

The Christian Worker and Lifelong Learning

God seems to call into full-time Christian service servants of the Word and servants of the people of God both those who are of an activist and a contemplative frame of mind. While the latter seem to need no encouragement to be lifelong learners, the former are so wired for the doing of ministry, that, unless they are intentional about it, they will not give time and attention to the continual study and preparation that ministry requires. Commitment to lifelong learning can be motivated by three perspectives. As a Christian and disciple, I am on pilgrimage all the way to heaven, I am becoming more like Jesus every day, and I am maturing in the Word. But this happens only with my cooperation with my day in and day out active learning. As a twenty-first century person, we do not need to be reminded that we live in an environment of change. If I do not stay abreast of these changes, their impact on me and those to whom I seek to minister, I will be condemned to more and more frequently repeat yesterday's answers to tomorrow's problems. As a professional Christian worker committed to excellence, I must always keep up in my field. I must benefit from the reflection and insights of others, the proven effectiveness of new ministry practices, and the probing about what may be coming next. Lifelong learning is a given for today's ministry. Not to pursue it, is not an option.

Lifelong Learning in Everyday Ministry

Two very helpful factors to consider in lifelong learning as part of daily ministry life are the accessing of knowledge and practices which implement the daily disposition to lifelong learning. Opportunities for learning abound, the availability of knowledge to strengthen me in ministry with the advent of personal electronic means is instantaneous. To take advantage of accessing material to promote my lifelong learning, the Christian worker needs to develop habits of immediate conservation of information and insights, as well as, creating storage facilities that permit him to access it at a later date. Generations of seminarians have been instructed to carry a spiral pocket size pad with them to collect thoughts and insights that come their way, particularly sermon illustrations, observed in real life situations. Now "PDA's(Personal Digital Assistants)" do the same thing. Different media, but the same principle. As a keen "exegete of the culture" as well as of the Scripture, "Will it preach? Will it teach?" should constantly be on the mind of the communicator of the Word.

Storage

Then, there is the matter of storage. Again, the medium may vary, but the principle of organization should be the same. Whether, you store information on 3X5 cards or in file folders or in directories on a computer, is the system you develop expandable and retrievable? Expandable means that you have so organized the material with a built in flexibility that you can add to it. Principles of organization like alphabetizing and following the canonical and chapter and verse order of Bible books allows for such expansion. And, you can create layers of precision to make things even more expandable, like directories and sub- and sub, sub-directories in a computer environment. And you can combine principles of organization to

increase the expandability even more. Say you were doing a quite thorough study, collecting what various commentators were saying on a particular passage. You record their insights according to the verses referenced. But then you could organize the commentators, if need be, alphabetically or chronologically.

Just as important as expandability is retrievability. Can I find the information once I have stored it? Although you might want to follow filing system recommendations of an expert, it is probably better to develop your own and let it evolve over the years. That evolution can take several twists and turns; there is trial and error involved; and depending on your degree of discipline, you may or may not always follow the same way of organizing your material. So it is probably good to write down somewhere the basic principles you have chosen to pursue in your materials organization and refer to it periodically. A well organized set of files in whatever medium can conserve a wealth of material gathered over years of lifelong learning which is sure to enrich ones ministry. One last thought. Often material gathered is quite timely and relevant, but because of that very fact, it has a very short "shelf life." Some rules of thumb, e.g., "Is this material still relevant to today or the next three to five years?" should be adopted for culling of ones files periodically, so that the best is preserved and there is room for more.

Daily Disposition to Lifelong Learning

There are basically three ways a Christian worker will probably show a daily disposition to lifelong learning while engaged in daily ministry practice. He will have certain reading, listening or viewing habits that he consistently gives himself to that is unrelated to immediate preparation for ministry. It might be a commitment to keep fresh in the original languages by a Greek or Hebrew reading program which keeps him exposed to the Biblical text. It might be the reading in a certain area of ministry practice. One pastor loved preaching. He always had a book of sermons he was reading. As the trunk of his car was cleaned out after his sudden death at the age of eighty-one on his way to a preaching engagement, what was found, but a few books of sermons he had taken along to read. Still learning after fifty-six years in the ministry. It may be tapes or videos, but whatever the medium, the lifelong learner shows that disposition by the way he uses his time in reading what is not necessary for immediate preparation or for immediate presentation. One other aspect of reading is subscription to newspapers, magazines, journals, e-journals and listserves. A balanced diet of a newspaper, a current events magazine, a thought periodical, and a theological or Biblical studies journal will keep the Christian worker sharp.

The other way a daily disposition toward lifelong learning shows itself is in always trying to make what I present better. There is much repetition in ministry practice. The missionary has his small group evangelistic Bible study; the pastor his new members class; the teacher his lectures on the same course material year after year. Will each presenter enrich each repetition by doing more study, more learning, so that what comes across is not from "yellowed notes" but from a fresh and increasingly informed interaction with the content area? The watchword of this disposition is "How can I make this better?" One other aspect of the relentless pursuit of excellence of the lifelong learner is evaluation. Critique of ministry practice at appropriate intervals will give opportunity for improvement.

Lifelong Learning as Intentional Professional Development

Normally we think of lifelong learning as pursued at particular points in time through such professional development activities as the attendance of continuing education seminars, conferences, even degree programs. This is very much part of what a lifelong learner in ministry should be doing. The types of activities pursued and the rate of frequency at which they are pursued is a key to their effectiveness.

The Christian worker needs to ask himself how he learns best. Is it in the solitude of uninterrupted personal study? Is it in the interaction with peers at a seminar? Is it at a large conference with much inspirational input? Is it in the structure of a course for credit? The answer probably is a combination of these with one predominating either because of the person's learning style or the particular needs for professional development. What the Christian worker needs to do is assess his professional development needs and then look for opportunities which will enable him to meet those needs. Seminaries, large churches, and parachurch groups often sponsor such events and advertise them in Christian periodicals and on the Internet.

Next, the rate of frequency of professional development needs to be planned. Is it a matter of self-study? Will your study/learning, unrelated to immediate presentation (though probably related to future presentation), going to be so many hours a week or a half or whole day a month or a one or two week study leave a year? Obviously, ministry responsibilities and the commitment and financial support of the people to or for whom you minister comes into play. But, the Christian worker's purposeful commitment is the key. If he wants to pursue professional development it will happen.

Conclusion

“Working Smart” in Christian ministry is not only a matter of knowing how to use time, it is also understanding the lifelong learning dimension of Christian work and taking those steps to implement it. Being a lifelong learner during the daily practice of ministry will be greatly enhanced by an expandable and retrievable storage system, as well as habits of lifelong learning—reading, enrichment of repetitive responsibilities, and evaluative reflection. Intentional professional development through personal study and seminar attendance further enhances ministry effectiveness through the knowledge, insight, skill, and inspiration gained.