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Accepted Manuscript (AM) Citation: Siew, Yau Man. "Pastor as Shepherd-Teacher: Insiders' Stories of Pastoral and Educational Imagination." (2013): 1-20.

This is a pre-copyrighted, author-produced version of the article accepted for publication in *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 48-70.

Version of Record (VOR) Citation: Siew, Yau Man. "Pastor as Shepherd Teacher: Insiders' Stories of Pastoral and Educational Imagination." *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 48-70.

## PASTOR AS SHEPHERD-TEACHER: INSIDERS' STORIES OF PASTORAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMAGINATION

### Abstract

The role of pastors in vibrant churches is established in the literature, but the nature of their influence as shepherd-teachers has not been probed. This case study looks at how a senior pastor shaped congregational culture, impacting educational vision and adult faith formation at a Congregational church in New England. Through careful listening to stories of pastors and church members, and participation in various faith events, the researcher sought insider perspectives to the research question. The study revealed an effective pastor as a servant shepherd-leader who has earned the trust of his congregation over many years and who possess a pastoral imagination to respond appropriately to unique faith contexts. The study also suggests that an effective pastor is an adaptive shepherd-teacher who views faith formation as integrated within the total life of the congregation and creatively shapes core ministries into faith forming experiences. This ethnographic study, applied in congregational contexts, emphasizes the importance of Christian education in the theological curriculum for the formation of shepherd-teachers. It also teaches seminary students that effective pastoral ministry always begins with attending to the rich and textured stories of the people they serve.

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A version of this article was published in a Journal. Citation details: Yau Man Siew, "Pastor as Shepherd-Teacher: Insiders' Stories of Pastoral and Educational Imagination," *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 48-70

The role of pastors in vibrant churches is established in the literature, but the nature of their influence as shepherd-teachers has not been probed. In 2008-09 a pastoral leadership grant from The Louisville Institute gave me an opportunity to study this important question. The research sought to understand how pastors shape congregational culture, impacting educational vision and adult faith formation in medium to large, urban-suburban churches in US and Canada. This report is based on a case study at Wellesley Congregational Church (WCC) in Wellesley, MA,\* selected because it is a leading congregation within the United Church of Christ in New England, and is led by a reputable senior pastor. After a review of the literature on pastor as shepherd-teacher and a description of the research method, I will outline and discuss the findings, concluding with some implications for the church and academy.

### Pastor as Shepherd-Teacher

In a seminal study to investigate the effectiveness of Christian education involving six major denominations in the US, Peter Benson and Carolyn Eklun highlighted its sad state among participating churches. Of concern were: (1) adults generally disinterested in educational programs, (2) congregations not able to maintain the involvement of their youth after grade eight, (3) great difficulty in finding and keeping volunteer teachers, (4) clergy seemed to lack interest in education, (5) parents not drawn into the educational process, and (6) educational programs and methods that were ineffective or out of touch with the needs and interests of adults, adolescents and children (Benson and Eklun, 1990, 1).

What the authors discovered about adult learning and faith was even more sobering. Only a minority of Protestant adults displayed the kind of integrated, vibrant, and life-encompassing faith that congregations sought to develop. For most adults, faith was underdeveloped, lacking some of the key elements necessary for faith maturity. Yet, the study found that Christian education is critical to healthy congregational life. Faith development correlated strongly with active participation in quality Christian education programs. Indeed, Christian education was more important than any other factor in promoting faith development and active church participation among members. The implication is clear: "If a congregation seeks to strengthen its impact on faith and loyalty, involving members of all ages in quality Christian education is essential" (Benson and Eklun, 1990, 42).

It has been widely acknowledged that Christian education is a major responsibility of the pastor. Bruce Martin helpfully observes that the metaphor of pastor as "shepherd-teacher" is the biblical pattern set by Jesus, emphasized within the earliest Christian traditions and maintained throughout the medieval, Reformation and modern church periods (Martin, 1998, 48-59). Clark Williamson and Ronald Allen note that reform and renewal in the church must begin, as it has always begun, with a renewed concern for authentic teaching of the Christian faith and the pastor is central to that leadership task (Williamson and Allen, 1991, 47-64). William H. Willimon laments that it is the failure of the minister or senior pastor to make education a ministry priority that

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\* The senior pastor at Wellesley Congregational Church has granted me permission to use his name, as well as that of his church in this paper.

is a major weakness in many mainline Protestant denominations. He agrees with John Westerhoff, III, who said that, if pastors spend more than ten hours a week in activities outside the parish, they are wasting their time because the educational needs of the congregation are too great. The needs for pastoral analysis, interpretation, and leadership are desperate and pastors are to equip their members to share Christ's ministry to the world. He calls pastors to rediscover their role as teachers; to follow in the steps of Jesus, who when he saw the great crowds, was moved to compassion and began teaching them. According to Willimon, what congregations need is truth and it is by teaching that real needs are realized (Willimon, 1993, 96).

Thomas Hawkins observes that congregations in the twenty first century are buffeted by immense challenges: increasing marginalization, information technology, global economy, and aging baby boomers. Amidst these challenges, pastors need a distinct educational leadership, one that mobilizes congregations to address the challenges themselves by framing problems rather than mere problem solving. Pastors need to help members examine assumptions and clarify competing values more than merely providing answers. The pastor as educational leader is to nurture congregations into learning communities with a capacity for adaptive change (Hawkins, 1997, 16).

Despite the importance of the pastor's leadership role in Christian education, and its impact on vibrant congregational life, many pastors are sadly not focused on the teaching ministry of the church. Eugene Peterson laments that American pastors are "abandoning their posts, their calling. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connections with what the church's pastors have done for most of twenty centuries" (Peterson, 1987, 1). He calls pastors to focus back on Scripture, prayer and spiritual direction, three key elements of pastoral ministry. Marva Dawn laments that the identity of a pastor is no longer that of a "shepherd" but a corporate CEO with key responsibilities in vision casting, budget and facilities management, or an expert counselor engrossed with the dysfunctions of members. The primary pastoral responsibilities for leading worship, teaching the scriptures and developing community life are sadly neglected (Dawn, 1997, 90-91). William Willimon noted that Henri Nouwen once reminded pastors at a conference that if they do not know what is absolutely essential in ministry, then they will do what is merely important (Willimon, 2002, 62). For Willimon, the critical role of pastors is "to profess the faith of the church, to represent the church's account of what is going on in the world, to bear the burden of the church's tradition before the congregation, to help contemporary disciples think critically about their faith, and to test the church's current witness by the canon of the saints" (Willimon, 2002, 20).

Gary Parrett and Steve Kang highlight that while pastors may be teaching Bible classes on a regular basis, most are not deliberately and actively engaged in the oversight of the teaching ministry in the church. Many pastors are embroiled in church organization instead (Parrett and Kang, 2009, 156-159). According to Kenda Creasy Dean, this lack of congregational learning leaves many adults unable to talk about the difference faith makes in their lives, and thus cannot provide the mentoring in faith that youth so desperately need in congregations (Dean, 2010, 61-75). Bruce Martin shared sadly that he had no encouragement to see himself as an educator by his seminary professors, or through his many years in pastoral ministry. Indeed, he found in his doctoral research that the terms, "curriculum" and "education" were largely missing from

the literature of pastoral theology. Educational themes, if present, are limited to Sunday schools (usually involving children) in formal classroom settings and the work largely delegated to paid staff or volunteers with little direct pastoral oversight. Yet, as Martin matured in his pastoral self-identity and as he engaged with other pastoral colleagues, he realized that educational issues preoccupied much of his ministry time (Martin, 1998, 13-20).

In summary, while the metaphor of pastor as shepherd-teacher is biblical and has been emphasized from the earliest Christian tradition, pastors today have generally neglected the responsibility for educational leadership in their congregations. Many are distracted by the myriad demands of a busy parish and miss what is essential in their vocation: teaching and equipping the church for mission. The literature on pastor as teacher in the congregation is scarce. How can pastors regain their vocational call as shepherd-teachers? What does it mean for them to exercise pastoral and educational leadership in the congregation? This is a case study of one pastor as shepherd-teacher, and how he shaped congregational culture and impacted Christian education and adult faith formation at WCC.

### Method

Ethnographic research was the method of choice for this study to better grasp the complex leadership, faith and congregational dynamics involved in pastoral and educational leadership from the perspective of insiders at this learning church. As suggested by Michael Patton, such a qualitative approach to inquiry, including the use of single case studies, is a valid method to gain in-depth understandings into an issue or phenomenon, and not for generalization to larger populations (Michael Patton, 2002, 447-452).

### *Context*

WCC celebrated its bicentennial in 1998 and is older than the town of Wellesley, which houses the renowned all-girls Wellesley College. The stately church sits prominently on a hill in the center of town. The parishioners, perhaps emphasizing the Church's close relationship and history to the town, affectionately call it the "Village Church." WCC, according to many of the pastors on staff, is a leader and forward leaning congregation within the United Church of Christ (UCC) in New England, and was one of the first within the denomination to be open and affirming. One associate pastor described it as "a forthright congregation," one that "likes to go to the edge and push themselves, and the leadership certainly takes them there."

David Fetterman recommended the helpfulness of an intermediary or go-between when seeking entry into an unknown social community in ethnographic research (Fetterman, 1998, 33). A well-known pastor, consultant and author, who is also a trusted friend of the senior pastor at WCC, made the connections for me, which opened significant doors for my research.

Martin B. Copenhaver, senior pastor at WCC, received the Mersick Prize for Preaching from Yale Divinity School and has had many sermons published in the "Best Sermons" series. He was ordained in the UCC and served congregations in Vermont and Arizona before returning to his beloved native New England to be senior pastor at WCC

in 1994. Copenhaver has a pastoral team of three associate pastors, two pastoral residents (interns) and five program staff (one in children ministry and four in music ministry) serving a congregation of about 1000. He is regarded highly within his denomination for his leadership and has written extensively on the pastoral vocation and the church (Copenhaver, Robinson and Willimon, 1999; Copenhaver, 2002; Copenhaver and Daniel, 2009).

### *Participants*

The number of pastors (all staff at WCC) interviewed in this study was 6 (male: 2; female: 4), and the number of church members in focus group interviews was 19 (male: 5; female: 14). Selection of church members was governed by purposeful sampling of “information-rich cases” (Patton 2002, 230). All church members were invited to participate in the study by the senior pastor, and they are all active members with significant knowledge of congregational life. In addition, since the study focused on adult faith formation, all church members were adults in various stages of life.

### *Data Collection*

All pastors were interviewed individually in the privacy of their offices at the church. Due to difficulty in scheduling, the two pastoral residents were interviewed together, over lunch at a local restaurant. A semi-structured question protocol was used, which allowed me to probe and explore emerging issues with the participants. All the interviews were taped with the consent of the participants after assurance of confidentiality was provided.

I spent ten intensive days at WCC and lived about ten minutes away, which allowed me easy access to the church. Along with in-depth personal interviews of pastors and focus groups of church members, I participated in two worship services, an adult Bible study, a breakfast meeting for members who work in downtown Boston, and a Lent study. In addition, I joined the senior pastor in one of his monthly meetings with a small support group of pastoral colleagues from other churches. Throughout my field research I kept careful field notes, exercised self-reflexivity to capture my feelings and reactions, and also reflected on the events attended. The participant observations and extensive field notes were drawn upon to enrich and triangulate data from the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed and carefully analyzed for patterns and themes. Matrices were used to list different themes among the various pastoral staff as well as the three focus groups of church members. There were also conscious attempts to triangulate information within the interviews, as well as to see correspondences between interviews and church bulletins, church website, bulletin boards, and field notes. Lastly, preliminary findings were shared with Copenhaver, who acknowledged that they were a fair representation of the congregation. This “interim report” provided a re-examination of data with the participants, which adds to the accuracy of the findings (McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy, 2005, 84-85; Fetterman, 1998, 117).

## Findings

This section describes the pastoral and educational leadership of Copenhaver at WCC. I have adopted an “appreciate inquiry” approach (Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, 2003). Through careful listening to the stories of pastors and people, and participation in various faith events, I sought to discern how Copenhaver positively impacted WCC’s core values, mission and culture for learning and faith formation. Copenhaver’s impact is assessed in two areas: as shepherd-leader and shepherd-teacher. In the discussion section that follows, these findings will be evaluated in light of recent literature.

### *Copenhaver as Shepherd-Leader*

Pastoral colleagues and church members highlighted the following qualities as integral to Copenhaver’s pastoral leadership at WCC.

*Discernment.* A key part of the story at WCC was when they celebrated their bicentennial in 1998. The church, with its historical links to the city and a legacy of social engagement, wanted to build a home for mentally challenged adults as a gift to the community. Aware that the church also needed some renovation work, a capital campaign was launched to raise four million dollars for both projects. However the consultants engaged to do a financial feasibility study reported to the leadership that they would only be able to raise about half that amount. The consultants highlighted two missing components: one was the congregation was not well informed about what the needs were, and second, there was no overarching sense of purpose.

Instead of a weekend leadership retreat to develop strategies for effective fund raising, Copenhaver and the leaders decided to engage the whole congregation in a discernment of the church’s purpose and future. This involved a lengthy process of asking fundamental questions of identity, of how each sensed God was working among them, and where he was leading them. Copenhaver described it this way:

We ended up spending two years, involving hundreds of our congregation and really trying to discern what God was calling us to be and do, what our sense of purpose is, our sense of mission. So, out of that is what resulted, a “why are we here” statement, a sense of purpose. And it was a result of a lot of study of Scripture, and our church covenant, and also many groups coming together for communal discernment.

One associate pastor described the discernment process as a sincere desire to be attentive to where “the energy is coalescing ... where God is gently leading the congregation.” She continued, “There is also a strong concern for one’s past, in keeping with who we are as a congregation and in our desire to grow in faith.” She noted that the tone set by the pastoral leadership was critical to the process. “It is remarkable there is not that many negative voices in this church, and people treat each other really well.”

Another associate pastor recalled an incident in which a new member, who was unaccustomed to the discernment process, presented a challenge. He had come from a

church where there had been a lot of dissension (with the pastor eventually being asked to leave), and perhaps expecting a similar tone he made comments that were considered less civil. The congregation responded gently but firmly, “We want to hear what you have to say, but we don’t do that here. We don’t treat each other in that way.” He got the message and made his point without being difficult. Discernment, according to this pastor, requires a fundamental openness to the Spirit; the whole exercise was soaked in prayer and conducted with a deep sense of reverence in the sanctuary.

Many pastors and church members said this discernment process was a defining moment in the life of the congregation; clearly this resulted from the senior pastor’s visionary leadership.

And then Martin came; he’s very intentional about why we’re here, and helping us to understand why we’re here. We went through a visioning process, and growth in faith was the primary thing. Martin is intentional in his leadership.

The outcome was the distillation of a succinct purpose statement about faith and witness for the whole congregation. This is listed prominently on the church website:

“Why are we here?  
To experience and express the Spirit of Christ  
in our individual and congregational lives.

Toward that end,  
we seek, in every way and in every setting,  
to nurture growth in faith by . . .

Glorifying God through worship  
Bonding in community  
Learning the Christian gospel and practice  
Sharing our faith  
Manifesting enthusiasm for service.”

This purpose statement is critical in setting the tone for Christian education at WCC. Under Copenhaver’s leadership members begin to see that there is no Christian life and witness without spiritual growth, and that Christian nurture happens as members engage in the core ministries of congregational life.

*Team-oriented leadership.* A common remark from pastors and church members is that Copenhaver is not only a visionary leader; he is also someone with a small ego. One pastoral associate, who worked with him for thirteen of the fifteen years of his pastorate at WCC, put it this way: “I think that for a person of his stature in the community and obviously his great gifts, if I can say this, he does not have much of an ego. It’s much easier to work with someone whose ego is not getting in the way.”

The most candid comments about Copenhaver as leader came from his church members. One long standing member, a former moderator of the Metropolitan Boston



Association of UCC churches for two years, and someone who knows all the pastors in the association, said:

Martin is characteristically an “ego-less” senior pastor in this church. And I remember another pastor commenting about how they know Martin, and it’s a way I do also, that he leads this church without giving the impression that he is leading the church. He would never have us thinking of him as a celebrity pastor, would be the way I put it, not calling attention to himself.

Copenhaver’s humility allows him to nurture a team approach for creative ministries. One member said that Copenhaver’s leadership is best described as an enabling leadership.

I am just beginning to work closely with him [Martin] now that I am moderator, and in doing so I’ve learned that he is terribly self-conscious of the amount he doesn’t lead. ... He does lead but he wants to share it more.

An associate pastor said, “There’s enormous amount of freedom that the pastors have to try things out. And that’s because we really feel like we’re trusted.” Copenhaver is very selective, but when he finds suitable candidates he patiently pursues them to join him. Convinced that growth in faith happens as people engage in the core ministries of the church, Copenhaver has gathered around him a talented pastoral team who regularly explores and develops rich and creative faith events in these ministries.

*Scripture-focused.* The third significant factor in Copenhaver’s pastoral leadership is his scripture-focused approach in a context that has historically been a more liberal religious tradition. Pastors who have been at the church longer sensed a significant change during Copenhaver’s tenure. One associate pastor observed:

... I think that in the last decade there has been much more intentionality about what we’re about as a people. It’s biblically based. It’s funny, when Martin started here there were a few people in the congregation who wondered why he was preaching from the Bible all the time. And it’s not that the former pastors didn’t do that, but somehow there is much more of a “groundedness” in Scripture and much more overt “faith-talk,” much more talk about Jesus.

Various church members shared about how Copenhaver possesses a central core in his faith and gently leads the congregation to that center. One person noted that the pastoral leadership is quite explicit that “everybody is somewhere on their faith journey, and that we accept people no matter where they are, and furthering the faith journey is a value of this church.” In his writings, Copenhaver shared about the unique religious heritage of New England and the need to regain a theological core, while being flexible with other more peripheral matters of the faith (Copenhaver, Robinson and Willimon, 1999, 33-44).

The two pastoral residents, who have been part of many faith communities, also shared about how they experienced this intentionality at WCC. One resident said: “In the

New England tradition, particularly in Congregationalism, it tends to be much more of a general God-talk. And so it's been interesting for me to see. Martin has put a lot of emphasis on Christian formation in this congregation."

When asked how they know that the adults in their church are growing in faith, many pastors said that the people lived more integrated lives. They observed that faith is more than just a Sunday affair, it is more than learning about doctrines and lore; it overflows into their homes, work and daily activities. One associate pastor commented:

I think that's what I would say, because I hear them talk about it. I hear people talk about the sermons they have heard or whatever. I mean what we did last night when talking about "testimony" is really real. People do this, they do say, "My life, my business is cut-throat, there must be another way and I am discovering another way. And I am very serious about trying to put my faith into action here."

Each month Copenhaver meets with a group of professionals from his church who work in downtown Boston for breakfast at 6:30AM. They pray, support and discuss faith and work issues at a church member's apartment. The following is a description of one of the meetings: Twelve people were present very early Thursday morning, all mid-career professionals (IT, law, finance, development). After a simple breakfast and introductions (a few were there for the first time), Copenhaver asked people to share about how they were experiencing the financial downturn. Each person was also encouraged to respond to the question, "How is it with my soul?" People shared openly, with periodic reflections and comments by Copenhaver. The feeling in the room was warm; their senior pastor was one of them, walking with them as they sought to live faithfully to the gospel in their workplaces. As the meeting ended, people joined hands in a circle for prayer. What I saw triangulated strongly with the pastors' claims; Copenhaver's Scripture-focused ministry is impacting members' lives in significant ways.

In summary, Copenhaver, as shepherd-leader, impacts congregational culture and shapes faith learning in significant ways. He guides the congregation to collectively discern its purpose at a critical time in its history, reminding them that growth in faith is necessary for witness. Comfortable with his own gifts, he purposefully gathers a talented team of pastoral associates and releases them for creative ministries. Mindful of the social and religious context of New England, Copenhaver gently leads the congregation back to a Scripture-focused, Christ-centered faith. Ultimately a congregation follows a humble leader it respects and trusts. One pastoral associate summed it up as follows: "So it's just the way that the leadership and the congregation work under Martin's ministry, they really trust him and he leads so beautifully that they just move together."

### *Copenhaver as Shepherd-Teacher*

Copenhaver believes that people grow in faith as they are engaged in the core ministries of the church. This approach to Christian education, developed as a result of the discernment process, identifies the core ministries as follows:

1. Glorifying God through worship.
2. Bonding in community.

3. Learning the Christian gospel and practice.
4. Sharing our faith.
5. Manifesting enthusiasm for service.

These core ministries will be reviewed to see how Copenhaver and his pastoral team shape them for creative Christian education and faith formation. "Learning the Christian gospel" and "Sharing our faith" will be discussed together as the pastoral leadership sees them as closely related.

*Glorifying God through worship.* When asked where exciting faith formation is actually happening many of the pastors pointed to the worship services. Copenhaver is a recognized preacher and the congregation appreciates his clear and engaging sermons (which interestingly lasts only about 20-25 minutes). One pastoral resident said, "I feel people really rely on the worship to help them think about what's going on in their lives and to reflect." But he added that there are other important reasons why worship is important to faith formation at WCC.

One associate pastor, who has been on staff for a long time, said that when she first came the church was very "left-brain, all very plain, very austere." She felt that Copenhaver brought a greater use of color and the creative arts into worship. Convinced that faith should be expressed and celebrated in multiple ways, Copenhaver and the worship team spend a great deal of time each week to experiment, plan and reflect on the worship services.

But, he encountered significant resistance in the beginning. Many in this established congregation did not want changes to the main service, although a sizable group of young families desired greater opportunities to worship with their children. After much discernment and research, the pastoral team created a new, intergenerational "first worship," occurring an hour before the main service.

The pastors sought a more creative use of space and integrated various visual and creative elements into this "first service." The bright basement room was decorated with colorful banners, with seats in concentric circles. A small fountain stood in the front and palm fronds lined the path leading into the worship area (it was Palm Sunday). Children gathered around the table and received communion with their parents. After the sermon, everyone, including children, lit a candle in response and placed them on stands around the room. As the service ended, the pastor dipped palm fronds into the small fountain and sprinkled water on the people, who seemed to welcome this cleansing act. After people exchanged the peace, the service ended. Some rushed to catch the next service upstairs, while others continued to chat over coffee and cookies.

Convinced that growth in faith happens when the congregation gathers for worship, Copenhaver and his pastoral team often include the arts to add meaning and depth. This imaginative use of the visual and creative arts engages people and deepens faith. He also adopts an intergenerational approach in an experimental "first service" so young families can worship with their children. While there was initial resistance, this service has garnered very positive feedback and is beginning to attract older adults as well. Copenhaver has also adopted an intergenerational approach to youth ministry. Youth often read the Bible, sing, testify and pray during worship, and the more gifted ones preach at the main service. Youth deacons serve on the church board and their contributions are sincerely sought and valued. Pastors note that many youth at WCC

enter religion majors at university, with some studying at seminaries and considering a vocation in Christian service.

*Bonding in community.* Pastors and church members expressed that close community life is not just an important agency for faith formation; it is a mark of spiritual growth. Copenhaver commented that the congregation, despite its size, “is a remarkably closely-knit group of folks, they really care about and for one another.” One pastoral associate said the people at WCC care very deeply for one another; “they are in and out of each other’s homes all the time.” She noted that whenever someone has a need, “people are right there, with support, care and prayers, with cards and meals and with whatever they need.”

The pastoral team intentionally nurtures community and pastoral care among the congregation. One of the pastors runs regular “caring” workshops for the deacons and members. There has been a conscious shift from “crisis care” through support groups (e.g. single parents, widows) to “daily care” through pastoral care groups. One focus group member shared a moving testimony about how community life impacted her faith. When she first joined the church, she was going through a very difficult time as her marriage was falling apart. Her family, who blamed her, was not supportive. But, she was fully integrated into the church community because she was asked to participate and serve on various boards; “This involvement helped me feel like I was still a functional adult in spite of my challenging time.”

In the introductory video on the church’s website members consistently expressed appreciation for the deep community at WCC. The monthly *Village Spire* (church newsletter) regularly introduces and welcomes new members. Hanging near the front doors of the church are hundreds of members’ nametags, to be worn at church functions, so people can relate to each other by name.

Throughout, I observed that Copenhaver always ends every church event by getting everyone to join hands in a large circle for closing prayer. One member summed it up well when she attributed the church’s strong sense of community to Copenhaver’s influence. “He’s helped to create family here. I mean ours have been here a long, long time before Martin came; but Martin, for me, has brought a certain joy, you know. With all due respect, it’s the ‘boy’ in him that laughs, and the grins got to us in so many ways.”

*Learning the Christian Gospel and Sharing Faith.* Over the past years, WCC has developed a Christian education series for Lent, where they learn the various Christian practices as outlined in Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith* (Bass, 1997). This Lent, the church was learning the Christian practice of “witness.” The event began with a simple service of readings, song and prayer led by the pastoral residents. Copenhaver then led the group (about fifty people) in a short reflection. He distributed the church’s purpose statement with the five core ministries and explained that these are dynamically related. He said, “As we worship we share our faith, and as we share our faith and testify we grow.” He reminded the people that “witness” is also important because it puts experience into words; “Description clarifies faith, not just talking ourselves into faith.” He read part of his journal reflections on the birth of his daughter, illustrating how that experience was deepened by words that captured his strong emotions. After this short reflection people went to different small groups to engage in this Christian practice of

“witness.” The meeting ended with the small groups coming together, and everyone joined hands as they sang a song and received a blessing.<sup>†</sup>

The pastors noticed that as the people become more comfortable with the practice of “witness,” they shared more regularly during worship. For the pastoral team, learning to bear witness is not just faith forming; it is a mark of spiritual growth. One church member describes this dynamic way of faith learning:

And that’s just a remarkable thing, almost in spite of yourself, your faith is going to grow if you start finding words for it because words are what help you to find it and then question it, and I mean for me that’s the biggest. I’ve been a church going person all my life, it wasn’t until I came here that I start learning words for my faith.

Many pastors highlighted that small group Bible studies also play a significant role in faith formation at WCC. There are about fifty small groups that meet regularly. Where previously people discussed contemporary social issues, current Bible studies seem to lay important faith foundations. One member expressed it this way:

I enjoyed it a great deal and it’s been a wonderful mental and spiritual stimulus, and emotional, so I would say for me it needs to be all three of those. That I need the kind of mental exercise to think about this, and what it means to be a Christian, and where I see Christianity going and how it’s changing, and how I was brought up.

Learning the Christian gospel and sharing faith are core ministries for faith formation at WCC. While small group Bible studies have and continue to play a significant role, Copenhaver takes every opportunity for congregational learning, particularly during the major seasons of the liturgical calendar. One associate pastor said that a Lenten Christian education series is now a common expectation for many at WCC.

*Manifesting enthusiasm for service.* A mark of WCC is not just a rich history of community service, but the pastors believe it is an organic part of dynamic faith. Pastors regularly encourage and model this integration, as each takes turns to lead short-term missions each year. Church members who participate in these service projects are often spiritually energized. One pastor described how a ninth grader’s life was transformed by meeting orphaned children in Quito, Ecuador. He has been there three times and now saves all his money so he can return. Many members appreciate this dimension of their faith experience, and eagerly share what God is doing overseas with other parishioners upon their return.

Many of these service-mission projects are also intergenerational. Adults and youth serve and reflect on their experiences together, growing in faith and deepening relationships across the congregation. One adult member, who has been to a number of service projects, recalls an unforgettable experience:

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<sup>†</sup> Aha moment. As I walked home that night, my head keep replaying the shared testimonies I heard in my small group. I reflected on how this Christian practice, experienced by many for the first time that night, helped them learn the gospel.

My most recent trip was to Arizona. I've been on about ten, all pretty amazing, each of them. And we were out in the desert, cleaning up trash from illegal aliens, and you know, it was hard work, it was hot, it was psychologically difficult to see how people, these illegal aliens, just leave their wallets, their clothes, their backpacks... because a lot of them have started out the journey not knowing how tough it was going to be. ... It's really hard for me to put into words, just how deep these kids (church youth) are with what they see, and what they feel....

A review of *The Village Spire* (Wellesley Congregational Church, 2009) highlighted the following service opportunities:

- Fumbelo Update—nutrition issues facing school children orphaned by AIDS in Fumbelo, Zambia; Knit a KuKu Kid—knitting dolls to bring to Fumbelo.
- Faith, the Environment, and the Future—A workshop on environmental responsibility.
- Interfaith Hospitality Network—training for helpers as the Church host homeless families in the basement, June 21-28, 2009.
- College Group—serving dinner at Rosie's Place, homeless shelter for women in Boston, April 5, 2009.

In summary, Copenhaver, as shepherd-teacher, believes that faith formation is not so much about “educational programs,” but an integrated experience of church life. Faith is nurtured as members engage in creative faith events that are thoughtfully developed for the core ministries of the church: artistic worship, meaningful service projects, learning gospel and Christian practices, faith sharing and dynamic community life. One member summarized WCC's approach to faith formation well: “There are so many opportunities outside of worship to explore my faith, that's what I find most helpful about the Village Church.”

## Discussion

### *Copenhaver as Shepherd-Leader*

Jackson W. Carroll likens a pastor joining a congregation to something like a lead actor in an ongoing play (Carroll, 1998, 167). Others have gone before with their script and roles, but the play continues with an open-ended script, constrained by what has unfolded thus far (set, setting, capacities of other actors). This interesting metaphor highlights the major role of pastoral leadership as one of setting directions, helping the congregation gain a suitable vision for its ongoing story, and to develop programs and practices to embody that vision. Copenhaver's leadership of the visioning process is widely considered by pastoral staff and members as a defining moment at WCC. At a crucial point in its long history, he guided them to discern their identity and purpose. Together they mapped a clear vision for the future and identified core ministries for witness and growth in faith.

Pastors generally prefer a proactive leadership style that inspires and encourages lay decision making with a willingness to step in and take action on their own when necessary (Jackson Carroll, 2006, 131-132). Copenhaver's pastoral leadership style is slightly different. He did not proceed with the visioning process until five years after his

arrival, and even then, advocated a collective discernment process that took two years. In addition, he strategically nurtures a gifted team of pastoral colleagues and creatively explores diverse approaches for Christian faith formation in the core ministries.

Copenhaver has cultivated the trust of the congregation by serving and living authentically among them for the past fifteen years. Pastoral staff (long standing and newer pastoral residents), and church members emphasized that Copenhaver, despite his multiple gifts and stature is someone with a “small ego,” a leader who “leads without giving the impression that he is leading the church.”

In all my interviews I encountered no expressions of dissatisfaction with Copenhaver as leader. All the five pastors said they were drawn to him as an “exceptional” leader and wanted to serve and learn from him. However, in one of the focus group of church members, one person said he did not always get a full hearing when he provided feedback to the pastoral leadership. The other members did not agree with him. The incident with the new member during the discernment exercise was perhaps one example of dissent. It is interesting to note that it was the congregation and not Copenhaver who responded, and what they sanctioned was the inappropriate way in which alternate views were expressed.

One question I asked was what challenges the pastors and members see for WCC in the next five years. One focus group member said that the church lacks a concentrated effort to reach out to the wider community (a sentiment also shared by one of the pastoral residents). He noted that while this “self-complacency” does not characterize the whole congregation, it was “pervasive enough to keep them from addressing the issue.” He continued, “We have property, plant and equipment and a staff that can easily minister to a congregation of 1500-1600; we have about 1050 here right now. I believe the challenge in the next five years is to change the attitude that we are just fine the way we are.”

This person noted that a common problem among the UCC churches is they do not articulate clearly to the community what they are about. A review of the various service projects at WCC affirms a passionate engagement with the wider community. But the concern of this person is not a lack of community service, but inadequate social engagement and outreach among its members. He notes, “This is the Village Church for Wellesley... but we don’t act like it’s the ‘village church; we act like it’s our church.” Copenhaver may want to review how members are actually reaching out to their neighbors, and review the type of congregational growth over the last five years.

In summary, Copenhaver has deeply impacted congregational culture at WCC. He led the church to discern the Spirit’s leading and together chart a clear vision at a crucial time in its history. Throughout the process, he was particularly conscious of the congregation’s social context, challenging the status quo but also affirming what was positive in their religious heritage. Copenhaver is also a humble leader who believes in the power of a dynamic team. More importantly, he led with integrity over fifteen years at WCC, which opened doors for innovative change as he sought a deeper spirituality for the congregation. These traits are evident in the literature on effective pastoral leadership (Mead, 1997; Carroll, 2006, 127-158).

Craig Dykstra highlights that pastors with a unique ability to lead thriving congregations possess a kind of “pastoral imagination.” This is “not just creativity but a set of unique sensibilities, virtues and skills developed over time that allow pastors the ability to see in depth in particular pastoral situations, enabling them to think, act and

respond through gestures, words and actions that are particularly appropriate” (Dykstra, 2008, 48). Copenhaver meets with a support group of seasoned, local pastors each month. They read, share innovative ideas, discuss challenging pastoral and leadership issues and pray together. He acknowledged their value to his pastoral formation and invited me to observe their meeting. In addition, he meets once a year with a group of like-minded pastors, scattered across the country. They would invite a notable theologian or author and spend a whole day to engage and pray together for the renewal of the church. Copenhaver shared that these support groups are crucial to his growth and new ministry ideas; for him this is an important source of “pastoral imagination.”

### *Copenhaver as Shepherd-Teacher*

According to Peter Marty, a pastor’s work is commonly thought to comprise a set of core tasks basic to ordained ministry: leading worship, preaching, teaching, providing pastoral care, and overseeing congregational life. But viewing ministry as any set of tasks can lead to mere functionalism. Pastoral ministry, according to Marty, is best conceived as a way of life, involving the “oversight of congregational life,” not so much administratively and sociologically but imaginatively and theologically. Pastoral ministry is the work of “shaping” the faith community so that the formative power inherent within Christ’s body gives abundant life in and for the world (Marty, 2008, 312).

Marty elaborates what this pastoral “shaping” of communities involves. First, Christian community begins with worship. Here the pastor focuses a keen pastoral eye toward helping people to engage not in themselves, but the worship of God through liturgy, sacraments, praise, and prayer. Second, the pastor encourages faithful living, inviting parishioners toward varied and imaginative forms of service. This not only gives deep joy to the one serving, but also links that member with others in the congregation resulting in mutual encouragement. Third, pastors help people find their theological voice so that they have a vocabulary and grammar with which they can be at home, creating a community of faith (Marty, 2008, 320-323)

It is interesting that worship, community, learning, witness and service are key faith forming ministries at WCC. Pastors plan creative and engaging worship, model and promote community service, emphasizing that it is not just a powerful agency of faith formation, but also a beautiful expression of its fruit. As members care for each other, witness and serve the wider community, many learn a new theological language and experience a vibrant faith. Copenhaver and the pastoral team spend much time to reflect theologically and creatively on these core ministries, always seeking to better understand and shape their faith forming elements. If something did not work, they would review and try something new.

This integrated approach to faith formation has similarities to the work of Maria Harris. For Harris, “The church does not have an educational program, it is an educational program” (Harris 1989, 47). Harris advocates that pastors be educational leaders who “give form” to the traditional practices of church life—proclamation, teaching, prayer/worship, community and service—so that members experience meaningful faith through participation. The whole congregation grows as members learn and serve together. Not surprisingly, all three of the pastoral associates at WCC have studied with Harris at seminary. This intergenerational, community-based model of



liturgical faith learning has been practiced in Israel from its earliest days (Siew 2001, 324-325), and is gaining increasing recognition in contemporary Christian education (Westerhoff and Willimon, 1994; Pfatteicher, 1995; Williams, 2009; Brown, Dahl and Reuschling, 2011). Similarly, James Smith calls for a “pedagogy of desire” (Christian practices, habits, rituals) rather than an abstract “worldview” approach in Christian faith formation because the human person is more than just a cognitive being; we are embodied persons with passion (Smith, 2009, 155-207).

WCC faces two challenges in the education of its people. The first is structural, and highlighted by the pastors and focus group church members. They all sense that the present governance structure does not quite fit what the church is currently doing. The church boards, while faithful and accountable, may be too far removed from ministry settings to provide relevant oversight. Copenhaver is working on a proposal for change to be presented to the church board.

The second challenge concerns the curriculum for Christian education. While the congregation at WCC may be sophisticated and well educated, Copenhaver believes that many still have a basic understanding of faith. He laments that there is no organized theological curriculum; “Too much time is spent on side dishes, there is not enough on the main meal.” To counter this, Copenhaver wants to bring the church back to catechesis. His vision is for adult classes to combine with confirmation classes for grade nine youth, both concluding with a ritual component at Easter Vigil. He wants to see a renewal of baptismal vows, learning of all the major Christian practices and basic Christian beliefs, the discernment of gifts and the encouragement of individual ministries. He believes that if churches encourage “every member ministry” they will need to provide a theological basis for people to respond to the call of God.

In summary, Copenhaver exercises a kind of “educational imagination” as he purposefully shapes a particular congregational context for learning and faith (Edie, 2011, 124). While learning in faith happens as members engage in the core ministries at WCC, Copenhaver believes that it needs to be more structured, even deepened, to cover the core theological doctrines. In this, Copenhaver has a corresponding view to Edward Farley, who advocates a return to “ordered learning” as basis for renewal of Christian education in the church (Farley 1996, 31-44; Farley 2003, 119-144).

### Conclusion

Christian education is essential to a vibrant church. However, many pastors, distracted by the varied demands of congregational life, are neglecting their major vocational call. Pastors need to reclaim their role as shepherd-teachers. They need to exercise imaginative pastoral and educational leadership so members can grow and mature in faith, embodying Christ in and for the world. This case study of Copenhaver, senior pastor at WCC, provides an in-depth understanding into his role as shepherd-teacher and his impact on congregational learning and faith formation.

First, Copenhaver, as servant shepherd-leader, demonstrates a unique “pastoral imagination.” At a critical moment in the church’s long history, he led the congregation to discern a clear vision for the future and identified core ministries for growth in faith and witness. He has a deep understanding of the culture and religious heritage of the people and he gently guides them back to a biblical and theological center. Second,

Copenhaver is a humble leader who firmly believes in dynamic team ministry. He is always looking out for talent and has carefully nurtured a team of gifted pastoral associates over the years for creative ministries. Third, Copenhaver knows that people will only follow a shepherd-leader they know and love. His humble discipleship over fifteen years has earned him the congregation's trust, giving him the authority to lead and the freedom to experiment with innovative ideas in congregational life. Lastly, Copenhaver, as adaptive shepherd-teacher, has shaped a unique congregational context for learning in faith. Convinced that the core ministries of the church contribute to growth in faith in unique ways, he adopts an integrated perspective to congregational life and learning. Copenhaver and his pastoral team spend a great deal of time reflecting theologically and experimenting imaginatively with the core ministries, seeking to understand how they can be meaningful faith-forming experiences. The whole church becomes a learning-growing-serving-witnessing community as members engage in its rich and diverse life.

This study has also identified a few challenges at WCC. Many members are growing in faith, but there is concern that some segments of the congregation may be a little "complacent." While there are numerous efforts to serve the needy in the community and beyond, members may not be reaching out to their suburban neighbors with the message of the gospel. There is a longing that the church should again become the "village church" for the whole community of Wellesley. A second challenge is that of governance. Pastors and members feel that the church board, while faithful and accountable, may be too far removed from ministry to provide relevant oversight. Lastly, while there are ample opportunities for learning in faith, there is a concern that members may not possess a comprehensive faith foundation.

This ethnographic study is significant for a number of reasons. First, it describes one fascinating model of pastor as shepherd-teacher and leader, who through pastoral and educational imagination shaped a dynamic context for learning and growth. The affluent and educated sociocultural background of New England congregationalism is acknowledged, but my purpose is for an in-depth understanding of this interesting case, rather than generalizations from it (Patton, 2002, 447-452; Putten, 2006). Second, this study affirms the importance of Christian education for innovative faith formation in the church. It is disconcerting that while pastoral ministry involves adaptive educational leadership, some seminaries are removing Christian education from the required core of the theological curriculum (Edie, 2011, 123). Sadly, seminary graduates may enter pastoral ministry with little clue about what Christian education is about. Lastly, as the church increasingly grapples with its missional call, pastors need to learn basic ethnographic research for understanding congregational hopes (Baker, 2011) and plan for meaningful change (Moschella, 2008, 40-41). Many seminaries teach students how to access helpful sociological data banks for community demographics, but few actually teach analysis of congregational contexts (Edie, 2011, 136). This study illustrates how ethnographic research can be done in a congregational setting, serving as a teaching resource for professors and students. Seminary students must learn that effective pastoral ministry always begins with attending to the rich and textured stories of the people they serve.

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