

LASHED TO THE MAST

The first ministers' meeting I attended after seminary left me wondering if I had made a terrible career mistake. Instead of being a time of spiritual enrichment, characterized by fellowship, worship, and prayer, the meeting was more like a sales convention.



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I learned that my supervisors were far more interested in my being a reliable manager of the local franchise of the corporate church than an effective shepherd to my two congregations. My job was to do what I was told, be "successful," and return a healthy profit in baptisms and tithe gains. I returned home feeling confused and discouraged.

I was ready to quit

My first few months in my district were not much more encouraging. I discovered that not all saints were eager to tell the world about a soon-coming Saviour. Some seemed intent on devouring one another, critiquing the pastor, and whining about their own needs and wants. Like discontented adolescents, they believed the mission of the church was to make them happy, not necessarily to glorify God and extend His kingdom.

I seemed to be just another hired hand to the conference. My congregations saw me as an on-call domestic servant. One woman asked me to do a household task

for her, explaining that all the other men she knew *worked*. Even my loving and supportive wife couldn't understand why I should not be interrupted in my study to open a jar for her. And, of course, society viewed clergy in general as leeches and buffoons.

In those early days I thought seriously and often about getting out of pastoring. Maybe I could go into counseling or hospital chaplaincy. I completed applications for medical school, which sat on my desk waiting until I could honestly say that the Lord had released me from my call to pastoral ministry.

I was not alone in my distress. Few of my seminary classmates continue today in pastoral ministry. Several gave up on God, church, and ministry altogether. For many more the pastorate was just a waystation on the path to another career.

Why pastors quit

As a rule, pastors are no longer highly respected by their communities. Pastoral ministry is not viewed as important or

DAVID VANDENBURGH

seen as making a difference. One member told me that when he was in college, the best and brightest went into medicine, the next tier went into education, and the losers went into ministry. The view of the world has become the view of the church all too often.

When I am tired and stressed, when my family rightly requests more of my time, when the bills multiply and the car breaks down, when I have absorbed the grief, anger, and pain of people in crisis and feel overextended, underappreciated, and underpaid, I am still tempted by the thought that there have got to be better things to do than this!

Internal factors

Some of the causes for pastoral dropout are internal. Pastors frequently neglect the care of the inner person. It is easy for us to be so busy "doing God's work" that we don't take time to be *with* God. We often don't take care of our bodies or our souls. We don't eat right or exercise enough, and time alone with God gets pushed to the bottom of the list.

Pastors commonly pay too much attention to what can be seen, and not enough to unseen essentials for personal well-being. We tend to be people-pleasers, and if people don't act pleased by what we do, we lose confidence in ourselves and cast about for something that will earn plaudits.

External rewards

Some of the causes of pastoral disenchantment are external. The work is never "done" in the pastorate, and all of it seems urgent. When we take a day off, it is easy to feel guilty.

The reward structure does not favor pastors in my denomination. Theoretically every church worker is paid the same salary so the "rewards" for competent pastoring tend to be bigger churches and more responsibilities within the denomination. Often the steps "up" are actually steps "out" of the pastorate altogether—a call to departmental work or denominational administration or teaching at a church-related college or university.

Most pastors' spouses in my denomi-

nation find that they must work outside the home. This imposes greater stress on the family. Pastors have less time and energy to give, and their ministry suffers.

Needed: a clear pastoral theology

With all of the inducements to burnout (and we have listed just a few), survival depends on a strong sense of security in Christ and a keen sense of personal mission. It is imperative for pastors to know who they are, where they are going, and what they are commissioned to do.¹ Only a commitment that is hammered out daily in the quiet place alone with God will survive the internal and external pressures to abandon the pastorate.

Pastors need to keep their perspective while tumbling about in a confusing and broken world. That perspective can be God's perspective, if we define our mission by biblical parameters. "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold," Paul cautions (Rom. 12:2; Phillips). We will have to form our individual pastoral theology. Pastoral theology is God's tune for pastors. It enables them to march to the tune of God's drummer, not the tune beaten out by the world, or by the latest ministry fad, or by the newest program dreamed up by some denominational guru. The great need is not for pastors who listen to the church or the culture and shape a ministry accordingly, but for pastors who listen to God and shape a ministry accordingly.

Pastoring takes time

Ministers with a clear and strong pastoral theology have staying power. The church needs pastors who believe that pastoring is the most important ministry in the church, and who have listened to God to find out how that needs to be done. They need longer-term pastorates than they generally receive. Paul says, "We are not trying to please men but God. . . . We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. . . . you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children" (1 Thess. 2:4-11, NIV). Paul did what he did in ministry not out of

some desire to please men or women, but to please God. Paul had a pastoral identity!²

Further, churches and pastors ought to be joined together in long-term covenant relationships. I believe that God intended for pastors to baptize youth, officiate at their weddings, dedicate their children, and eventually baptize and marry their offspring. There is no substitute for this kind of long-term involvement in people's lives.

Most often it is the existence of some problem in the congregation or in the pastor that is the inducement to make a move. But people and congregations grow to maturity through challenge. Problems are an occasion for growth, not avoidance. Often the congregation simplistically assumes that the problem is the pastor and demands a change. There are churches that have gone through pastor after pastor while the real problems are never addressed.

The fifth year of a pastoral term is often a plateau. The honeymoon is over, all the easy problems have been solved, and what remains are the hard problems with roots entwined around the congregation's core identity. Now what the pastor is made of will become apparent. To stay or not to stay, that is the question. Calls to go elsewhere come in. New and more alluring positions beckon. Most pastors succumb and abandon their posts. If they stayed, they would break through the plateau into the most fruitful years of ministry: the years after the seventh year. Sadly, most pastors never see these years.

Pastors as coaches

We need a pastoral theology that focuses on growing people, not churches. The pastor needs to see him or herself as called to be a soul-grower, not a CEO or a chaplain. There are many important and worthwhile professions, but only pastors (and some counselors) are in the soul-growing business. If they abandon this work, who will do it?

The biblical model talks about equipping the saints for the work of ministry.³ Maybe we need to give up our outmoded language by replacing the term *pastor*

(another word for shepherd—a rural-agrarian role with which most of us are unfamiliar) with the more contemporary term *coach*. A pastor is an equipping coach.

"A coach," Tom Landry once said, "is somebody who makes you do what you don't want to do so you can be what you want to be." A coach is one who helps another be more effective. A pastor-coach helps parishioners be salt and light. He or she equips Christians to live the life and to do the work of ministry for which Jesus has called them. It takes time. In fact, growing people is a lifelong process.

I was intrigued by the coaches I saw on television during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Most of them never made a name for themselves as athletes, but they had what it took to coach. They knew how to help another person become what he or she wanted to be. They could see what needed to be done differently, what was holding an athlete back from running faster, jumping farther, and doing better. They encouraged, cajoled, taped ankles, dried tears. Perhaps pastors can best understand their role as coaching Christians to become the best they can be at running the Christian race.

The work of a lifetime

There's no place in this philosophy of ministry for a pastor to enter a church, simply run the course of his or her program, and then move on. "Build people, not churches." "Grow people, not churches." If I understand my task as coming into a congregation to grow each and every person to spiritual maturity in Christ, I will have a job for life there.

Pastoring is gardening: a long-term soil-improvement process.⁴ One can't make good soil in a few months. It takes years. It's a matter of coming into a church, exploring the variety of soils and cultivating each one, planting something and watching it grow. Pastors who have no patience with soil improvement won't make successful gardeners.

Success is . . .

The church is people, not denominations or organizations or buildings or

creedal statements. Ministry is about growing people, not sitting on boards or committees or making policy or decisions. Jesus never said, "Go and make decisions." He said, "Go and make disciples." He never told us to build a church building or to write a working policy, or even to organize a church. He told us to make disciples, to baptize them, and then to teach them all the things He taught (notice the order!).

The world tells us that being president of a denominational entity, jetting to meetings all over the world, and being responsible for large numbers of people and/or dollars make a person more important than the person who quietly tends a congregation, but it isn't so. The hands-on work of building Christ into people's lives is the most important work any human being can do. At best, the other must simply be part of the support system for pastors and churches. Every step one is removed from pastoral ministry is one step further away from what really matters.

Lashed to the mast

And what about the pastor who leaves the pastoral ministry altogether? What can we say to him or her? Did God call you, or didn't He? Having put your hand to the plow, can you now look back? Were you obeying God when you went into pastoral ministry? Do you have as clear a call out of the pastorate as you had into it? What about your ordination vows? Didn't you take a vow to prayer and the ministry of the Word? Would you leave it to wait on tables?

Peterson, in *Working the Angles*, has a wonderful metaphor for ordination. He has the church saying to its pastors: "We are going to ordain you to this ministry and we want your vow that you will stick to it. This is not a temporary job assignment but a way of life that we need lived out in our community. We know that you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as we are. We know that your emotions are as fickle as ours, and that your mind can play the same tricks on you as ours. That

is why we are going to *ordain* you and why we are going to exact a *vow* from you. We know that there are going to be days and months, and maybe even years, when we won't feel like we are believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And we know that there will be days and weeks and maybe even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it. You are ordained to this ministry, vowed to it. There may be times when we come to you as a committee or delegation and demand that you tell us something else than what we are telling you now. Promise right now that you won't give in to what we demand of you. You are not the minister of our changing desires, or our time-onditioned understanding of our needs, or our secularized hopes for something better. With these vows of ordination we are lashing you fast to the mast of word and sacrament so that you will be unable to respond to the siren voices."⁵

Lashed to the mast by our vows of ordination. Lashed to the mast, like Odysseus, to resist the song of the sirens that lures sailors to their doom. Lashed to the mast of word and sacrament, that we might not succumb to the temptation to "make a difference" or to say what people want to hear or to become successful shopkeepers and lure more customers than the pastor down the road—this is why we were ordained.

There are many inducements to leave pastoral ministry. To do the job properly, there must be a long-term commitment. Pastors must somehow communicate to congregations, "I am committed to you and to your children. My greatest desire is for your spiritual growth. I believe in what God can do in your lives and I want to be a part of that. I will stand by your side through thick and thin. I have no desire to go anywhere else or to serve anyone else. I am not a part of your lives until something else comes along that I like better, or that moves me up the organizational ladder. I am a part of your lives because I believe that being a part of what God is doing in your lives is the most exciting and rewarding work in the world."

Finding meaning in pastoral ministry

We all long for significance. Most of us seek meaning by adapting to our culture and our subculture (in this case, our church). Our culture gives little notice to pastoral work. Churches often affirm pastoral work they like and value, but not necessarily the pastoral work they need. Pastors must lead their churches in ways they don't always like, but need to go. At such times, David Fisher says, "we must learn to live under God's smile, knowing that human smiles are mere frosting on that divine cake. Our sense of purpose and success must come from our identity as Christ's servants."⁶ Jesus will tolerate no rivals for our affection, service, and loyalty—not even our churches. He is against all "isms." He doesn't call us to build up or serve any church or denomination, but only to serve Him by building up, one by one, the people who make up His body. ■

¹Another name for this "sense of mission" is "pastoral theology": that branch of theology that deals specifically with what pastors are called to do and why. Most pastors have no pastoral theology, or rather, they have no explicit pastoral theology worked out from Scripture. They have de facto pastoral theologies, created ad hoc from bumping up against the expectations of denominational officials, parishioners, the culture, and their own ambitions and self-expectations. (This is really a part of a larger problem, which is that, by and large, we have no ecclesiology, but that's a subject for another article.)

²Curiously enough, in the Adventist Church, at least, it is the conviction that Paul's itinerant apostolic ministry should be normative for pastors today that undergirds the short-stay pastoral model. In the latter 1800s there was strong resistance to the idea of "settled pastors," claiming that Paul's example should be followed and Adventist clergy should all be itinerant evangelists. This view has been revived in recent years as the explanation for a stalled North American denomination.

³Eph. 4:12.

⁴Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), p. 57.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

⁶David Fisher, *The 21st Century Pastor*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), p. 28.

SUGGESTED READING

Fisher, David. *The 21st Century Pastor*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996, 248 pages. Fisher explores Paul's concept of ministry and applies it to pastoring the present and future church. Part 1 of the book is really a pastoral theology, and Part 2 applies this theology to creating a practical framework for ministry.

Hybels, Bill. *Too Busy Not to Pray*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988, 151 pages. On the assumption that pastors who don't take time to slow down and be with God will not survive in the ministry, I include this basic but powerful book on how to do just that. Hybels knows the stresses of ministry, and his personal advice on how to find space for God is useful, practical, workable—and vital.

Peterson, Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Christianity Today, Inc., and Word, Inc., 1989, 176 pages. Chapter 3, "The Subversive Pastor," is must reading! When tempted to assert our importance, we must remember that our effectiveness is in our subversiveness. Check it out. Volume 17 in *The Leadership Library*, published by *Leadership* journal from Christianity Today, Inc.

———. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992, 197 pages. A look at the pastoral vocation through the biblical book of Jonah. Devotional, useful, challenging—and preachable. If you've ever been tempted to flee to Tarshish or to complain about God

and how He treats you, you will find this book helpful.

———. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987, 192 pages. A must read for every pastor! A challenging call to return to the basics of pastoral ministry, which Peterson understands as prayer, scripture, and spiritual direction.

Tidball, Derek. *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House (Ministry Resources Library), 1986, 338 pages plus an extensive bibliography. A serious, biblical, successful effort to write a pastoral theology for the present generation that answers the questions "What exactly is pastoral theology?" and "What are the proper tasks and essential functions of those who are called to be pastors?" Provides a much-needed theological basis for pastoral ministry.

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995, 398 pages. From his experience as pastor of the dynamic Saddleback Valley Community Church, Warren shares his convictions and methods for organizing the church around purpose rather than around tradition, finances, programs, personalities, events, seekers, or buildings—and explains why he believes the purposes he has chosen are biblical. His focus is on people-building through a deliberate process that is portable from church to church—a focus and process that has resulted in tremendous numerical growth in his church.