

Afterword

The Church Administrator as Person

*Who am I: This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once?
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1944¹*

The preceding chapters are a topical presentation of church administration. Church administration is a collection of encounters with governance, boards, personnel processes, legal issues, planning, fiscal matters, resources, conflict, communication, teams, and external relationships. But what of the administrator, especially the administrator (administration as holy calling) who time-travels all these engagements? What is worth noting about the *person* behind it all, more personally put, you and us? We finish with three thoughts: taming the untamable, the importance of self-awareness, and the attitude toward learning.

Organizations-R-Crazy (Including Church Ones)!

Much of the writing on administration delivers an oh-so-rational view of organizations and the world in which they exist. Administration, then, is not so difficult because the world holds still while administrators apply their calculated steps of observation, analysis, decision, and action. We hope we have not fallen into this trap. Each chapter has tried to be realistic about how these administrative tasks play out in everyday organizational life. The sub-theme “Riding Time to the End,” set forth in the Preface, acknowledges the need for courage and persistence in confronting the unpredictable and fading character of all things. The prophet (known as “Second Isaiah”) says:

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;*

surely, the people are grass.
—Isa 40:6b-7

Administration is not rationalizing the irrational, ordering disorder, or taming the untamable. It is *effort* (with expected outcomes) undertaken with others in the face of irrationality, disorder, and the unruly nature of things.

Equipped with a degree of understanding and corresponding skills, it is possible to do administration and do it well, with full knowledge that it won't be neat and without pain. Planning serves as a good example. Preparation for planning (see chapter 4) includes confronting the aftermath of previous planning episodes that may carry the seeds of disappointment, skepticism, and even anger, to sufficiently cleanse the past, enabling new and effective planning to proceed.

When someone says, "I am not an administrator," even though she or he is doing administration, they may mean, "I have been disappointed with my efforts to do administration," or, "I am disillusioned with human nature's propensity for self-centered behavior that works against teamwork or pursuing common goals," or, "I was taken in by a belief in the inevitable triumph of rationality." Notice that the entire field of administration was seduced by the false promises of pure rationality (see chapter 1). This led finally to a discovery of the social side of human nature as expressed in groups and collectives, and the necessity of thinking of institutions, their governance and administration in systems terms and images to comprehend their dynamic and complex character.

Church administrators should know better than to fall for the rational trap, given such theological assertions as, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22b-23); "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him [God] a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:10); we are both saint and sinner at the same time (Martin Luther); and "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3).

Those who work within church systems can attest to the intensification of conflict and the accompanying emotions around important and unimportant issues. Holy matters are at stake! The potential for great good and egregious evil is multiplied. The quote with which this Afterword begins is from the prison writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The poem that contains these words is an honest self-reflection on the degrees to which the Nazi struggle in the nation and *in the church* was taking its toll on him. Bonhoeffer's identity as person and child of God was under siege, as the concluding lines make clear:

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.²*

In a similar fashion (though perhaps not as dramatic), the church administrator needs ways to guard against the effects of irrationality, selfishness, and even deliberate assaults on the *personhood* of the administrator. To be involved in the unfolding of the Christian story is to take on the history and future of that story with all its struggles against the forces that oppose it and would like to defeat it. That struggle shows up inside as well as outside the church, even *inside* the administrator if we are to believe the above theological claims.

It is imperative, therefore, to access ways and means to fight against the corroding acids of cynicism and denial that, if untreated, lead to disillusionment, withdrawal, and abandonment. Taming the untamable? Hardly, but being armed with concepts and tools for the doing of church administration at least makes it possible to assist the church and its organizations in fulfilling their mission and being faithful to their calling.

The Importance of Self-Awareness

Albert Speer was a great builder and industrialist. There was just one problem. His talents were offered to and used by Adolf Hitler in the diabolic attempt to inaugurate a “Thousand Year Reign” of National Socialism in Germany.

Speer’s misdirected use of his talents serves as a parable for the church administrator. There seem to be two very powerful forces at work in human beings: the desire to be effective, that is, to have an effect on the world around us, and the almost endless capacity to fool ourselves about what we are really good at doing.

Let’s call the first force the *competence motive* (from psychology) and the second, the *capacity for self-deception*. How effective you or we are as administrators will have much to do with how we activate the first and avoid the second.

Psychiatrist Rollo May has studied the competence motive and believes it to be more powerful than even the famous search for identity:

The old myths and symbols by which we oriented ourselves are gone, anxiety is rampant; we cling to each other and try to persuade ourselves that what we feel is love; we do not will because we are afraid that if we choose one thing or one person we will love the other, and we are too insecure to take the chance. . . . The individual is forced to turn inward, he [sic] becomes obsessed with the new form of the problem of identity, namely, Even-if-I-know-who-I-am, I-have-no-significance. I am unable to influence others. The next step is apathy. And the step following that is violence. For no human being can stand the perpetually numbing experience of his own powerlessness.³

One reason why administrative ability is important is that it is one way (not the only or even the most important way) of having an effect, making a dent on the world around us, especially in and through institutions where we spend much of our time. From this perspective, understanding and acting on what we are good at is not just a private search for identity or fulfillment; it is an activation of a basic human need and, if directed toward the betterment of society (unlike Speer), helps to make human collective efforts, like institutions and their administration, more effective and doable.

But a funny (or not so funny) thing happens on the way to competence: self-deception. There is not space in this book to explore the many ways human beings deceive themselves; let it suffice to claim that it happens, especially among those who lead others. This claim is supported by the presence of “self-awareness” or “strong self-concept” on almost every list of leader traits or competencies. A Google search on

“leadership” uncovers an extensive study on leadership conducted by a major university in partnership with a well-known public-opinion survey group that identifies nine major areas of interest, including “self-awareness and reflection.”

How does one become self-aware? There are many ways: through reflection on major life experiences, listening to others (who will tell you the truth), counseling, and coaching. Three ways of gaining greater self-awareness are feedback analysis, autobiography, and the IRS model (Identity, Roles, and Skills).

1. *Feedback Analysis*. The grandfather of modern management, Peter Drucker, observes, “The only way to discover your strengths is through feedback analysis.”⁴ Acknowledging the difficulty of finding persons who know you well enough and will be honest, Drucker suggests an alternate activity he has followed for more than thirty years. After each major life or work decision, write down what you hope to accomplish. After nine to twelve months, reflect on (and write down) what actually happened. Analyze the gap between intention and outcome. What were the forces at work? What did you do or not do to determine the actual outcome? What did you learn about yourself?

2. *Autobiography*. A second example comes from two theologians who did a study of Albert Speer’s life through his autobiography, *Inside the Third Reich*. Their conclusion is that Speer fails the test of overcoming self-deception. Speer explains himself to himself in ways that strengthen self-illusion and avoid the tough requirements of the real story of the Third Reich. The two theological researchers make the following case for the art of autobiography as an antidote for self-deception:

The art of autobiography offers the best illustration of how to recheck and test the adequacy of the central story and image we have of our lives. The constraints and requirements of autobiography parallel those of a life well lived. Like the moral person, the autobiographer cannot simply recount the events of his or her life. He or she must write from the dominant perspective and image of his or her present time. If his effort is successful, these images and metaphors will provide the skills to articulate the limits of past images and show how they have led to the autobiographer’s current perspective. Autobiography is the literary form that mirrors the moral necessity to free ourselves from the hold of our illusions by exercising the skills which more demanding stories provide. Autobiography is the literary act that rehearses our liberation from illusory goals by showing how to bring specific skills of understanding to bear on our desires and aversions, so that an intelligible pattern emerges. An autobiographer, like a moral person, needs to find a story that gives a life coherence without distorting the quality of his or her actual engagements with others and the world.⁵

For our purpose here, note that autobiography has five features. It:

- is written (“a literary form”)
-

is more than description (“cannot simply recount the events of his or her life”)

- confronts the limits and illusions of old self-understandings (“articulate the limits of past images”; “free ourselves from the hold of our illusions”)

- prepares for the future (“rehearses our liberation from illusory goals”)

- produces a direction both realistic and desirable (“an intelligible pattern emerges”; “a story that gives a life coherence without distorting . . . actual engagements with others and the world”)

An illustration: The entry into a doctoral program in public administration includes a required course in self-assessment. The lone requirement is a one hundred-page paper consisting of four parts: exploration of major life themes (especially recurring ones); obtaining feedback from others and analysis; a model to relate self-understanding, feedback, and life choices; and life, family, and doctoral program goals. Cohort student groups are formed based on geography and access for mutual support. Career and self-assessment material is supplied.

At the end of the semester the students gather, turn in their papers, and reflect with each other and the professors on the experience. Four of the twenty-nine students announce they are dropping out but declare this course to be the most valuable activity they have ever experienced. An evaluation conducted three years later shows the extremely high regard participants placed on the course and the strong correlation between course learning and completing graduate study, making work and life choices. The course made a difference. This course increased self-awareness, not in some narcissistic way (“look at me”), but in a productive and positive manner related to society and its need for effective public administrators.⁶

3. The IRS Model. In addition to feedback analysis and autobiography, a third way to enhance self-awareness is the IRS model, that is, to clarify one’s Identity, Roles, and Skills.

Identity is the more durable aspects of personality over time. What is constant, recurring not once but again and again? One of us seems to always seek out (or is sought out for) starting up things: a new tutoring program in college, a new congregation, a new national church agency, a new denomination. The other author is best casting a vision and seeking a path forward amid tough situations: a problem solver and solution seeker, not in perennial search of conflict but calm and effective in dealing with it. The life themes of the autobiographical work in the previous example are a good way to capture identity. Answer the question, “Who am I?” ten times, and an identity narrative will develop.

Roles are not a popular concept, probably because of the connotation of “playing roles” being non-authentic and manipulative. We do, however, tend to fulfill certain roles in a situation or organization. Small-group research was one of the early ways roles were discovered. Regardless of personality, gender, and race differences of group members, tasks undertaken, environment, or any other variables, certain group roles develop, and are filled sometimes by different or the same members. In the research these two roles were generalized as *attention to task* and *group maintenance*, that is, some persons

concentrate on getting the job done, while others care for the ways the group works together. Try these two simple exercises. Complete the sentence “I am . . .” twenty times. Your roles as husband, mother, child, executive administrator, neighborhood counselor, congregational pastor have a lot to do with how you function and what you seek out to do. Or look at the list of roles related to running a machine (see Appendix K). The three you check as “most like to do” or “do not like to do” are windows into your identity and represent the ways you tend to exercise your effectiveness.

While individual strengths and preferences shape the roles taken by church administrators, there are three general categories that emerge, given the nature of administrative work. They are:

- Interpreter. “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him [the Lord]?” asked Paul in his letter to the Romans (10:14c). And how do people who associate with organizations know what’s going on without an interpreter? Rumors rampage, bad news is exaggerated, good news is ignored, the past is wrongly remembered, the future is uncertain—all these realities of organizational life need interpretation in ways neither “Pollyanish” or “doomsday” but honest, direct, and enlightening.

- Integrator. The church body of the authors declares itself not to be top down or bottom up but interactive. The parts (congregation, synod, churchwide office, related institutions) work together to fulfill an identity and carry out a mission that assigns ultimate authority only to God. In such a church and in almost all organizations these days, administrators are expected to be integrators who bridge and connect groups, both informal and formal. In fact, the work of administration today increasingly takes on the central role of connector, especially as groups develop around passionately held positions creating more and more we’s and they’s. The administrator integrates hardened lines that otherwise morph into dividing walls.

- Innovator. Hopefully, with more than personal ego at work, the church administrator often is dissatisfied with policies, procedures, and systems that seem to have outlived their usefulness. Changing things is an art, as people often resist, partly because change creates uncertainty. Yet the role of innovator goes with church administration, not innovation for its own sake, but to improve, to increase effectiveness. Research on exemplary leaders has shown that they “challenge the process,” “search for new opportunities,” and engage in “experimenting.”⁷

Skills are capacities to achieve effectiveness, some skills are technical in nature, others involve working with people, and some are symbolic, that is, developing vision, or defining the situation, or offering motivation to get from here to there. A newer word for skills is *competencies*. Either way, it is important for a church administrator to (a) be aware of what skills or competencies she or he possesses or needs to develop, and (b) which ones the congregation or church-related organization requires to carry out its mission. A broad set of competencies provided in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*

of the U.S. Department of Labor is shown in Appendix L. This list, organized by data, people, and things, can be used by individuals (to determine strengths), or by organizations (to develop expected and needed competencies to achieve organizational goals and effectiveness). Finally, a set of eight questions has proved helpful for individual and group reflection and assessment in following the IRS model (see Appendix M).

Self-awareness is a key to doing effective administration. Three examples have been described for increasing self-awareness: feedback analysis, autobiography, and the Identity, Roles, and Skills model.

Learning to Learn

The third and final aspect of the administrator as a person is the call to continuous learning. Reflecting on his seminary experience, one graduate reported that the best gift the seminary gave him was teaching him how to keep learning.⁸

A church administrator's continuous learning involves attitude and style. The attitude is formed from the belief that one does not know it all, others (colleagues, partners, board members, constituents, donors, clients) have something to teach, and life is a sequence of learning opportunities because change is a constant companion.

Style in its simplest form refers to three ways of learning: reading, writing, or talking.⁹ Great leaders exhibit one of these three modes for learning. For example, Winston Churchill and Ludwig van Beethoven kept copious notes and sketchbooks. Talking is often not well understood by those around a leader who learns that way, as it may appear the leader is changing his or her mind when what is actually happening is talking through the options available. An additional factor for the church administrator is response to the ongoing guidance of God in changing situations: "O sing to the Lord a new song" (Ps 96:1a), or "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

The administrator who ceases to learn is in danger of being overtaken by developing events and emerging needs. Part of being on top of things involves an open attitude toward learning that never stops.

A Final Word

In his first inaugural address (1861), Abraham Lincoln wrote, "I do not consider it necessary at present for me to discuss those matters of administration about which there is no anxiety or excitement." We have tried to follow President Lincoln's lead by discussing those matters of church administration about which there is anxiety or excitement. The ministry of administration is too easily dismissed as marginal to the real work of the church. We have tried to show how integral administration is to the doing of ministry and mission in the world.

In between his discussion of spiritual gifts and their proper role in the church and his poetic proclamation of love as the more excellent way, the apostle Paul wrote to those assembled in Corinth about who they were and who was to do what among them. Paul begins with a declaration, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor 12:27). Not, “I would like you to be the body,” or, “I hope you want to be the body,” but “you *are* the body!” Body is carnal, fleshly, and from a theological point of view in-carnational: “You are the body *of Christ*.”

Our reasoning behind this book is that the church is called to exist and minister in the world. The church “occupies space,” to use a Bonhoeffer phrase. The world is constituted by space and time coordinates. The church, if it cares at all about incarnation in time and space, must employ the gifts given by the same God who calls, in as response-able manner as it can possibly muster.

And that is what Paul’s next sentence to the Corinthian assembly is about, namely, the use of gifts in response to the call to be the body of Christ. “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second. . . .” We quarrel with a translation. The Revised Standard Version (1952) includes “administrators” among those who use their gifts for the sake of the body of Christ. The New Revised Standard Version (1989) does not. The Greek word in question is *kybernis*, rendered in early translations as “governments,” “governings,” or “administration.”¹⁰ As mentioned in chapter 2, this word literally means the work of a ship’s pilot who steers the ship through rocks and storms to safe harbor. One commentator claims, “The people to whom Paul is referring are the people who carry out the administration of the Church. It is supremely essential work.”¹¹

Our protest over translation is mild and beside the point. The point is that Paul’s assertion that, as the called body of Christ rides time to the end, it is gifted beyond belief. As Paul wrote elsewhere: “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). If among the revocable things—including the ways the church responds to God’s call at different periods of history to meet changing circumstances—there is a good word spoken for *governings* or even *administration*, we are happy. Thanks be to God for the *call* and the *gifts* (among them the gift of administration)!