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Title: In the Middle: A Comparison of The Limitations and Opportunities of An Individualist Ministerial Stance With A Relational Ministerial Stance

Abstract:

This dissertation explores the limitations and opportunities of applying a Social Construction stance to congregational ministry through Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Relational Responsibility. (RR) Ministers often stand in the middle between the Academy and their congregations, drawing on their theological studies to impart wisdom as experts in a top down fashion to inspire congregational life. An interdisciplinary dialogue between Social Constructionist professional ministry and theologians creates ministerial leadership alternatives through dialogic theology constructed within the relationships between minister and congregation. Drawing on the relational understandings of Social Constructionist as practiced in the author's own experience, this dissertation explores the implications of understanding and practicing ministry from a relational stance, expanding ministry beyond traditional individualistic, subject-object leadership choices.

Dissertation

The paper begins by locating an intersection between an individualistic understanding of ministerial leadership and a relational understanding supporting a concept of theology as socially constructed through dialogue. From the perspective of a congregational minister applying the concepts of AI and RR to congregational leadership, that intersection is developed. As specific applications of Social Constructionism, AI and RR suggest that meaning is constructed relationally, through the process of dialogue, equating language practices. The utilization of language practices encourages multiple approaches, intentional choices of behaviors, and the adoption of different voices in relational engagements to avoid absolutes, explore complexities, and to appreciate diversity.

Ministers often are expected to fulfill extraordinary expectations for productivity, care, and inspiration. The practical application of their academic theologies includes balancing those expectations with their own resources to create viable and sustainable professional choices. Choosing a more appreciative and collaborative role in ministry models and encourages a more sustainable, relational, shared ministry. The position of expert is one, sometimes necessary

and appropriate response to fulfilling the responsibilities of leadership roles and institutional needs. This paper explores alternatives to the “minister as expert” voice developed by processing needs and expectations dialogically in right relationship with members of the congregation. Dialogue, as practiced in AI and in RR, between minister and congregation not only develops more sustainable patterns of behavior, it can deepen the relationships and experiences of a lived theology.

The paper then discusses the appreciation of congregational relationships as the source of meaning, as theology constructed through dialogue. This perspective is developed theologically using Henry Nelson Wieman’s principle of creative interchange, Carter Heyward’s relational theology, and Martin Buber’s notion of the relational encounter. Exploring Social Constructionism through this theological language allows us to see that meaning-making conversations, at the heart of congregational life, are theological in nature. An ongoing practice of RR can directly reveal the dialogical theology already implicit in the life of a congregation.

In The Social Construction of Reality Peter Berger points out a sociological middle in between the understanding of reality experienced by the “man in the street” and the understanding of the reality and knowledge of the philosopher. Similarly, ministers experience a theological middle in between the Academy and their congregations. This paper continues by exploring the place between a minister’s personal spiritual development and the academic understanding of theology, spirituality, and knowledge.

This approach deepens the theological authority of congregational life, and the notions of a relational theology. By exploring the opportunities and limitations of an individualist stance and a relational stance, the many choices for leadership in congregational ministry are increased. Leadership is then appreciated as dialogic, nurturing and as deepening the relationships, which are a source of sustenance in congregations. A commitment to communal, relational responsibility then becomes a community as well as an individual practice, simultaneously opening possibilities for spiritual growth within individual congregants. The implications of intentionally choosing a relational viewpoint to ground ministerial roles in working with communal and individual spiritual maturation, can promote a relational orientation to theology. The paper shows how the role of the minister can be continually transformed through the practice of appreciating these relationships as a source of human and institutional growth. These congregational relationships are understood theologically as ongoing acts of dialogically constructive theology.

The paper closes by affirming the addition of a relational view to the choices available to those in leadership positions as a subtle but important distinction for religious institutions. By relieving the pressure on ministers to “know” the answers, the polarity of right and wrong, good and evil can be diminished. This paper proposes that AI and RR can become both useful practical resources for congregational ministry and the means to deepen theological understanding of the role of ministry. This paper concludes that such a dialogical theology offers opportunity for theologians and social constructionists by opening interdisciplinary alternatives and regenerative ways of engaging human resources for social transformation.