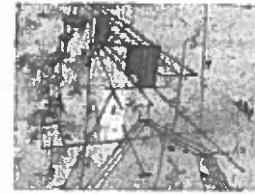


Re-Calling Ministry

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Ministry as Grief Work

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with grief...
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:3, 6 (RSV)

To be a minister is to know the most searing grief and abandonment, daily and profoundly. To be a minister is to take as partners in solemn covenant those who are sure to renege. To be a minister is to commit, unavoidably, energy and passion, self and soul, to a people, to a vision of who they are born to be, to their readiness to share and live into that vision. To be a minister is to make that all-out, prodigal commitment to a people who cannot possibly sustain it. That is the nature of ministry, as it is of the God thus served. The minister is called by their need, by their fundamental inability to be who they are born to be, hence by their fundamental inability to share and live into that vision in which the minister invests all. To be a minister, then, as God knows, is to be forsaken regularly and utterly, by those on whose partnership one most relies for identity, meaning, and selfhood, as these are lodged in the vocational commitment. In their forsaking ways the minister's call is rebuffed and repudiated and grieved for over and over again; in their forsaking and in that grief the minister's call is renewed over and over again. For the minister is called by their need, by their fundamental inability to live into the vision and the compact into which the minister must live so totally. Ministry is called forth and occasioned by just such grief. That makes the grief no less painful and no more welcome, only to be recognized.

"How can I be a minister" (which, for ministers, usually means "How can I be anybody?") "if they will not be a church?" are the sorrowful and angry words of grief. But these very words of grieving for ministry are the words that constitute ministry. If they *were* a "church," if they could be the people of God, there would be no need for ministry; there could be no ministry. "I am a minister precisely because they cannot be a church" is the confession of one who recognizes ministry as grief work. The grief is never welcomed or enjoyed, certainly not sought, as though it constituted or certified ministry. But when the grief comes, as it does daily and decisively, it is accepted, and the grief work it occasions is welcomed as ministry. The minister, quite literally, *works through* the grief. Ministry must be in partnership; still more essentially, however, ministry is found in apartness, the apartness of people from themselves; from God; from each other; and, inevitably, from the minister and the ministry they have invited. Facing and sharing that grief, and the grief work it occasions, minister and people can discover a new and more binding kind of partnership, a partnership of apartness.

Other people may experience only a few times in a long lifetime the grief of losing a crucial life partner; the grief of a crucial promise broken by a parent (or a teacher) absolutely trusted until then; the grief of being jilted by a lover, divorced by a spouse, betrayed by a friend. In any one week a minister experiences many such moments of grief. The minister is seduced by the commitments of ministry to put near-ultimate reliance on a partnership, a mutuality, a reciprocity, or a covenant, only to discover daily and painfully that the commitment, so earnest on one side, is one-sided.

To be a minister is to be like a ballet dancer straining all muscles and energies into a daring leap only to find the partner not there to make the catch or steady the landing. To be a minister is to have learned one's role in a play well, to be committed to the message of the play and passionately geared for a performance, and to appear on stage to discover the rest of the cast in disarray, unprepared, or absent. To be a minister is like being married to someone who is not married to you.

Most other professionals hold back some selfhood to invest in family, hobbies, luncheon clubs, days off, or even church. A minister is all-out a minister, and usually nothing but a minister, twenty-four hours a day. So when ministry is thwarted and the minister feels not a minister, there is the emptiness and grief of being nobody. Most other professionals find their "clients" dependent on them; clients follow the rules and roles set by the lawyer, nurse, auto mechanic, or physician. But ministers are in a partnership. Their work depends on invitation and response from others. Lawyers and physicians and nurses and auto mechanics take charge. Ministers plant seeds.

Moreover, ministers plant seeds—on purpose, as part of their ministry—on rocky soil, where the seeds are mostly doomed. Where the soil is good and the climate is nourishing, there is no need for ministry; plants seed themselves naturally and grow abundantly. Some ministers do seek haven from grief, and hence from ministry, where faith and community, perhaps even love and justice, do seem to be thriving abundantly. But the ministry of the God who has ever pursued an apostate people precisely in their faithlessness and brokenness is called to flourish exactly where it can never flourish, in those corners of life where it is most needed and hence most unwelcome. When the minister hears a comfortable affirmation and acceptance, there may be cause for self-scrutiny. Ministry may still lie ahead. When the people say no, ministry may have been reached. Ships are meant to travel through the waves of the high seas; if the surface is always placid, they must still be in the harbor.

"Acquainted with Grief..."

To grieve is to take two coffee cups from the cupboard in the morning, only to remember that one's wife is dead or separated...and to have to put one cup back.

To grieve is to start joyfully into the gift shop, one's eye attracted by the perfect gift in the window, only to remember that the child is dead...and to walk on down the street, heavily.

To grieve is to start out from the office with habitual joy at the end of the day, toward the usual rendezvous with one's lover, only to remember the long, anguished phone call of the night before...and to go home alone.

To grieve is to be delighted with the snapshot prints at the drug-store counter and impulsively to order duplicates to share with one's mother, only to remember that she died six months previously...and to say to the clerk, "Never mind."

To grieve is to have an especially interesting job come into the shop, a job one automatically routes to a favorite young protege, only to have the word come back that he has just quit and gone to work for a competitor...and to look up, confused, saying, "Who can do this?"

To grieve is to wake up on a brilliant sunny morning with spontaneous, unbidden anticipation of playing golf, only to be reminded instantly by heavy limbs that one has had a stroke...and to close one's eyes, now moist.

To grieve is to invest prime energy and love into a sermon for a much-loved people, only to be reminded that it was not heard: "I enjoyed your sermon." "That was a cute illustration." "Wasn't the choir lovely this morning?"

To grieve is to pour one's energies for months and years into the struggles of a beleaguered minority group or a beleaguered marriage or a beleaguered teenager—standing by patiently and wisely and lovingly, and indeed making a crucial difference—only to have the group or couple or teenager, having found themselves, shun you as a threatening enemy.

To grieve is to introduce into a discussion at the deacons' meeting some biblical allusions, such as some of the ringing phrases from Romans 8, as one has spent years training oneself to do and supposes to be standard in a Christian community, only to have the deacons look blankly at you and someone remark, "You ministers sometimes do pick up some funny language."

To grieve is to presuppose among one's people a Christian concern for the oppressed and to build upon this foundation an alertness to the problem of civil rights for homosexuals or Puerto Ricans, only to have this foundation manifestly absent: "Stick to religion and to our own kind of people."

To grieve is to commit oneself seriously to the pulpit committee's assurance that the people of the church want to develop intentional small groups, such as house churches and prayer cells, only to discover the utmost resistance: "Well, folks are pretty busy here in the evenings; Sunday morning is about all we can manage."

To grieve is to accept the pulpit committee's assurance that the people would not be prejudiced against a woman as minister and that she could function effectively, only to be confronted by a barrage of offensive putdowns.

To grieve is to have one's earnest readiness to share the depths of the people's lives frustrated repeatedly by their attempt to assign one to superficial roles: "Just give the invocation at the women's luncheon; please try to get around to each of our homes at least once a year, even though you can't stay long."

To grieve is to prepare earnestly for the training session that the church school teachers asked for, only to have them spend the entire evening preoccupied with discipline problems for the individual students, problems about getting supplies in and out of the supply closet, and questions of scheduling the year-end picnic.

To grieve is to invest years of heady anticipation and hearty preparation in taking one's place as the minister among the people of God, only to discover the visions of that anticipation and the fruits of that preparation disparaged and frustrated by those very people. The visions have been bolstered by so much: by the study of church history, disclosing the high unassailed and unambiguous status of clergy in the established churches of the past; by memories of one's childhood and

adolescence when total loving support seemed to close around the minister or oneself as the "pretheolog"; by the offhand abstract language of much transcendental theology so deliberately out of touch with the realities of the institutional church as to speak easily and glibly of the committed people of God, or the functioning body of Christ as though it were fact; by most teaching of pastoral theology, which instructs a minister how to take a part in the script by assuming all the others are playing their parts; by one's own lifelong yearnings for a closely supporting community; by the rhetoric of ordination sermons.

The vision is also sustained by the very impediments in the preparation for ministry. Sterile seminars in Bible and theology, if endured, seem justified by that vision of the community soon to be entered in which Bible and theology are validated and learned by being lived. The belittling tendered the apprentice theological student by a training church enhances the vision of the time one will assume a full and respected place as the minister.

Through theological training and into first assignments one can endure many years of anguish and ambiguity by keeping this lofty vision. One can be sustained and guided through an entire ministry by the vision, so long as it is kept apart and beyond, never located, never confused with a particular people or place or program. Knowing full well that no community, no parish, no people can embody the vision—through such grief work, anticipating the death of the vision by knowing it cannot fully live, the minister stays in ministry.

To locate the vision, to ground it in a place and people, to try to lodge it in a program or parish who cannot but dislodge it, sooner or later—that is to invite grief without preparing for it. When the vision is identified with a particular assignment or community—one's first full-time church, one's first church as the senior minister, those people in the inner city who are committed and free of the shackles of the institutional church, or the church in the university town where people are literate about Bible and theology—or with particular people—the counselee with whom one has developed such close rapport through long, intimate hours, the one family who seems on the same wavelength with each other and with you, the no-nonsense group of businessmen working with you on the public housing project—such grounding of vision sets one up for grief. For no people, no person can ever become that fully responsible, fully responsive partner to ministry envisioned by theological abstraction, personal yearning, or historical simplification. Yet ministry nevertheless seems to require and propel that intensity of investment, that dancer's leap, that actor's total immersion into a role that presupposes just such unswerving partners, invested and totally committed.

Swallowing Grief

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

Isaiah 53:7

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There are two ways to swallow grief dumbly, both ways making it more poisonous than nutritious. One can deny the life that was lived, the partnership that was shared. Or one can deny the death, the real limits and breakdown of the partnership. The widower can throw away the now-offending second coffee cup and the jilted lover can burn the letters, as though the life and love had never been lived and shared. Death is triumphant. Or the widower can continue to make the second cup of coffee, keep all of his wife's clothes and room as they were, and the lover can continue to haunt the rendezvous and reread the letters as though they were fresh, just as though nothing had changed, just as though the partnership persisted, undaunted. Death is denied.

The minister can swallow grief either way: death triumphant or death denied. The minister can repudiate the visions, deny the tremendous and total investment made in them, exaggerate the abandonment by partners, see only the assault on the vision, not the visions. That is, the minister can flee the ministry, either by actually resigning from the church payroll or by becoming resigned to a visionless, partnerless occupation, by becoming jaded and "professional," mechanically going through the motions, like a zombie actor reciting long-memorized lines on a darkened and empty stage to an empty house. This is the path some take, stockading themselves, darkening the house, with drink, with golf, with cynical banter with fellow professionals. These are the ministers that novelist John Updike knows and portrays so well. They have protected their visions by abandoning them and by no longer caring whether they have partners or effect. They go through the motions. The motions may be those of worship or preaching or counseling or municipal politics or jovial backslapping or studying or more efficient administrative operations or personal spirituality. But, like the jilted lover who hides from further grief by staying home evenings and reading romantic stories, such ministry-like motions are totally self-contained and get nowhere. The minister, purposely defensive, heeds not the needs or reactions of prospective partners. The minister hears only the no.

Or the minister may cling tenaciously to the vision and expectation of partnership and deny its limits, which are clearly evident in the practice

of ministry. The minister pretends not to hear the no. The minister may find or seek out those few—celebrated as "the faithful remnant"—who seem to offer the maximum possibility of partnership and concentrate ministry on them, who least need it. Or the minister may find a few selective avenues of ministry that seem to generate a response—counseling often seems to make people warm and responsive, political action puts one in touch with those who know how to stroke back. And effective ministry will be stockaded as safely as possible, like the jilted lover closeted and reading old love letters.

The death-defying minister's intense addiction to a few forms may not be much different from the jaded minister's casualness about going through the motions. Both protect themselves from facing the grief of disappointment in partnership, past and future, by effectively shielding themselves with the motions of ministry from the majority of those to whom they would minister but from whom they feel separated by the risk of broken covenant.

There is a common way of denying the seriousness of the no, of clinging to the expectations of partnership and denying the radical violation of the partnership that does in fact exist. This is to suppose that the people's "delinquencies" need just a bit more coaching and training to remedy. The people's failing in partnership is not taken *seriously*; it is seen as only a temporary and technical defect. They can be taught from the pulpit or from the Bible or from the denominational manuals, from the longings of the minister's heart and from the abstractions of theology. Having been taught the script, they will, it is assumed, readily play the part. Let the people be scolded or instructed or cajoled into proper partnership. The minister's vision is grounded just on the other side of this locker room pep talk: In the second half of this ministry, the team will be functioning smoothly.

Another way of trivializing the failure of partnership takes the form of the occasional journalistic account of distress in a particular church where conflict or dissonance between minister's expectations and people's expectations have surfaced, as though this is news, an unusual event. Or the minister may simply swallow the grief quite literally, keep it private, personal, and ignored. He or she will go relentlessly on, oblivious to the disappointments of failed partnership, heedless of the dance leaps taken and uncaught, the supporting cast in disarray. This is a heroic posture of ministry and perhaps a necessary one. But it, like the other responses, swallows the grief, refuses to take seriously the visions and their frustration, and so fails to learn from the grief and to find ministry *in* the grief.

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Working through Grief

*Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him;
he has put him to grief...
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand;
he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous.*

Isaiah 53:10–11 (RSV)

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It is the extraordinary claim of Christian and Jewish faith that God works through grief. Contradicting all natural expectations (and especially the American prizing) of the efficacy of smoothness and disclosing, in the midst of brokenness and in desolation of spirit—indeed out of the very raw materials of brokenness and desolation—come a wholeness more substantial and a life more vital than can be found otherwise. From creation out of chaos to the promise of salvation in the midst of apocalypse, the Bible records the works of a God who fashioned a people out of slaves, wanderers, and exiles; an intimate and lasting covenant out of the most faithlessly broken covenant; dramatic life out of the most forsaken death; a community of faith out of those in most fearful disarray.

The record of the Old Testament is nothing if not the record of a God who experiences the constant grief of the abandonment of his people, and who enters into that abandonment and lives into that grief to unlock the creative energies within it. It is only after Adam and Eve have violated their first covenant and are hiding in fear and shame that God seeks them out, first appears to them face to face, and sets in motion a drama of salvation that takes with utmost seriousness the persisting bond between God and people and with equal seriousness the ruptures to that bond. It is in the squalid faithlessness of the Jewish people, time after time abandoning their part of the partnership with God, that God is most powerfully present, scourging the rupture to the bond with fierce wrath, tenderly nurturing the remnant of bond that is within the very experience of grief. Indeed, the Lord of the Old Testament knows precisely what it is to “see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied.”

The record of the New Testament is nothing if not precisely the story of ministry in the midst of broken expectations as in no other place; indeed, the story of a message and a ministry conveyed *by means of* broken expectations. Incarnate deity in a village stable confounded the wisest expectations of the wise men. (But by taking seriously both the commitment in those expectations and their radical destruction, they learned a lesson.) Jesus’ ministry consistently frustrated the highest religious expectations of the Jewish people as recorded in their law and guarded

by the lawkeepers. Jesus’ ministry with his disciples was one disappointment after another, as each repeatedly frustrated the expectations of the other. Jesus would not dispute and teach as a good rabbi should but rather indirectly, in parables and in deeds. The cheering Palm Sunday crowd abandoned him, as he abandoned their expectations. He celebrated communion in the midst of betrayal and finally lived out salvation in the most forlorn of deaths. The teaching and the work of Christ proceeded precisely by means of breaking expectations. Jesus caused grief, and Jesus suffered grief; the grief was necessary for the uncovering of wholeness. If people had persisted in living only in their expectations, they would have kept themselves separated from God—the fate of the Pharisees; so, too, with those who abandoned their expectations, once frustrated, such as the rich young ruler. Wise men, disciples, women, finally Jesus himself, in the agony of Gethsemane and Golgotha, persisted in living *in* their grief and abandonment and wrestling from it new vision, new commitment, new guidance, and new personhood. It is the *intent* of the Lord to reach people in grief, his and theirs, as perhaps they can be reached in no other way. “It was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief...”

The creative healing power of grief is dramatically confirmed in human experience—so long as one is dealing with real grief, which denies neither the dreams nor their dashing, denies neither the commitment nor its betrayal, denies neither the expectations nor their frustrations, denies neither life nor death—so long as one takes seriously, in the grief, the earnestness of the vision and the earnestness of its shattering.

Lovers disappoint each other bitterly, yet, holding fast to the radical commitment that has made them so vulnerable to the disappointments and taking equally seriously the severity of the disappointment and the grief, they enfold each other and find in their mingled tears and despair an intimacy and a trust and a hope far greater than that which they found dashed.

The new widower takes down two coffee cups and then sadly puts one back; there is both a shared life to be celebrated and a death to be recognized; in the grief he ponders in such moments, in that quick review of his life with, and now without, his wife, he comes to enhanced and deepened appreciation of the relationship and of himself in separation from her. He is more a whole person and readier to enter new relationships for having lived through such moments of grief.

The young woman is in despair as she recovers from her hysterectomy. She does not deny the loss and the grief by clinging blindly to the now-impossible dream of having children, nor does she deny the grief by repudiating that vision with a callous shrug. Instead, she lives into that grief by living into the vision and into its defeat until she discovers deeper aspirations and fulfillments. The personal fulfillment, indeed the

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experience of motherhood, is not to be denied even though giving birth is to be denied. Her spirit is opened to new vocational possibilities, new forms of motherhood, once she faces fully her grief and sees in it two things: the deep aspirations that were lodged in her hopes for children and frustrated by the hysterectomy; and the absoluteness of that frustration, the complete death of her hopes for children of her own. Facing her grief means facing the depth of her hopes and the depths of her despair; facing her grief becomes the means of finding new expression for those hopes.

The call to the ministry functions in the same way. There is a call to the covenants of ministry, then constant frustration of the expectation built into that call, then formidable and powerful re-call to ministry in the grief of those frustrations. This seems not unlike the redemptive processes displayed in the Bible and the intentions of God as recorded in Isaiah: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief...the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied" (RSV). The minister is called into a ministry of grief, is re-called to deepen and reform and refresh and redirect that ministry by, quite literally, working through the grief that befalls every venture into ministry. The minister is re-called to ministry by working through the grief of failed partnerships, the grief experienced by the minister in the abandonment of those to whom ministry is directed and with whom it is to be shared. "How can I be a minister when they will not be a church?" This is not a hopeless question. But the answer comes through facing, not denying, the grief that it presupposes.

The minister is called to particular partnerships, to particular roles that require others to play corresponding and reciprocal roles. Indeed, ministry of the living God who works in history and by incarnation does not exist if it is not lodged or placed in particular callings, in specific covenants and partnerships with particular people at particular times and places. The call to ministry often comes precisely in such callings, personal needs to be met, organizational rhythms and systems with a place to be filled, traditions to be lived out. Yet such callings, in particular times and places by particular people, can never make good the call they make. We must not ignore the disappointments and abandonments—inevitable and healthy—with which ministers' partners must eventually respond to ministry. These abandonments, if the grief is lived into, themselves become new callings. (We must not deny the abandonment and frustration that ministers supply their partners. Ministers, too, let down the partnership. I do not deny this, but neither is this my present concern. Others scold ministers for their delinquencies. I attempt here to support them in their distress and to redirect the energies of despair.)

Preaching, teaching, counseling, enabling deacons, arranging committees, leading prayer, pricking consciences, organizing picketing or

petitions—all respond to a bidding, a calling by another person, a need or readiness expressed implicitly or explicitly, and presuppose a response in partnership. The minister moves and expects a reciprocal move by the people. Sometimes that happens; the dancers are in step, the ecological system is in balance. Frequently it does not happen; the dancers are out of step, a disruptive mutation dislodges the partnership out of its ecological niche. The people fail to make the complementary move. (The people say no, the people fail to say thank you, the people get distracted and preoccupied with organizational machinery.) Or the people make another move, an unexpected move, which seems to call from the minister a move that contradicts ministry. (The people say pray, the people say heal, the people say perform, the people say sacrifice.) The momentum of ministry is stopped, the call contradicted, the partnership betrayed. There is reason for all of the grief the minister feels and more. What is necessary is that the minister experience the grief fully, live fully in it, work fully through it; repudiate neither the authenticity and loftiness of the call to which ministry was responding, the importance of the partnership that was expected, nor deny the genuineness and fullness and authenticity of the betrayal, the frustration. The people *did* say no after they said yes and after the minister was lured by the yes. Fully viewed, taking both the yes and the no absolutely seriously, the grief transforms the partnership and re-calls to ministry; it does not end the partnership of ministry.

Taking the Yes Seriously

The people meant their calling and whatever the calling meant to them. From their perspective, their present no is in continuity with the earlier yes. Jesus said he came to fulfill the law, not to repudiate it, even as he systematically frustrated all those expectations of people based on the law. The law affirmed something Jesus wanted to affirm, pointed to something Jesus wanted to point to. If one can believe the yes and not fear to look for it in the no, one will find it. The no is a word in the conversation and has a meaning in the conversation. It does not end the conversation.

If the people say, "We enjoyed your sermon," perhaps they do not mean to slight it or to put it aside; perhaps that is only their way—their only way—of talking about it. Perhaps they mean simply: "We were touched or moved or pricked by the sermon, too much so to verbalize it comfortably; so we both express and disguise this reaction with 'enjoyed your sermon.'" Perhaps they mean: "We admire your learning and wisdom, your knowledge of the Bible, and your ability to make it speak to us, so much that we are intimidated and do not know how to enter into your league." Perhaps they mean: "You made us angry, but we never felt permission to be angry in church." And perhaps the

response means just what the minister likely feels it means: a stuporous, bland, heedless, perhaps even inattentive, reception. But what does *this* mean among the churchgoers? Why do people persistently come to church and persistently not hear? This is still part of some awestruck wonder at the word. If people do feel themselves unworthy or unneeded, if the spoken word is too lofty or too mean or too mysterious and arcane, why do they come? Or if they come, why do they persistently turn off? There is *some* dialogue going on. The people *are* responding, if the minister has ears to hear. Just as the first invitation to preach the sermon or their attendance at the worship service are a placing of their lives into some kind of relationship with the word as preached, so is their response at the end of the sermon. Though their response may not be what the minister expected in the partnership, the minister would do well to assume that the people are still in the partnership. Their response transforms the covenant and the call by extending it.

If the minister listens to the no for what it means strictly in the short run to him or her, the minister, then there is heard only the denial of expectations. But the minister can listen to the response for what it means to the people and hence to the minister and ministry in the long run.

There is a literalistic reading of people that is sometimes practiced even by ministers who have become quite sophisticated about reading the Bible without literalistic shackles. Such literalism skims off, at face value, the superficial level of people's response. Because the minister reads glibly, he or she easily assumes that the people are being glib, that the no means quite literally only what it seems to mean at first hearing. The more sophisticated minister reads the words of the Bible in the context in which they were written and asks what they meant to the writer before asking what they may mean to the reader. What spoken or unspoken implications, what cultural or individualized connotations of the language are there for the speaker? In that particular context, what impact, larger than any literal reading of the words, did the speaker or writer mean to communicate? Why not accord contemporary church people the same sophistication of intention, either conscious or unconscious, and learn to read their words for what they mean to *them* in *their* context?

Taking the No Seriously

Much as the people's response is part of the continuing partnership, it is a rebuff to the minister's move, and intended to be so. The minister has responded to the call, but apparently not quite on target. The minister has entered into the compact, but with too compacted a ministry, has fit into too narrow an ecological niche. The people seem to be saying, "We feel you, but not exactly where we hurt or yearn; we are not there." The minister's role is going to have to be transformed.

This asks for a sacrifice by the minister. Not the simple sacrifice of high salary or high social status; those things are given up relatively easily. The sacrifice is being willing to lose one's identity, to be swallowed up into chaos. For the minister does make the moves of sermon or any other role of ministry with an energy and an investment and an ultimacy in which they provide identity and important meaning to the minister. This is why the minister is so ready to hear the resistive response as an attack; there is much of importance here to be defensive about. The minister is asked to respond to the experience of taking a flying leap and finding no one there to steady the landing by taking another flying leap in a different direction in a style for which there has been no practice or script and to a place where again there may be no partner.

Remember that the people's words do *not* provide close literal guidance for the new calling. They are only saying: "We are not just where you are aiming." To take literally their call to pray or heal or anything else is surely to enter into a new blind alley. One needs to probe beneath the surface of their calling to find the new call within it. Sometimes this probing can be done verbally, until the minister does feel some assurance about the new target and the new response, hears the new call. But sometimes a minister has to probe behaviorally, not verbally, beneath the resistive response that is a re-calling. The minister has to take the leap, has to venture a new response and see where it gets.

Indeed, most ministry is probably in this chaotic, interim mode. Seldom in stable balance, the ecology is more often in a state of disruption, which means it is always evolving. Most of us live by the light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel myth that points to a time when all *will* be stable, and one can settle down to ministry with partners responding as expected. In fact, a yes response, an apparently stable partnership, may be the most resistive and denying of all; it may well represent a sophisticated encapsulation of the minister by really shackling ministry, keeping it in a box, keeping it from reaching out effectively into disruption.

Ministry is not in answering questions or in having questions answered. Ministry is precisely in the creative process of continually reshaping questions and reshaping answers. Ministry is in the process of re-calling, reforming, revisioning, ever peeling off what is partial and encrusted in human resignation and contentment with forms in order to leave room for the boiling vitality of God's creative, redemptive spirit.