times. In one congregation more than 120 cluster home complexes were erected within a few years. This asks for a new vision and a restructuring of the ministry. The need is for a minister or group of ministers who are visionary leaders. Where initiative is taken, and new ways for the ministry are developed, there is cause for hoping. One such example is where, in the above-mentioned congregation, the pastor had started with a separate worship service in a small private chapel, situated in the midst of all the new cluster homes.

What is it that causes the pastor to hope, to keep on with the difficult task of leadership, instead of giving up? We have detected several such factors. Among them are:

- A feeling of commitment because of the conviction that one is called to this task.
- Regular rests and vacation, which refreshes the pastor working in an environment where rewards are scarce.
- The willingness and ability to change and adapt to new situations.
- The maintenance of both work and love systems; where a good balance is found between the claims of the congregation and the needs of the family.
- Where there is a feeling of “job fit”, the pastors doing a good job are those who seemed to be handpicked for that specific job. This emphasises the need for the church to do more in terms of correct placement of ministers in specific/particular situations.
- Spirituality of the pastors who could keep the act of hoping alive were those who, in some way or another, kept their spiritual lives going.

Peter, one of our co-researchers, in his story reflects how hope can be developed. He said that his first meditated concept of hope was developed during his theological studies. He saw hope in the following way: “Hope is not the wish that something will come true but that

something has been done”. He, however, did not appropriate this concept to himself until he experienced a time of darkness - when he resigned from the ministry and his first marriage broke down. He describes his feelings as follows: “It was the kind of despair or hopelessness in the sense that all the promise of the future had suddenly disappeared, that is the dreams of the future in ministry, which were already then very much wrapped up in my identity. That was an experience of hopelessness in the sense of that I am losing my identity, I do not know who I am”.

In his case, hope was firstly seen in terms achieved through the structure of routine. In this way “not everything fragments” as is quoted in Yeats’s poem. The structure of working and achieving relative success, along with the affirmation this brought, helped Peter to feel worthwhile again. Peter remarried, which brought with it the affirmation of being involved in a “normal” human relationship. A deeper level of hope began to surface through contact with two brothers in the ministry, who gave Peter unconditional acceptance. He says, “They just wanted me around. I know that I mattered to them. They showed me a gospel that said that I was acceptable. This ‘being accepted’ brings hope at the deepest level, because it brings a sense of worth and identity. I actually mattered to them”. Peter says that his loss of identity was finally healed when he was accepted back into ministry.

Hope for him has become the affirmation that God gives it despite our brokenness. The fact is that God’s purpose can still be worked out in us. He says that his hope is an utter dependence on a graciousness that he will never deserve.

2.4 Prospects of hoping

Leadership seems to be possible where the so-called leader has a future perspective, both for him or her self as an individual, and for the church.

In some of the stories we detected feelings of concern for the future. A significant percentage of the pastors in our group were thinking of alternative careers. The reasons are threefold:

- Frustrations, because of a difficult work situation and little career satisfaction.
- Financial problems of the specific congregation.
- Tension between pastor colleagues because of incompatible personalities and/or poor developed management structures.

Matthew, another co-researcher, copes with these concerns for the future using the biblical image of an anchor. “It is an image that I can grab hold of in the sense that it is anchored in who God is, God who anchors the future”. This hope equips and empowers him to live with the uncertainty,

frustration and sometimes even the seemingly hopelessness of the present. This concept of hope developed over time in an experience of a congregation where it would have been very easy to give up – there were people both inside and outside of the congregation undermining him. He stayed because something was worthwhile, namely the Christian community. There was something of value, worth hanging in for. “Because the future in God is good, a person can take hold of that in faith and persevere with the painful, hurting or frustrating present.”

It would appear that leaders who are best able to keep hope alive for themselves and for the people they lead, are those who have developed what Plugge, as quoted by Paul Tournier (1971:XIX) in Goddard’s preface to *I’ve got that hopeless caged in feeling*, calls genuine hope (Lester: “transfinite hope”), which feeds the common or finite hope of achieving goals. For this to happen, pastors would need to have distinguishing competencies beyond the basic skills.

Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002), in their book *Primal Leadership*, see the skills of self-awareness and self-management as the core of these distinguishing competencies.

3 CONCLUSION

We are hopeful that there are enough prospects of hoping for new leadership for the future to be found among the pastor-leaders in South Africa. But we are also convinced that there is an urgent need for the development of a new style of leadership. A prerequisite for that is the prospect of hoping. Not only new styles are necessary, but new organisational structures for churches and congregations must be developed, so that the leader can be a guardian of hope, but at the same time be an ordinary human being in need of care.

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