

Soulful Superintending

FROM A COACHING PERSPECTIVE

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Our old institutional wineskins can no longer hold new wine. The Divine Vintner is creating something new as it becomes increasingly clear that our models for superintending in ministry must evolve to meet the needs of the current contexts and purposes of ministry.

Particularly since the 2012 General Conference added the phrase “Chief Missional Strategist” to the role of a superintendent, much is being written about what it means to be an adaptive leader in the church.

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Bishop Bill McAlilly says, “Superintendents have accepted a dangerous opportunity.” The dangerous opportunity is to utilize supervisory positions as adaptive, strategic, and innovative leverage points for change. What might have at one time been a mono functioning management role is now a multidisciplinary art form. I sense a wide consensus across the top leadership in the United Methodist Church that the role of superintendent requires a lot more than middle-management.

Susan Beaumont is a leading voice in shaping what adaptive superintending might look like from the lens of supervision. I aim to further your thinking about what adaptive superintending might look from the lens of coaching. And I believe that you will find a great deal of overlap between these two perspectives.

A COMPLEX CHALLENGE

In 2005, the Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary published a study showing new District Superintendents identified the following as the skills in which they most need to grow to function well in their new positions:

- Coaching congregations toward growth and renewal
- Conflict management
- Supervision

While denominational leaders are varyingly gifted, most are eager to enhance their overall aptitude—not only in the number one identified need, coaching, but also in the whole cluster of identified skills used by coaches. Which explains why our coach training for denominational leaders has been in such demand across the country since we started offering it in 2010.

The purpose for exposing superintendents to the basic skills of coaching is not so that they go off to become professional coaches. It is so they develop the ability to adroitly meld coaching skills into the work they are already doing. We call this “leading with a coach approach”. One does not need to become a professional grade coach to be able to be a “coach-like leader” of other clergy persons.

THE COACH APPROACH TO CONVERSATIONS

The key to effectiveness in this style of leading is the overall stance you take toward those with whom you are in conversation.

From the coaching stance we believe that the people we have conversations with already possess the deep inner wisdom needed to create options, make decisions, and devise outstanding plans, so our job becomes helping them excavate that gold by listening deeply, staying curious, exploring alternatives, and asking good questions. The pastor may feel stuck or confused about what to do or may have settled into unhealthy routines, but the only person who can bring the needed discernment, genius, and willpower to make a change is the person being coached.

From this stance instead of seeing ourselves as experts in someone else’s life, conversationally we see ourselves as partners. We come alongside the individuals we coach, metaphorically “shoulder to shoulder” with them on their journey of self-discovery and change. Coach-approach leadership employs a style:

- that is less top down and more come alongside.
- that listens more and tells less.
- that asks great questions rather than giving okay answers.
- that honors resourcefulness while daring to expect accountability.
- that recognizes church leaders as the experts in their settings.
- that co-creates a vision for the future.
- that mines a leader’s experience and knowledge in creating action plans.

Here are some examples of what it might look like for a superintendent to intentionally utilize a coach-approach to conversations with clergy in a variety of settings.

INDIVIDUAL COACHING CONVERSATIONS

- Offer to have individual coach-approach conversations with each of the newly appointed pastors under your guidance for the first six months. This could be as casual as a monthly breakfast conversation or a scheduled coaching phone conversation.
- Select five gifted pastors who are doing strategic work with their congregations that has resulted in transformational change. Look for the ones with bright and eager eyes. Offer to meet with each one individually, or as a group or both, to offer your support.
- Offer to have coach-approach conversations with key laity, or youth and young adults who are contemplating ministry.

GROUP COACHING CONVERSATIONS

- Offer to meet as a group with new pastors and use the coach approach to mine the peer learning from the group. This requires the leader to remain inquisitive, taking an asking approach to the conversation rather than an authoritative telling approach.
- Identify pastors who have a common strategic goal, such as breaking the 100 or 200 or 500 barriers in average worship attendance, or who are leading through congregational merger, or who are starting building programs, or tactically downsizing, or starting new small groups or new community-related ministries. Maximize the built-in affinity these pastors have with one another by coaching them forward as a group.
- Develop a culture of coaching by getting six to ten respected pastors trained in coaching so they can utilize coaching skills with their clergy peers.

Each of these suggestions runs counter to the idea that denominational leaders must provide the same attention, time and resourcing to every clergy person on their district, what is sometimes referred to as “the tyranny of all.” Not only has that approach not worked, but it is not even possible. In 2010, the smallest number of clergy supervised by a district superintendent was 32. Now, 7 years later it is customary for a district superintendent to have direct responsibility for 75 to 150 or more congregations. Downsizing is the current trend in judicatory structures, which means that as conferences downsize by combining districts, the size of those districts increases, often dramatically.

This growth in the size of districts creates a challenge but also provides an opportunity to get creative. Strategic-minded, adaptive, district leaders are prioritizing the investment of time and financial resources, targeting opportunities to the places of greatest impact. One example is a superintendent choosing to selectively invest time in coach-like conversations like the ones described above.



FOUR COACH-APPROACH QUESTIONS FOR THE ANNUAL CLERGY ASSESSMENT

In all the teaching I have done with denominational leaders, there is one thing that leaders have most dependably captured in their notes. It is the four helpful questions for a leader to ask from a supervisory position.

- What can we celebrate that has gone well?
- Where are you stuck?
- What, if anything, do you need from me?
- How may I pray for you?

Imagine what the conversation can generate, for you and for the pastor, when these four questions form the central focus of an assessment.

The last question, “How may I pray for you?” fully honors the spiritual dimension of the relationship superintendents have with those to whom they are partnered in doing God’s work. If you are not making the offer to pray with pastors you supervise, there is a very good chance no one else in their circle is either.

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ROLE

You may be wondering how wise it is for a supervisor to actually take more of a coaching role in relating with clergy. This is an important question to consider because we certainly can’t ignore the imbalance of power at play in the relationship and the complicating dynamics it creates.

At an interdenominational national gathering focused on bringing about change in religious institutions, I had the honor of representing the

discipline of coaching. The panel of which I was a part also included a top church consultant and a nationally known spiritual director. We were given the task of delineating the uniqueness of each of our helping modalities and enumerating their strengths.

I described to the gathering how I coached pastors who were also under my direct supervision. And as you might imagine, during the question and answer period I received a considerable amount of pushback for breaking what is thought to be a sacrosanct rule of coaching: “You cannot be both a person’s supervisor and coach.”

Finally, an Australian coach from the back of the room stood up. In a commanding voice, he declared, “I beg to differ with the argument everyone else is making. I think you’ve got it exactly right! This notion that you’ve got to segment roles and be only one thing to a person under your leadership is rubbish. If a supervisor can supervise when needed, instruct when required, counsel when asked, and coach when coaching is appropriate, that supervisor is playing the most helpful roles imaginable for team members. By adding coaching to your supervision of clergy, you’ve got it exactly right!”

However, let me add a word of caution. If a denominational leader is going to intentionally function in a variety of helpful capacities, that leader must be clear about the role in which he or she is standing at any given time. It is unfair and confusing to the other person if you are having a coaching conversation one moment, telling the person what to do the next, and then demanding to know why their annual reports are not in on time, all in the same conversation.

While it is best to stay in a singular mode of interaction during a conversation, if we do decide to switch functions, we must use our blinker when switching lanes. Just like our driving instructors taught us, it is reckless to swerve in and out of lanes without using the signal indicator. In changing roles, the leader might say, “Do you mind if I switch to my supervisor mode for a moment?”

PROGRAMMING IN ISOLATION NO LONGER WORKS

For over forty years, denominations have taken the programming approach to resourcing pastors and congregations. We have provided weeklong seminars and Saturday workshops, and have brought in resourcing experts to share ideas and foster ministry.

We now realize that the limitation of the program approach to resourcing ministry is that a relatively small percentage of pastors and congregations attend those opportunities. In the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, we recognized that about 30 percent of churches and pastors take advantage of the major training that is offered, and they are repeat attendees. This means that nearly 70 percent of the churches and pastors do not take advantage of the learning opportunities provided.

What is more, those workshops rarely lead to significant congregational transformation. The actionable follow-through from most of the training provided is actually weak. It is one thing for a pastor, or a pastor with a team of lay persons, to attend an inspiring workshop. It is another thing to go back to the congregation and actually implement needed changes. Most leaders who attend seminars and workshops are not just looking for information or inspiration; they are looking for transformation.

Which is why some judicatories are now providing short-term follow-up coaching conversations as a part of the training events and workshops they provide. For example, the Arkansas Annual Conference provides annual funding to send a certain number of congregational leadership teams to attend a major out-of-state conference. However, part of the commitment made by each team is to engage with a conference-trained coach upon returning to help apply the new ideas gleaned from the conference. Without the additional step of coaching for implementation, the training event largely serves the purpose of inspiration but not of application. If transformation is the desired outcome, the training will be purposefully followed by coaching conversations.

SUPERINTENDING WITH SOUL

During this time in the life of the church, which requires such a high degree of adaptive leadership, the role of district superintending is being reshaped out of necessity. The ability to lead from a coach-approach is proving to be one of the most transformational tools in the superintendent's tool belt and is only one of the ways the Divine Vintner is creating a new form of superintending ministry.

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