

TEACHING LEADERS FOR CONGREGATIONS

Dan Moseley

*Herald B. Monroe Professor of Practical Parish Ministry
Christian Theological Seminary*

Clark Williamson is a teacher. He has given his life to the search for knowledge and understanding. He has engaged in research and reflection on the meaning of God's participation in creation. He has sought to articulate a Christian faith that is "(a) appropriate to the Christian message, (b) credible, and (c) morally plausible."¹ His passion has been to share that understanding with those who would be leaders in congregations.

For Clark Williamson, this life of teaching isn't simply an exercise in intellectual inquiry. It is grounded in a profound conviction that the way one *perceives* life forms the way one *lives* life. His research into the way the Christian faith contributed to and shaped the killing of six million Jews in Nazi Germany has fueled his passionate commitment to contribute to clarifying the Christian faith for a new generation.

Because Williamson believes so passionately in the role of teaching as life-transforming power, he is convinced that the primary role of the leader of congregations is that of teacher. He believes that deep and clear thinking about God and God's relationship to the world is the key to reforming congregations in our North American

¹Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *The Teaching Minister* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 81.

context. To this end, he has challenged a generation of leaders to learn from the tradition, to think critically about that tradition as it intersects with our context, and to speak with passion and courage in witness to a God who seeks to love and bless the creation.

I believe that Williamson's focus is on target. We live in a time when labels and logos are a multi-billion dollar business. We live in a culture where people wander orphaned, looking for a name. We see children mimicking adults by buying clothes that will mark them as "cool" or "stylish." We hear stories of young people killing to get Nike or Calvin Klein.

The desire to associate with others to create a sense of identity is not new. As communal creatures, we have always needed to know who we are in relationship to who others are. Our ancient forebearers were in a continual journey of self-discovery. The people of Israel sought to distinguish themselves from others by ritual and belief. The early Christian community defined themselves over-against those who would practice different codes of conduct. We always know ourselves by the people with whom we associate and the people from whom we are separated.

But within the current context in North America, we are offered multiple ways of self-identification. The development of multi-national companies and the explosion of communication technology have created a virtual cafeteria of options for self-identity and self-understanding. Family name has less and less to do with the identities new generations are claiming. The values of various sub-cultures are being made available for all to choose from. Each sub-culture has its music, its heroes, its value system, and its moral enforcers.

Within this context, the church is seeking to bear witness to a gospel centered in a God who blesses the world, a faith that is credible and morally plausible. In this context, it is important to develop leaders for congregations who can help people experience, claim, and perpetuate an identity which is formed by the Christian tradition.

I believe that this task requires that we train leaders with the ability to teach. But I also believe that we must understand learning

in a holistic way. For faith to sustain, it must be centered in the core of human existence and must participate in all the modes of learning available to human existence.

I discovered this at a point in my life of profound upheaval and loss. After my wife of thirty-one years died of cancer, my father died of an aneurysm, my children left home, I resigned as minister of a congregation, and I moved to a new city to do new kinds of work; I was left confused and wandering. I had been a person who spent a great deal of time reading and thinking about life. I had been one who sought to understand life and then to act on the basis of that understanding. My mind was the eye with which I looked at the world. I sought intellectual consistency.

But after all the losses in my life, I found that skill of intellectual exploration and consistency profoundly challenged. I could not focus. I could not read. As a preacher, I found it a real challenge to coordinate thoughts into a sermon. The rational faith that had sustained me for fifty-two years of my life was insufficient for the confusing times in which I found myself.

In place of that rational way of living, I found myself wandering in a world of emotion and confusing passions. I was driven out of my mind and into my body. I was obsessive about being out in nature and feeling the forces of nature wash over me. I read poetry and listened to music. The intellectual compositions of Bach and Mozart that had been my mainstay gave way to the blues of B. B. King and the ballads of James Taylor. My stable and steady life centered in a community of faith soon exploded in constant movement. I had to keep moving, by car, by bicycle, by foot, by train, and by plane. The spaces of my soul were exploding and needed new spaces for my body and heart.

As the center of my life collapsed and the intellectual and logical skills on which I had relied for my sense of identity faded into a fog, different parts of the faith community increased in importance. The intellectual exploration of mystery became more and more difficult. I was drawn more to the music and the passion of mystics and desert fathers and mothers. I discovered that the sermon became less important and the familiar liturgy became more powerful in sustain-

ing me. The Lord's Supper, practiced by my people each week, became less a witness to the nature of community present, and more a witness to the community of the saints. The broken bread and the cup became deeply personal as I relived the breaking of my wife's body in death.

What I have since discovered is that I was relearning the world. I was putting myself in new situations that were teaching me about myself as I sought to discover how to negotiate life within a new context. I discovered that learning was a much more "full-bodied" experience than I had previously known. My mind not only had to learn a different world, but my heart, my soul, and my body had to be taught.

During this process of relearning, I discovered the work of Howard Gardner. In his groundbreaking work, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Gardner explores how we learn with different dimensions of the self. He suggests that we have seven intelligences: "the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences that are at such a premium in schools today; musical intelligence; spatial intelligence; bodily-kinesthetic intelligence; and two forms of personal intelligence, one directed toward other persons, one directed toward the self."² When I read this I realized that the change in behavior and the need for different religious experiences was a way of my using different intelligences to relearn the world I was now living in.

Most of my life, I had used my linguistic, logical-mathematical skills to know my world. I also relied on intra-personal insights and inter-personal relationships to help process what my linguistic-logical mind was receiving. The preparation for ministry that I experienced in the 1960s was heavily laden with information received through lectures, reading, and seminars. The processing of that information was done in communities of students and parishioners. I learned how to be a pastor through these intelligences.

But as I worked through the process of grieving and was attracted to other experiences in my life (such as physical activity,

²Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), xi.

mobility, and music), I began to realize that my original learning of the world included these intelligences as well. My soul had learned a sense of aesthetics through the gifts of poetry and music. My body had learned what its abilities were and what it was to be a man within the inter-personal relationships I had experienced. The art and architect around me taught me about the world I lived in. As I relearned the world I lived in, I needed to travel to new spaces to learn about the different world in which I now lived.

These experiences have moved me to consider what it is that we do within the church to teach people the gospel. If we are to be teachers, it is important that we teach in such a way that all the intelligences are addressed. The cafeteria of offerings within the context of our culture frequently use methods of teaching which appeal to the multiple intelligences. If we are to help people within congregations learn who they are, to learn a sense of new identity, we must educate all intelligences.

The intelligence to which we have appealed in many of our “mainline” Protestant churches is linguistic-logical. Seminaries and theological schools are modeled on the educational pattern of universities. Universities have been shaped by the enlightenment belief that linguistic-logical intelligences are primary. The thinking which has shaped the Protestant church is that if we think right, we will act right. We have focused on the role of word to transform human life. We have focused on rational argument to convince others that what we are presenting is “credible and morally plausible.” And being formed by this educational system, I have built my life and ministry on the assumption that this is true. I have structured my priorities in ministry around the belief that clear thinking produces the resources for decisive action. I have worked on sermons and spent hours reading and seeking understanding.

I do not regret this focus. I believe that our mental framing of the world is critical for defining how we live alone and in community. I believe that ethical and moral behavior requires insight and understanding which guide decisions and actions.

But I have come to understand how critical the other dimensions of ministry are which speak to the other intelligences in Gard-

ner's schema. We learn to be Christian not simply by thinking logically and linguistically. We learn to be Christian by relationships with other people. We learn what it means to be Christian by the way those who are Christian relate to us. If we hear that mercy is a dimension of a Christian person, and then we experience mercy among Christians, we know that truth more completely. If we have heard that God cares and forgives and we experience people who pay attention to our needs within the Christian community, we will have learned the faith more fully.

Therefore, if a minister is to be a teacher, one of the dimensions of teaching that contributes to learning the faith is that of administration. If a community is organized in such a way that people have occasion to experience mercy from each other, they are more likely to have learned mercy in a way that it might be shared with others. Frequently, poorly managed congregations are ones where people do not have occasions to come together so that the gifts of each might be received for the blessing of creation. If there is no one to manage a community, those who are the most aggressive and outspoken might dominate the community life and others will never learn that they can give their gifts for the blessing of all.

Good administration also requires good systems to sustain relationships. In some churches there is no manner for new persons to enter the community processes in any meaningful way. The structure is such that those who have been there for a long time will always be the ones who will govern the organization. There is no systematic way for persons who are new to be integrated into the organizational life of the church. When this happens, those who are new are not taught the ethos by which the community is formed. Good systems that are open and understood by all increase the opportunity for interpersonal learning on the part of the people.

Intra-personal intelligence is also a medium for learning. It is important for the learner to find some way to integrate the information gained through linguistic-logical intelligence with the intuitive experience of the self and its history. When one is told that the faith declares God's desire for justice for all, yet within their own soul ex-

perience deep injustice, they will not learn the truth of God's justice in a way that is operative in their lives.

Therefore, a minister-teacher is one who has to develop skills of pastoral care and counseling which enables her to walk with persons in their internal journey of discovery and integration. The ability to teach the faith requires the ability to listen to the deeper voices of the human psyche in such a way as to help the learner discover resonance within their own soul with the faith they hear proclaimed. An effective minister-teacher is one who assists the learner to know and appreciate the intra-personal intelligences with which they have been blessed.

The church throughout history has known that we also teach and learn through spatial intelligences. The architecture of the houses of worship has always been designed to communicate the nature of the Christian faith in a way that is credible. The high arched cathedrals declared the transcendent nature of God. The cruciform of the nave rehearsed the centrality of the cross. The elevation of the chancel taught the value of the word spoken and the word broken and shared. The stained glass not only taught the stories of faith through visual images, but also communicated the glory of a colorful and aesthetically sensitive deity. In the reformation, the architecture reflected the primacy of the word as places of worship were deprived of the detracting art and beauty. Many church buildings in the rural south sport low ceilings and seem to communicate the more communal nature of the faith of the gathered community. The focus in these churches is more on the community here and now, not on the transcendent and historically ubiquitous deity.

A minister-teacher must be aware of this kind of intelligence because it forms the ethos of the community. When a congregation shaped by the cathedral expanse decides that it wants to change its way of being and focus on the social/communal dimensions of the faith in its worship, it is very difficult to do that in the cathedral space. When the minister-teacher tries to change that space without regard for the spatial sensitivities that have become normative for worship in that church, he is likely to encounter deep resistance. That resistance is appropriate because there has been a formative reality

communicated throughout the years of the congregation's worship in that space.

Training of ministers in the role of aesthetics in the process of knowing is also important to the spatial knowledge. The human representations of reality through the visual and structural arts reveal truth regarding spatial relationships. When I view the painting, "The Scream" by Edvard Munch, my sense of agony and lonely pain pierces sky and sea. The painting resonates with experience that space and time are deeply connected to the silent scream of isolation. My place beside the sea and under the sky shrinks and swirls and compresses. I know myself in a way which may not be unlike the sky turning black and the foundations of the earth shaking at the death of Jesus. Through my spatial perceptions, I know more about the whole of who I am than I would know if I did not engage the arts. For this reason, the minister-teacher becomes a more effective communicator of the gospel by participation in this form of intelligence.

Musical intelligences are well known and experienced within the community of faith. Hymns of faith have been a part of the Jewish community life and the Christian church's worship. Music is sometimes the most theologically formative teaching which is done within the life of the believer. The kind and gentle Jesus is a part of the faith of many people because they grew up in church singing "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling." The challenge to fight evil has been reinforced by Christians singing "Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War." The images of the crucifixion are deeply ingrained in the songs of blood and suffering. It could be said that the inability of many persons to develop a consistent and coherent theology is related to the multiple messages and images that permeate the music of the community.

But learning through music is one of the most powerful ways of learning. What we learn musically sometimes remains with us beyond any other learning. When I was relearning my life, music was a central part of that relearning. As I was trying to figure out how to relate to women as a single man, I found many of the popular songs very informative. They spoke of love and longing in ways that resonated with my need and desire. The fact that they revealed a rather

simple and distorted perception of healthy and mature relationships didn't seem to matter. The music reached into dimensions of the self and shaped my thinking and acting.

Music as an intelligence is confirmed in the work of music therapists with Alzheimer patients. In most cases of dementia when persons are losing their memory, the last memory to evaporate is music. Frequently people will be able to sing songs and remember words set to music when they have no other memory. Music teaches reality by merging the linguistic with the poetic and mediating it in the emotions.

A good minister-teacher will be one who recognizes the role of music in the shaping of the community and its ethos. She will be sensitive to the power music has and will work with care and patience in helping people explore musical learning. Many people in churches have been abused by the blatant disregard for their faith that is grounded within their musical intelligence. For ministers to act without regard for this intelligence is to communicate a lack of grace and respect. The person who learns through music must be acknowledged and respected. He must be helped to understand that others too learn through music and that wider ranges of musical expression may very well be appropriate within the worshipping community.

The final frame of mind defined by Howard Gardner is that of bodily-kinesthetic. He believes that the body is a medium of knowledge and learning. The body learns by practicing who it is and how it should respond. There are people who have been victims of sexual abuse. Their bodies respond to sexual advances in ways that reflect the abuse and fear. The bodily response is often unaffected by mental machinations. They may believe in their head that their present partner is a person who will not abuse them and will love and respect them, but teaching their bodies to respond requires more than believing that in our head. And sometimes even interpersonal intelligences are insufficient to change the body's response to sexual approaches. Being assured by the lover that they are loved and receiving many other signs of that love may do little to teach the body new information.

For the minister-teacher to teach the gospel, it is important to teach the body. Physical sensations are a deeply experienced learning. The church does bodily-kinesthetic education whether we know it or not. By the way we arrange our worship service, we teach people that God is related to sitting and listening. The body is taught to be still and to wait to hear a word from God. In churches where people still kneel for prayer, the body assumes a posture of humility as one communicates with the holy. When services where members stand for the Eucharistic service, the body learns rise in respect before the holy. In the participation in the Lord's Supper, the body tastes and smells bread and wine. The olfactory sensations develop a memory and when those smells are encountered again, the presence of Christ is known.

For a minister to be an effective teacher of the faith, she must develop an appreciation of the way the body learns and remembers. When she knows this, she will develop ministries with people that will teach bodies how to respond to pain and ache, how to respond to pleasure and joy. She will use language which is grounded in the physical reality of existence. She will stimulate the visceral memory by leading a congregation in experiences of service and worship that are human.

Teaching is central to the role of the minister. To be an effective teacher requires a broad and deep understanding and experience of learning. For the gospel to be taught in a credible and morally plausibly way, all the intelligences must be engaged. Seminaries must continue to explore these other intelligences and teach to them. In that, we will help ministers become better teachers in their congregations.