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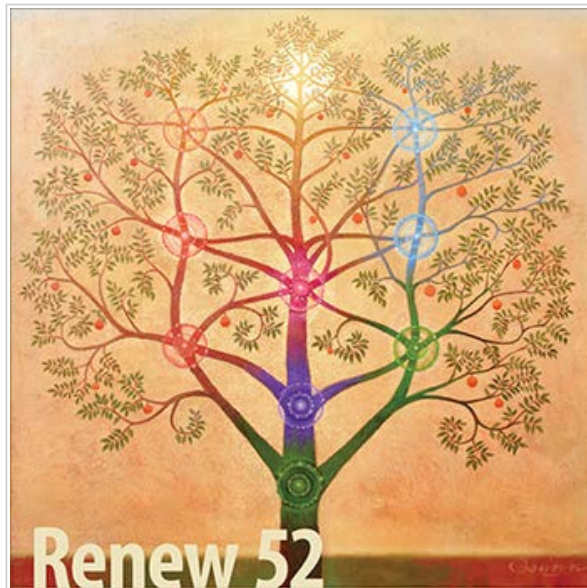
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David Lose: On the self-image of ministers

It's time for pastors to think of themselves as coaches and teachers, people trained not only to do certain tasks well but also to help others do them for themselves, says a Luther Seminary professor.

by [David Lose](#)



Book cover detail courtesy of Vibrant Congregations Project

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October 9, 2012

Editor's note: In "Renew 52: 50+ Ideas to Revitalize Your Congregation from Leaders under 50," a free e-book from the [Vibrant Congregations Project at Luther Seminary](#), a variety of Christian leaders present their best ideas for congregational renewal. In this essay from the book, the project editor, David Lose, Marbury E. Anderson Chair in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary, suggests a different way of looking at the essential tasks of pastoral ministry.

Think about how most ministers are trained in seminary. They are trained -- we were trained! -- to do things. In particular, we were trained to execute certain skills -- preaching, teaching the Bible, offering pastoral care and counseling, and so forth. Ministers are trained to perform certain religious tasks on

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behalf of a congregation.

This “performative” model of ministry -- so called because it emphasizes *performing* certain activities -- served the church well for the last century or two. It was particularly effective when the larger culture was, if not Christian, at least highly supportive of church life. For many years, in fact, going to church was considered not simply normal but actually desirable, a mark of education, civility, and good moral standing. Further, and not all that long ago, the larger culture actually helped ministers tell the Christian story by teaching it in the public schools and showcasing it on televised Christmas and Easter specials and the like.

Curiously, while we all know those days are pretty much over, we haven’t necessarily changed the way we think about professional ministry and often find ourselves surprised that we now live among a generation of Christians who a) no longer privilege going to church over other activities and b) do not know the Christian story very well. As a result, more and more of our people simply don’t find the Christian story helpful in navigating their daily lives, and so increasingly wonder why they’re spending their Sunday mornings in the pew.

In response to this drastically changed situation, pastoral leaders also need to change. In particular, *we need to stop executing religious skills for our people and train them to perform them for themselves*. Otherwise, they will continue to be spectators, appreciating the faith but never really learning how to do it for themselves.

When my kids were young, we started them in violin lessons. They’ve been playing now for about a decade, and I sometimes think about where they’d be if each week they spent their hour-long lesson listening to their teacher play. That wouldn’t have been a bad way to spend an hour, when you think about it, as over time they would have learned much of the Western canon of violin music, to appreciate classical music more generally, and to recognize and value good technique and musicianship. But despite all this, they never would have learned to play the violin themselves.

There have been several generations of ministers trained and commissioned to perform the Christian story to the delight and edification of their congregations. But while we have trained a multitude of Christians to *appreciate* the Christian story, very few of them can tell it themselves, either as a guide to their daily decision-making or to share with others. And I think the only way to reverse this trend is to re-make our self-image.

In previous generations, it was common to compare ministers with two other well-educated and well-respected professions: doctors and lawyers. While I have great respect for doctors and lawyers, however, I am increasingly uncomfortable with this comparison, as you typically go to these professionals when you need expert counsel on something you know you can’t do yourself. After all, most of us wouldn’t prescribe medicine for ourselves any more than we would represent ourselves in court.

But does this model serve us well, where ministers are the experts who perform specialized tasks for our people, tasks they could never do themselves? Don’t get me wrong -- I greatly value the expertise we develop in seminary, but I hesitate to endorse a “cult of the expert” that sets up some as “doers” and others as “receivers” or, even worse, “consumers.” So I want to prod us not to abandon expertise, but to deploy our expertise differently.

With that in mind, let’s go back to our opening list of some of the skills we learn at seminary: preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Can part of our task not only be doing these things well but also teaching our people to do the same? After all, why can’t everyday Christians learn to interpret Scripture, make connections between faith and life, and share their faith with others -- all of which are elements of preaching and teaching? And why can’t our congregations learn to visit, listen to, encourage, and pray for each other -- elements of pastoral care?

Of course they can learn these things, as long as we teach them.

So let’s shift our self-image from doctors and lawyers to coaches and teachers, highly skilled people who are capable not only of doing these things very well, but also of the more challenging task of helping others to do them for themselves.

Read more about [Renew 52](#) and download a free copy of the e-book for iPad, Kindle or Nook.

