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A Fragile Marriage?

Some reflections on the relationship between Pastors and Congregations
A Paper presented to the German Baptist Pastors' Conference March 2009

This is not an academic paper – there are many much more qualified than me who could do this much better. Rather it is a reflection drawn on 25 years' experience of being a Baptist minister, though you will have to allow for the fact that it is now a long time since was a full-time local church pastor. It also draws on my years as a Regional Minister in the north of England often being called in when churches and pastors were experiencing difficulties with one other. Some years teaching at one of our British Baptist Colleges helped me to think through some of the issues I discuss in this paper in relation to forming men and women for ministry. And then these past few years have allowed me to see something of the rich but sometimes bewildering, diversity of churches and ministries in our European Baptist life. These are the factors of my experience which form the background to this paper.

And it not a paper primarily about leadership – the Christian bookstores are full of advice on theories of leadership and the 7 or 10 or 12 ways to be a better leader. Some of this may indeed be helpful but sometimes I am concerned that they may not adequately address our peculiarly "Baptist" way of being the church.

And my last preliminary comment would be that I do not have first-hand experience of the way in which German Baptist churches function on this question of the pastor and the congregation. I have made an assumption that it may not be so different from British Baptists churches which I know much better.

A FRAGILE MARRIAGE?

What I am most interested to explore in this paper is neither a worked out Baptist ecclesiology, though we will inevitably make reference to our way of being the church; nor the different views of ministry among our Baptist Unions, though we will draw on that. I take the subject you have given me to mean that what we are interested in is the dynamic between church and pastor; that open space between the gifts and calling of the pastor and the story and the calling and contemporary context of a local church.

I have described this relationship in the title as 'a fragile marriage'. Because in most European Baptist Churches the day of the new pastor's Welcome or Induction is often likened to a 'wedding' of pastor and people. A coming together in the belief that pastor and church have in some ways being called to one another in hope and expectation that together they can see this local church become alive and effective in its mission context. It is for this reason that certainly in the UK we have so far resisted the idea that legally the pastor is an employee of the church; this is in order to try to preserve this sense that church and pastor are called to one another. This is very different from the 'hire and fire' culture which exists among Baptist churches in some other parts of the world.

After the guests have gone home from the Pastors' welcome or Induction then we often talk about a 'honeymoon' period; those early months when usually goodwill is abundant, pastor and congregation are sizing each other up; making more allowances for each other, perhaps, being more tolerant with the pastor's new ideas, for instance, than might be the case later on. The Pastor is getting to know her or his church – who are the key people, the movers and shakers? Who are the spiritual leaders? Who are the gifted musicians and worship leaders? Who are the practical people? Who are the pastorally demanding people? Who are the ones looking suspiciously at everything she does. And who are the five people who didn't vote for him in the Church meeting which called him?

So like the early stage of a marriage it is a process of getting to know one another which needs to be worked at. And hopefully, and with God's help, it is a beginning in the growing together in the task to which God has called the whole church and in which the church has called the pastor to lead.

FRAGILITY

But this marriage is fragile – it depends on the grace of God to sustain it and on the skills and gifts of both pastor and congregation to make it work. When it all goes well with a creative synergy between pastor and congregation, then ministering to God's people can be a deeply privileged and fulfilling experience. And when sadly it all goes wrong, it often goes badly wrong, and results in hurt to the individual and the hindering of the mission of the church. These two situations illustrate both the strengths and perhaps the weakness of our Baptist way of being the church and I shall return to this point later.

What are the factors which contribute to this fragility of relationship between pastor and congregation

A CHANGING CONTEXT

It is fragile because it is a changing and bewildering situation in Europe today to be the church and to be a pastor. The old certainties about how to be the church in our society and culture are seriously under question. To focus it in one city, in London today people may travel to church on a bus which has on the side of it an advertisement paid for by the British Humanist Association which says: *There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.*"

But It is a complex situation. Not all parts of Europe are equally 'secular' or 'post Christian'. In Russia, for instance there has been a resurgence of the nationalism of 'Mother Russia' supported by both church and state. But here in western Europe to one extent or another we are in an increasingly secular, Post-Christendom era.

The British Baptist missiologist Stuart Murray spoke of this in an address given to the EBF Mission Conference last year, and said that in many parts of Europe (though not all) 'the long Era of Christendom is coming to an end'¹

¹ This and what follows are taken from an unpublished paper, 'New Ways of Mission and being Church in Europe Today' given by Stuart Murray Williams at the EBF Mission Conference, Prague June 2008

By Christendom he understood:

- A geographical region in which almost everyone was at least nominally Christian.
- A historical era beginning with the fourth-century conversion of Constantine.
- A civilisation shaped by the story, language, symbols and rhythms of Christianity.
- A political arrangement in which church and state provided mutual, if often uneasy, support and legitimation.
- An ideology, a mindset, a way of thinking about God's activity in the world.
- Despite its remarkable achievements, an imperialistic, oppressive and brutal distortion of the Christian faith.

And by post Christendom he referred to several transitions:

- *From the centre to margins*: in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority*: in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners*: in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- *From privilege to plurality*: in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness*: in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.

Stuart Murray went onto say that this situation, though happening in different ways and at different speeds in Europe presents both huge challenges and great opportunities for churches in their mission; and that Baptists should be particularly equipped by their story and their identity to face them and take hold of the new opportunities to develop the authentic life and mission of their churches.

Surely this is an authentic Baptist response? Baptists protested the link between state and church. Baptists urged religious liberty. Baptists rejected the notion of Christian-by-birth in favour of believers' churches. So why are so many Baptists disconcerted by the end of Christendom? We should be throwing post-Christendom parties! Maybe Amsterdam 400 could be an opportunity for this??

Why do I begin with this as a underlying cause of fragility in the relationship between a pastor and his or her congregation? Because when there are so many bewildering uncertainties around this has its affect on our local churches. Many of our church members have lived through these transitions and some have made the journey and some have not. And uncertainty often breeds insecurity and the feeling that we have left something behind but we have not yet arrived at something to replace it. In this season of Lent leading up to Easter when we remember Christ's forty days in the wilderness we do well to remember that many Christians today feel themselves to be in a kind of wilderness in there are few signposts and a real sense of dislocation and disorientation. Of course we must also remember that desert experiences of the people of God in the Old Testament and for Christ in the Gospels were also creative times when faith was re-formed and priorities for mission and ministry established.

² Stuart Murray Williams *op.cit.*

And there is a bewildering variety of answers. Do we become a purpose-driven church (With all the positive things about Rick Warren's writings I still react negatively to that word 'driven'), a seeker-sensitive church or engage in 'natural church development'? Or are simply beginning to realise that that old wineskins of the way we have done church cannot hold the new wine needed today and so we need to embrace something of the emerging church insights in order to communicate the gospel to our contemporary cultures and societies

And what is the pastor's role in all this? I follow Stuart Murray in thinking that to be a Baptist church today, to be a Baptist pastor today is to formidable challenges and huge opportunities. But there will be a variety of responses to the situation; and uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety about the future show themselves in all kinds of ways in church life, not all of them positive.

COMMUNITY

The second aspect of fragility is that churches today are made up of people who are often searching for authentic community in a fragmented world. And I think it would be right to say that people are joining our churches with much more complex and deep-seated pastoral needs and problems which in the past might have been partly addressed in the extended family or in a community where they had spent most of their lives. For some people the church almost becomes their primary community and they have high expectations of what it might do for them

Visiting Eastern Europe since just before the fall of communism showed me the real strength of churches built around strong family units with many people in a settled situation because there was no real opportunity for them to move anywhere else. Of course, this is gradually changing but what we encounter in the West is a much more fragmented society where the family unit is not so strong and people are more alone and searching for a meaningful community to join. One writer on the concept of 'missionary congregations' in the UK describes Community as one of the chief marks of such a congregation and says 'Such community involves building loving, honest relationships which stand out against the "fragmented relatedness" of consumer culture'.³

This brings great opportunities for local churches to become such communities but they are often fragile, having to deal with the pastoral baggage which people bring with them.

And our communities are becoming more diverse. With the movement of people to find work across the European Union, with coming of economic migrants from other parts of the world, and with the increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers many of our churches, especially in our large cities, are finding themselves truly multiracial and multinational. Again, this can enrich the life of the local church but it can also contribute to its fragility as different cultures, different values, and even different ways of expressing the faith and being Baptists are now found not just by missionaries who go abroad but in the local church itself.

EXPECTATIONS

³ Robert Warren: *Building Missionary Congregations*, London, Church House Publishing 1995, p52

My father, who passed away recently at the age of 97, talked to me sometimes about his beginning as a Baptist pastor in the year 1942. He told me that at that time there was a reasonably well accepted way to be a pastor and to be a Baptist Church. And on the whole if you followed this, people would respond and your church would grow. This is no longer the case. There are often competing visions and expectations of what the church and its pastor should be doing.

Here is a piece from a Methodist publication on ministry some years ago. It is called, 'The perfect Minister – A Computer Survey'.

The perfect minister preaches for exactly 20 minutes; he condemns sin but never upsets anyone. He works from 8am to midnight and is also a good caretaker of the church building. He receives a very modest salary, wears good clothes and never looks shabby, keeps his library up to date, has church members regularly as guests for dinner, drives a new car and gives a large sum to the poor and to the church. He is 30-35 years old with about 25-30 years experience as a pastor. He has a burning desire to work with young people and spends all of his time with senior citizens.

The perfect minister smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humour which keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. he makes daily calls on church families, the elderly and those in hospital; he spend all of his time evangelising the unchurched and is always in his office if needed.⁴

The idea that the new pastor is a kind of 'parachuted Messiah' come to lead the congregation in significant growth into the fullness of God's kingdom is not so uncommon! Sometimes there is the more worldly added pressure that the finances of the church and the ability to support the pastor might depend on such growth, and this then becomes an extra expectation and pressure.

And here we encounter a possible weakness with our Baptist ecclesiology. When it is left up to the local church, hopefully waiting on the Lord, to choose a new pastor is there a tendency for them to choose the pastor they want, rather than the one they need? Of course we hope that by the leading of God's spirit they are one and the same person! But for instance a congregation made up mainly of older people may subconsciously be looking for some a kind of 'chaplain' to minister to their needs and preferences in worship in their old age. Nothing wrong with that of course, but they would not necessarily be also thinking about someone who might challenge them to change, in order that the church as a living witness to the Gospel might live on beyond them to future generations. Fortunately there are those prophetic voices of young, old and middle-aged in most of our churches which are willing to look to the future and discern the leader which the church needs to take it the next phase of the journey. And the tension between ministering to the needs of the church members and leading the mission of the church will always be there.

And the pastor, too may have unrealistic expectations of the church, based on his preliminary meetings with the leadership before he accepted the call all to be pastor. In my experience as a Regional Minister of being called into churches where conflict had broken out between the pastor and the church, the underlying cause was often a lack of agreement and clarity about what the priorities of the pastor and the church should be. And therefore there is a clash of expectations.

BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

⁴ *Great Expectations*, Methodist Church Division of Ministries, London, 1990

The last factor I would mention in this list of 'fragilities' is our Baptist way of being the church our ecclesiology. In this year when we celebrate the first Baptists church community meeting in Amsterdam, we should give thanks for the ability of those Separatists from the state church to dare to be different' as they met in Jan Munter's bakehouse by the Amstel River and considered what God was calling them to be as his church. As against the churches from which they had 'come out' in which popes, bishops and priests had told the people what they must believe and do, these believers embraced the radical congregational principle; that it was in the gathered company of believers waiting expectantly upon God that authority under God lies and the authentic voice of Christ is to be heard. They believed that there truly was a priesthood of all believers and that the prophetic voice might be heard in the youngest newest member of the congregation.

Furthermore, belief cannot be coerced and so there was also a voluntary principle, that the church is made up of those who in freedom have given their lives to follow Jesus Christ this being expressed in the water of believers' baptism; and who have bound themselves together in covenant.

Nigel Wright puts it this way:

The Church which meets to worship God through Christ and in the Spirit is also the church which meets to discern the ways of God. There is no yawning cavern between meeting to offer praise and meeting to make responsible choices. They are both of a piece with knowing God and loving God with heart, soul and mind. If the church is not a democracy where the will of the majority is the decisive factor, neither is it an autocracy, where one person rules, a patriarchy or matriarchy where the men or women rule, an aristocracy where an elite determined by birth rule, or an oligarchy where a clique rule. The point about the church is that it differs from all these systems and transcends them. This is where Christ rules among his people. It is an experiment in a new way of being, one which anticipates the rule of God in the final Kingdom'⁵

This is the glory of our Baptist tradition and identity but it is also fragile. For there is a questioning again today of where an ordained pastor 'fits' in this concept of the church. The concept of ordination itself is a comparatively recent phenomenon (from the 19th century) and its meaning and practice are different in different Unions of Baptist Europe. Some still hold a high view of ordination as the setting apart for the ministry of the whole church of Christ which is more about being than doing; contrast that with what seems to me to be the more common functional view of Baptists today that ordination is the recognition of gifting for leadership in the local church. We do not seem to have consensus as to what ordination means, nor who is competent to carry it out. In some EBF Unions the Union as representative of the wider church has a clear and indispensable role in the recognition of ministry and ordination; in other Unions it is left up to the local church almost entirely and the Union simply accepts as one of their pastors whoever the local church calls and recognises.

And, whatever our understanding of what ordination means, working out the relationship of someone set apart to lead with the church as a whole is perhaps more challenging today. A friend of mine, a Roman Catholic priest, once said to me "You Baptists pastors are at the mercy of your deacons!" (or church board). That is one way to express the relationship! A few years later when he was moved on to another parish at very short notice I was able to comment that he seemed to be at the mercy of his bishop!

But certainly in the UK, there was the feeling among some in the 1970s that Baptist pastors were not being allowed to lead by their congregations. This was followed in the 1980s by

⁵ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision*, Paternoster 2005, p134-135

a tendency for some, under the influence of the charismatic movement, to become more authoritarian, accountable to a small hand-picked group of elders rather than the church as a whole. At the same time the idea that the Pastor was omni-competent was thankfully replaced with concepts of team ministry and using the gifts of the whole body of Christ in the local church.

In the 1990s and up to the present time among some Baptists there has been less an emphasis on the *ministry* of the pastor and more on her or his *leadership*. This has not been without its difficulties. Such leadership models have been drawn from the world of business as well as from the experience of churches. These have tended to emphasise the pastor as the origin of vision and direction in the local church, with the church's role to affirm and support, rather than vision originating and being formed by the church as a whole.

And in Europe today history and culture also seem to determine the role of the pastor in relationship to the role of the church as a whole. In Baptist churches in some countries the regular meeting of the church, perhaps every month, can be an important time to build vision together. In other places the Church Board or Board of Deacons seems to assume this function, with the church in some cases only meeting together once a year. In the Eastern European Unions the legacy of the communist era is still present in the authority given to the pastor. In the communist time he was the main link between the church and the union, which itself was often controlled in some ways by the State and expected to keep their pastors in line. This factor, alongside the less democratic cultures in some countries, mean that congregationalism is a weaker reality among some European Baptists.⁶ And in Unions where significant numbers of African churches have recently joined, they also bring from their culture a more autocratic understanding of the pastor's role which then exists in tension with an understanding in western Europe which is now markedly less so.

A ZONE OF TRANSITION

We could sum all this up by saying that the relationship of pastor and congregation is a fragile marriage because we are living in a time of huge change and transition in the story of the churches in Western Europe. So how shall we respond to this? Time does not permit me to answer this as fully as I would like. But let me suggest one theological insight about the church and then some models which I think might be relevant for pastors

PERICHORESIS

Baptists have tended to ground their faith and practice christologically, majoring on the Lordship of Christ, or to use the old Baptist phrase, the 'crown rights of the Redeemer'. But more recently some thought has been given to what a Trinitarian faith in father Son and Spirit means for our Baptist way of being the church.

In his book on the Trinity, *After Our Likeness* the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf dialogues with Orthodox and Catholic theologians and the early Baptist theologian John Smyth to explore how our view of the Trinity, for instance as hierarchy or community, influences the nature and structure of our church life. He takes up the concept of perichoresis, the interpenetration and dynamic relationship of Father, Son and Spirit to

⁶ I was grateful that in the discussion following this paper, this observation received a necessary balancing corrective. It is of course true that in some places ruled by Soviet-style communism, notably East Germany, it was the churches which modelled a more democratic, participative, way of being and it was the churches which played the crucial role in the events leading up to 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the ending of communist rule.

one another. From this he suggests a non-hierarchical, participative model of the Trinity and the kind of church might reflect this:

If it is through self-conscious decision that faith is taken up – faith no longer belonging to the self-evident features of a given social milieu – then the mediation of faith can only succeed if those standing outside that faith are able to identify with the church communities embodying it and transmitting it'....one will be able to transmit faith effectively today only in social groups with a participative structure'.⁷

I want to suggest that Baptists are well able to respond to this desire to have church which is fully participative, where people are not spectators but full participants, where hierarchy and institution are less important than being part of a missionary movement in which everyone is involved.

I want to further suggest that such churches which are fully participative communities are best able to respond to the challenges of a secular post-Christian Europe. As we were reminded earlier by Stuart Murray, Baptists at their best can indeed become such communities: committed at the core and yet open at the edges to those who come seeking to participate and to find Christ for themselves, and to grow in discipleship.

It is as the Reformed missiologist Lesslie Newbigin put it, that '*the only hermeneutic (interpretation) of the Gospel is a community of men and women who believe the Gospel and live by it.*' Newbigin went on to say that what he called a missionary congregation is, '*a place where such men and women are trained supported and nourished in the exercise of their parts of priestly ministry to the world*'.⁸

And I want to say that I think in this situation the role of the pastor with his or her congregation, increasingly as part of an active leadership team is a continuing and vital one but also a changing one. And in the variety of roles and responsibilities which a pastor can take on in the church there is a greater need to consider carefully what are the priorities of a pastor in our contemporary context.

Let me suggest some models which might point the way. This is not an exhaustive list nor do I suggest that all of these may be found in one person. But I do believe that they are all important for the ministry of the whole church.

MODELS OF MINISTRY

Spiritual Director

There is an increasing tendency in writing about ecclesiology to see the church as a *community of disciples*,⁹ moving towards Christ in their desire to follow him. Some of the thinking from the 'emerging church' may be right to see the pastor in relationship to the congregation less as a 'Chief Executive Officer' of the church and more as a spiritual director, nurturing and mentoring disciples on their journey. One leader puts it this way, 'My job is to help keep the community healthy, to be a pastor for prayer and pastoral needs, to be a mediator when things go wrong, and to be custodian to a vision to keep

⁷ Miroslav Wolf: *After Our Likeness: The Church as Image of the Trinity* Eerdmans 1998

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, London, SPCK, 1989, Chapter 18

⁹ e.g. Avery Dulles in *Models of the Church: Gill and Macmillan 1974 Second edition 1987*. In this second edition Dulles adds to his previous models of the church as Herald, Servant, Communion, Sacrament as Institution what he considers to be the 'defining' model of the Church as a 'community of disciples'.

the group journeying together’¹⁰ This requires training in the skill of theological reflection so that there is an emphasis on preparing people for their own ‘priesthood’ in the world, in the market place with all its ambiguities and making the clear connections with faith. Someone has said that the church needs a ‘hippopotamus spirituality’ – a spirituality for surviving in the mud’. The nurturing of spirituality and growth in discipleship, and putting this at the centre of our church life, seem to me to be vital in our the European context if disciples are to be sustained for their journey

Mission Enabler

It seems to me that less effective mission and evangelism takes place today in Europe as church *programmes* and there is a shift to seeing mission as a feature of the whole life of the congregation: its worship, its community life, its weekly activities and not least its sending out of its members in the world as witnesses week by week. A passion for the fulfillment of the great commission permeates every area of church life and the task of pastoral leadership is to inspire, encourage and enable it to happen, rather than by always leading it. As Eddie Gibbs says in his book on leadership:

The church must re-establish the priority of the Great Commission. It is the Lord’s mandate that defines the church as the people who follow Christ in every area of life with a local and global vision of Christ’s reign on earth. It also drives the church to turn from an inward focus that invites the world to come and enjoy its benefits to a church that disperses and infiltrates every power centre and every segment of the culture.¹¹

Reconciler

In my work with local churches and with Unions I have seen that Baptists do not always handle conflict well. With our congregational principle, and with different understandings over the role of the Union in such matters conflict can so easily become destructive. On one visit to Baptists in Russia I was interested to look in on a training session for their Regional Bishops in conflict mediation. Such courses have been available in the UK for some years now, run by the Mennonites. A few years ago a seminar was offered on ‘hurting churches’ at the British Baptist assembly and to the surprise of those leading it 700 people turned up for it. Part of the witness of the church is to show that it can handle conflict well and that at the Cross of Christ we can overcome the things which divide us. It may have been true historically that Baptist ‘multiply by dividing’ but much conflict I see among us today is destructive and one of the roles which pastors need today is as reconciler and peacemaker

Midwife

This may seem an unusual and startling image which until recent years belonged almost exclusively to women rather than men. A midwife uses her skills to help to bring about the birth of new life. Her job satisfaction is derived from seeing that baby safely in to the world, and to do what is necessary at the beginning to ensure that the baby has a healthy start to life. And in applying this to our Baptist churches and ministry today I believe that some of the skills of a pastor in relationship to the congregations is to know how to nurture and encourage new life. If we are true to our Baptist heritage then the development of vision and the setting of the agenda of the church belongs to the whole congregation and not just the pastor and the leadership team. Leadership is located in leading a process of congregational discernment so that the vision of the church is built and owned by all, and it is not the case that leaders walk out far in front dragging a reluctant people behind them. Therefore the pastor is seeking to bring to both something which is not just hers or his, but belongs to everyone. This is a vital part of being a healthy church and at the same time being true to our Baptist identity.

¹⁰ Gibbs and Bolgar, *Emerging Churches*, Baker Academic 2005

¹¹ Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* IVP 2005

Bearer of Hope

As a parent of three children now aged between 18 and 23 I am sometimes shocked by what I sense is a culture of nihilism and despair among many young people, and maybe others as well. A sense of the pointlessness of life and futility in the face of so many of the world's problems seem to characterise many in our societies. Our churches are challenged to be communities of hope, real hope which addresses these issues in the name of Christ. Leslie Newbigin talks about 'movements which begin in the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known and experienced, and from which men and women will go in to every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel.'¹²

And in the congregation itself, the pastor and his or her leadership team must be bearers of this hope putting forward a confidence in the power of the Gospel to transform individuals and communities, and refusing to see any situation as 'hopeless' or beyond the reach of the healing power of Christ. To keep real hope alive and animating the congregation is perhaps the greatest privilege and responsibility of being a pastor today.

POSTSCRIPT

In a wonderful little book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen describes the role of the Christian leader as embodying and articulating hope in Christ and in the Gospel. I offer this as a closing meditation:

The task of future Christian leaders is not to make a little contribution to the solution of the pains and tribulations of their time, but to identify and announce the ways in which Jesus is leading God's people out of the desert to a new land of freedom. Christian leaders have the arduous task of responding to personal struggles, family conflicts, national calamities and international tensions with an articulate faith in God's real presence. They have to say 'no' to every form of despair in which human life is seen as a pure matter of good or bad luck. They have to say 'no' to sentimental attempts to make people develop a spirit of resignation or stoic indifference in the face of the unavoidability of pain, suffering, and death. In short they have to say 'no' to the secular world and proclaim in unambiguous terms that the incarnation of God's Word, through whom all things came in to being, has made even the smallest event of human history into Kairos, that is, an opportunity to be led deeper into the heart of Christ. The Christian leaders of the future have to be theologians, persons who know the heart of God and are trained – through prayer, study, and careful analysis – to manifest the divine event of God's saving work in the midst of the many seemingly random events of their time.

Theological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God's gentle guidance. This is a hard discipline, since God's presence is often a hidden presence that needs to be discovered. The loud boisterous noises of the world make us deaf to the soft, gentle and loving voice of God. A Christian leader is called to help people hear that voice and so be comforted and consoled.¹³

¹² Leslie Newbigin op.cit. p232

¹³ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, Crossroad New York, 1989 pp67-69