

The Course of Study: Basic Five-Year Curriculum 2005–2008

The titles, descriptions, and objectives that follow were formulated by the directors of the Course of Study schools in conjunction with staff from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of The United Methodist Church. These titles, descriptions, and objectives were then reviewed by faculty who teach these courses and by board members who oversee these programs. Subsequently they were revised by those who initially wrote them.

The titles represent the twenty courses that comprise the five-year program of the Course of Study schools. Each year includes four courses, two of which are foundational (the biblical and theological courses) and two of which are functional. These courses are designed to relate to each other within a given year, as well as in sequence through the years. The first year is introductory, the second through fourth years are developmental, and the fifth year is both integrative and serves as a bridge to continuing education.

The course descriptions and objectives represent the focus of the subject matter and the areas that receive attention in both the teaching and the taking of the course. The descriptions summarize the overall thrust while the learning objectives delineate particular concerns that shape the parameters of the course. Since each course is limited to twenty contact hours (in addition to work completed before the course begins), that which is described for each course serves as a desired end, although its full accomplishment cannot be attempted. Those who teach and those who take each course seek to accomplish as high a level of learning as is reasonable given inherent components.

First Year (Foundational Courses)

COS 111—The Pastor as Interpreter of the Bible

This course introduces the role of the United Methodist pastor in biblical interpretation. Attention is given to the formation and function of the canon and to the development of a methodology of interpretation consistent with the nature of scripture. The importance of the Bible as a witness to the life and faith of ancient Israel and early Christianity is illustrated from a survey of representative biblical materials (focusing on Genesis, Hosea, Amos, Mark, and Philippians).

Objectives:

1. Exploration of the role of the pastor as interpreter of the Bible in the life of the congregation
2. An understanding of the formation of the canon and its function within the community of faith, past and present
3. A critical introduction to historical, literary, and theological approaches to scripture while keeping in mind the experimental dimension of biblical interpretation
4. Development of an exegetical methodology consistent with the nature and authority of the Bible

5. A survey of representative materials from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as identified in the course description
6. Development of the ability to understand what was meant historically and to interpret what it means today

COS 112—Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit

This course considers the role and responsibility of the pastor as an interpreter of the gospel, with emphases on the Wesleyan heritage and the student's own growing sense of theological identity. Basic terms, tasks, and methods of Christian theology are introduced, and representative classical themes are defined and illustrated.

Objectives:

1. Challenging students to reexamine their understanding of faith
2. Critical consideration of theological methods and the Wesleyan use of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason
3. Introduction to the problems inherent in issues such as theodicy, revelation, Christology, law, and grace
4. Development of the pastor's identity as a theologian
5. Utilization of theology as a resource for pastoral functions

First Year (Functional Courses)

COS 113—Pastoral Care for Spiritual Formation

This course explores the caring presence and actions of the pastor as a form of spiritual leadership and formation. Skills of effective pastoral care are presented and practiced, including effective listening and response, awareness of cultural differences, timely intervention, and appropriate referral. Students are encouraged to reflect on their personal strengths, their need for growth in developing relational skills, their self-care, and the development of personal spiritual practices—all in the context of the community of faith.

Objectives:

1. Developing the pastor's identity as a spiritual leader and caregiver, with emphasis on the need for continuing spiritual and professional growth
2. Instruction, practice, and feedback in basic communication skills, including verbal and nonverbal communication
3. Examination of basic methods for dealing with developmental issues and life crises, including when and how to refer a person to other sources of assistance
4. Exploration of ethical issues, including confidentiality, personal and professional boundaries, and the pastor's legal responsibilities
5. Introduction to a Wesleyan understanding of spirituality and spiritual practice

COS 114—Pastoral Leadership and Administration

This course focuses on the pastor's formation and competency in fulfilling the role of pastoral administrator, so that a unity is achieved between the pastor's doing and being. The development of administrative skills in keeping with the theology and polity of The United Methodist Church is addressed.

Objectives:

1. Examination of the nature of the church as foundational for the development of mission statements, administrative decisions, and leadership styles

2. Clarification of the respective leadership roles of laity and pastors
3. Introduction to planning, coordinating, decision making, conflict management, and evaluation in the church setting
4. Development of skills for, and understanding of, the dynamics involved in the small church and multiple-charge setting
5. Enhancement of the student's understanding of United Methodist structures and administrative procedures

Second Year (Foundational Courses)

COS 211—Hebrew Bible I

This course interprets the developing institutions and traditions of Israel and examines the varying ways in which the Hebrew people understood critical events of their history as acts of God. Attention is given to the earliest covenants, the Exodus, the rise of the monarchy, and other events up to the eighth-century prophets.

Objectives:

1. Formation of a historical overview of the life and faith of ancient Israel
2. Exegesis of selected passages that illustrate crucial turning points in the history of Israel
3. Correlation of exegesis with its utilization in preaching and other pastoral functions
4. Reflection upon ways in which God has been at work in the lives of people in these biblical materials
5. Ongoing development of an exegetical methodology
6. Application of these studies to the concerns and issues of the present day

COS 212—Theological Heritage: Early & Medieval

This course reflects critically on significant individuals, decisive events, and fundamental tenets of the Christian faith as found in the early church and in medieval Christianity. Utilizing the categories of *grace* and *faith* as focusing lenses, the student appropriates the Christian heritage and enters into the church's ongoing task of interpreting, articulating, and enacting the gospel for contemporary life. There is some use of primary sources.

Objectives:

1. Examination of an emerging Christian orthodoxy in dialogue and debate with Gnosticism, Montanism, Marcionism, and Greek philosophy
2. Study of major theologians and church leaders whose writings focus on key doctrinal issues (for example, Origen, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas, Pseudo-Dionysius)
3. Engagement with pivotal theological concerns in their historical context (for example, faith and reason, authority of predestination, eschatology)
4. Focus upon the distinctive aspects of Eastern Orthodox theologies compared with Roman Catholicism
5. Exploration of major theological developments in medieval Christianity
6. Appreciation and appropriation of the relevance of historical theology for pastoral ministry

Second Year (Functional Courses)

COS 213—Formation for Discipleship

This course examines the ministry of the church as a means of nurturing faith, Christian values, and ways of life among members of the congregation and community. Skills for evaluating, planning, and designing educational experiences are stressed, as well as the pastor's role as mentor and servant.

Objectives:

1. Emphasis on pastor's identity as servant and mentor, highlighting the need for pastors to be both teachers and learners
2. Examination of faith development in the light of location, economics, gender, ethnicity, age, generation, and human relationships
3. Survey of the major methodologies for educating Christians, with special stress on developing small-group ministries and on teaching scripture, confirmation, and the basic doctrines of the Christian faith
4. Reflection upon the work of the church as formative for Christian discipleship (personal piety and social justice) and development of an action plan for transforming the life of discipleship and the congregation and community
5. Development of the ability to critically assess curricular materials for theological content and appropriateness to ministry setting

COS 214—Practice of Preaching

This course focuses on preaching the gospel. Central concerns are the utilization of biblical exegesis, sermon preparation and delivery, and evaluation of the pastor's preaching.

Objectives:

1. Utilization of biblical exegesis for preaching with reference to the lectionary
2. Awareness of and skills for understanding the context for preaching (congregation and community)
3. Evaluation of sermons for biblical authenticity, theological soundness, and contemporary relevance
4. Appropriation of insights gained from the evaluation of the student's sermons
5. Analytical participation in the evaluation of the sermons of classmates
6. Development of skills in the ordering and delivery of a sermon

Third Year (Foundational Courses)

COS 311—New Testament I

This course presents a panoramic view of the content, main characteristics, and message of the books of the New Testament in light of their historical, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious environment, as well as their importance as literary expressions of the faith and history of the early church. The practice of exegesis is again emphasized, with special focus on Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians.

Objectives:

1. Review of the nature, scope, and purpose of the New Testament
2. Review of the origin and formation of the New Testament canon
3. Description of the historical and social background out of which the New Testament emerged

4. Development and practice of an exegetical methodology that is appropriate and helpful to the study of the New Testament
5. Articulation of an introductory explanation of the origin, formation, development, and expansion of the Christian faith during the first century
6. Examination of some of the ways in which the early church interpreted the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and how this interpretation informed how its members lived out their faith in various social circumstances
7. Reflection on the meaning and significance of the message of the New Testament for the faith and mission of the church in its contemporary context

COS 312—Our Theological Heritage: The Reformation

This course is a critical reflection upon the individuals, decisive events, and theological developments during the period of the Protestant Reformation. Utilizing the categories of *grace* and *faith* as focusing lenses, the student appropriates the Reformation heritage and enters into the church's ongoing task of interpreting and enacting the gospel for contemporary life. Attention will be given to selected primary sources.

Objectives:

1. Reflection upon movements and events in the period prior to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (for example, mysticism, nominalism, the Renaissance, the Papal Schism, and the martyrdom of Huss and Savonarola)
2. Examination of the Reformation on the European continent, with due attention to the theologies of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists
3. Engagement with pivotal theological concerns in their historical context, including the relationship of faith and reason, justification by grace through faith, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and Christology
4. Analysis of the Catholic Reformation as reflected in the Council of Trent and such figures as Ignatius Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Blaise Pascal
5. Analysis of the English Reformation of the sixteenth century and the rise of Puritanism in the seventeenth century
6. Understanding and appreciating the historical development and context of Christian theology
7. Continued growth and development of the pastor's identity as theologian

Third Year (Functional Courses)

COS 313—Our Mission from God: Evangelism

This course analyzes the theology of evangelism and our faithfulness to God's call. It also examines various strategies for and approaches to the church's evangelistic task in the heritage of United Methodism, stressing the proclamation and the enactment of the gospel.

Objectives:

1. Significant reference to the biblical roots of evangelism, with particular attention to New Testament foundations as illustrated in the scriptures examined in COS 311
2. Interpretation of the Wesleyan heritage of evangelism
3. Survey of strategies and models for evangelism in the past, present, and future life of the church

4. Analysis of contemporary issues in evangelism, such as debates on church-growth methodologies, the relationship of evangelism and mission, evangelism in relation to personal and social transformation, evangelization and liberation theologies, and revivalism
5. Focus on evangelism in and use for the local congregation, with emphasis on such issues as preaching evangelistically, organizing and training laity for evangelism, relating evangelism to Christian education (including evangelism in confirmation classes), and planning for long-range evangelistic efforts in communities
6. Critical analysis of and appreciation for electronic media as instruments of evangelism

COS 314—Pastoral Care and Counseling

This course focuses on the pastor's understanding of human nature with attention to methods and skills in pastoral care and counseling. Students participate in an assessment of their personal interactive styles.

Objectives:

1. Examination of basic styles and types of pastoral care and counseling
2. Analysis of pastoral-care experiences through such methods as case studies, verbatim, incident reports, and tapes
3. Practice in the skills of pastoral care and counseling with classes, feedback, and appropriation of insights gained
4. Focus on the counseling process from initial contact to completion, including referral as appropriate
5. Formation of pastoral theology through reflection on the uniqueness of the pastoral dimensions of care and counseling
6. Sensitivity to the life situations and relationships of individuals receiving care and counseling

Fourth Year (Foundational Courses)

COS 411—Hebrew Bible II

This course continues to examine the Word of God as it was expressed through some of Israel's prophets, selected psalms, and passages from the Book of Job.

Objectives:

1. A focus on the biblical message as a whole by integrating this year's study with previous study of the Bible
2. Greater familiarity with a number of the great passages in the designated books
3. Continuation of exegetical practice
4. Exploration of the assigned passages as relevant for preaching, mission, and ministry by today's pastor and congregation

COS 412—The Wesleyan Movement

This course is a critical reflection on significant individuals, decisive events, and fundamental tenets of the Christian faith as found in the development of United Methodism. Utilizing the categories of *grace* and *faith* as focusing lenses, the student appropriates particulars of the Wesleyan heritage and enters into the church's ongoing task of interpreting, articulating, and enacting the gospel in contemporary life.

Objectives:

1. A review of the factors in the English Reformation, the Puritan revolution, and German Pietism that illuminate the Evangelical Revival
2. Introduction to John, Charles, and Susanna Wesley, with emphasis upon the ministry and theology of John Wesley and the development of Methodist societies within eighteenth-century Anglicanism
3. Consideration of significant theological and historical developments in Methodism and in the Evangelical United Brethren tradition in nineteenth and twentieth-century America
4. Reflection upon pressing theological and church polity issues facing contemporary United Methodism
5. Appreciation for and appropriation of the contributions of historical theology
6. Continued growth of the pastor's identity as theologian

Fourth Year (Functional Courses)

COS 413—Worship and Sacraments

This course examines the sacraments, rites, and liturgy of The United Methodist Church and the pastor's role as worship leader.

Objectives:

1. Examination of the church year and its historical and theological grounding
2. Examination of the theology and practice of the sacraments
3. Review of the rites of Christian marriage, death and resurrection, and other occasional services, including appropriate counseling methods
4. Reflection on worship practices, including use of nontraditional liturgies, media, music, and lay leadership
5. Development, for reflection and evaluation, of a sample service of worship

COS 414—Personal and Social Ethics

This course analyzes the biblical and theological bases for Christian behavior—personal, professional, and social. Emphasis is given to the acquisition of pastoral skills in moral discernment and ethically responsible decision making and action.

Objectives:

1. Exploration of biblical and theological bases for ethical thinking and activity
2. Survey of major approaches to ethical reasoning
3. Examination of the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church as a frame of reference for ethical decision making
4. Exploration of ways to deal with ethical dilemmas inherent in such issues as war and peace, hunger, poverty, political tyranny, domestic violence, substance abuse, racism, sexism, AIDS, and biomedical technology
5. Reflection on case studies that challenge pastors to examine carefully their ethics and responsibilities
6. Focus on pertinent issues for personal and professional life, with indication of guidelines for ministerial ethics
7. Delineation of and reflection upon essential guidelines for Christian identity and moral behavior

Fifth Year (Foundational Courses)

COS 511—New Testament II

This course continues the third-year New Testament course, but focuses on the exegesis of assigned texts. It emphasizes the integration of previous learning in exegesis and biblical studies with contextualization in the practice of ministry. Special emphasis includes the books of Matthew, John, James, and Revelation.

Objectives:

1. Improvement of the student's ability to effectively use scripture in the preparation of sermons and Bible studies
2. Deepening of the student's understanding of the various assigned biblical studies
3. Strengthening of the student's skills in using critical methods for biblical study
4. Development of a rationale for the hermeneutical task
5. Relating of the process of exegesis with sound hermeneutical methods for the student's pastoral role
6. Assisting the student in relating the eternal biblical message to the context of ministry

COS 512—Contemporary Theology

This course critically reflects on significant individuals, movements, events, and fundamental tenets of the Christian faith that have shaped contemporary theologies in the past century or so. Through study of varied theological expressions in the modern and postmodern decades, the student enters into the church's enduring task of interpreting, articulating, and enacting the gospel for contemporary life. Attention will be given to selected primary sources.

Objectives:

1. Consideration of nineteenth-century theological issues that form the backdrop for twentieth-century developments
2. Examination of the liberal-conservative split of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as well as ensuing neo-evangelical movements, orthodox theologies, and liberal developments
3. Analysis of the Barthian/neo-Orthodox traditions
4. Interpretation of theologies of history and eschatology (for example, Niebuhr, Pannenberg, and Moltmann)
5. Reflection upon Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American liberation theologies, with due reference to ethnic, feminist/womanist/mujerista, and class expressions
6. Exploration of other significant theological movements, such as feminist, ecumenical, contemporary Roman Catholic, post-Enlightenment, postmodern, evangelical, Eastern Orthodox, and process theologies
7. Appreciation for contemporary African, Asian, and Latin American theologies

Fifth Year (Functional Courses)

COS 513—Our Mission from God: Transforming Agent

The mission of the church is to serve God and neighbor by proclaiming the gospel

for the redemption of the world. Redemption is God's holy activity that transforms individuals, societies, and all of life. When faithful to its mission, the church serves as an agent of God's transforming redemption. Based upon this understanding of the nature of the church and its mission, this course seeks to help pastors gain theological understanding and practical ministry skills for leading congregations to carry out the mission of the church as God's agents of transformation.

Objectives:

1. Development of a biblical and theological framework for Christian mission
2. Consideration of the Wesleyan understanding of personal piety and social holiness
3. Examination of unjust social realities—such as racism, sexism, and classism—that impact society and thus impact the mission of the church
4. Exploration of the growing influence of social, economic, and political globalization in the world and its implications for the mission of the church
5. Exposure to United Methodist ecumenical, interreligious, and community programs that model effective social transformation in the spirit of the gospel
6. Analysis of the context of ministry in local congregations for the development of strategies and leadership skills for the transforming mission of the church

COS 514—Theology and the Practice of Ministry

This course emphasizes the integration of the role of the practicing pastor with the church's theological heritage and its particular Wesleyan expression. The course also stresses theology as an ongoing task of critical reflection for the purpose of action. Consideration is given to issues, events, and institutions that form the context within which the pastor is required to think, speak, and act with theological clarity.

Objectives:

1. Continued growth of the pastor's identity as theologian and the development of his or her own credo (a written statement of the pastor's own understanding of Christian doctrine)
2. Focus upon thinking theologically about everyday activities and contemporary events in the political, economic, and social areas of life
3. Reflection upon a variety of theological perspectives in order to apply a faithful critique to persons who claim to be God's voices in our time
4. Integration of the pastor's theological understanding in the practice and evaluation of ministry
5. Encouragement of lifelong theological reading, reflection, and growth

Section IV: Mentoring Clergy in Extension Ministries (Probationary Elders) and Service Appointments Beyond the Local Church (Probationary Deacons)

Paragraph 327.4 of the 2004 *Book of Discipline* states that probationary members shall be supervised by the district superintendent under whom they are appointed, and shall be assigned a deacon or elder as a mentor.

Experience is a good teacher
but the bills are exorbitant.

Mentoring relationships for commissioned ministers appointed to extension ministries or service appointments beyond the local church within the annual conference will be established with the same care as those for clergy appointed to local churches. In establishing the mentoring relationship, attention must be devoted to the unique and distinctive pressures of secular and institutional settings.

When the commissioned minister is serving in a setting outside the bounds of the annual conference, the Board of Ordained Ministry may seek the assistance of the Board of Ordained Ministry in the annual conference in which the commissioned minister is serving, to provide a meaningful mentoring experience. It is the responsibility of the commissioned minister to maintain the connection with his or her home conference.

Section V: Mentoring in Groups

Another valid structure for clergy mentoring is the group setting. Mentors must have not only the skills for one-on-one mentoring but also the skills for facilitating group discussion. It is also important for the mentor to have a person that can help him or her to reflect on and learn from his or her leadership of the group. Theological reflection upon call, vocation, and practice of ministry forms the core of the experience.

1. *Group Covenant*—As with one-on-one mentoring, the group needs structure and direction. In addition to each participant's personal covenant statement, the group as a whole must write a covenant. All that has been said before about mentoring is applicable to the group setting, but may need to be adapted.

2. *Confidentiality within the Group*—The dynamics of confidentiality are more complicated in a group than in the one-on-one situation. It is essential that the group state its understanding of confidentiality in its covenant and hold members accountable.

3. *Spiritual Formation of the Group*—The disciplines of prayer, worship, and ritual practices for the group deserve attention and preparation. Responsibility for these disciplines should be shared by the whole group and not simply assumed by the mentor/facilitator.

4. *Meeting Frequency and Length*—Geography, ministry settings, and other specific conditions will impact the frequency and length of the group's meetings. Group members may communicate electronically with one another between face-to-face sessions.

5. *Group Expectations*—It is crucial that participants are clear about the expectations that will govern the meetings. Use questions such as the following to establish expectations:

- How will leadership be shared?
- Who will design and lead worship times?
- How are topics selected and brought into the group?
- How will site visits be conducted?

In summary, the group is not primarily a support group, a therapy group, an educational seminar, or a fix-it group. The focus is *mentoring* through biblical-theological reflection. The mentor's role is to facilitate this process.

A LOCAL PASTOR'S STORY:

I was assigned to a small group (consisting of my peers) for mentoring. As it turned out, it did not feel like we were peers; consequently, I felt uncomfortable.

How can I fit into such a group? I wondered. After a couple of meetings reflecting on ministry events, I discovered that we are in this together.

A safe place for
reflection and growth.

— *Discipline* ¶1349

A closed mouth gathers no feet.

Section VI: Accountability beyond the Mentoring Relationship

You are not isolated and alone in this mentoring relationship in The United Methodist Church. The relationship itself was assigned through your annual conference or district processes. The superintendent, Board of Ordained Ministry, and/or district Committee on Ordained Ministry has participated in establishing the mentoring ministry and making specific assignments. Your relationship is one of several in your district and annual conference.

Supervision

Supervision is required in the connectional relationships of probationary members and local pastors. Probationary members are supervised by the district superintendent, the Board of Ordained Ministry and the Pastor/Staff Parish Relations Committee or employing agency. Local pastors are supervised by the district superintendent, the district Committee on Ordained Ministry and the Pastor/Staff Parish Relations Committee. **Mentoring is distinct from the evaluative and supervisory process (§1349). Mentors are not supervisors and do not participate in the evaluative process of the Board or District Committee.**

Reporting

The Board of Ordained Ministry is responsible for developing an annual reporting process. This mentoring report is used to verify participation in the process. It is to be descriptive and nonevaluative in nature. If the mentor needs practice in distinguishing between descriptive and evaluative reporting, it is a good idea for the mentor to write a report and review it. Words and phrases that convey opinion, judgments, ratings, or advocacy are indicators of evaluative reporting. However, if the report simply reports events, agreements, or topics, the report is descriptive. When the Board of Ordained Ministry requires detailed descriptive reports, the following model may be helpful:

- The mentee writes a first draft of the report.
- The mentor reviews the report and makes amendments, if needed.
- If the report has no amendments, the mentee signs and submits the report.
- If the report is amended, the mentor returns the report to the mentee without signature.
- If the mentee disagrees with the report as amended, he or she makes further amendments and returns the report to the mentor for signature.
- If the mentor disagrees with the mentee's amendments, he or she repeats the process with the mentee until an agreement is reached.

Basic principle: Mentor and mentee will agree on and sign the report. The mentee will sign off last and submit the report to the appropriate annual conference and/or district officer.

Feedback on the Mentoring Process

Boards of Ordained Ministry may seek feedback on the mentoring process in order to determine its effectiveness. Information requested and shared should focus

on the process and not upon the persons involved. From time to time surveys may be conducted or commissioned by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry in order to collect data across the denomination.

Self-Evaluation

Participants may choose to evaluate their mentoring relationship. Such evaluation should center upon the upholding of their covenant. The following questions may help:

- Can we name instances when we were particularly successful in upholding the covenant?
- Was the covenant ever broken? If so, when and how did this happen?
- Was the covenant ever restored? If so, when and how did this take place?

Yearly Cycle

The clergy-mentoring relationship is intended to last for the mentee's entire period as commissioned minister or during his or her participation in the Course of Study. The nature of the United Methodist appointive system allows opportunities to annually celebrate, evaluate, and renew the covenant.

Men are from earth. Women are from earth. Deal with it.

Interviews

If the process in an annual conference requests that mentors be present at interviews, they should be silent observers. The purpose for observing the interview is to allow the mentor and mentee to reflect upon the process in a later session.

Closure

It is inevitable that the clergy-mentoring relationship will reach closure at some point. This might happen because either the mentor or the mentee has received a change in appointment that makes continuing the mentoring relationship impossible. In such a case, another mentor will be assigned.

Closure also happens when the mentee completes the Course of Study or is elected to full-clergy membership and ordained. In other instances there is closure because the mentee leaves the clergy office and seeks another vocation. Whatever the cause for ending the mentoring relationship, it is important that both the mentor and the mentee pay attention to how to bring closure to the relationship. A final session provides an opportunity for the mentor and mentee to reflect together in conversation and prayer about the experiences and gifts that the relationship has made possible.

Plan to celebrate the mentoring relationship. Closure does not mean that a relationship and friendship cannot continue. It simply means that the formal, assigned dimension of the mentoring ministry has been completed.

Always remember you're unique,
just like everyone else.

Let anyone with ears
to hear listen!

— Luke 14:35

Resources

Listening Skills

Just as the love of God begins with hearing God's Word, so the beginning of love for each other begins with listening. Conversation becomes communion when we hear God's Word. The Hebrew root for "hear" and "listen" is *sama*, which appears 1,050 times in the Old Testament. To "hear" or "listen" implies a response to the Word. The response to hearing God is obedience.

In the New Testament, the Greek word ἀκούω means "to hear." In some cases, it means to hear from God's perspective, so that the hearer will know what to do. "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luke 14:35)

True listening to another person is both a gift and a practiced skill. We think about four times faster than we speak which means that often when listening to someone speak our mind wanders to fill in the gaps. How often in listening to someone else do you begin to think of what you want to say, even while the other person is still speaking? Do you sometimes appear to be listening to another person even though you are actually thinking of other things?

The practice of love includes active, reflective listening, such as when the listener repeats what has been heard. For instance, "Are you saying that. . .?" or "Are you feeling. . .?" or "I don't understand what you mean when you say. . ."

Increase Your Listening Skills

- Spend at least fifteen minutes a day in focused meditation.
- Practice focusing on the other person's words.
- Try to eliminate distractions in the surrounding environment.
- Watch for visual helps and body language.
- Listen for vocal changes.
- Discern how your body feels as you listen to the other person.
- Ask questions.
- Paraphrase what you have heard, to test how well you have heard the other person's meaning.
- Write a summary of what the other person has said.

Discard Poor Listening Habits

- Don't interrupt the other person.
- Don't engage in conversations on the side.
- Don't fail to give response or feedback.
- Don't correct the other person's grammar or word choice.
- Don't complete the other person's sentences.
- Don't show disinterest.
- Don't walk away or do other things while claiming to listen.
- Don't answer a question before it has been completed.
- Don't look at your watch or at the clock.
- Don't say you understand when you don't.
- Don't disagree with everything that is said.
- Don't abruptly change the subject.

Feedback

The letter of James warns about the dangers of the tongue. Speaking can hide or distort as quickly as it can reveal and heal. Therefore, inviting, giving, or receiving feedback about a person's leadership can be a risky enterprise. This is why many clergy live with a sense of isolation while they minister in a sea of speaking.

The art and discipline of feedback calls those of us in the church to use words in a way that practices the love of Christian covenant. Again, this requires a life of prayer in which our listening for and speaking to God reflect our listening and speaking with one another.

When we are uncertain about ourselves or when we feel vulnerable, our speech is self-protective and/or defensive. In these times our speech may be voluminous or absent. It will not be used to share or reveal something about ourselves.

The ministry of feedback must be saturated in prayer. Knowing we are secure in God's love becomes the core from which we can invite and offer feedback. Holding ourselves and others in prayer is essential preparation for the ministry of feedback.

Feedback involves saying what you experience, observe, think, and feel about another person's leadership.

Feedback IS

- plain speaking.
- self-revealing on the part of the speaker.
- humbly invited, humbly offered.
- a gift invited and offered.
- a dimension of covenant and love.

Feedback is NOT

- winning a point.
- coercing another to do something.
- passing rumors.
- hiding behind what someone else is saying.
- advocating a theological perspective.
- defending oneself or others.
- promoting scandal.
- objective truth.

You must understand this,
... let everyone be quick to
listen, slow to speak.

— James 1:19

Below is a checklist of important items for church leaders in asking for and receiving feedback. The list is not just for a mentoring relationship. *All* church leaders are part of feedback processes. The board chair, the church-school teacher, and the treasurer—no less than the pastor—are strengthened through their invitation for feedback from others.

In inviting feedback from others about your leadership:

- be specific about the kind of feedback you are seeking. (A general survey of your leadership is very different from specific feedback about a particular task you do in leadership.)
- make sure that the respondent understands what he or she is being asked to do.
- set the expectations you have for the feedback (that is, explain why you are asking).
- provide the tools necessary to structure the feedback (question sheets, rating scales, etc.)
- structure the feedback sessions carefully.
- make sure the physical setting allows for speaking and listening without interruption.
- be clear about the boundaries of confidentiality.
- avoid a confrontational dynamic.
- invite observations and/or experiences of your leadership that are specific to the area of focus.
- assume a positive motive and intention on the respondent's part.
- ask the respondent to be specific with instances and detail.
- remember that the respondent is speaking from his or her perspective.
- test the speaking and hearing for clarity of communication (that is, are you hearing what the respondent is intending to say?).
- invite questions for clarification.
- pay attention to your feelings, your breathing, and your physical situation.
- if needed, call for a break.
- divide the feedback itself and the conclusions from the feedback into two different sessions.

Bibliography

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