

Models for practical ministry

Methodological considerations pertaining to the construction of models from the description of the situation and its theological interpretation

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At this point of the process, we proceed to the task of developing strategies. The first contributions to this volume discuss the situation we are in. Situations, one should say, the countries being so different. And, more specifically, even within these respective countries we find many different situations for the church and the ministry. Still, some major issues, questions, and developments come to the fore.

The central issue obviously is the interaction between the roles of the minister and the congregation. Around this interaction we find a number of other relevant factors. First, there is the interaction with the wider society and the cultural and political ramifications thereof. Here we find fundamental differences in comparing the Hungarian and the Dutch context. The church in the Netherlands is in an overall situation of decline, indicated by notions like secularization. We have found ourselves in a minority position.² Beyond diminution in scale, the concept of secularization points to the fact that the church seems to play a much smaller role in society and in individual lives. Together with a radicalized democratization that is apparent in our society and church, the minister as representative of the church has lost much of his or her previously taken for granted authority. From an observer's point of view, it seems that the Hungarian situation is more defined by a history of suppression with only fairly recent moves toward more democracy and freedom. The role of the minister in that situation became or remained much more central, and the Western European move toward

1. I would like to thank the Dutch student participants to the conference Thom de Haan, Bindert de Jong, Johannes de Jong, Helga Knecht, for their summaries of the discussions that have informed the final version of this paper.
2. F. de Lange (ed.) *Geloven in de minderheid? Een bundel opstellen ter gelegenheid van het 140-jarig bestaan van de Theologische Universiteit der Gereformeerde Kerken te Kampen*. Kampen, Kok 1994.

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shared responsibility and the involvement of volunteers may be less visible. The challenges of the situation have yielded accordingly devised strategies. In the Netherlands the churches have invested much in their efforts to seek alliance with (post-)modern culture. In Hungary the churches seem to have survived by preserving the more separate and classical identity of the church.

If these observations are correct, they invite for thorough theological discussion. Questions must be addressed regarding ecclesiology and theology of ministry. This involves a hermeneutical inquiry into the relations between Scripture, confession, historical tradition, and actual praxis. In this inquiry we will have to reconsider the theological models we have perhaps self-evidently used to deal with questions like these and ask whether they are adequate to respond to the challenges at hand. We will also unavoidable enter into debates of a normative kind, both in relating scripture, confession, and praxis and in identifying possible strategies. Are we called to adapt the church to the societal trends or to conserve its classic identity in juxtaposition? Are we to define the relation of ministry and congregation in terms of diametrical positions or in terms of collaborative vocation? Are we to focus on professional and/or theological normativity? Are we to understand the theological dimension of ministry in terms of prophets, priest, judges, or kings – if a clear-cut biblical distinction is possible at all?³

These normative questions are of utmost importance for the task that I will begin to describe in this contribution. Given the situations we are in, and reading them hermeneutically, moving between the empirical data and the sources of our Christian tradition, how can we develop models for ministry that are situationally adequate and theologically legitimate?

Before anyone might begin to expect too much, my contribution will not offer such a model. That will be a shared task for congregations, ministers, and academic theologians. I will merely try to pave the ground by discussing methodologically how these models might be constructed, and where the decisions are made underway. Obviously, there will be some theological content in it as well. Pure method does not exist, because each method implies its own views and values. I will try not to obscure these, but instead highlight them so that the reader will be free to question the implicit theology of my approach as well.

My intention is to focus on three methodological issues. First I will consider normative criteria, precisely because we are on our way from theological interpretation to theological strategy. Where do we locate our values and the principles that will determine our strategies? Second, I will identify a number of parameters that seem essential for adequate models. These parameters are thought of as a formal structure of criteria, and hopefully they will trigger some creativity. Finally, I will question the scope and horizon of the models to be constructed. We can differentiate between local and general theories and strategies. This choice determines at least in part what our models will look like.

3. See the contribution of T. Marjovszky.

NORMATIVE CRITERIA

In his paper, Rinse Reeling Brouwer reminded us not to mistake descriptive theology in a positivistic sense as providing objective data to be interpreted afterwards. Praxis - and that includes the praxis of church and ministry - is theory laden, and our perception of that praxis is already determined by our Vorverständnis. In the same way, our theological interpretations and the theological tradition in which we stand have grown out of the previous praxis of church and ministry. Now that we have taken this hermeneutical circle of theory and praxis twice, we need to ask ourselves where we find the normative criteria to create new strategies or to evaluate existing ones.

One way of doing this is taking the classic paradigm of Scripture as the revelation and final judge of what we do or intend to do. This may lead to an equally classic deductive-foundational approach, in which we move from the canonical texts through a tradition of explaining and actualizing in church history and dogmatic systematization into *theologia applicata*, where the truths and wisdom of centuries are transposed to practical ministry.

Strong as this tradition may be, it fails to recognize the hermeneutical nature of our knowing and doing things. As stated, praxis and interpretation are always intertwined. We have learned from hermeneutical philosophers like Gadamer and Ricoeur that there is no direct access to the original meaning of texts nor to the intrinsic meaning of present praxises. This implies that we are at great risk if we follow the deductive path. All too easily we will read our interpretations into the texts and into the praxis, misunderstanding them both. It seems to me that even a critical reading does not safeguard us against these risks, because it still seeks the original - in a way objective - meanings. If we take seriously the insights of hermeneutics, the deductive-foundational approach is in fact a deceptive one.

Obviously, this criticism applies to the inductive-pragmatic approach as well. Here the final judge of our strategies may be found in their effectiveness. Models for practical ministry will be evaluated positively if they work. We may of course try to specify this. One might want to define effectiveness in terms of the happiness of church members, the quantitative growth in participation, or even the spiritual development of those ministered to. And then again, we should ask how this development is measured and against what criteria it is evaluated. Most readers may agree that this inductive-pragmatic road is equally deceptive.

I would not want to leave the reader with the impression that I suggest to disregard both. Any model for ministry should comply with our understanding of Scripture, doctrine, history, and with our understanding of the needs of our situations. The point is that neither of these can function as a direct source of normative criteria for the strategies we want to develop. Speaking in faith language, we might have to say that the true source of normative criteria is God Himself. This should caution us against the hubris that is inherent to our every effort to define absolute criteria.

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Paradoxically, precisely this humility may bring us to the point where we can establish some criteria. Not the ultimate ones, but penultimate criteria that will do for our present situations. If God, truth, and absolute criteria are not accessible to us, maybe we can value the many pathways where we find traces of God. In more methodological terms, we may come to appreciate the use of triangulation: the combination of more than one source and method. We may read the Bible as witness of living with God, and in the same way we may read our present situations as ways of living with God. If we take this approach, our task as theologians is to foster the dialogue.

There is, however, one more question. And if one answers this question negatively - as I do - our task becomes even more humble. The question is this: Do you believe that theologians should make normative statements and provide the right strategies for the church? It seems to me that answering 'yes' to this question grants the theologian an authority that he or she does not merit. The criteria we may come up with, the models and strategies we may develop, they are in no way better, more normative, or more true than what the church, the believers can offer.

This is a daring statement and one to be disputed. But it is not just a particular theological opinion. It is also a methodological critique that is right at the heart of the theme of this volume. I would like to challenge the habit of theologians like ourselves to blur the distinction between our professional and/or academic task on the one hand, and our role of believer or minister on the other. As believers or ministers, we are part of the church, and together with others we evaluate the situation, search for the will of God, and develop new ways of being and acting. In fact, it may be our ministry to guide this process, and show the right direction. But as professionals, and especially as academics, we have to be aware of the limits of our insights and engage in scrupulous self-critique. If we use our professional academic skills, we may help the church's communication - internally between members, externally with other groups and naturally with the texts and traditions that are the sources of her understanding of God.

To summarize this part, before developing models for strategy, we have to clarify where we locate our criteria. My suggestion is that they are found precisely in the communication between the church and its tradition, between the church and its members, and between the church and its surroundings. As theologians, we may want to foster these communications, without claiming that we can do it better.

PARAMETERS

Now, modest as our task may be, we are here to work on theological description, interpretation, and strategy. To do so systematically, I will propose some parameters we may consider in developing models of practical ministry. The function of these parameters is to provide the formal logic for these models. As parameters, their value - that is, their content - may be altered, and each variation

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will result in a changed model. I take my parameters from Don Browning's encyclopedic proposal for what he calls *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.⁴ Browning distinguishes five levels or dimensions of practical moral reasoning: The visional level, the obligational level, the social-environmental level, the rule-role level, and the tendency-need level.

Let's start with the visional level. According to Browning, our theological thinking is embedded in a tradition that is determined by stories and metaphors that shape our self-understanding. Each model for practical ministry will involve a vision of the identity of the minister. Our conference here seems to focus on this level, but for developing strategies this is only one part of the picture. Three basic notions seem important here, two of which are central to our theme. The first is ministry as an ordained position. The second is ministry as a profession. The third one, absent in the title of this conference, is ministry as personal charisma. These three concepts of ministry all have a long history. In different currents of Christianity, the balance between these concepts may differ, resulting in different models of practical ministry.

When considering this level, we should take into account that visions of ministry are always complemented by visions of the church and of the world. These complementary visions may be implicit, but they interact with the visions of ministry. It is not just that each notion brings about different associations, maybe even a different discourse. They also imply a different vision of the situation of the church and the world. And, conversely, each vision of the church results in specific visions of ministry.

Following Jan Jonkers, if the vision of the church will have to change in the direction of understanding and accepting a position in the margins of society, then our vision of ministry will change with it. But this vision is still open for more than one meaning. The church may resort to the margins, withering away, it may come to understand itself as called to evangelization, it may rejoice in the kenosis of the gospel into a post-Christian era, or it may play its role as one significant minority group in society alongside others. The minister involved will change accordingly from a care giver to the last Christians, to a missionary, to a prophet of secularization, to spokesman and educator.

The vision of ministry can also be described in classical terms as VDM, minister of the Divine Word. This notion implies a servant role, primarily to the Word but subsequently to the congregation. The minister may serve the congregation as 'spiritual facilitator', aiding the believing community in developing an authentic relation with God. Reformed theology of ministry has always combined the vocation of the minister by God and therefore as an antagonist to the congregation and the vocation through the congregation, commissioning him or

4. Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. Minneapolis 1991

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her with a special task.⁵ The isolated position of the minister that is somehow inherent to these visions brings about serious risks (like burn out) and thus demands attention to personal and spiritual well-being.

The second level is the obligational. This has to do with the ethical demands, general moral principles, that are embedded in the visional, but meantime gain relative independence. As an ethicist, Browning underlines this ethical dimension. For the purpose of our discussions, I would distinguish these two levels slightly differently. My proposal is to take the visional level to indicate the identity of the church and the minister. Who are we, where do we come from, where do we stand? Accordingly, we might take the obligational level to describe our mission. What is our task, our direction, our mission? The obligational level then applies to the core business of the minister. Is it to represent God, to bring God's Word? Is it to represent authentic humanity before God? Is it to serve the people? Is it management, education, counseling? Is it the explanation of ancient texts?

The three basic notions of ministry - ordained position, professional function, and personal charisma - may all lead to a different description of the task and mission of the minister. And again, a discussion at this point will involve a parallel discussion on the tasks and mission of the church in the world. Is it evangelization? Is it contributing to the welfare of society? Is it speaking prophetically against forces and powers that contradict our understanding of God's will?

In line with the above description of the minister as spiritual facilitator, the task of the minister will be to create space for authentic faith and to furnish the congregation with all necessary for spiritual communication and growth. This may involve a significant change in for example our ideas of preaching. Instead of *speaking* the Word of God, the minister will have to communicate in such a way that the participants will *hear* what they can see as the Voice of God. Evocative language then will take the place of declarative language. Likewise, in congregation theory ('Gemeindeaufbau') the focus will be on the possibilities and desires of the community rather than on the activities and inclinations of the minister.⁶

The two levels of the visional and the obligational thus challenge us to consider our basic understandings of God, humankind, church, ministry, world. Any model for practical ministry consists of presuppositions and implications regarding anthropology, soteriology, and so on. Our task as theologians is to clarify these presuppositions and implications, and to identify possible choices.

The third level is called the tendency-need level. In moral reasoning this has to do with the needs and the pre moral good. In our discussion it may provide parameters for the practical and personal needs of ministers and congregations.

5. See M. Josuttis, *Der Pfarrer ist anders*. München, Kaiser 1982; P. Ricoeur, 'The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation.' In: P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*. Minneapolis 1995.

6. See Sándor Gaál's contribution on the end of the minister-centered congregation.

No matter how elevated our ideals, how spiritual our vision, we live with specific tendencies and needs. The relation between minister and church is defined largely by concrete issues. Some examples. The financial situation of a shrinking community may be such that a full-time minister can no longer be afforded. Ministers may need - more than before - some spare time and a life of their own. A congregation may demand the minister to be primarily a crisis counselor, even when this particular minister may feel that explaining the Bible is at the heart of his work.

Browning states that 'the mere existence of these needs, whether basic or culturally induced, never in itself justifies their actualization . . . [but] . . . [the] higher order moral principles always function to organize, mediate, and coordinate these needs and tendencies . . .' Any model for practical ministry will have to take into account this tendency-need level, or it will fade away like an ideological dream. Our challenge will be not to disregard these needs, but to incorporate them in our models and find ways of addressing them creatively and conscientiously.

The same may go for the environmental-social level, and for the rule-role level. The environmental-social refers to the social-structural and ecological constraints of a particular congregation and ministry. The rule-role level refers to the most concrete level of actual practices and behaviors, together with the institutional structures of - for example - a denomination. It is here that the sociological and psychological analysis is more than needed to understand the possibilities and limits of the theological models we are to develop. That is not to say that the social sciences are only present at this level. They too are concerned with vision and obligation, just as much as theology has to engage in tendency-need, environmental-social, and rule-role levels. But as theologians usually are not very well equipped for this, the contribution of social scientists is much wanted.

Theological education, preparing for ministry, will have to attend to this level much stronger than it has done earlier. The personal emotional and spiritual biography of the minister will play a larger role in the educational process, especially in relation to the development of his or her professional identity. The constraints of our historical and socio-cultural contexts need to be taken into account if we want to avoid the construction of idealistic images. These contexts are subject to fundamental changes like globalization, the church as 'community of choice' ('Wahlverwandschaft'), the gender issues, and the replacement of the verbal by the visual.

Summarizing again, if we want to construct strategies, develop models for practical ministry, we have to include these five levels. Each model has to answer the following questions: What is the core identity of church and ministry? What is the central mission they have to fulfill? What are the basic needs in a particular church and ministry? What are the constraints that are placed upon this church and ministry? And what are the ecclesial and societal structures in which church and ministry are to function?

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These five questions bring together compliance with the tradition and our faith-understanding on the one hand and compliance with the needs and possibilities of our situations on the other. They deal with the communication between the church and its tradition, its members, and its surroundings.

SCOPE AND HORIZON

My final section will deal with the scope and horizon of the models to be generated. I already mentioned the need to include the particularities of a specific congregation and minister, and at the beginning I promised to differentiate between local and general models. At this point I intend to defend the position that we are in need of specific, local, here-and-now models rather than general ones. But this is an issue for debate. I would claim that our way of understanding the world is based on particularity and temporality. Our hermeneutical enterprise - moving to and fro between praxis and theory, between our actual lives and tradition - can only be adequate if we are willing to become enmeshed in the particular understanding of one situation. Only then we can begin the struggle of distantiating and the search for truth without deceiving ourselves in quasi-objective discourses. I have argued that we should settle with penultimate criteria that will do for our present situations. It is my hope that our working together will benefit from our differences, not because we try to establish some general agreement or discover some shared core answers, but because our differences foster our understanding of the particularities of our situations.

Whether or not one agrees with me on this point, there is a methodological need for clarity concerning the scope and horizon of the model we wish to construct. A model for practical ministry in a specified situation will look different from a general model for practical ministry that is thought to suit both Hungary and The Netherlands, both major cities and rural areas. If one chooses to develop a general model, it seems that there are two options. One is to incorporate in the model only that which is pertinent to every situation where it should be applied. In this case the risk is that of abstraction. The other option is to incorporate everything that may belong to the ministry, with the concomitant risk of expecting too much of the minister - the classic profile of the five-legged sheep.

My invitation would be, then, to indulge in the development of particular models for specific situations and specific ministers. We may learn to understand what is needed - practically, but also theologically - in distinct congregations of Debrecen and Amsterdam, Kampen and Cigand. If we take that approach, we are forced to study the specifics of that congregation and develop models in communication with these churches. We may develop models for practical ministry that distinguish very different ministries. There may be a need of classic ministers with their variety of tasks, but there may also be a need of specialized ministers, working in a larger area and serving a number of churches on one particular function: pastoral counseling, religious education, sermon preparation. Maybe we will need both specialized professionals and ordained generalists. Our task as

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theologians may be to find ways of generalizing the results of these processes. That does not mean we extend their scope toward a new general model to be applied everywhere. Instead we should seek to understand the similarities and the particularities of the process of developing models.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by summing up the challenges that I see in our task of generating models for practical ministry.

Let's be clear how and where we seek to establish the normative criteria: deductive-foundational, inductive-pragmatic, or in triangulating the communications of the church itself.

Let's evaluate our models on the five levels of vision, obligation, tendency-need, social environment and rule-role structures.

Let's be clear - methodologically, theologically, and practically - if we intend our models to function everywhere or to be adequate for a specific congregation at a given time and place.