

A Ministry Filled with Learning Curves

By Bob Young

Especially during the last several years of my full-time ministry, I often jokingly said that I was tired of jobs that required a new learning curve. I learned that urban ministry is significantly different than rural; small churches different than medium. Various educational roles had unique requirements for reports, self studies, and administrative skills. Undergraduate requirements differ from graduate. Campus planning and construction projects provided a whole new set of learning curves. Mission work has its own unique set of learning curves; cross-cultural settings provide another set of unique challenges.

The first person to describe the learning curve was Hermann Ebbinghaus in 1885. He found that the time required memorizing a nonsense word increased sharply as the number of syllables increased. Arthur Bills gave a more detailed description of learning curves in 1934 and discussed the properties of different types of learning curves including acceleration and plateaus. In 1936, Theodore Paul Wright described the effect of learning on labor productivity and proposed a mathematical model of the learning curve. The learning required for productivity and efficiency generally follows the experience curve, but with interesting secondary effects. Initially introduced in educational or behavioral psychology, the term has acquired a broader interpretation over time so that today we can talk about the experience curve, improvement curve, cost improvement curve, progress curve, startup curve, and efficiency curve almost interchangeably.

Think with me about some ministry and leadership activities that have severe learning curves. These challenges call for ministers that have vision, training, and the ability to train others.

Bible study

I remember the excitement of reading the Bible through for the first time during my teen years. I remember the thrill of reading a passage or a book in the Bible and realizing that I understood its meaning. Later, I remember hearing classes and sermons, taking careful notes, and repeating those classes or sermons in my first feeble efforts in teaching and preaching. Eventually, I found commentaries with fresh insights and tried to incorporate those into my classes and sermons.

If one is not careful, one subtly comes to substitute the classes and sermons and lectureships (and Internet sermons!) for one's own efforts. Especially for ministers and church leaders, the task of Bible study is ultimately about developing the tools to read and study and interpret the Bible. Ideally, those who minister in the word learn the original languages and develop the ability to read, interpret, and understand the message of the text. The process does not begin with the ideas of other people in sermons, classes, or commentaries. The process begins with one's own careful reading and rereading of the text, reading and understanding the context, developing a correct translation, and analyzing such factors alternatives, structures, textual issues, grammar, key terms. Only when the text and context are clearly in view is one ready to check understanding by seeing what commentators and

others have seen that has been missed. For the serious minister, this kind of Bible study is part of a “daily learning curve”.

Preaching and Teaching

The move from Bible study to preaching or teaching must not begin in an artificial agenda for the sermon or class. The process must begin firmly anchored in the biblical text and its message. Only after the biblical message is in view can one know what is to be heard from the text, that is, what one should teach or preach.

Too many modern sermons find their genesis in a cute story around which a sermon is built or in an idea that ultimately is unworthy of taking up 100 hours (or 500 hours) or human resource time as 200-1000 people listen to a 30-minute sermon. Regardless of how good a sermon might have been in its original presentation, it loses something in the “translation” when it is lifted from the Internet or some other source and preached verbatim. Preachers who employ such a technique are unlikely to see their congregations grow.

Gifted speakers may provide a sermon that is fun to listen to, but people still go away empty and by mid-week most of the hearers know it. It is not enough to inspire and entertain. The kind of preaching that is both deep and wide flows out of a carefully laid out sermon preparation model that reflects the discipline of personal spiritual development coupled with weekly interaction with the Scriptures, the faith community, and the waiting world.

It is one thing to understand a complex topic; it is another to help others become interested in it. The challenge of teaching well is reflected in a statement I remember from my beloved professor, Dr. Raymond Kelcy: “A sign of learning is the ability to make complex things simple.” Many teachers struggle to explain difficult matters because they do not understand them sufficiently. Dr. Lynn McMillon reminded us in graduate classes that a well-manicured lawn is not punctuated with the mower, trimmer, and other tools left out in the open for all to see. He encouraged us to use the tools and then put them away, with the observation that our listeners would know whether or not we had used any tools in preparing our lessons.

All of this suggests that the processes of Bible study, teaching, and preaching present continual learning curves for those who would minister and lead well.

Counseling

One does not work in the church very long before one realizes that people’s lives are filled with complex problems. Some, especially church members, turn first to the church. We want to help, but often cannot. The ability to give hope and to facilitate solutions requires more than a heart that wants to help. Professional understanding and skills are essential. Some seem to think that counseling is natural, but effective counseling requires great thought and each counseling situation presents its own unique learning curve requiring the best of skills, insights, and abilities for the counselor who will facilitate long-term emotional, relational, and spiritual health.

Evangelism

Most ministers and church leaders begin with a strong commitment to bring the lost to Christ. We want to help others find salvation. We soon learn that it is not as simple as pouring information down a tube. Evangelism requires compassion and understanding. One is well-

served by an awareness of human thought processes, motivation, and persuasion. The need for a hospitable climate in the assemblies and classes of the church, openness in spiritual conversations, and a church culture devoted to outreach is not always obvious to churches. Creating a culture of outreach, invitations and referrals, acceptance and assimilation is an intentional process. Many churches and church leaders think they want to be evangelistic but are unwilling to pay the price required in the evangelism learning curve.

Missions

Cross-cultural efforts present their own unique and often difficult learning curve. Short-term mission efforts may fail to see the learning curve and sometimes do more harm than good, despite short-term relief efforts and seeming success. The manner in which the word is heard, the way in which leaders are developed, the way in which families function....these and a host of other factors may change in cross-cultural situations. The mission group or missionary who goes to the field without an awareness that a learning curve exists will probably not even see the challenges or problems.

Shepherding

The learning curve for being an effective shepherd is incredibly difficult in our contemporary culture of individualism and entertainment. Fathers expect children to do what they say (although this principle may also be in jeopardy in our culture), but elders can hardly expect that the adult volunteers with whom they work will be so compliant. Administration requires the art of delegation. Effective leadership requires the very best of personal interaction skills. The required behaviors are not natural—they are learned. Shepherding requires more time than most elders have or are willing to give. As a result, the minister often becomes the primary pastoral figure. When the pastor-elders give up pastoring, it is no wonder that the minister appears to be the primary “pastor”. Elders who are serious about their role and responsibility are always learning, trying to get on top of the leadership learning curve.

Learning curves imply what they say: learning. Church leaders, teachers, and ministers who are serious about the work to which God has called them will be careful, regular, life-long students as they seek the knowledge, understanding, and skills essential to doing the work to which God has called them.