

PASTOR TO PASTOR

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR
REGULAR PASTORS

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Pastor to Pastor
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To Brooke, who never set out to be a pastor's wife,
but who learned how to be a pastor's wife
while I learned how to be a pastor.

To Emma, Noelle, Amelia, and Clayton,
who never asked to be pastor's kids,
but who are the greatest kids a pastor could ask for.

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INTRODUCTION

I never wanted to be a pastor.

In high school my biggest aspiration was getting to graduation with as little effort as possible. I avoided advanced placement courses like the plague. I stuck with elective courses like Jewelry 101. I even refused to join the National Honor Society because I didn't want to fulfill the community service requirements. Like I said, my goal was getting a diploma with as little effort as possible.

In college I started out as a psychology major. I loved the courses, but after two years I switched to business. This decision was based purely on economics. Business didn't thrill my soul, but I wanted a bigger paycheck, and I didn't want to spend an extra six years in graduate school to get that paycheck. So, I changed my major from psychology to accounting.

Along the way I got married. After a year of ministry at a local apartment complex my wife and I decided God was leading us to the foreign mission field. We talked to our denominational sending agency, and they encouraged us to

go to seminary before going to the mission field. We moved to Louisville to attend Southern Seminary. Two years later, one kid later, and desperate for a job, I found myself pastoring a church.

I never thought I would become a pastor.

I've worked a variety of jobs in my life. I mowed lawns and worked in restaurants. I worked in a mom and pop grocery store and sold Bibles at a Christian bookstore. I worked evenings at a church recreation center. I worked for a parachurch ministry as an apartment complex missionary. I even mastered the custodial arts, cleaning church buildings and office buildings. All of these jobs taught me valuable things I needed to know in life. But none of these jobs prepared me to be a pastor.

I don't want the following statement to sound arrogant, but I believe it's true. Pastoring a church is unlike any other job on Earth. I'm not sure there is anything that can really prepare a man to serve as pastor of a local church. I remember my first day on the job at my first church. I tried to play it cool for my wife and my congregation, but I had no idea what to do first!

I also had no idea that when you become a pastor you forfeit your status as a regular guy. With one congregational vote I became the only person qualified to pray at family gatherings. Overnight, people were suddenly ashamed to say four

letter words in my presence. Suddenly, no one called me by my first name anymore. I was brother, pastor, preacher, reverend, but not Landon.

I never knew pastoring a church would be like this.

I had only been a member of two churches before becoming a pastor. One church in Amarillo, Texas, the other in Louisville, Kentucky. Both were large churches with large staffs. As a first-time pastor, I found myself at a church that was smaller than some of the Sunday school classes I attended in Amarillo and Louisville. My experiences in larger churches did little to prepare me for life in smaller churches.

I've been the pastor of three churches. The first church I pastored was North Benson Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky. North Benson was established in 1825. It is a rural, blue collar church. The second church I pastored was First Baptist Church in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. FBC Kingfisher is a white collar church that gives generously to missions. Currently I pastor Immanuel Baptist Church in Odessa, Texas. Immanuel has a history of faithful Bible teaching and innovative methods. All of these churches are small to medium sized. Compared to the larger churches I attended, things are just different in a smaller church. Not better. Not worse. Just different.

What about seminary? What about books? What about conferences? Don't these educational opportunities prepare a

man to be a pastor? Personally, I benefited greatly from seminary and books and conferences. However, I don't remember anyone telling me what to do day one on the job. Many seminary discussions about practical ministry flowed out of a larger church mindset. Many of the books I read were written by pastors of mega-churches. The trendy conferences are usually headlined by the same ten celebrity pastors. After a few months on the job at a small church, I realized that most of the men I looked up to were serving in ministry positions that were drastically different than mine. I struggled with some of their advice and many of their admonitions, wondering if they really knew or remembered what it was like to pastor a small, obscure church.

I was not prepared to be a pastor.

I wish Marty McFly could pick me up in the DeLorean and take me back to November 1, 2006. That's the day I officially became a pastor. I wish the "present me" could go back in time and tell the "past me" what to do on day one. I know that's probably too much to ask. But what if the "present me" could receive a letter from the "future me" that detailed everything I would learn in the next ten years of pastoring? Again, probably too much to ask.

I've been a pastor for almost ten years. I look back and see victories. I see situations where I received good advice and

put that advice into practice. I also look back with plenty of regret. I see situations where God blessed me and his church in spite of me. I'm still trying to figure out exactly what it means to be a pastor. I know how the New Testament describes pastoral ministry and expectations, but I'm still trying to pin down a comprehensive job description for a pastor of a small to medium sized church. What I really mean to say is this: I'm still learning how to do what God has called me to do.

What if there was a book written by a regular pastor to regular pastors? I'm not talking about the advice of the conference speaker or the mega church pastor. I know the big names are big names for a reason, and I know there is much to learn from the big names. But I'm talking about the advice of a guy who spent the last decade doing what you're doing now. He has witnessed regular pastors succeed and fail. This book would tell you what you need to do on day one. This is the book I needed ten years ago.

I love being a pastor.

This book is written for a variety of people. This book is written for the seminary student who is nearing graduation, and who will soon begin looking to pastor a small to medium sized church. This book is for the man who feels called to pastoral ministry, but who will not be able to attend seminary before stepping into this new role. This book is for

the minister who has worked on a church staff, but is about to become a senior pastor for the first time. This book is for the senior pastor who is leaving one church to begin a new ministry at another church. This book is even for the church member who wants to know what they should expect from their pastor.

Broadly speaking, this book is written by a pastor and for a pastor. More specifically, this book is written by a *regular* pastor for a *regular* pastor. The advice I offer in this book probably has little bearing on the day to day ministry of mega church pastors and conference speakers. Those guys (appear to) have it all figured out anyway. I'm writing as a pastor of small to medium sized churches, and I'm writing for pastors of small to medium sized churches.

To be fully transparent, this book is "from me" and "to me." It's from the "present me" to the "past me." These are the things I wish I could go back and tell myself. These are the things I'm glad I did on day one. These are the things I wish I had done on day one. These are the things I wish I had not done on day one. I still don't know exactly what I'm doing as a pastor, but I think I've learned a few things along the way. I hope the things I've learned can help you figure out how to do what God has called you to do as a pastor.

CHAPTER 1

SENDING YOUR RESUME

In 2001 George O’Leary was hired as the head football coach at the University of Notre Dame. This wasn’t O’Leary’s first head coaching position, but it was certainly the biggest job of his life. Unfortunately, just a few days after being hired O’Leary was in trouble. Nosey reporters with access to O’Leary’s resume had been digging around in his past. On his resume, O’Leary claimed that he lettered in football three years at the University of New Hampshire. In reality, O’Leary never played a game for the school. When he was confronted by the Notre Dame athletic director, O’Leary offered his resignation. Surprisingly, the Notre Dame athletic director refused to accept O’Leary’s resignation. Instead he asked O’Leary if there were any other “inaccuracies” on O’Leary’s resume. To his credit, O’Leary admitted that he never received a master’s degree from NYU – Stony Brook University. In fact, the school didn’t even exist. O’Leary made it up by combining the

names of two schools located 50 miles apart. At that point, Notre Dame asked O'Leary to resign.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

At the risk of stating the obvious ... Don't lie on your resume like George O'Leary! With that helpful piece of advice aside, let's admit that resumes are tricky, especially for pastors. How do you put it together? What do you include? What do you leave out? How much detail is too much? Who do you send it to? Do you include a cover letter? If so, what should it say? Do you need recommendations? Or can you send resumes to strangers? These are pressing questions for anyone looking for a new ministry position.

BUILDING YOUR RESUME

Let's start with a few ground rules. First, you should understand that a resume is not an exhaustive account of your life. The folks who look at resumes are not interested in the details of all your life experiences. They want the big picture. Second, you must be honest, and you must not exaggerate.

This doesn't mean you have to reveal all your faults and failures, but it does mean you must not include anything that is untrue. Be honest. Don't exaggerate. Third, you need to detail some of your "accomplishments," but you need to do it with humility. Some of you will be uncomfortable "bragging" on yourself. Others will have no problem recounting your life victories. The key here is balance. You have to list your accomplishments, but you have to do it with humility.

Now for specifics. Your resume should be two pages, no more, no less. One page doesn't give you enough space to include everything required. But if your resume is more than two pages you've included too much. Cut something out. At this point in the process, no one wants to know all the details about your college mission trip to Bangladesh where you built homes for orphans whose parents were killed in the last political revolution. Cut it to two pages, no more, no less.

Also, the second page of your resume should include a header with your name at the top. This is a courtesy for the people who will be handling your resume. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you can rest assured, yours will not be the only resume in their stack. If your two pages get separated, make sure someone is able to match them back together without comparing paper style and font size. Put your name on the top of the second (last) page of your resume.

One unique component of a ministry resume is your picture. Business resumes rarely include a picture of the applicant. But for the purposes of ministry, you need to include a picture. It needs to be at the top of the first page. It should be a clear, color photo. And it should look professional. That doesn't mean you have to wear a suit and tie in front of a smoky background. That does mean a selfie isn't good enough. This picture needs to look nice. If you're married, include your wife. If you have kids, include your kids.

Some people argue that a picture is unnecessary. After all, you're applying for a ministry position, not the Miss America Pageant. But let's be honest. This is the age of Google and Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. If you don't include a picture it just means someone has to look you up on the internet. They will do this eventually, which means you need to check your social media accounts. But for now, save them a trip to the web and include a nice, color photo.

After you get your smiling face on the top of page one, you need to fill up two pages with six sections: 1) Contact information, 2) Personal information, 3) Education, 4) Experience, 5) Personal statement, and 6) References. Your contact information should include an address, your cell phone number, and your email address. Your personal information should include basic facts about you and your family. Your

education should detail the schools you attended, the degrees you received, and the years you graduated. Your experience should include relevant secular positions as well as ministry positions, dates worked, and responsibilities at each position. Your personal statement should be brief. You can share beliefs, philosophy of ministry, or your objective in sending a resume. But you need a personal touch to an impersonal piece of paper. Finally, you need to mention references. You can list names, contact information, and how these people know you. Or you may write, “References available upon request.”

<p>Your Name Address Cell Phone Email</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Family Picture </div>
<hr/> <p>Personal Birthday, birth place, hometown Info about wife (birthday, anniversary, degrees, work) Info about children (birthdays, birth place) Hobbies, interests</p>	
<p>Education Seminary (degree, graduation date) College (degree, graduation date) High school (degree, graduation date)</p>	

Your Name (Page 2)
<p>Experience Current Ministry Position (place, dates, responsibilities) Previous Ministry Position (place, dates, responsibilities) Special Training (place, dates, focus) Previous Secular Position (place, dates, responsibilities)</p>
<p>Statement Philosophy of ministry, doctrinal statement</p>
<p>References *References Available Upon Request* OR List 3-4 references (name, work, relationship, contact info)</p>

In addition to your two page resume, you need a cover letter. This letter should include a brief introduction, it should state your objective, and it should contain your contact information. This letter should not fill up more than half a page.

The last thing you need to remember: Typos are not allowed. Not even one. This means you need to proof your resume carefully, and you probably need a friend to proof it as well. The formatting, spelling, and grammar must be perfect. Even one mistake makes you look silly when your resume sits next to one with no typos. Take the time to proof it closely. Then proof it again. And again.

SENDING YOUR RESUME

Now you've got a nice two-page resume. What in the world do you do with it? Obviously you want to send it to churches that are looking to hire someone like you. But how do you find those churches? There are several avenues. One, if you attend a Bible college or seminary you should use their placement office. Two, you can use personal networks and relationships to ask around about open positions. Three, you can contact denominational agencies. Just remember that local agencies tend to provide better and more accurate information about job openings than national agencies. Four, you can use the internet. There are many websites devoted to posting ministry positions. Social media is also a way to use the internet in your search. Find the right people and organizations on

social media and you may just find the right opening.

WHAT YOU ARE SAYING

When you send a resume to a church you are simply saying that you are potentially interested in their ministry opening, and you would like to learn more about the position. You are not making a commitment. You are not making a promise. You are not agreeing to take the position should they eventually offer it to you. You are simply expressing interest.

On that note, I advise prospective pastors to send many resumes. Understand that you will not hear a word from many churches. Remember that you can always say “no” if the church is not a good fit. Even if you’re not completely certain that you’re interested in the position, send your resume. Maybe you think the job is too big. Send a resume anyway. Maybe you think you don’t have enough experience. Send a resume anyway. Maybe you don’t think it will pay enough. Send a resume anyway. You (or the church) can always say no. Sending a resume is simply the way you express interest in a position.

WHAT TO EXPECT

This is a tricky question because no two applicants are alike. However, I'll share my experience with you. In 2005-2006 I was nearing graduation and looking for a ministry position. I found ministry positions online and sent over 100 resumes. Several months later I had received ONE response. Just one! That's when I turned to the seminary placement office. Obviously your experience will be different, but the placement office was able to put me in contact with several churches looking for someone with my qualifications. Four years later I was nearing graduation again. This time I sent close to 200 resumes and received positive contact (not a nice rejection letter) from around a dozen churches. My point in sharing these numbers is simple. You need to know that you will not hear back from most of the churches that receive your resume. Some will send a nice rejection letter in the mail. Don't be frustrated or embarrassed. It's all part of the process of finding a place to serve.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Is your resume two pages, and is your name on both pages?
- Did you include all six sections (contact information, personal information, education, experience, personal statement, references)?
- Is your resume totally free of typos?

CHAPTER 2

TALKING TO COMMITTEES

In 2001 I was a freshman in college who knew nothing about anything. One Thursday night I went to a campus worship service, and someone introduced me to a girl named Brooke. A few weeks later, we went on our first date at Taco Bell in Canyon, Texas. I wish I could tell you that sparks were flying and conversation was flowing. I wish I could tell you that it was just like a scene from your favorite romantic comedy. Here's the truth. It was a typical first date. We were both fairly guarded. We both wanted to come across as funny and intelligent. We both held our cards pretty close. We both tried to figure out the person eating tacos on the other side of the table. We both put our best foot forward and showed the other person exactly what we wanted them to see. I don't want to seem jaded or cynical, but that's usually how dating works in America. Brooke and I have been married for 13 years now, but our first date was a typical

first date. Talking with pastor search teams is a lot like going on a first date.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS AND SEARCH COMMITTEES

For everyone involved, pastors and members of the search team, the entire process can feel awkward. You don't really know each other, so you're not entirely sure about when to laugh or how much to laugh. You don't share inside jokes or memorable stories. And many times you feel like you're not getting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Focusing on the pastor search team, most of them have no idea what they are supposed to be doing. They want to make sure you aren't a serial killer or a pedophile. They want to make sure you know something about the Bible. They want to make sure you aren't socially awkward. Beyond that, they don't know what to do or what to ask. No one trained them for this task, and many of them have never done anything like this in their entire life.

Focusing on the pastor, you can expect to hear partial truths about most issues you discuss. Does this mean all search teams will lie to you? I guess that depends on your definition

of “lie.” Just remember, this process is a lot like a first date. The search team wants you to be aware of their issues, but they don’t want you to see all of their dirty laundry. They’ll be quick to admit their church is not perfect, but they don’t want you to know the depth of their dysfunction. All that means you will hear partial truths about conflict, factions, change, and money.

You must remember that there’s always another side to the story. If a search team starts sharing concerns they have with certain people or certain groups at church, just remember there’s another side to the story. On the other hand, if a search team refuses to air any dirty laundry, be skeptical. Their church may be a great place, but I’m willing to bet all of their members are still making progress on the spectrum of sanctification. Sin is still a reality. No church is perfect.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

The first thing you need to think about when meeting with a pastor search team is your attire. Churches are different, so there is no universal rule about what to wear to an interview with a search team. However, you should probably dress like you were going to preach at their church. That may mean a suit and tie, business casual, or jeans and a t-shirt. You

need to do your homework on this issue so you know what they expect. You also need to remember that they do have expectations about what you should wear (on Sundays or to an interview). If a church is a suit and tie kind of place, they don't expect a t-shirt. If a place is business casual, they don't want you dressed like you're going to a wedding or a funeral. Do your homework, and dress appropriately.

Second, you need to be prepared to listen. Yes, in an interview you're going to do a lot of talking, and the search team wants to hear what you have to say. But you need to be ready to listen too. In particular, you need to listen to the questions they ask you. Especially in your initial meeting, the first questions they ask will reveal a lot. You'll learn about the previous pastor, the condition of the church, the mindset of the members, the spoken expectations, the unspoken expectations, and even past issues they've dealt with.

Third, come prepared to ask questions. My suggestion is that you bring a list of questions you want to ask. After an hour or so of answering questions, your thoughts will be scattered. Write your questions down and bring them to the interview. Do some research on the church by talking to people in the community, searching the internet, and calling local pastors.

Fourth, be on time. Scratch that, be early. The people on the search team are volunteers. They are sacrificing family

time, personal time, and work time to meet with you. Be early.

Fifth, be as honest as possible. Just like a first date, you don't have to put all your cards on the table the first time you meet with a search team. But you need to be honest. You must never lie about your abilities or your experience or your education. And you must never exaggerate. Rest assured, a good search team will dig around to see if the things you tell them are true. They will talk to your references. Don't get caught trying to make something sound better than it was. Be honest.

Sixth, treat internet interviews like real interviews. Skype, Facetime, and Zoom are wonderful tools that can save search teams thousands of dollars in travel expenses. I've used this technology both as the one being interviewed and the one conducting the interview. But here's my word of caution. If you are going to use the internet, treat it like a real interview. Find a quiet place, and make sure the lighting is adequate. You wouldn't invite your two year-old or your Chihuahua to a face to face interview, so don't invite them to a Skype interview. You wouldn't wear your pajamas to a face to face interview, so don't wear them in a Facetime interview. Treat these meetings like real meetings.

Finally, end your time by asking the search team where they are in the process and when you should expect to hear back from them. Waiting on a team to pray and discuss your

interview can take days or even weeks. When you don't know when a search team will meet again, the waiting can drive you crazy. So just ask when they plan on meeting again, where they are in the process, and when you should expect to hear from them again.

WHAT YOU ARE SAYING

Taking the time to meet with a pastor search team says you are *very* interested in the position and want to learn more. This is a step up from simply sending a resume, but this is not a commitment of any kind on your part (or theirs). Even if they paid money to fly you in for a visit, you are not obligated to accept the position simply because you interviewed.

You should be clear and honest with the search team. Be clear about your wife's role in your ministry. If she's not the next Beth Moore, make sure they know that up front. If she likes to be involved, they need to know that too. Be honest about how long you expect to stay in the position. These plans will probably change as life happens, but you still need to be honest. Especially if you plan on leaving in the short-term (less than 5 years), you should be open about that during the interview process.

One word for those who interview at one church while they are serving at another church. Because an interview is not a commitment, it is OK to be secretive about the meeting. You should never be dishonest with your current congregation, but you should also try to protect your current congregation. Many pastors go through seasons of praying for direction in ministry. When you're in that process, your current church doesn't need to know every pull and tug on your heart.

WHAT TO EXPECT

When you meet with a pastor search team you should expect to share your testimony, talk about your family, and describe your ministry experience. Even though no one likes the question, you should be prepared for someone to ask you about your strengths and your weaknesses. You should be prepared for questions about your practice of spiritual disciplines, as well as doctrinal and theological questions.

After an initial interview, the search team should respond in one of two ways. One, they may tell you that God is not leading them in your direction. Two, they may want to move forward in the process. You should also remember that you need to decide if God is leading you toward this church, or

if God is leading you in another direction. Be honest with a search team as you pray for wisdom.

I've experienced just about every possible scenario when it comes to meeting with pastor search teams. I've met with teams once and been told they were not interested. I've gone through the entire process only to have one of eight search team members vote "no" and end our discussions. I've done interviews via the internet, as well as face-to-face meetings. I've been asked to come visit in person, and in different situations I declined and accepted that offer. I've heard "no" way more than "yes," and I've told search teams "no" myself. Whatever happens in this process, trust the sovereignty of God and remember that interviewing itself is a valuable experience.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Do you know what you are expected to wear?
- Do you have a list of questions to ask the search team?
- Are you prepared to be as honest as possible?

CHAPTER 3

PREACHING TRIAL SERMONS

As I write this chapter the United States is entering into the heat of a presidential election. This year it seems like every eligible adult has declared that they are running for president. We've already had one major Republican debate, and there were so many candidates they had to have two debates to accommodate everyone! Already the latest polls are released on a daily basis, along with the latest analysis from all the talking heads. Before long there will be buttons and attack ads and bumper stickers. The typical candidate will make hundreds if not thousands of stump speeches where they promise to improve the economy, create jobs, lower or raise taxes, fight one war or end another war, defend this group or that group, and generally make the world a perfect place. If you've lived through a presidential election, you know the vast majority of these promises will never be kept. You also know that down the road these broken promises will be used against the

eventual winner. Pastor, you can learn a valuable lesson from politicians who promise their constituents the world while campaigning for a job.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Most churches require prospective pastors to preach a trial sermon, sometimes called “preaching in view of a call.” These sermons are among the most difficult a pastor will be asked to preach. For one thing, you’re probably going to be extra nervous. At this point in the process, the search team and the church know you’re a decent person, and they feel like you meet their qualifications. Now it’s time to “close the sale” by preaching a good trial sermon. Expect to be nervous.

Also, expect this sermon to feel somewhat artificial. If you took speech in high school, you know this feeling. You weren’t an expert on anything you talked about in speech class, and your audience was captive. If you attended Bible college or seminary, you know this feeling from preaching class. You stand up and preach to your classmates, but they’re only there because they have to be there, and you’re only preaching because you want a good grade. These are obviously artificial situations, and preaching a trial sermon can have a similar feel.

Another challenge you face in a trial sermon is the congregation itself. For one thing, these people are listening critically, judging not only your content but also your style. Add to this the fact that there will be more people in church when you preach a trial sermon than a typical Sunday. People come out of the woodwork to hear trial sermons! Some will be curious. Others excited. Others skeptical. Just know people are going to come hear the new guy, and there will be a lot of them.

A final challenge relates to the issue of relationships. Most of the people who listen to your trial sermon will be total strangers. Most churches will have some kind of “meet and greet” the weekend a pastor comes to preach a trial sermon. You’ll see a lot of faces and hear a lot of names, but you still don’t know the people listening to your sermon.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

To be clear, there is no one, single, right way to preach a trial sermon. However, there are several wrong ways to preach a trial sermon. Here are four approaches you should avoid at all costs.

Only talk about yourself. I’ve heard of pastors who take the platform to preach a trial sermon, and they spend the entire

time talking about themselves. Certainly you need to share a few things about your life, your family, your education, and your experience. But don't forget this is a trial sermon, not a trial autobiography. Make sure the bulk of your time is spent talking about the Bible.

Make impossible promises. I had a friend in seminary who preached a trial sermon, and in that sermon he made all kinds of promises. He promised the church would experience numerical growth, spiritual growth, and needed change. Little did he know his most sincere efforts would not be able to bring these things to fruition. As you would expect, these unfulfilled promises came back to haunt him. Remember, a trial sermon is not a political stump speech, so be careful about making promises of any kind in a trial sermon.

Cast your vision for the church. Many prospective pastors want to use the trial sermon to communicate their vision for the church. There are two major problems with this approach. Most basically, you aren't preaching a sermon at all. Instead, you're laying out a road map of where you want to go in the future. Another problem rests in the fact that you are the new guy. It doesn't matter how much research you've done, you don't really know the congregation or the community yet. Be careful about casting vision for the future when you don't even have a good grasp of the realities on the ground.

Try to impress everyone. I'll admit, a trial sermon is a nerve-racking experience. You want to be biblical. You want to sound intelligent. You want to be funny. You want to be passionate. You want to dress correctly. You want to appear relaxed. You get the idea. However, if these things are your primary goal, your sermon will fall flat on its face. Focus on preaching the Word, and don't try to impress anyone. Be yourself, and don't try to come across like a super-hero-pulpiteer.

WHAT YOU ARE SAYING

When you accept the invitation to preach a trial sermon, you are telling a congregation that you are *extremely* interested in serving as their pastor. My suggestion is that you only preach a trial sermon if you intend on accepting the position. Some churches will have a congregational vote. Others will let a team of church leaders vote. The method of making a final decision will vary. But for the sake of the church, when you agree to preach a trial sermon, you should have every intention of accepting the position should it be offered to you.

Understand that a prospective pastor can do great damage to a church by rejecting a church's vote to affirm, or call him to serve as their pastor. There may be reasons for a prospective

pastor to say “no” after a church says “yes.” Just know that this kind of rejection can crush the spirit of a church and devastate the morale of a pastor search team. From their perspective, not only have they wasted months talking to you, they’re also back to square one. They’re right where they were when their last pastor left. This can be incredibly discouraging. If you’re going to preach a trial sermon, you should be prepared to serve as the next pastor of the church.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Again, expect a large crowd. Expect the more outgoing, vocal, gregarious members of the church to go out of their way to share their diagnosis of all that ails their church. Expect to see lots of faces and forget lots of names. Expect your nerves to fire on all cylinders when it’s time to preach.

It’s also safe to say that you should probably expect at least one “no” vote, or two, or more. Don’t let something less than a unanimous “yes” crush your excitement. Be realistic, and talk to the pastor search team about what an acceptable vote would be. An overwhelming “yes” is fine in most churches because there may be a few folks who vote “no” on everything.

Personally, I’ve experienced just about every possible

scenario and lived to preach another day. I preached a trial sermon at a church in southern Indiana. In talking to the pastor search team, we decided that an affirmative vote of 80% would be appropriate. The vote was 79% “yes.” I turned down the position. A few months later I preached a trial sermon and the vote was 88% “yes.” I accepted this position and stayed for four years. The next two trial sermons I preached were unanimous votes, and I accepted both positions. My point is simple. Know what to expect. Decide beforehand what percentage is required for you to accept the position, and trust God’s sovereignty over the process.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you prepared to preach the Word of God in your trial sermon?
- If the church votes “yes,” are you prepared to accept the position?
- Have you decided what percentage is an acceptable vote?

CHAPTER 4

DELEGATING MUSIC

Think about the greatest worship experiences of your life. What comes to mind? I'm convinced many would immediately think about camps and concerts. When I was in high school I attended a Super Summer in Abilene, Texas, and MercyMe led the worship. At the time, no one knew these guys. But after a week of camp, we were in love with their music. I remember each night ending with MercyMe playing on stage and the students at camp refusing to leave the auditorium. The camp staff tried to herd everyone out, but no one wanted to leave!

When I think about great worship experiences I also think about concerts. I've seen MercyMe several times since high school. I've seen Third Day and Chris Tomlin and other well-known bands. These concerts are moving experiences on many levels. The crowd is huge and enthusiastic. The lighting and the visual experience is stimulating. And of

course, the music is phenomenal. I hate to be a downer, but let's be realistic. Sometimes church worship can be downright disappointing compared to camps and concerts.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

This might be one of the greatest challenges for pastors, especially first-time pastors of smaller churches. How can your church choir or praise band compare to the camp or the concert experience? It's impossible, right? Unlike the megachurch down the road, you have a relatively small pool of people from which to draw your musicians.

Add to this your past church experiences that may have created unrealistic expectations. For example, if you attended seminary, it's possible that you attended a "seminary" church. This church had professors for pastors and plenty of talented seminary students to lead worship. When you get into a "real" church, these people aren't there to help with music. Another example would be your past church experiences. Maybe you grew up at a church that excelled in a particular musical style. Maybe they had a rocking band or a glorious choir, but maybe your first church isn't known for having outstanding music.

A final challenge is the fact that you're the new guy. That

means you are not used to the status quo like everyone else. When Bertha sings a solo, you recoil in horror while everyone else smiles because they know and love Bertha. When the drummer breaks into a solo during a worshipful moment, you look around in shock while everyone else has grown accustomed to spontaneous drum solos. You get the idea. When you're the new guy, you see and hear issues with music more clearly than most long time members.

HELPFUL REMINDERS

As a pastor, I've experienced three different situations with music. In Kentucky, our church had an all-volunteer praise team and a volunteer choir director who led the choir. In Oklahoma, our church had a praise band led by a bi-vocational leader, and a full-time choir director. Currently, I serve alongside a bi-vocational worship leader who heads up a band of paid musicians. Each situation brings a unique set of challenges. But whatever your particular situation may be, here are a few reminders for dealing with music and musicians.

First, remember that you are the pastor, not the music leader. As much as possible, you need to delegate this responsibility to others. Let me repeat, *as much as possible*, you need

to delegate this responsibility to others. Don't try to do it all. You may have musical training and ability, but your job is preaching and leadership. Find people to lead music. Follow the example of King David. He is known for writing songs and playing instruments, but he also made a policy of appointing people to lead corporate worship.

Second, don't micromanage in the area of music. Of course the pastor has to be involved in planning corporate worship, but don't be a micromanager. I know a pastor in Texas who took a position at an established church. He was new, young, and relatively inexperienced. The worship leader had served at this church for many years. Immediately the new pastor began to micromanage issues relating to music, and it was not a healthy situation. I know another pastor who took a position at a church with a praise band. On his first week, before he preached a sermon, the new pastor attended band practice and tried to tell the lead guitar player how to play a guitar solo. The guitarist happened to be a musical savant, and the pastor made himself look like a fool before his first Sunday. Please heed my advice: Be involved, but do not micromanage music.

Third, if you don't have anyone in your congregation who is capable of leading music, start praying and looking and asking. Pray that God would send you someone. Look around for people with unknown abilities. Ask others in your

community about people who might be interested in serving at your church.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Moving on from general advice, here are a few practical suggestions for how a pastor should be involved (or not involved) with the musicians at his church. First, if possible attend rehearsals. If you have a band or a choir or both, be present at rehearsal. You don't have to stay the entire time, but your presence shows your interest and appreciation for those who serve. It also makes you available for any questions that may arise during preparation for worship.

Second, give your worship leaders your preaching plan. Let them know in advance what you're going to be preaching about (topics, passages, series, etc.). If a special guest speaker is coming, make sure to give your worship leader plenty of notice. Keep them in the loop and communicate several weeks ahead.

Third, when you make special requests, don't do it at the last minute. Nothing is more frustrating to a worship leader than spending valuable time to prayerfully select songs only to have the pastor tweak those songs at the last minute. When

you regularly make last minute requests you cheapen the efforts of your worship leader. You also make their job more difficult because last minute requests get less time in practice and preparation.

Fourth, spend time building a relationship with your music leader(s). If the only things you talk about are song lists and order of service, you don't have a real relationship. You need to spend time together and talk about things that are not church related. When you establish this kind of relationship, you not only value your worship leader for who they are as a person, but you also find your occasional special requests will be better received.

Fifth, publicly affirm and encourage your musicians. Don't say things that aren't true. Don't flatter them with false statements. Don't make them or their performance the focus of a Sunday morning. But at appropriate times and in appropriate ways, affirm and encourage them in front of your congregation.

Sixth, don't expect your musicians to lead worship like someone else you know. Nothing is more annoying than a new pastor who constantly talks about how they did things at his last church. If your last church was so great, you should go back! Focus on your current church, and focus on the strengths and abilities of the people God has placed in your

current church. Value them for who they are, and let them lead with the personality and the abilities God gave them.

Seventh, focus on your preaching more than music. Here's the honest truth. In a small-to-medium-sized church, the senior pastor does have to be involved in the music. The folks responsible for your music may be volunteers, they may be bi-vocational, or they may be full-time staff members. But on some level you must be involved. Just remember, involvement and leadership does not mean making every decision. Delegate as much as possible. Resist the temptation to micro-manage. Find people who are capable and turn them loose to serve. Most importantly, focus on your primary responsibility, which is preaching, not singing.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you praying that God will send you talented musicians?
- Are you encouraging people to use their musical talents to serve?
- Are you personally investing in relationships with your musicians?

CHAPTER 5

COPYING OTHER CHURCHES

I have friends who can tell horror stories from their first pastorate. Some of these bad experiences were the result of mistakes they made early on, but others were the result of extremely difficult church members and situations. Personally, I was blessed to pastor a great group of people at my first church. It wasn't a perfect church by any stretch of the imagination, but the people at North Benson Baptist Church were gracious and patient with me as I learned how to be a pastor.

One thing I did experience at my first church was a group of members who had plenty of suggestions about what we should be doing at our church. Several people regularly told me the story of "Frankfort Church" (a made up name for a real church across town). Frankfort Church was a small, old, established church just like our church. A few years back some of the members began praying that God would grow their church. Almost instantly, the church began attracting droves

of unchurched people and disgruntled church people. They quickly outgrew their small, old building and built a huge new campus that they soon outgrew. I heard this story many times, and the unspoken suggestion was always the same: If we do what they did (pray for growth), the same thing will happen here. While I think all churches should pray that God would grow them, there was one problem with the suggestion that we simply copy their method. We weren't Frankfort Church. We were North Benson Baptist Church. We had different people, a different location, and a different history.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

One of the greatest temptations a pastor faces is the urge to copy another church. This temptation rears its ugly head in a variety of ways. From the mouth of the pastor, this temptation comes out with these words, "At my last church, we used to do ..." Don't be the guy who always talks about how you did things at another church. When you are that guy, you sound just like your church members who roll their eyes and say, "We've never done it like that before." Every pastor hates to hear those words, so don't subject your people to the same foolishness.

Another challenge for pastors is the fact that there's always a trendy church in town. I've seen this in small towns, large towns, and big cities. There's almost always one church that seems to attract unchurched people and disgruntled church people, and everyone knows this church is the trendy place to go. When you know about a church that seems to attract people effortlessly, it's always tempting to try and do what they're doing.

Sometimes pastors face the temptation to copy another church because new people are joining your church. These people are obviously excited about your church. If they weren't, they would have gone somewhere else. But even in their excitement, many new church members want to recreate past church experiences in your church. When new people come in with excitement and ideas, it can be tempting to copy the style or programs of other churches.

Many pastors find themselves tempted to copy other churches because pastors read books. Maybe it's Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, or maybe it's Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*. You pick the book, the pastor, and the style. The same thing happens every day in churches across the United States. A pastor reads a book written by the pastor of a large, well-known church, and that pastor decides to make his church look just like the church he read about.

Closely related to this is the fact that many pastors have an artificial church experience during seminary. While I was a student at Southern Seminary I attended Ninth and O Baptist Church. It's a phenomenal church! The preaching and teaching are top notch. The worship is biblical and done with excellence. The fellowship is genuine. I watched many of my friends graduate seminary, leave Ninth and O, head out into a small church, and try to recreate Ninth and O at their new place of ministry. It never worked. It never will work. But many pastors succumb to this temptation.

HOW CHURCHES COPY OTHER CHURCHES

Sometimes churches try to copy other churches in location. You've probably seen this happen. I know I've seen it in my home town of Amarillo. When I was growing up, many churches relocated to the west side of town, several built dazzling facilities, and many thrived. However, some failed almost immediately. These churches relocated under the assumption that being on the right road in the right zip code would automatically lead to growth. They were wrong.

Some churches copy other churches by mimicking

facilities. When I was a pastor in Oklahoma, my church was blessed with fantastic facilities. We had a brand new youth building and a brand new cabin at Falls Creek. We had a nice sanctuary and great children's space. When I met with other pastors in the area, I would often hear them wish for our facilities. In our conversation, it was clear that these pastors thought the right facilities would magically produce growth. If they could only recreate our facilities, they would be more successful. Nothing could be further from the truth. Having the right facility is not a silver bullet for growth.

Maybe it's not facilities or location that pastors try to copy. Maybe it's style and structure. So many pastors assume that if they only had the right genre of worship music, or they only had the right ecclesiology, then they would be primed for growth. I'll be the last to say that style and ecclesiology are unimportant. I'll also be the first to say that if you are copying the style or structure of another church because you think it will automatically lead to growth, you are badly mistaken. The wrong style and structure may prevent you from growing, but the right style and structure are not silver bullets or magic beans.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

Here are five suggestions for pastors when it comes to dealing with the temptation to copy another church. One, when you're the new guy, be slow to change your church just so you can look like someone else. There are plenty of good reasons to push for change in your church. Trying to recreate a past experience or trying to be just like the church across town are not good reasons.

Two, learn the history of your church. This takes time. Before you change anything, you need to understand why they offer the programs they offer. Why they use the styles they use. Why they are located at the place they are located. History matters, and as the pastor you need to understand and appreciate the history of your church.

Three, study the context of your community. When new missionaries hit the ground overseas, we expect them to study the context and culture around them. They need to know the language, the religions, the leaders, the customs, the community. This takes time and effort, and as a pastor you must put in the same time and effort. Be a missionary in your community. Study your context.

Four, learn how God has gifted (and not gifted) your church. Before you try to recreate a past experience or copy

the folks across town, you need to be realistic about whether or not your church can pull it off. Do you have the leaders? Do you have the money? Do you have the musicians? Do you have what it takes to implement the change you want to bring about?

Five, remember the key to your ministry is the Word of God and prayer. This is what the apostles devoted themselves to in the book of Acts (Acts 6:1-7). They weren't overly concerned about what was happening at the synagogue across town. They weren't worried about the latest trends in music. They weren't even primarily worried about the immediate needs in their own church. They focused on preaching the Word of God and persisting in prayer. That's your job. If you want to copy someone, forget the pastor across town. Copy the apostles.

QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS

- Are you guilty of trying to recreate a past church experience?
- Have you put in the effort to learn the history of your church?
- Do you think like a missionary in your community?

CHAPTER 6

PERFECTING YOUR CHURCH

In 2004 my wife and I left Amarillo, Texas and moved to Louisville, Kentucky so I could attend The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Ten years later we moved back to Texas, this time to Odessa. During our ten year sojourn, we lived in one apartment and three houses. We bought homes in Frankfort, Kingfisher, and Odessa.

Somewhere in the process of all my moving I read this maxim: Most homeowners spend more money in the first six months of living in a home than the next six years combined. New homeowners attack their to-do list with vigor, trying to perfect their new home. But money and energy don't last forever, and some things we just learn to live with.

All of my moving over the last ten years has proved the six-month, six-year maxim to be true. When Brooke and I move to a new home, we have a list of things we want to fix, change, or update. Initially, we attack our list with vigor, but

after a few months our vigor and our bank account run dry. We never finish the entire list. The easy fixes and important issues are scratched off. But there are other things we just learn to live with and eventually stop seeing as problems.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

When you begin a new ministry at an established church, it's sort of like moving into a new home. Someone else designed the place. Other people have lived in your new digs. And initially you see a lot of issues that need to be addressed. You have a to-do list, and you're ready to scratch everything off that list as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the comparison of your new church to your new home breaks down when you remember your new church is "occupied" by other tenants, your congregation.

These co-occupants make the process of fixing up your church difficult. For one thing, you are going to see some issues they have stopped seeing. Your perspective is fresh, and obvious issues are obvious to you. However, your congregation has lived with these issues for some time, most likely because they've stopped seeing the issues entirely.

Additionally, not only are you walking into a new church,

but you're also walking away from another church. Maybe you just left your home church, or maybe you just left your seminary church. It's entirely possible that you are leaving a relatively healthy church to lead a relatively sick church. Also, if this is your first pastorate, your new church is probably smaller than the church you're leaving. As you compare the church you left to your new church, things will be different. Not necessarily better or worse, just different.

On top of all that, you're probably reading books written by pastors of other churches. These books may describe the biblical ideals for any church, or they may paint a rosy picture of a church that has it all together. It can be very discouraging to compare your new church to what you read in books.

HOW PASTORS TRY TO PERFECT THEIR CHURCH

When you combine these factors, you frequently end up with a new pastor on a mission to perfect his new church. Sometimes the to-do list includes facility issues. Maybe the décor is outdated. Maybe the playground or the sound system needs to be updated. Maybe the carpet is nasty and the paintings are old. As the new guy, you see the facility “warts” more

clearly than your congregation who has grown accustomed to these eye sores.

Other pastors have procedural issues or structural issues on their to-do list. Maybe they want to reform how decisions are made, how scheduling takes place, and who holds authority. Maybe they want to change the ecclesiology, the staff, the elders, the deacons, the committees, or the teachers. Again, as the new guy in town you will see problems in procedure and structure more clearly than those entrenched in the history of the church. Still other pastors will paint with a broader brush and address the traditions and culture of a church. These can be very difficult problems to solve, but many new pastors are able to see where their new church has issues in tradition or culture.

CRITERIA FOR CHANGE

I want to be clear about one thing. I am not in favor of new pastors simply being content with the status quo at their new church. Because of your education, experience, and newness, you will see problems more clearly than anyone else in the church. Some things need to be changed, and you're the one person with the potential to lead necessary change. So my

advice is, “Go for it!” Identify the changes that need to be made and get busy scratching issues off of your to-do list. But ... But ... But ... Ask yourself these questions before you jump in.

First, is this a clear biblical issue or a mere matter of preference? If the issue is a clear biblical issue, get busy. If the issue is merely a matter of preference, slow down. Pray for wisdom, and continue to the next two questions.

Second, will you be present to see this change through the entire process? The process of change depends on what is being changed. New carpet and new ecclesiology require different approaches. That means you need to think through the change process from beginning to end, and you need to ask yourself if you are going to see the change through to the end. Will you address the problem? Teach about the problem? Lead through the problem? And fully implement the solution? If so, get busy. If not, slow down. Pray for wisdom, and continue to the last question.

Third, is this issue a hill you are willing to die on? For many issues, you won't have to fight, much less die. However, you should never underestimate the potential resistance to any change. Even if you don't have to fight, be prepared. If you don't want to fight for the change, slow down and pray for wisdom.

TRUTHS TO REMEMBER

After you've asked and answered these three questions, you're still not ready to begin perfecting your church. Before attacking your to-do list, remind yourself of these five truths. First, you will never have a perfect church. If your goal is perfecting an imperfect church, stop what you're doing. Perfect by-laws, biblical ecclesiology, and relevant programs will not change the fact that your people are sinners led by a sinner. Externals will not perfect your church.

Second, remember that your church was around long before you showed up and they'll probably be around long after you're gone. As much as you think they need you, they've managed without you in the past, and Jesus can take care of them in the future. This should not prevent you from making changes that will benefit your church, but it should make you more cautious.

Third, don't expect an entire group of people to conform to your personal preferences. This goes back to the question of biblical issues versus matters of preference. Pastors are called to serve with humility, not dictate from on high. In matters of preference, be willing to defer to your people.

Fourth, your preaching must not become focused on confronting issues you want to see changed. Your job is not using

your bully pulpit to push for changes you want to see happen in your church. Your job is to preach the Word without apology (see the next chapter). When you preach the whole counsel of God, issues that need to be addressed will be addressed without direct confrontation.

Fifth, don't try to impose every book you read on your congregation. I've seen this happen too many times, and it's always a disaster. As the leader you should read plenty of books, and you should always have an eye toward improvement. Nevertheless, don't bludgeon your people with every book, fad, and idea you read.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Do you expect external change to perfect your church?
- Would you like a church filled with people who are willing to defer on matters of preference? Are you willing to set that example for your people?
- Are you more focused on preaching God's Word or pushing your agenda?

CHAPTER 7

PREACHING THE BIBLE

When I lived in Frankfort, Kentucky my wife and I often drove to Lexington to eat dinner. We regularly made the trip because our two favorite restaurants, PF Changs and Abuelos, were located right next to each other at the mall. The drive usually involved heated debate about whether we would eat Chinese food or Mexican food, but it also involved discussions about preaching. On the way to the mall, we always drove by a large church located right off the highway. This church was consistently ranked as one of the fastest growing churches in America. On the side of their building that faced the highway, they always had a large banner advertising the current sermon series. These series often had edgy themes, and many were based on popular TV shows, movies, or songs.

On these dinner drives through Lexington, I often found myself jealous. This church had the resources and man power to plan “cool” sermon series. They also had the money to

advertise and redecorate the stage for each series. Truth be told, I probably ate a lot of lettuce wraps and tortilla chips dreaming about a preaching ministry that could be displayed on a full color banner for everyone in town to see.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Eventually two things changed. First, this church ended up dumping the traditional sermon for platform discussions (a decision and a discussion for another book). Second, I realized I liked my preaching plan better. As a new pastor, a new father, and a seminary student, I only had time to pick a book of the Bible and preach through that book passage by passage. Occasionally I tossed in a special series, but I mostly preached right through books of the Bible.

I think I eventually came to like my plan better because I decided it fit better with Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” That’s a great life verse for any pastor, but especially a young pastor struggling with envy towards those who have a flashy preaching ministry. Ezra set out to do three things: study, do, and teach. Study the Word. Obey the Word. Teach the Word. That’s it. No attempt to

piggy back on cultural phenomena with a catchy sermon series, a cool logo, or awesome stage décor. Study. Do. Teach.

I love the simplicity of Ezra 7:10. But simplicity doesn't always translate into ease. The reality is this, Ezra 7:10 is simple, but if Ezra 7:10 were easy everyone would be doing it. Ezra 7:10 is not easy, especially for the pastor of a small to medium sized church. You have to marry and bury. You have to counsel and visit. You have to minister to senior adults and high school seniors. And if you're at a church like my first church, you're the only one charged with these tasks. In the midst of your hectic schedule, how are you supposed to make time to be serious about studying the Word, obeying the Word, and teaching the Word? Wouldn't it be easier to pattern your preaching ministry off that of another church? Wouldn't it be easier to preach a series derived from the last book you read? Do you really have time to devote yourself to serious exegetical study week in and week out?

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

My answer is not simply, "Yes, you have time." My answer is emphatically, "Yes, you must make time." I don't want to pretend that weekly exegetical study that prepares you to

obey and teach is an easy task. It's not. It requires great effort and significant time. But it's worth every minute and every bit of energy you put into it.

Here are my suggestions for a new pastor thinking about how to approach the task of preaching every week. First, make a habit of preaching through books of the Bible. Throw in a handful of series every now and then to keep things fresh, but devote yourself to preaching through books of the Bible. When you are a new pastor at a small to medium sized church, all sorts of tasks fall into your lap. You're forced to wear many hats. You simply don't have time to dream up catchy sermon series. Pick a book of the Bible, and dig in with your people.

Second, think of preaching as the most important part of your job. Of course, you're going to have to make visits, spend time counseling, and prepare for meetings. But these are not the most influential parts of your ministry. The time you spend standing in front of your people each week has far more potential, for good or bad. Think of preaching as the most important part of your job, and let that importance impact how much time you spend in sermon preparation each week.

Third, remember that as you walk your people through books of the Bible, you are teaching them how to study the Bible. An exegetical walk through Scripture will certainly help your people understand the Bible in context, but it will also

help them see how to walk through the Bible on their own. Over time, your people will study the Bible like you preach the Bible. Additionally, preaching through books of the Bible gives your congregation the opportunity to grow to maturity. If you only preach series of your own creation and pluck verses that fit your series, your people can only grow to your level of maturity. But when your preaching is a true reflection of God's Word, your people can grow to full maturity.

Fourth, when you preach series, root your sermons in texts. Don't just pick a verse here or there. Rather, when you preach series, root each message in a text.

Fifth, don't waste time worrying about media and props. To be clear, I think you should make every effort to use pictures and videos to enhance your teaching. However, I think many pastors waste time worrying about media when they should devote themselves to study and preparation. Here's a good rule to remember, if you can't preach without media, you can't preach with it.

Sixth, always be prepared. Preaching is the most visible part of your job, and it's really hard to do it well. You must be serious about guarding your time to study and prepare. When you get up and stumble through a message or read a page of notes, you do a great disservice to the gospel. When you are not prepared to preach, you are telling your people that your

job is not important and that you have not worked hard. You simply must be prepared to preach well.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Here are a few practical tips as you think about the most important part of your new job as a pastor. The process you use to craft a sermon needs to be well thought out. Good sermons don't just fall into place. They require thought and work and effort. You must begin with study and prayer. Dig into the Word and ask the Spirit to guide your work. Then move on to outlining your passage, and if possible develop some sort of "big idea" or "central thought." This unifying truth will bring clarity to your mind and to the minds of your people as you preach. Your outline can easily be used for sermon notes. My experience is that most people like to follow along with notes. Not only do they listen better, they also have a feel for where the sermon is headed.

Once you have an outline, I suggest that new pastors write an entire manuscript. Writing your sermon word for word does two things for a new pastor. First, it improves clarity. Your thoughts become clearer when you put them down on paper in a concise, succinct way. Second, a manuscript helps

you manage the length of your sermon. Many new pastors find themselves running out of material or droning on too long. Writing a manuscript will help you gauge the length of your message. Once your manuscript is complete, develop some form of notes you will use when you preach. No set rules here, just use whatever you're comfortable using. Finally, if you have time, create PowerPoint or Keynote slides. Include your major points as well as relevant pictures or videos.

As you work through this process, focus on clarity. You need to be clear about the meaning of your text. You need to communicate that meaning clearly. And your application must be clear to your congregation. As you work on a sermon, strive for simplicity without being simplistic. When you achieve this sort of simple clarity, a funny thing happens. Your people will thank you for preaching with "depth." Conversely, when you strive for depth, you either confuse your people or sound like a pompous theologian. But when you strive for clarity, people will appreciate your depth.

Two final thoughts: don't speak too long, and be yourself. I can't give you the perfect sermon length. I can't tell you how long is too long or too short. I can tell you that I've preached 20 minute sermons and 50 minute sermons. Your goal should be to say what you need to say, to say it as clearly as possible, and to sit down. Additionally, as you preach a sermon of

appropriate length, be yourself. Certainly you can learn from other preachers, but don't try to imitate your favorite author or pastor or conference speaker. Be yourself. Don't worry about humor or raising your voice or communicating emotion or body language. All of these things are important, but they should not be your focus.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you devoting enough time to do the most important part of your job with excellence?
- Do you have a well thought out process for sermon preparation?
- What do you need to do in order to improve the clarity of your sermons?

CHAPTER 8

LISTENING TO PEOPLE

I moved to Odessa in the spring of 2014. Within a few weeks at my new church, two different pastors invited me to lunch. Both men meant the invitation as a “welcome,” and I certainly appreciated a free lunch. However, something strange happened at both lunch meetings. Both times I met the other pastor at a local restaurant. Both times we shook hands and introduced ourselves. And both times I sat for an hour and listened to my new friend talk non-stop about their life, family, church, and hobbies. I’m not exaggerating when I tell you both of these men talked at least 55 of the 60 minutes we spent together at lunch.

I left both lunch meetings with a full belly, but I also left confused and exhausted. Confused because these men were not the least bit interested in getting to know me. They didn’t ask a single question about me or my life. Not one. Exhausted because listening is hard work.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Listening might be the hardest, most frustrating, most exhausting thing you do as a pastor. One reason listening is hard is because we pastors like to think of ourselves as experts. We've done lots of reading. We've gone to seminary for advanced degrees. We've seen real life up close and personal in our churches. Quite frankly, we feel like experts on many things, and we think people should listen to us. Instead, we find people want to talk while we listen.

Another reason listening is hard is because good listening is mentally and emotionally draining. Just try and follow along as Margie talks about her grandson's step-dad in Wisconsin who has a teacher that was just diagnosed with cancer. If you're going to keep up with the concerns of your people, you're going to have to use a tremendous amount of mental energy. Additionally, there will be times when you find yourself totally uninterested in what someone is telling you. That may sound "un-pastoral," but it's true. It's also true that if you want to be a pastor you have to learn to listen well even when you're not interested.

A final reason listening is hard is because you talk for a living. The best part of our job is when we get to stand up in front of people and talk. Hopefully most of our folks are

listening, not sleeping. And hopefully our people are soaking up all our wisdom, not doodling. Just remember, when you step off the platform, people want to talk to you, and they want you to listen.

WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO?

As a pastor you find yourself listening to many different groups of people. Briefly I want to mention a few of these groups and tell you why you should listen well when these people open their mouths to speak to you.

As the pastor, you need to listen to your staff, your elders, and your deacons. Church polity varies both between and within denominations, so I won't get too specific about power structures. My point is simply that you need to listen to the recognized leaders in your church. These people may not have your educational background, but they do have invaluable wisdom. They know victories and failures from the past, and most of them are eager to share this knowledge with you. Listening to these leaders validates them and helps them buy into the direction of your leadership.

As the pastor, you also need to listen to your church members. You certainly can't believe everything you hear, and you

must always remember that there are two sides to every story. Your job is to trust but verify what church members tell you. With that caution in place, you can learn a great number of things from your church members. They can tell you about how people perceive you. They can tell you about the needs in your community. They can even help you discover opportunities for improvement in your church. But you have to listen to them if you want to learn from their perspective.

As the pastor, you should also listen to former pastors of your church as well as other local pastors (even the ones that talk through an entire lunch meeting). These men know the reputation of your church and whether that reputation is deserved or not. These men know the local culture and the unique traits of your church. In my experience, it really doesn't matter if the previous pastor left on good terms or bad terms. You can learn from his experience if you're willing to listen.

As the pastor, you also need to listen to people in counseling situations. Certainly there will be some situations that you refer to a professional counselor or psychologist. However, many of the issues your people deal with can be addressed in your office, just by listening. Especially in marriage counseling, I've discovered that I don't have to have a profound diagnosis or a professional program for improvement. Often I just need to listen.

As a pastor, you must also listen to lost people. As you find yourself with opportunities to share the gospel, don't withhold the good news from those who need to hear it. But first take time to listen. Find out where people are spiritually. Learn about their past experiences in church. Dig into their life and discover their underlying worldview assumptions. After you have listened to these things, share the truth of God's Word with those who need to hear it most.

As a pastor, you should also make time to listen to disgruntled members. The people in your church should know they can bring their concerns straight to you. If they don't feel like you will give them a listening ear, rest assured they will turn their concerns into gossip and complaints. Make time to listen to your people when they have concerns, and make time to listen to people who left your church for various reasons.

At the first church I pastored, two of my deacons took me on a recruiting tour to bring back all the disgruntled members who left when the previous pastor was fired. Not a single person we visited came back to North Benson, but I did learn a lot about our church in the process. I'm not suggesting you embark on a recruiting tour like the one I went on with my deacons. I am suggesting that you find a way to listen to those who have previously been hurt at your new church. Don't make excuses or try to justify mistakes. Just listen.

HOW DO YOU LISTEN WELL?

Listening is not easy. In fact, after a decade of interacting with people as a pastor, I'm convinced most people don't know how to listen well. Sit them in an auditorium with an outline and tell them to listen to a sermon, they do ok. But sit them down with another person and tell them to listen well, they struggle. Extroverts struggle because they won't shut up. Introverts struggle because they're often uninterested in what the other person is saying. Pastors struggle because listening is hard and we have to do it often as shepherds.

Here are four suggestions about listening well. First, you have to learn to stop talking. Again, this is hard for pastors because the best part of our job is talking while everyone else listens. For some reason, we tend to think our personal conversations should work just like a Sunday morning sermon. We talk. People listen. While that may work for Sunday morning, it doesn't work as well during the week. Pastors have to learn to stop talking.

Second, pastors have to learn to ask good questions. It doesn't matter if you're talking to your key leaders, to a disgruntled member, to a lost person, or to a struggling couple ... You have to ask good questions. Good questions are open ended questions, not questions that can be answered with a

yes or no. Good questions often include the words “why” or “how.” Good questions often include a plea for explanation. As a pastor, you must learn to ask good questions.

Third, pastors have to learn to wait for answers. People and personalities are all different. Some will volunteer more information than you ever wanted to hear (like my pastor friends at lunch). Others will hold their cards closely, and you’ll have to work to draw them into conversation. Part of listening well means you stop talking, you ask good questions, and you actually wait for answers.

Finally, pastors have to care. People can spot a phony a mile away. If your mind is elsewhere, people will know. If you don’t care about the people you’re talking to, people will know. You have to learn to care about people, their families, their drama, and their struggles. As a pastor, if you find yourself regularly uninterested in your people and their lives, you need to rethink your calling as a shepherd. A good shepherd knows his sheep and cares about their lives.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- When you step off the platform, are you able to stop preaching?

PASTOR TO PASTOR

- How can you improve your skill in the area of asking good questions?
- Should you ask God to give you the heart of a caring shepherd?

CHAPTER 9

MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

An assumption is a thing accepted as true or certain to happen, without proof. You've probably heard the old line that warns about the danger of making assumptions, so I won't repeat it here. I will say that most newlyweds wake up after the honeymoon and realize all is not as they assumed it would be. Disney makes it look so easy. There's a princess. There's a prince. The prince saved the princess. They live happily ever after. What's so hard about that?

Adults are fed the same story in countless romantic comedies. Sure the plot lines have been tweaked over the years, but the same basic story is presented time and time again. Two people fall in love, and by the end of the movie we're left to assume they live happily ever after. Most of us grow up with Disney and graduate to romantic comedies. So when it comes time to get married, most of us assume it's a piece of cake as long as you've found the "right" person. Many of these

same people end up in my office, frustrated and discouraged, because their marriage doesn't seem to be headed for a fairy-tale ending.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Assumptions can get you in trouble when you enter a marriage. They can also get you in trouble as a new pastor. One way assumptions get pastors in trouble involves listening. This is something pastors are forced to do on a regular basis, and it's something pastors need to learn to do well (see chapter 8). As you listen, you hear all sorts of information, perspectives, opinions, and diagnoses from your church members. You may assume some folks are always honest and perceptive. You may assume others are under-handed and dull. Both kinds of assumptions will get you in trouble. Yes you should listen to your people, but you can't assume everything you hear is gospel, nor can you assume people don't know what they're talking about.

Another way pastors get in trouble with assumptions has to do with the process of hiring a pastor. When you meet with search teams, committees, and deacons, you will hear plenty of interesting things. You'll hear whole-truths, half-truths,

and non-truths. You'll hear what they want you to hear and what they believe to be true. If you assume everything you hear corresponds to reality, you're headed for trouble. Listen to these people, but listen critically and look for verification.

If you work at a church with other staff members, you're sure to find a perspective that doesn't quite line up with the members or committees. Staff members usually see situations differently than church members and lay leaders, and again you have to guard against the danger of making assumptions. After talking to some staff members, you might assume all church members are spawns of Satan. Talk to others and you might assume all church members are angels in disguise. Rest assured, both assumptions will land you in hot water.

AREAS OF CAUTION

New pastors must recognize the danger of making assumptions. Here are seven areas where I've seen pastors make wrong assumptions, each of which caused problems that could have been avoided.

Disclaimer: I may or may not have made some, if not all, of these assumptions, over the ten years I have been a pastor.

First, beware of making assumptions about people. As

the new pastor, the search team will give you plenty of unsolicited descriptions of people in your church. They'll tell you who to trust and who to hold at arm's length. They'll tell you about rock solid staff members, and they'll tell you about staff members they want you to fire. As you listen to these personal descriptions, refrain from making assumptions. You can value this unsolicited advice while also waiting to form your own opinions about church members and church staff.

Second, beware of making assumptions about programs. When you walk into an established church as the new pastor, you inherit an entire slate of programs. You may have experience (positive or negative) with some of these programs, while others are unfamiliar. Guard against the temptation to make assumptions about a program's effectiveness at your new church. Some programs work well at one church but not another. Don't assume your new church has effective programs, and don't assume your new church needs all new programs. Ease into your new position and evaluate the situation for yourself. Form your own opinions and make informed decisions rather than decisions based on misguided assumptions.

Third, beware of making assumptions about a church based on their style of music. Many pastors assume traditional churches are traditional because they resist change, while contemporary churches are more open to change.

These assumptions will bite you both ways. In my experience, age and musical preference are poor indicators for a person's receptivity to change. When change is led the right way, you can bring along older more traditional folks. When change is led poorly, you can lose younger more contemporary folks. The take away is simple: Don't assume change is impossible in an older, traditional church, and don't assume change is easy in a younger, contemporary church.

Fourth, beware of making assumptions about the ease of church planting. I know several pastors whose first pastorate was a small, established church. After several years of serving in this setting, these young pastors were thoroughly frustrated with established churches, so they decided to plant their own church. They assumed that many of the problems they experienced could be eliminated by building a church the "right way" from the ground up. There may be some wisdom to this line of thought. However, all these pastors discovered that their "rightly-built" church plant was soon filled with sinful people. Thus, there were problems. Don't assume a church plant will save you from the headaches of an established church. As long as you are a sinner pastoring sinners, there will be headaches.

Fifth, don't assume you know what your new church expects from you as the pastor. There needs to be an abundance of communication between you and the pastor search team,

the elders, the deacons, and the members. Different churches in different communities expect different things from their pastor. In small town Oklahoma, I was expected to go to football games. In a larger town in West Texas, I still go to football games, but no one would care if I didn't attend. In addition to job related expectations, different churches grant pastors different amounts of authority. Know what you're getting into before you assume you have the authority to make certain decisions. Again, when it comes to expectations, assumptions should be few and communication should be abundant.

Sixth, don't assume you have your new congregation "figured out." As a new pastor, it would be wise to seek counsel from the previous pastors of your new church as well as local pastors in the area. These men will be able to give you invaluable information about your new church. However, don't assume everything they tell you is true. Don't assume every member is a seminary trained theologian just because the previous pastor was a great preacher. Don't assume most of your members need to be excommunicated just because a local pastor tells you horror stories about your new church. Don't assume everyone in your congregation loved or hated the previous pastor just because the pastor search team told you stories about the last guy. Go in with an open mind, and don't make assumptions that will quickly prove to be untrue.

Finally, don't assume your first impressions are accurate. As a new pastor, there will be many folks who seem like they want to be your best friend. Some are genuinely interested in building a relationship with their pastor. Others are genuinely interested in advancing their own agenda. Rest assured, some of those who seem like your best friends will prove otherwise, and many who seem odd and annoying will prove to be invaluable. Be wary of your first impressions, and don't assume you've got things figured out from day one.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- If you have a staff at your new church, are you giving them a chance to succeed under your leadership? Or have you gone in assuming the worst?
- Are you willing to evaluate existing programs without making assumptions based on previous church experience?
- Are you critically evaluating what you heard from the pastor search team?

CHAPTER 10

COMMUNICATING CLEARLY

In the summer of 2015 my family went to the mountains of New Mexico for summer vacation. As a pastor, one of my favorite parts of vacation is the opportunity to “go” to church without going as the pastor. Before our trip I did a bit of online research and found a church that looked like a good fit for our family. It may sound silly, but I was truly excited about the opportunity to attend church with my family.

Unfortunately this Sunday proved to be more disappointing than exciting. Most of the disappointment came from the lack of clarity in the worship service. Towards the beginning of the service the pastor stood up and asked everyone to fill out a special card. I had no idea what it was for or if I should fill it out. Then there was a time of greeting followed by the Lord’s Supper, but no one told us what to do during these parts of the service. The members clearly knew, and we tried to follow along, but the whole process was confusing. During

the sermon I was totally lost. The pastor seemed like an intelligent man, but the direction of his message was constantly changing. The announcements were as directionless as the sermon, consisting of random comments and inside jokes. My biggest complaint as we left? I was confused!

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Clear communication is difficult. It doesn't happen without serious thought and effort. As pastors, we spend a large part of our week thinking about Sunday. We've thought things through and made our plans. We've studied our sermon and memorized important parts. By the time Sunday arrives we pretty much know what to expect. Meanwhile, most of our church members have no clue what's coming at them Sunday morning. Our guests are certainly walking in blind. While we're familiar with the "program" and the "plan," everyone else is just along for the ride.

A similar challenge relates to the church calendar outside Sunday morning. We plan the events. We contact the volunteers. We make the necessary arrangements and preparations. When the program or event finally comes, we're ready and informed. The problem is that our church members don't live

and breathe church life like we do. We've worked through bulletins and newsletters and Facebook posts, so we know exactly what's going on, when it's going on, where it's going on, and who's invited. Our people are not enmeshed in our planning, and they need clear communication.

As new pastors, a final challenge relates to our inexperience. We took New Testament and Old Testament, Greek and Hebrew, Systematic Theology and Missiology ... But it's entirely possible no one ever taught us how to communicate clearly. As new pastors, we don't have years of public speaking experience to guide us. As new pastors, we struggle with repetition, not wanting to sound like a broken record, but not realizing that repetition increases clarity. As new pastors, we struggle to get everything done during the week, usually giving little thought to announcements we make at the end of the service.

CLARITY IN PREACHING

If there is any area where new pastors must strive for clarity, it's preaching. When you stand up to talk about the Word of God, you must be clear. Without clarity, all your passion and study and exegesis and application is wasted. If

your people can't follow your sermon and can't understand your message, they will leave frustrated instead of encouraged. Some will be frustrated with you, wishing you would be clear. Many will be frustrated with themselves, assuming the Bible is just too complicated for them to grasp. Pastor, you must be clear!

This means you must slow down and talk at a reasonable speed. Many new pastors find their nerves accelerate their rate of speaking. A message they thought would last for 30 minutes is done in 20, and no one was able to keep up along the way. Clarity also requires you to talk like your people talk. Missionaries do this. They learn the language of the people they want to reach. As a pastor, you need to do the same thing. When you preach, talk like your people talk. Unless the majority of your church consists of seminary and university professors, you shouldn't sound like a professor. Clarity also means you need to be yourself. The worst kind of preaching is imitation preaching. Don't try to sound like some other well-known preacher. Just try to sound like you.

If you want to be clear, you also need to think about non-verbal communication. In the context of preaching, that involves your posture and position, any handouts or sermon notes, and anything you might display on a screen. Your posture and position should be confident and engaging. Your

handouts and sermon notes must be neat and consistent with your sermon. Your screen displays must be clean and professional. Each of these things can help or hurt your clarity.

Another way to make your preaching clear is to devote more time to study and preparation. Preachers who possess a thorough knowledge of their text or topic are much more likely to be clear in communicating the gospel. Preachers who do not possess a mastery of their text or topic are sure to be confusing. This means you need to be an expert before you stand up to preach. To be an expert, you need a well thought out process of study and preparation.

Personally, I begin sermon preparation with study of the text, followed by study of several commentaries. Then I summarize the passage into one “big idea” that I will share with my people. With the “big idea” in place, I move towards building an outline of my sermon. This outline essentially becomes the sermon notes I provide in the bulletin. With an outline in place, I write an entire manuscript, word for word, every week. This forces me to think through what I want to say and how I want to say it. It also provides a step by step guide for the person clicking through my PowerPoint slides. A great sermon can become very confusing if you and your tech crew are not on the same page. A manuscript helps those working with you behind the computer. My final step during the week

is to take my manuscript and condense it to usable notes that I place in my Bible while I preach. These notes focus on introduction, major points, and conclusion.

With all that preparation behind me, I always read through my sermon on Saturday night and again on Sunday morning. By the time I stand up to preach I've studied the text, summarized the big idea, outlined the sermon, written a manuscript, condensed a manuscript to notes, created PowerPoint slides, and studied twice. In that process, I have mastered my text or topic, and I'm ready to clearly proclaim the good news.

CLARITY IN ANNOUNCEMENTS

Preaching the gospel is certainly more critical than making announcements. Nevertheless, making announcements well involves much more than simply asking a staff member to stand up and read the bulletin. Announcements should be discussed as a staff. They should be communicated in print form (bulletin), visual form (screen), and vocal form (speaking). Announcements should not be impromptu or spontaneous. To be clear and effective, they should be rehearsed. All of this means announcements must not become an afterthought to your service. Rather, you must be intentional and

thoughtful about what you say and how you say it. Otherwise, the message will not be clear or effective.

CLARITY IN MEETINGS

Pastors need to strive for clarity when they stand on the platform, but they also need to strive for clarity when they sit in meetings. It may be committees or staff or deacons or elders, but when you preside over a meeting you must be clear in your communication. This means you must be prepared. You need an agenda. If possible, this agenda should be emailed before the meeting and printed for the meeting. As you work through the agenda, you need to pause and ask people if they understand what's being discussed. Especially when you make assignments, you need to make sure people understand what you're asking them to do.

CLARITY IN ALL THINGS

One final warning about clarity. In all things you must be clear. To quote your grandfather, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." This maxim applies whether you

are standing on the platform, sitting in a meeting, or talking behind closed doors. Pastors must display integrity in our communication. Do not talk out of both sides of your mouth depending on who's listening. Be consistent. Be honest. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Is your process of sermon preparation thorough enough to result in clarity?
- Are you giving adequate attention to preparing for announcements and meetings?
- Are you a person of integrity in what you say?

CHAPTER 11

WORKING HARD

Pastors must prioritize family over ministry. Period. End of story. If you've been around church for any length of time, you've probably heard the same stories repeated countless times. Some pastors fail to take care of their family because they're too busy taking care of their church. The details change, but the basic story is the same. Some pastors neglect their family because they're too busy looking out for their church. In the end, these pastors lose both family and church.

I'm a Millennial. I don't know how much this problem was addressed in previous generations. I do know that I've received a steady stream of warnings about this danger from seminary, conferences, books, and blogs. Time and time again I've been warned, "Don't lose your family by being a workaholic at church." I think many of the young pastors I know have heard these same warnings. While I appreciate the sentiment behind the warning, I've also seen a disturbing trend

among some of my younger pastor friends. Too often I see lazy pastors who justify their laziness by talking about the importance they place on family.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

This is a tricky issue. Balancing family life and church life is hard for a pastor, especially a new pastor. There's never enough time to get all your church work caught up, but life at home doesn't slow down just because you're busy at church. It's a delicate balancing act for pastors to work hard and take care of their families. While I know some pastors have worked too hard at the office and lost their family in the process, I've personally seen more of the opposite. I've seen pastors take advantage of their position. They talk a good game about wanting to prioritize family, but really they're just lazy when it comes to work.

The dynamics of a small to medium sized church make this particularly tricky. Most new pastors serve at this size of church. In small churches, it's not uncommon for the pastor to be the only paid staff member. In this situation, accountability is often woefully lacking. In medium sized churches, you often find more paid staff, but you also find a pastor who gets

to call most of his own shots. Again, there's not a tremendous amount of accountability for most pastors when it comes to how hard they work during the week. In these situations, it's not hard for a pastor's laziness to go undetected.

REMINDERS FOR PASTORS

I don't want to imply that all pastors are lazy. Nor do I want to call pastors to be workaholics at the expense of their family. I do want to remind you, a new pastor, that you must be committed to working hard. Here are a few reminders to guide you in your new position.

First, realize that ministry is not a 40 hour a week job. If that's a problem, find a different career. As a pastor, it really doesn't matter what size church you serve. You can rest assured that doing your job well will require more than 40 hours of work each week. You can also rest assured that this is not a job you can leave at the office. There is no time clock to punch in and punch out. You're always on call. Again, if this is a problem, or if you find yourself complaining about this reality, you may need to find a new career.

Second, remember that your people work full-time jobs during the week. When they "punch out" they turn around

and give you their time and their money. They are business owners and teachers and farmers. They have to work odd hours, weekends, and overtime. The fact that you have a position and a paycheck is a result of their contribution outside of their regular 9-to-5.

Third, accept the fact that your job description includes many “miscellaneous duties.” Especially at a small to medium sized church, you can expect to find yourself doing all sorts of odd jobs. As a pastor in Kentucky, I often found myself power-washing the church and taking care of the grounds. Yes we had volunteers who helped, but as their leader I had to roll up my sleeves as well. As a pastor in Oklahoma, I found myself working with a group of men to solve a drainage problem outside our sanctuary. That wasn’t spelled out in my job description, but it did fall under “miscellaneous duties.” When a flock of birds took over the porch outside our youth building, no staff member or church member jumped forward to lead that clean-up crew. Sometimes, in a small to medium sized church, you find yourself stuck with “miscellaneous duties.” Don’t be an ivory tower theologian who can’t get his hands dirty when something needs to get done. Just work hard and take care of the problem.

Fourth, office hours matter. We all know a sermon can be written at home in your recliner or at Starbucks on the couch. But being available to your church members and your

staff members is vitally important. You need to spend time in the office. Even when the work could be completed elsewhere, there's value in being available for those who need your leadership.

Related to this issue of "office hours" is Sunday morning. There's really no easy way to say this, so I'll just say it. The best pastors I know are the first to arrive and among the last to leave. Don't be the pastor who walks in five minutes before church and who can't wait to get out the back door for lunch. Show up early. Stay late.

Fifth, in addition to regular office hours, realize that the time you work during "off-hours" is highly important to the success of your ministry. For example, in Odessa I began praying for a group of men to disciple. After several months I formed two discipleship groups. As I began planning our meetings, it became clear that we would not be able to meet during the work day. Lunch was not a possibility. Evenings were booked because of family time. That left the morning. Early morning. 6:00 am before work mornings. So that's when we meet. It doesn't fit into a normal work day, but if you're going to be a pastor it's the kind of hours you work.

Of course, as you process all of these reminders, you do have to make time for your family. You can't become a workaholic, ignoring the principle of rest and Sabbath. You can't

prioritize the people you serve at church over the people you serve at home. You can't ignore your need for vacation. You need time alone and time away with your family. Like I said, plenty of seminaries, conferences, books, and blogs are talking about the importance of these issues. However, in my personal experience, I've encountered more lazy pastors than workaholics. So my charge to you is this: work hard.

PERCEPTION IS REALITY

A final thought about working hard. Perception is reality. The people in your church are not stupid. You may be able to fool them for a while, but sooner or later they will know if you're working hard or hardly working. As the spiritual leader of a church, you need to have a reputation for working hard.

In Kentucky, many of the men in my church met at a coffee shop across the street from my house. I don't drink coffee, but it didn't take me long to realize I needed to walk across the street once in a while. Those 5:00 AM alarms came early in the morning. But since my guys started their day that early, I needed to start my day that early.

In Oklahoma, many of the folks in my church worked in agriculture. There are no off hours when you're a farmer or a

rancher. You get up early and work late. In addition to these folks, we had many professionals who woke up early to make the 30 minute drive into Oklahoma City for work. When these folks were up early for work, they knew my car would be at the church. They knew I would be the first one to the building on Sunday. And they appreciated my commitment to work hard, just like they did.

In Texas, I serve in a community that depends on oil and natural gas. Many of my church members depend on overtime pay. Can you imagine how they would respond to a pastor who insisted on a 40 hour work week? My people are disappointed when the economy gets tight and their work week gets cut to 50 hours. They expect their pastor to work hard, just like they work hard. That means long hours. That means odd hours. That means “miscellaneous duties.” And yes, that means working hard to take care of your family.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you regular in office hours to make yourself available to those you lead?
- Are you willing to work as hard as the people in your church?

PASTOR TO PASTOR

- Are you willing to do what needs to be done, including “miscellaneous duties?”

CHAPTER 12

GIVING GENEROUSLY

In the spring of 2015 multiple news agencies reported that Creflo Dollar issued a plea for \$60 million dollars in donations so that his ministry could purchase a Gulfstream G650. A G650 is a plane, by the way. And if you've never heard of Dollar, he's the pastor of World Changers Church in Atlanta. Pastor Dollar released a video to his members, partners, and supporters, asking them to send in their dollars. The secular media and evangelical Christians responded as expected. It was a mixture of shock, horror, embarrassment, and outrage.

Most pastors hate talking about money, and I think the antics of pastors like Dollar contribute to our hesitancy to ask our people for more dollars. This chapter is about dollars. But instead of talking about the dollars you ask your people to put in the offering plate, I want to talk about the dollars you put back in the offering plate. Or, maybe I should say, I want to talk about the dollars you don't put back in the offering plate.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

I think financial stewardship is a tricky issue for most pastors. I'll be honest, I've had conversations with other pastors about many different struggles. But I don't remember many heart-to-hearts about the issue of how much money we as pastors should give away. I don't think it's because pastors are naturally or supernaturally generous. I think it's because financial stewardship is an issue pastors struggle with just like regular church members.

For one thing, pastors don't get paid exorbitant salaries. I don't want to throw a pity party about how pastors don't get paid enough. In fact, in my experience most churches do their absolute best to pay their pastor a fair wage. Many churches do this even when it hurts the overall financial position of the church. Nevertheless, most pastors aren't on the same pay scale as Creflo Dollar. Especially when you consider the level of education most churches expect in their pastor, most pastor salaries are not exorbitant.

Another challenge is the fact that pastors are often tempted to see our work as special. After all, the money we take home in a paycheck came from money our members tithed. So hasn't it already been tithed once? And if your check comes from a religious institution shouldn't it be exempt from all religious

tariffs? Simply put, some pastors feel like they do not have to tithe off a check they earn by serving God in a church setting.

A third challenge relates to the fact that a good shepherd knows the needs of his sheep. Pastors are often aware of financial needs that no one else in the church sees. The vast majority of pastors I have personally known have been generous to those in need, especially those in their own congregation. Most of the pastors I have personally known would not think twice about helping a family with groceries, school clothing, or utility bills. These men are happy to give from what they have to help those in need. The challenge comes in when pastors face needs greater than their resources.

A final challenge may seem petty to non-clergy, but I'm certain my fellow pastors will agree with my angst. Pastors get hit up for every fundraiser. It doesn't matter if it's the church mission trip, the school band, the chess club, or club sports ... pastors are always asked to help because everyone knows the pastor. We get all the letters about every mission trip. We are always asked to buy popcorn, cookie dough, raffle tickets, or whatever else is being peddled.

In the midst of these challenges, pastors are called to be good stewards of the money entrusted to us. It's no wonder that for every story you hear about a pastor running off with his secretary you also hear a story about a pastor mismanaging

church funds. I've pastored three churches. At each I've heard stories about pastors who, one way or another, got caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

THREE TRUTHS TO REMEMBER

As a new pastor, there are several things you must remember. Whatever temptation you face, whatever justification or rationalization flashes through your brain, you must be a faithful steward of the money entrusted to you. To that end, remember these three truths.

First, someone will know if you tithe or you don't tithe. And when I say someone, I really mean someones. Yes, I know the policies about financial confidentiality with giving. I also know a good treasurer or financial secretary will take their secrets to the grave. But let's be real. At least one person knows how much or how little you put in the offering plate. And if one person knows, there's a pretty good chance more people know.

I saw this play out in dramatic fashion at a previous church I pastored. A church down the street hired a new pastor. He was young and energetic, and the congregation was genuinely excited about his arrival. Things went fine for a while. But

eventually it seemed as if people were turning on the new pastor. Those of us not involved in his church learned the truth a few months later. The new pastor wasn't tithing. Or giving. Anything. Nothing. The financial secretary kept this to herself for a while, but eventually passed the information to some of the lay leaders in the church. At that point, the cat was out of the bag and there was no going back. Soon most of the church knew their pastor wasn't giving. Within weeks he was gone. The lesson for you is this: someone knows if you give or don't give. And if they know, odds are others will know as well.

Second, even if your treasurer is tight-lipped, and even if your financial secretary is a vault of secrecy, and even if no one else ever knows about your giving habits ... God knows. As a pastor, I'll assume you're familiar with the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. I'll also assume you don't need me to connect the dots of this story to your lack of generosity. The bottom line should be clear. God knows whether or not you give faithfully and generously, and that's all that matters.

Third, there is biblical precedent for those who make a living as spiritual leaders to give a tithe of the peoples' tithe. In Numbers 18:25-32, God commanded the Levites to collect tithes *and* to tithe off those tithes. In other words, there is no asterisk or exemption for those who earn their income from

religious service. God calls everyone to give faithfully and generously. Pastor, that includes you.

SUGGESTIONS

My first suggestion is that as a pastor, you should do what you expect your people to do. If you expect them to tithe, you need to tithe. If you expect them to give to missions offerings or building funds, you need to give as well. If you refuse to do this, you're a hypocrite. If you call your people to give, you must also be willing to give.

My second suggestion is that as a pastor, you must be serious about making a personal budget. As a new, first-time pastor, your salary isn't going to be extravagant. It won't be easy to give your tithe, pay your bills, and give over and above in other ways. Even though it's not easy, that's what you are called to do as a pastor. Part of managing your household well involves managing your money well (1 Timothy 3:4). You're going to need a budget.

My third suggestion is that as a pastor, you teach your children the importance of stewardship. This teaching must include biblical truth, but it also must include hands on practice. Your kids have to learn how to give their money, not

your money. Christmas gifts and birthday presents are a great place to start. Get out the calculator, get out the envelope, and help your kids learn to be good stewards of their money. If you teach them now, it will be second nature by the time they're grown.

My final suggestion is that as a pastor, you do everything possible to lead your church to be generous with the money it receives. Don't let your church sit back and spend all of its money on itself. Lead your church to give generously to missions. This giving can take a variety of forms (denominational giving, direct giving to missionaries, local benevolence ministries, etc.). The point isn't to adopt a one-size-fits-all-plan. The point is to make sure your church is faithful in the area of financial stewardship.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you doing what you ask your people to do when it comes to giving?
- Are you serious about planning and budgeting your money?
- Are you leading your church to be generous in giving?

CHAPTER 13

MAKING REAL FRIENDS

In 1994 NBC hit the jackpot with a new sitcom called *Friends*. The series followed the lives of six friends living in Manhattan. *Friends* ran for ten seasons, and the series finale aired in May 2004 with over 50 million viewers in the United States. This rating gave the finale the title of most watched television episode of the 2000s. There was one official spin off series (*Joey*), and several cast members tried their hand at new sitcoms. But none of the original cast was able to recapture the magic of *Friends*.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Friends* was the lack of family connections in the show. Yes, two of the characters were siblings. Yes, parents and children played small roles from time to time. But for the most part, the storylines revolved around non-family relationships. Hence the title, *Friends*. The popularity of *Friends* reveals the importance and power of lasting, genuine friendships. I think pastors should

learn a lesson from *Friends*. That lesson is simple: Pastors should make real friends.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

The previous statement seems so obvious. “Pastors should make real friends.” Who would disagree with that statement? Does anyone really believe pastors should not make real friends? Of course not! However, the statement needs to be made because many pastors don’t have “real” friends. They have plenty of acquaintances. They have lots of “friends” and “followers” on social media. But they have few people they think of as “real” friends.

There are several reasons many pastors live a friend-less existence. For one thing, pastors know there are plenty of church members who only want to be close to the pastor for position and influence. These people like to have the pastor’s ear. They like to make their preferences known to someone in power. They may approach the pastor with the appearance of friendship, but their real motive is selfish.

Another reason pastors often live a friend-less existence is the fact that so many of the people who attend their church are people they would not normally be friends with outside

of a church setting. Pastors find themselves relating to people from different generations, with different backgrounds, and even having different personalities. Truth be told, if you lived a “normal” life and you weren’t a pastor, you would not be friends with many of the people who think of you as their friend. But, as the pastor, you have to do your best to build relationships with a wide variety of people.

A third reason pastors find themselves friend-less is the reality that you can’t be real friends with everyone in your church. The first church I pastored was a small church averaging just under 100 people in worship. Even in that setting, it was impossible for me to have deep, meaningful relationships with everyone. When pastors face this dilemma, they often develop surface relationships with many and deep relationships with few.

Some pastors find themselves friend-less because they don’t know how to be vulnerable with the people they lead. Real friendship requires vulnerability, and many pastors feel pressure to exude spiritual confidence in all situations. When you find yourself avoiding vulnerability in relationships, you find yourself without real friends.

Finally, many pastors find themselves friend-less because they have to spend so much time listening to other people. Everyone wants to talk to the pastor. They want to make

suggestions about church life. They want to share their burdens and unload on listening ears. They want to gripe and complain to someone who can address their concerns. In many “conversations” pastors find themselves listening to people who only want to talk. Everyone wants to talk to the pastor, but few want to listen. Don’t get me wrong, they’ll listen to a sermon or a Bible study. But when the pastor is done speaking they’re ready for an opportunity to share their thoughts. The result is often pastors who listen to many people without having anyone really listen to them.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

After 10 years of pastoral ministry, I can look back and see the value of real friendships. Some of my friendships took place in the context of my own church. There were church members and fellow staff members who provided genuine friendships along the way. However, many of my real friendships took place outside the context of my own church. Fellow seminary students, other pastors in the area, even neighbors who attended another church in town have been real friends along the way.

MAKING REAL FRIENDS

As a pastor, you should try to develop real friendships on three levels. You should look for friendships within your church, friendships with other pastors, and friendships outside your church. When I talk about all those “friends” I know what most pastors think. “Who has time for all those friends?” I know your schedule is busy with ministry and family. But genuine friendships are important.

For one thing, genuine friends keep you from being lonely. As a pastor you have to be friendly with everyone. While this means many people think of you as a friend, you know better. There’s a world of difference between being friendly and being real friends. When your world is dominated by friendly, you face the real danger of being lonely in the midst of many friendly people. Genuine friendships will save you from the pain of loneliness.

You also need genuine friends so that you have people in your life who understand your lot in life. Even your best friends at church will not know what it’s like to be a pastor. This is where friendships with other pastors are invaluable. When you develop a real friendship with another pastor you have a friend who understands your schedule, your struggles, your frustrations, your joys, and your sorrows. If all

of your real friends have trouble relating to your lot in life, isolation and frustration will set in. Find other pastors who can be real friends.

A third reason real friends are important involves your needs as a believer. You're not Jesus. You need people to invest in your life. You need encouragement. You need rebuke. You need a listening ear. You need people who will be there for you in your darkest moments. Simply put, you need real friends. I'm not talking about people who invest in your ministry. I'm talking about people who invest in you.

A final reason you need real friendships is your need to "escape" from church life from time to time. This is why you need friends who are not part of your church. When you've spent all week preparing for Sunday, making visits, and handling crises, the last thing you want to do is "clock out" and talk about church life. Yet that's a common experience for many pastors. They do church for their job, and they continue to do church when they leave work. Church never ends. The phone calls and texts come at all hours. At times it feels like there's no escape. But when you have real friendships with people who are not part of your church, you have an opportunity to "escape." You can talk over dinner about whatever you want without having to rehash what's going on at work.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you willing to be vulnerable enough to develop real friendships?
- How will you make time to develop real friendships?
- Are you looking for real friendships outside of your church family?

CHAPTER 14

LOVING PEOPLE

There's an old saying that gets thrown around when pastors get together. The discussion usually goes like this. Pastor A tells a story highlighting the insanity or depravity of his congregation. All pastors in the discussion chuckle and shake their heads. Pastor B pipes up and says, "Ministry would be great if we didn't have to deal with people." Again, all pastors in the discussion chuckle, this time nodding their heads in agreement.

Let me be direct. The notion that people make ministry miserable is foolish, short-sighted, and most of all insulting to Jesus who died to redeem the people who are making you so miserable. Here's the bottom line for you as a pastor: If you don't love people, if you won't love people, or if you can't love people, you need to find a job pushing a pencil and leave the ministry before you destroy a church. Additionally, if you're going to act like you love people, but then you're going to

turn around and complain about people, go ahead and stop at the pencil sharpener on your way out.

Real friendships are a two-way street. The previous chapter emphasized the benefits you as a pastor receive from genuine friendships. This chapter is related in topic but different in emphasis. In this chapter I want to talk about the importance of you as a pastor loving the people in your church. This certainly includes the folks you consider “real” friends, but it also includes the people you consider mere acquaintances.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

There’s a reason pastors repeat the stupid line I mentioned above. Sinful people are hard to love. It doesn’t matter if they’re your family or your friends or your church members. Sinful people are hard to love. As a pastor called to love your people, here are a few of the challenges you’re sure to face.

For one thing, loving your people takes time and emotional energy. There’s no short cut to speed this process along. As you invest time in people you’re going to have to show concern, affection, and attention. When you pour these things into your people, you’re going to find yourself drained. This isn’t a complaint. This is just reality. Loving people will

drain you physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It really is hard work.

Secondly, you also have the responsibility of family at home. You have a wife to care for and possibly children to invest in. That means at work you have to love your church members and pour your life into their lives. Then when you go home you have to love your family and pour your life into their lives. Again, this isn't a complaint, just a recognition of reality.

Another reason loving people is difficult is the fact that some of your people are annoying. Others are not very lovable. There are even a handful that you just won't want to be around. Nevertheless, as the pastor, you don't have the option of loving a select group of people. Church isn't a sports team. You don't get to trade unlovable members, and you can't cut annoying members. Instead, you have to find a way to love your people ... All of them.

A final challenge in loving your people is the fact that pastoral ministry is a busy job. There's a lot you have to do, especially as the pastor of a small to medium sized church. You don't always have the option of delegating certain responsibilities to another staff member. You have visits to make, sermons to prepare, people to counsel, fellowships to attend, and a building to maintain. At times you will be overwhelmed with tasks and left wondering how you're going to make time to love people.

WARNINGS FOR PASTORS

Pastor to pastor, I want you to know that loving your people might be the most important thing you'll do in your ministry. Not a sermon, those will be forgotten. What people will remember is the love you showed them. However, pastor to pastor, I want to warn you that loving your people will cost you time. Lots of time. Loving your people will be inconvenient. Really inconvenient. Loving your people will require intentionality. It won't happen on its own. Loving your people will break your heart. And if your heart doesn't break, you probably haven't really loved your people. Despite this warning, I assure you that loving your people is one of your most important roles as a pastor. Here's how you do it.

HOW TO LOVE YOUR PEOPLE

One of the ways you love your people is through counseling. Even though you may feel ill-equipped to "counsel" people in crisis, they have confidence in you because you're their pastor. You're their spiritual leader. There may be times when you need to refer people to a professional. But under no circumstance should you give your people the impression

that you are unwilling or unable to counsel them. That's your job! You're their pastor! You don't have to come up with some brilliant analysis of their problem, and you don't have to find a solution that makes life all giggles and smiles. You do have to listen. And you do have to tell them what the Bible says about their struggle. A pastor is a counselor.

You're going to be asked to do pre-marital counseling and in-marriage counseling. You're going to counsel parents in crisis. You're going to counsel people struggling with their sexuality and gender identity. You're going to counsel people who are in conflict with other church members. In all of these situations you have opportunities to love your people. Counseling in these situations involves asking questions, listening to answers, and talking about what the Bible says.

Another way you love your people is when you walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death. You must make hospital visits. Especially if you pastor a small to medium sized church. Your people expect you to show up and reach out. It doesn't matter how much you hate hospitals. We all hate hospitals. Get over it, and go see your people. You don't have to stay long, but you need to go, you need to listen, and you need to pray with your people. You also need to tell them you love them. Don't assume they know. Open your mouth and tell them.

Some of the people you visit in the hospital will not return home. Some will die, and when they die you will have another opportunity to love your people. Funerals aren't fun, but you have the responsibility to walk with your people through the process. Take time to sit and listen to the family talk about their loved one. Ask them questions, and take notes so you can share their stories in the funeral itself. Make sure you pray with these families, and make sure you tell them you love them.

On a brighter note, you can also show your people love by attending big events whenever possible. These events include sports, performances, graduations, and weddings. Yes these things are boring for you. Yes these things cut into your personal time and family time. Of course you need to take care of your family responsibilities. No one is suggesting that you ignore your home life. But when you sign up to be a pastor, you are giving away a significant amount of "your" time. It really is important for you to be present at big events with your people. Especially in small churches and small communities, regular appearances at big events will help your ministry in amazing ways.

WHY TO LOVE YOUR PEOPLE

I've mentioned a few ways to show your people that you love them. But what's your motivation? Why should you be intentional about loving your people? For one thing, Jesus loves them, and if Jesus loves them you should love them too. The Bible tells us that Jesus felt compassion when he looked on the masses (Matthew 9:36). The Bible tells us that Jesus loved his disciples to the end (John 13:1). As the under-shepherd, you are called to model the love of the Good Shepherd.

Another reason you should find ways to love your people is a bit more pragmatic. From a leadership perspective, it just works. There's a reason so many business books have started talking about "servant leadership." It's not their commitment to the authority of Scripture. It's their commitment to pragmatism. Servant leadership works. People will follow a pastor when they know he loves them. Even when he preaches a bad sermon or makes a poor decision, people will follow a man they know loves them.

All of this assumes your love is genuine, not just a pragmatic ploy. Your people will spot a phony a mile away. If you're faking it or doing it just because it's your "job," they'll know. This presents an interesting question. Make no mistake about it, this question is not hypothetical or theoretical.

You will have to answer this question as a pastor. The question is, what do you do when you don't want to love your people? The answer, love them anyway. Give them your time anyway. Invest in them anyway. Go to the event anyway. And as you do these things, ask God to change your heart. Ask God to help you love your people like Jesus loves them.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Do you need to repent of an attitude that sees people as an annoyance?
- Are you willing to give up personal time to invest in your people?
- Will you ask God to make you like Jesus by giving you a heart to love your people?

CHAPTER 15

JOINING YOUR COMMUNITY

A few months ago I went to eat lunch with a new pastor in town. We started with get-to-know-you small talk. Then we discussed the challenges associated with moving and settling in to a new place. At some point in our conversation, my new pastor friend turned his sights on our town, Odessa. He complained about how much he missed his home town, and explained all the ways his home town was superior to Odessa. He also detailed all the things he didn't like about Odessa, ranging from the terrain to the weather to the people to the pace of life.

I wish I could go back and look at my expression as this new pastor ran *our* town into the West Texas dirt. I'm sure it was one of shock and surprise. I just couldn't believe this new pastor was denigrating *our* town. After all, he chose to move to Odessa. No diocese or bishopric forced him to move. But only a few weeks into life in a new place, my new

pastor friend was openly demeaning his new home. As I sat and listened, I wondered, “How will you serve as a pastor in a town you don’t like? How will you serve as a pastor in a town you despise?”

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

I’m not exactly sure what my new pastor friend needs to hear, but I am sure about this. If he’s going to succeed in Odessa, something has to change. Either he needs to learn to love this community, or he needs to keep his mouth shut and make people think he loves this community. Pastors simply do not have the option of despising the communities in which they serve. Additionally, pastors must find meaningful ways to join their community.

To be clear, this isn’t always easy for pastors. In fact, it can be incredibly hard for pastors to jump in and be a part of life in a new community. One challenge is the fact that we often serve in a place that is not our “home.” For many people, the place we grew up holds sentimental value. But most pastors find themselves pastoring in a city or community that just doesn’t *feel* like home.

On a related note, pastors often find themselves serving in

communities that are far from their extended family. Parents and grandparents, siblings and cousins, aunts and uncles often live hours away. This distance can feel even greater when a pastor realizes that many of the people in his church *do* live in their home town and *do* live close to their extended family. When everyone you know seems to have family close by, the distance between you and your family only feels greater. In subtle ways, this distance can cause a pastor to resent the community where he serves. It can also cause a pastor to day-dream about living in a different place, which in turn leads to resentment for your current “home.”

Another challenge is the fact that many pastors don't feel the freedom to move anywhere and find work. Teachers, nurses, and many professionals can live just about anywhere they want and find gainful employment. Pastor positions are not always available in your home town, two blocks from your momma's house. Sometimes pastors feel “trapped” in a place they would rather not be, and this feeling of being trapped can lead to resentment for your community and detachment from your community.

A final challenge for pastors is the undeniable reality that it's easier for an outsider to see the flaws of a community. I know this from personal experience. I spent the first 22 years of my life in Amarillo, Texas. It holds great sentimental value

in my heart, and it formed the basis of what I think of as “normal” life. Moving to Kentucky and Oklahoma was challenging. In many ways, life is different in these places. Not better. Not worse. Just different. As an outsider, I noticed these differences. As an outsider, I was able to see the flaws of these communities.

HOW TO JOIN YOUR COMMUNITY

Despite these challenges, pastors must find ways to join their community. Yes, you will experience different ways of living. Yes, you will see the flaws of your new home and miss life in your true home. But just like a missionary in a foreign country, you have to find ways to jump into your new home with both feet.

In Kentucky, my wife and I often found ourselves attending community festivals, fairs, and yard sales because folks in Frankfort gathered at these events. At our church we started a tutoring program because so many kids in our community struggled academically. As a pastor I tried to work with other churches in the area when it was possible, and regularly found myself praying at community events (like the dedication of a new nursing home). None of these activities involved

preaching or evangelism, but they did give me the opportunity to build relationships and establish myself as a real member of the community. That had positive impact on my ability to preach and evangelize.

In small town, rural Oklahoma, I learned that joining your community meant being part of a civic organization (Rotary, Lions, etc.). I also realized that as the pastor of First Baptist Church, football games and basketball games were not just school events. They were community events where people gathered. Our church worked closely with the local schools, often feeding teachers and students in our facilities and at our expense. Did we preach Jesus at these meals? No. Did I share the gospel at every sporting event? No. But participating in those gatherings showed the community that I wanted to be one of them. It gave me standing and respect that empowered my ministry.

My time in Odessa has taught me another lesson about joining your community. Simply put, pastors must not complain about the place they live. If a missionary moved overseas and complained about every aspect of life in their new home, we would rightly question their call to missions. Likewise, as a pastor, if you accept a call to pastor a church, you must refrain from constantly criticizing your new home. If you don't, your people have every right to question your call

to their church and community. I live in a place that is not immediately endearing to new people. The heat. The landscape. The wind. No one loves these things. But as a pastor, if my constant refrain involves gripes and complaints, I lose the ability to relate to people in my community. And when I lose the ability to relate to people in my community, I lose the ability to impact their lives with the gospel.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR INVOLVEMENT

It's easy for pastors to say, "This isn't my job." It's easy for pastors to talk about the priority of preaching and evangelism, or even shepherding their family. It's easy for pastors to focus on church life instead of community life. But if you want to be effective in ministry, you just can't neglect the importance of joining your community in meaningful ways.

When I interviewed for the pastor position in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, one elderly member asked me about football. In particular, she wanted to know if I had a problem with the expectation that the pastor would attend all home football games. At first I was offended. I knew the biblical answer about pastors and their role in ministry. But then I realized

that in this particular community, football was my way in. It was a way to connect. It was a relational bridge I could use to further the gospel in Western Oklahoma.

I think this is what God was trying to tell Jeremiah when he was sent into exile. It would have been easy for Jeremiah and the other exiles to live like outsiders. They were far from home, and their home was the Promised Land. However, instead of secluding themselves into Jewish “bubbles,” God called Jeremiah and the exiles to seek the good of their new home (Jeremiah 29:7). God wanted the prophet and the people to realize that in order for the Kingdom to grow, they had to connect with the people who lived next door.

I also think this is part of what Jesus was saying when he told his disciples they were to be “salt” and “light” in a dark and decaying world (Matthew 5:13-16). For light to do its job, it has to be introduced to darkness. For salt to do its job, it has to get out of the shaker. We can only light up the darkness and stop the decay when we find meaningful ways to join our community.

TWO WARNINGS

Warning one, don't become a social crusader who tries to make this world a perfect place. Don't abandon the gospel in your attempt to bless your community. Ultimately your mission is making disciples who in turn make disciples. Don't forsake this mission for the sake of community involvement. Do realize that to be effective in making disciples you must join your community in meaningful ways.

Warning two, joining your community is not easy. It requires you to think like a missionary. You have to study and learn your context. You have to recognize the various people groups in your midst. You have to learn by trial and error the things that work and don't work in your particular setting.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Do you need to ask God to change your heart and emotions toward your city?
- How can you connect with your community in meaningful ways?
- Have you abandoned the gospel for the sake of community involvement?

CHAPTER 16

PRAYING FOR WISDOM

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is found in 2 Chronicles 20. The king of Judah was a man named Jehoshaphat, and he had a problem. A three nation army was headed straight for Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. The text tells us that Jehoshaphat was “afraid” (2 Chronicles 20:3). The text also tells us that this godly king moved from fear to prayer. In fact, Jehoshaphat assembled all the people of Judah to pray for the nation (2 Chronicles 20:3-4). When the king led the people in prayer he prayed an amazing prayer. My favorite part is in verse 12 where Jehoshaphat prayed, “We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

As a pastor, there will be times you feel powerless. There will also be times you just don't know what to do. In these moments, pray what Jehoshaphat prayed! Then pray for wisdom! Passages like James 1 and Proverbs 2 give you rock solid

assurance that God will give wisdom to his people when they ask for wisdom and seek wisdom like priceless treasure.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

I realize some pastors begin ministry without formal education or training. I also realize God calls some pastors into ministry straight out of a “secular” career. However, most pastors spend some amount of time studying at a Bible college or seminary. We invest heavily in training for our calling, and as a result we don’t want people to see us as incompetent or unqualified to handle difficult situations. Positively, we want our people to have confidence in our ability to make difficult decisions and handle difficult situations. Simply put, we want people to recognize our wisdom as leaders.

This is a problem when you get into real pastoral ministry. The honest truth is this: You will certainly face situations where there is no good option, only a least bad option. You will face situations with no precedent upon which you can base your decisions. You will face situations that feel like they’re above your pay grade. They will feel that way because they *are* above your pay grade. Whether you want to admit it or not, you are in desperate need of God given wisdom.

STICKY SITUATIONS

In Kentucky our small, rural church had a cemetery in the front lawn. One day as I was working in my office, a family pulled into the parking lot and began walking through the cemetery. This wasn't unusual as people regularly came to visit the graves of loved ones. What was unusual was this family asking me what they needed to do to bury their recently deceased matriarch in our cemetery. I explained to them that our cemetery was legally closed and had been for some time. They explained to me that their loved one had purchased a plot in our cemetery years ago.

To make matters worse, their "plot" had been used by a poor church member decades earlier. The family of this poor member did what many poor Kentuckians did when they couldn't afford a proper headstone. They used a large rock. I explained to the family that there was someone buried in their plot, and it was marked by the rock. They insisted it was just a rock. They also insisted that their loved one had to be buried in *her* plot.

To make matters even worse, the family came up with a plan that involved a backhoe in our cemetery. They wanted to dig up the rock-marked plot and look for a body. From my conversations with our deacons, I knew this was not an

option. Several years earlier, in the process of construction, a backhoe had accidentally opened several unmarked graves. The deacons and our members insisted that no one be allowed to dig up the cemetery with a backhoe.

Through the whole messy process, I was the one who had the privilege of negotiating with this family. Why me? I was the pastor. It was my job. This family was right in the middle of the grieving process. They had travelled many hours to get to Frankfort. They were facing the time constraints of burying their loved one. Rest assured, no seminary class prepared me to handle this crisis. I was totally unqualified to handle this sort of situation, so I prayed for wisdom.

In the end the family decided to cremate their loved one against her wishes. They did this so they could bury her ashes in a shallow grave on top of the older, rock-marked grave. The cemetery was not opened by a backhoe, and the family was able to use *their* plot. I'm not sure this solution followed proper burial protocol, but in the end everyone could live with the decision.

As a pastor, I doubt that you will ever find yourself negotiating the location of burial plots or the use of heavy equipment in a cemetery. But I promise you this: You will find yourself dealing with situations that don't have a good option and have no precedent. You will have to deal with church

members and families caught in immorality. At times, these crises will threaten to split the fellowship of your church in half. At other times, you will have to deal with people who lie to your face. You will have to decide when to call a lie a lie and when to let a lie be a lie (see Proverbs 26:4-5 for direction). At yet other times you will have to deal with leaders and staff who need to be corrected, rebuked, reigned in, let go, or transitioned. Many of these people will have more real “power” in your church than you do, and you’re going to need wisdom to know how to proceed.

PRAYING FOR WISDOM

I could try and provide you with a list of situations for which you will need great wisdom. Unfortunately, if things were that simple you wouldn’t need wisdom, you’d just need my list. The circumstances and situations you face as a pastor will be unique to your church and your ministry. They cannot be predicted. They cannot be foreseen. That’s where wisdom comes in. Wisdom guides your decisions when your circumstances fall between the black and white teaching of the Bible.

These “gray” situations are even trickier when you are a first-time pastor. To use an analogy from real life ... Pastoring

a church for the first time is a lot like bringing your first child home from the hospital. As the nurse waves goodbye from the curb and you pull away from the hospital, the feeling is surreal. You can't believe they really let you leave with a tiny, living human. You know you have no idea how to keep a baby alive, and you wonder why the nurses would let a person like you leave the premises with a tiny person.

As a new pastor, this is the feeling you will have. When you feel overwhelmed, don't worry. You should feel overwhelmed. Nothing has prepared you for the position you are in, and nothing can prepare you to make the decisions you will be forced to make. Recognizing your inadequacy is a healthy thing, and it should be a regular reminder that you are in desperate need of God given wisdom.

This recognition of need should move you to pray. Just like Jehoshaphat, you must admit your weakness and fix your eyes on God. Specifically, here are four ways you should pray as a new pastor seeking wisdom from God.

First, you should pray for wisdom proactively and preventatively. What I mean is, don't wait for the crisis to hit and then pray for wisdom. Instead, pray for wisdom knowing that sooner or later the crisis will hit.

Second, as you pray, trust the promises of God in Proverbs 2 and James 1. Both passages assure the believer that God

answers genuine and fervent requests for wisdom. Rest in these promises.

Third, when it comes time to make a decision, do it without looking for “signs” and “omens.” Don’t be like Gideon, asking God for a wet fleece then a dry fleece. Instead, pray for wisdom, use your brain, and make a decision.

Fourth, before you settle on a decision, talk to godly people around you and involve them in the process. Listen to your elders and your deacons and your staff and your leaders. These people will clarify your thinking and help you make the best decisions in difficult circumstances.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Have you recognized your need for God given wisdom?
- Will you faithfully pray for wisdom before the crisis hits?
- How can you involve other people when hard decisions need to be made?

CHAPTER 17

SAVING AND SENDING NICE NOTES

One of my biggest regrets in ministry involves a person named “Julio Warwick.” Here’s the story. When I was a pastor in Oklahoma our church posted audio and video of the Sunday sermon online. One week, I received an email in response to a sermon we had posted. It was from “Julio Warwick.” The name was fake, and the email account was set up so the sender could remain anonymous. My mystery listener wanted to criticize something I said in a sermon, but they didn’t want me to know their identity.

As soon as I realized the email was anonymous, I knew I should delete it and move on. Instead, I read the criticism over and over. Several comments in the message told me that the anonymous sender knew me personally. This email was not sent by a stranger, just someone who wanted to remain anonymous. After multiple readings and detailed exegesis, I

decided to respond. This was against my better judgment, but I didn't care. I wanted to argue. I wanted to make my case. I wanted to criticize my mystery listener for their cowardice. Several emails later I finally came to my senses and dropped the anonymous argument with Julio Warwick. I wasted precious hours thinking about this person and drafting words that I hoped would hurt him (or her) as much as they had hurt me.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

The issue of saving and sending nice notes is larger than anonymous emails, although I'll come back to that below. The truth is ministry can be extremely draining. Pouring your life into other people often leaves you with little to nothing left in the tank. Additionally, when you stand up in front of a group of people week in and week out, you stand under a collective magnifying glass. All of your words and all of your actions are parsed and interpreted. Add this pressure to the built in frustrations and discouragements that come with pastoral ministry, and you often find yourself drained. Emotionally drained. Spiritually drained. Even physically drained.

Another challenge of pastoral ministry is the fact that

everyone in your church has an opinion about how things should be run. Most of them want you to hear their ideas and implement them with haste. Those who don't want you to hear their ideas probably expect you to read their mind and know what they are thinking without them having to tell you. As a pastor, when you receive this constant barrage of suggestions, it's easy to hear only criticism. People may not be criticizing you at all. In fact, they're probably just trying to help. But when you regularly hear ideas and suggestions, it's easy to hear people criticizing you and the way you do things.

Another challenge is the busyness of pastoral ministry. Especially in a small to medium sized church where you find yourself wearing many hats, a week can fly by in the blink of an eye. There are sermons to prepare, visits to make, meetings to attend, and your own family to care for. At the end of all that, who has time to sit down and write notes to those who need to hear an encouraging word?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Several things in my life have reinforced the value and the power of hand written notes. I could detail many of these things, but I'll only mention two. First, my mom used to

always make me write thank you notes as a child and a teenager. She never let me get by with a generic “thanks” before signing my name. Rather, she always made me write, with neat handwriting, a personal thank you note. At the time, I hated writing these notes. As an adult, I’m thankful for her persistence. Now I see the value of writing and receiving kind notes, and I’m grateful my mom impressed this into my life.

Second, my pastor during seminary was also one of my favorite professors at seminary. One of the things he said in class has always stuck with me. It wasn’t related to the tense of a Greek verb. It had nothing to do with pressing hermeneutical debates. It was just a simple piece of advice from a veteran pastor to future pastors. He told us to save every nice note we received as a pastor. He told us to file them away, and he encouraged us to go back and read these notes from time to time. He also told us to throw away any mean notes or words of criticism. Yes he wanted us to read these negative comments, but after reading them he told us to throw them away. As a pastor, I’ve put this advice into practice. Ten years later I’m thankful for his advice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NOTES

The Bible recognizes the importance of encouragement. Pastors love to quote Hebrews 10:25. It's one of the few verses in the New Testament that clearly and directly speaks to the importance of regular church attendance. What we sometimes overlook is the role of encouragement. Hebrews 10:25 says that one of the reasons we should regularly meet together is so that we can encourage one another.

My wife will tell you that encouragement is not my spiritual gift. I'd agree, but I'd also say I can't think of many people I know who easily and naturally encourage other people. I know plenty of people who have mastered flattery, but few who have mastered encouragement. And yet, we all know the importance and power of encouraging words. We know the feeling that rises within us when someone shares a sincere compliment or an uplifting word. We know what it's like to receive a written compliment and to read that compliment over and over. We also know the destructive power of criticism and sharp comments.

As a pastor, the words you speak to your people (staff, leaders, members) have heightened potential. Like it or not, your position gives your encouraging words a little more power. And like it or not, your position gives your critical

words a little more bite. You must recognize that the title “pastor” makes all of your words, the encouraging ones and the critical ones, just a little more important to your people.

HOW TO

Let me give you four basic suggestions when it comes to notes you receive and notes you send. First, read all of the notes you receive, and read them with an open mind. Read the encouraging ones, and read the critical ones. When you receive the occasional anonymous note (or email), toss it in the trash or hit delete. If someone won't attach their name to their criticism, don't give it a second thought.

Second, from time to time, pull out the kind notes you've filed away. When you're feeling discouraged, pull out the encouraging cards and letters and emails people have sent your way. Sometimes, the drain of ministry can cause you to forget the victories of ministry. It's hard to imagine changed lives can be forgotten, but in the busyness of ministry you will forget them. So, from time to time, pull out your file and read the nice notes people have sent you. Read these notes and remember the ways God has used you for the good of his people.

Third, set aside time to write kind notes to other people. When you do this, don't be surprised to hear people genuinely thank you for sending them a thank you note. People will tell you that you are the first pastor who has sent them a kind, handwritten note. Your time will not be wasted. Your encouraging words will be truly appreciated by those who receive them. Again, you're going to have to make time to do this. It is a slow process, and you are very busy, but your time will not be wasted.

Fourth, be specific when writing these notes. Don't just send generic thank you cards and sign your name. Slow down, think about each card, and write a personalized message to each person. Focus on how God has used the person in your life or the life of your church. When possible, include Bible verses, but don't just list the address. You know as well as I do that no one takes the time to look those addresses up in the Bible. Take an extra minute and write out the verse itself.

Of course you can use technology to encourage people. Email and texting and Facebook are wonderful tools. But there's something special about sending a personal, handwritten note to those you want to encourage.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Do you have a system for saving nice notes?
- Will you commit to ignore anonymous criticism?
- When will you make time to send encouraging notes to your people?

CHAPTER 18

BEING AFRAID

In 2014 I travelled to Kenya with a short term mission team from my church. Our flight from Europe to Nairobi arrived after midnight local time. The airport was under construction from a recent fire, so we waited in the old parking garage that was now serving as baggage claim. After an hour of waiting it became clear that most of our bags did not make the trip. After inquiring at the baggage claim counter we learned that United had lost 50,000 bags that day because of a computer glitch. Most of our bags were in that 50,000.

To speed the claims process, I used my passport to claim all of the missing bags for our group. After another hour at the claims counter, we finally loaded up and drove to our room for the night. When we tried to check into the hostel, I realized that I left my passport back at the airport with the baggage claim man. I wish I could describe the fear I felt when I realized that I was in a third world country without

my passport. All I can tell you is that I was afraid. Really, truly afraid. Fortunately, after another hour driving back to the airport I found my passport right where I left it, in the hands of my smiling friend at the baggage claim desk.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

Unfortunately, losing your passport in a third world country is not the only time you will struggle with fear as a pastor. Leading a church can be a fearful thing on multiple levels. Of course we all know the short answer to this problem. When you find yourself struggling with fear as a pastor ... don't be afraid! I wish it was that easy.

Leading a church is a lot like running a business, especially when you serve as the senior pastor. Business owners will tell you that it's hard to leave work at work. You're always thinking about payroll, inventories, advertising, and how to better serve your customers. The same things are true of pastoral ministry. Even when you aren't at the office, you find yourself thinking about programs, people, finances, and numbers. Most of us just can't "check-out" of church life when the clock hits 5:00. And to be honest, I think that's the way it's supposed to be. I think a good pastor is one who lives and

breathes church life. Yes he needs to take time for family and rest, but ministry done well requires a major life investment.

Here's the problem. When you think about church all the time, it's easy for your mind to drift towards worry. When you start to worry about church all the time, you're just a baby step away from fear. That's where you don't want to be as a pastor. Worry and fear will cripple your ministry. But the truth is, ministry can be scary. The questions that roll through your mind are weighty. Will I make this person mad? Will that person leave? Will our offerings be enough? Will people show up when we ask them to show up?

MANIFESTATIONS OF FEAR

As I look back over my first ten years of pastoral ministry, I can think of four big areas where my thoughts moved to worry and eventually fear. Identifying these areas is a good first step in battling fear and worry in my life and yours.

First, I have found myself afraid of people, and I have experienced this on multiple levels. Most obviously, some people are just intimidating. I don't think of myself as a pushover, and I don't struggle with self-esteem issues. Nevertheless, some people are just intimidating. Other people

are always negative, and when you're around these folks you wonder when the negativity will turn towards you. Some people will make you afraid because they wield more power in your church than you do. Maybe it's the matriarch of a small family church, or maybe it's the wealthiest member of a medium sized church. But odds are, you're going to have to interact with people who have more say-so at your church than you do. I could give other examples, but you get the idea. On multiple levels, you are going to face the temptation to be afraid of people.

Second, I have found myself afraid of money. More specifically, the church budget. Again, I don't think this fear rises up because of my incompetence when it comes to money. I have an accounting degree and feel very comfortable looking at budgets, financial statements, and giving reports. However, fear can creep into the equation when you focus on the responsibilities your church has embraced. There are salaries to pay, (including your own). There are missionaries to support. There are programs to fund. There are building repairs to be made. And when you settle into your specific church it won't take you long to figure out the "tight" seasons for a church budget. Summer is tight because people are on vacation, and many don't give when they don't come. Fall is tight because people just spent all their money on summer vacation.

Christmas is tight because presents need to be bought, and those who do give are also asked to support missions offerings. The beginning of the year is tough because people just went broke buying Christmas presents. And spring is tough because people are saving up for summer vacation. That pretty much sums it up. Church budgets are tight.

Third, I have found myself afraid of failure in ministry. Again, I don't really struggle with self-esteem issues, and I realize that I serve with the benefit of a world-class seminary education. Nevertheless, at times I find myself afraid of failure. When you serve as a pastor there's always the possibility that you will be "kindly" asked to leave. Usually this will be phrased in terms of God leading you on to another ministry assignment. But you'll get the point. Your people might just want you gone. Failure also becomes an issue when people quit coming to church. I know I'm supposed to tell you not to take this personally, but personally I know how hard it is not to take this personally. Add to these fears the possibility of your church getting smaller instead of bigger, and the possibility of failure can be a scary thing.

Finally, I have found myself afraid of competition. I hate to use this word, "competition." But you know what I mean. I'm talking about other churches in your community. Of course, on our best days we would never describe the saints

down the road as competition. But if we're going to be honest, sometimes that's exactly what they are. New churches will be started, and some of your people will leave your church to be a part of something new. There's always a "trendy," "hot" church in town. I've seen it in Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Texas. I've seen it in big towns, small towns, and regular towns. These "cool" churches will attract some of your folks. Their flashy programs and lavish spending will make your preaching and Sunday school seem boring by comparison. People will want to know why your church isn't as "active" as the church down the road. When you give them a Bible answer about the priority of making disciples instead of providing entertainment, you'll get a combination of rolling eyes and blank stares. Rest assured, some of your people will leave. When that happens, you're going to struggle with the fear of failure.

FIGHTING FEAR

There will be other situations where you find yourself struggling with worry and fear. My hope is that you can identify these situations and fight back in the following ways. First, rest in the promises of God. Jesus has promised to be with you, and he gave his word that he will never leave you.

God is faithful, and he always does what he promises to do.

Second, believe that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Of course, this assurance doesn't apply to every group of people who identify as a local church. But in the grand scheme of things, you have to believe that you're bigger than just your local tribe. You are part of *the* church, and in the end even the gates of hell will fall.

Third, remember how the kingdom grows. Jesus describes it as a small amount of yeast that spreads through the whole lump. Jesus describes it as a tiny seed that grows into a great tree. Jesus describes it as wheat that grows up amongst a field of tares. In all of these pictures, Jesus is telling us to look for slow, steady growth. Of course, if God pours out his blessing and a Pentecost-sized revival breaks out you should celebrate with gusto. However, if no mass revival occurs, stay the course and keep preaching the good news of the Kingdom.

Finally, find your identity in Christ, not ministry. First and foremost you have to see yourself as a child of God, a member of the Kingdom, a bond-servant of Jesus. Secondly, and it's a distant second, see yourself as a pastor. Keeping these two roles in check will help you battle the worry and fear that come along with pastoral ministry.

That brings us back to the simple answer to the question of being afraid: don't.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you fearful about people, money, failure, or competition? Why?
- Have you forgotten how Jesus described the growth of the kingdom?
- Where does your identity rest? As a follower of Jesus? Or as a pastor?

CHAPTER 19

WANTING TO LEAVE

In previous generations it was common for men to work the same job their entire life. I think about my dad. After college he worked briefly as an accountant. When he realized he didn't like pushing pencils he opted for sales. Thirty years later, he's still selling. Contrast this kind of commitment with my own generation. One of my friends had a great job but wanted to live in a larger city, so he quit his job and moved. Another friend was a CEO of a large company but wanted more flexibility, so he quit his job and found something else. Still another had a good job with a bad company and wanted something more stable, so he quit and found something else. Whether you think it's right or you think it's wrong, you can't ignore the trend. Gen-Xers and Millennials don't mind leaving one job for another job, and their reasons for leaving are varied.

How does this relate to the job of pastor? More and more I hear voices in the evangelical world suggesting that wanting to

leave your church is wrong. These voices suggest that the “right” thing for every pastor is picking a church and staying put until you retire. I know friends who are doing this. I’ve read blogs, articles, and social media posts that encourage this. When I hear these suggestions, I’m concerned. Especially when someone suggests every pastor should pick a church and stay put forever, I have concerns.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

The fact that I cringe when someone tells all pastors to stay put doesn’t mean I think the issue is black and white. On the contrary, this is a very complex issue. For one thing, the job of pastor is a job that involves people. People mean relationships. Relationships involve deep emotions. So when a pastor changes churches or careers, it’s not like my friends I mentioned above. When pastors don’t understand the dynamic of people and relationships and emotions that get wrapped up in their “job,” they end up leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

Like it or not, a pastor leaving a church for a new church or a new career is a lot like a divorce. There’s more going on than just a change in the person who writes your paycheck. When you leave a church, your people hear you say that you don’t want to be with them anymore. Of course in

most situations you won't utter those exact words. But that's what they'll hear. You can coat your resignation with as much spiritual sugar as you want, but ultimately your people hear you saying these words: "It's not me, it's you."

Another complicating factor is the reality that there's always a worse place of ministry. You always know someone who has it worse than you. However, and here's where the danger really resides, there's always another place with greener grass than the lawn you're mowing. There's always a place that seems like it would be a better fit. Maybe it's more staff, or less staff. Maybe it's more pay, or less responsibility. Maybe it's more stability, or more potential. But there's always a position out there that seems to have your name all over it.

There's another problem as you wrestle with the desire to leave. Who do you go to for advice? Of course you talk to your wife if you're married. But you don't want to talk to your kids. Can you imagine the instability and insecurity for a pastor's kid who had to hear about every time his dad wanted to move to a new church, a new town, a new state? Understand, the same issues of instability and insecurity can cripple the people in your church if they catch wind of your desire to move to greener pastures. So you can talk to your wife. Maybe you can talk to a pastor friend in a different community. But other than that, you're on your own.

QUESTIONS ABOUT LEAVING

To be clear, there are legitimate, genuine opportunities for pastors to move. Pastors get fired. Others retire. Some change careers. When a church is without a pastor, someone has to step in and lead. Usually that person is going to be the pastor of another church. That means another church will be without a pastor, and the cycle continues. It's sort of like the coaching carousel at the end of every sports season. Someone gets fired. Someone else gets promoted. Someone else is hired to fill the next vacancy, and on and on it goes. This is why you see the typical pattern of pastors "climbing the church ladder." Sure some pastors are just greedy ego-maniacs who want to climb the ladder. But most of us are just caught up in the normal process of hiring and firing and retiring.

Another tricky issue is pastor tenure. I've heard the stats about average pastor tenure in the United States. They're both depressing and hard to believe. Certainly it hurts a church to go through a revolving door of multiple pastors in a short period of time. On the other hand, I've also seen churches hurt by pastors who should have long since moved on or retired. Sometimes it really isn't a good idea for a man to pick a church and dig in his heels. Sometimes churches get stuck because they're stuck with a pastor who needs to move

on. So somewhere in the middle there has to be balance and common sense. Is it always good for pastors to come and go like temporary employees? No. Is it always good for pastors to stay put for their entire ministry? No.

Another question to consider is the importance of training and preparation. When I hear people calling pastors to pick a church and stay put, I often want to ask them, “Is it not *possible* that God would use your time at a small to medium sized church to prepare you to lead a larger congregation? If it’s not possible, why not? If it’s possible, how can you suggest that every pastor should stay put?”

CAUTION ABOUT LEAVING

Here’s my personal conclusion about a pastor wanting to leave his current place of ministry. Wanting to leave is OK. You shouldn’t feel guilty when you wrestle with the call of God on your life. You don’t have to push the idea of leaving into the back of your mind. You *do* have to be honest with yourself, and you also *must* use caution as you face this issue. Here are five warnings to think through as you wrestle with wanting to leave your church.

First, don’t waste hours on the internet dreaming about

greener ministry opportunities. If you have access to Google you have access to information about pastorless churches around the world. Looking at numbers and budgets and websites on the internet and comparing them to your current place of ministry is a dangerous game. It's sort of like looking at Facebook and comparing the smiling photos and exciting vacations to your boring family life. To be clear, I'm not telling you *not* to search for other ministry opportunities when you feel that it might be time to move. I'm just telling you to guard your heart by watching the time you spend online dreaming about another job.

Second, be honest about the condition of your church. If you leave, will things really be OK? Of course there are always struggles when a church is without a pastor, but be honest. If you leave, will things crumble? Have you started to implement change that hasn't been seen all the way through? Are there things you need to accomplish before turning the job over to someone else? Are there problems you need to deal with instead of running away? Don't run away from something God wants you to do, even if that something is difficult. Also, don't leave a church in a position of vulnerability. Your job is to serve as an under-shepherd. That doesn't mean you can't move to a new flock. That does mean you need to protect your current flock even in the process of leaving.

Third, be honest about your personal motivations. I get tired of the same old story of “God moving me on to a new place.” I would never deny the possibility that God would or could move someone on to a new place. I would also appreciate more pastors honestly admitting that they *want* to move on to a new place. Don’t blame God for what you want to do. Just admit it. Sometimes we move just because we want to move. As you deal with wanting to leave, be honest with yourself about why you want to move. Is it God leading you? Do you need a larger paycheck? Do you have a heart for a particular city? Do you just know it’s time to go? Whatever your motivation, be honest with yourself.

Fourth, if possible, seek wise counsel. Talk to your wife, of course. But try to find someone outside of your situation to advise you. Be careful to protect your current church and your future ministry at your current church. If your people find out that you really want to leave, you immediately become a lame duck pastor. If your people find out that you really want to leave but don’t have any place to go, your people will not follow your leadership just because you’re “stuck” where you’re at. So protect your church and keep a tight lip, but seek wise counsel from an outside perspective.

Fifth, to do the previous four things you’re going to have to prepare for the possibility that you might leave from your

first day of ministry. As soon as you start serving in a new place, you need to serve in a way that prepares you and your church for the possibility that one day you might move on. This means the ministry of your church cannot be solely driven by your personality. If it is, it will crumble when you leave and your church will suffer. This means you need to be mentoring and discipling men in your church from day one. If you don't, the vacuum caused by your departure will go unfilled and your church will suffer. Remember, your job is not to do all of the ministry. Rather, your job is to equip your people to do the ministry, and from your first day as pastor you must start working towards that goal.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you guilty of wasting time day dreaming about greener pastures?
- Have you been honest with yourself about “why” you want to leave?
- Are you preparing now for the possibility that one day you will move on?

CHAPTER 20

SAYING GOODBYE

As I mentioned earlier, I worked a number of secular jobs before settling in as a pastor. All of those jobs have one thing in common: they all ended with my resignation. I always dreaded the conversation where I actually told my boss that I was quitting. I wasn't afraid. I didn't think any of my bosses were going to physically assault me for quitting. But I certainly felt dread about the actual conversation. Strangely, once the news was shared and I officially quit, I always felt a sense of relief, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Contrast that feeling of relief with the experience of resigning as pastor of one church to go be pastor of another church. Quitting a secular job filled me with dread, but it never hurt. Resigning as pastor hurts. When I resigned in Kentucky and in Oklahoma, it was really difficult. I felt dread, and probably some fear. And once it was done I didn't feel

relief, I just felt hurt. Even though I was excited to move to a new place of ministry, saying goodbye hurt.

Thinking about those experiences reminds me of a missionary friend in Argentina. This friend told me he would be willing to leave his place of ministry in Argentina, but only if God clearly lead him away. He also said, “If I ever have to leave, I want it to hurt.” I know the feeling. When you do your job as a pastor, and you do it right, it hurts to say goodbye. You just can’t walk away from your sheep, leaving them without a shepherd, and not feel hurt. Sure you can keep in touch on Facebook and through regular texts, but it still hurts.

CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS

The challenges here are both obvious and numerous. When you leave one church to go to another church, you leave behind real people and genuine relationships. All I can tell you is that if you’ve done things right, there will be pain, sadness, and disappointment. You will feel these things, and so will your people. I wish there was a balm to mask the hurt, but the truth is saying goodbye is not easy.

In the moment, too many pastors take the easy way out. They stand up in front of their people and talk about how

God “called” them to move. They stand up to resign and mutter something about God “telling” them it was time to go. I hate to question people who have a real relationship with Jesus, but I’ll be totally honest. Many of these statements are disingenuous. It’s the spiritual way for a pastor to pass the responsibility of his decision off on God without having to own up to his own actions. We all know God leads people and directs their steps. But do you mean to tell me you got a phone call where God spelled out in detail his plan for you to resign one place and move to another? I don’t think so.

Another challenge relates to the timing of your resignation. If you’ve dealt with pastor search teams and personnel committees, you’ll probably be asked to preach in view of a call (also known as preaching a trial sermon). The question is, when do you tell your current church what’s actually going on? Do you tell them your plans to leave before you preach in view of a call? If you do, what happens if the new church doesn’t vote “yes?” If you wait to tell your current church you’re leaving after your new church votes yes, you still have a dilemma. What do you tell them about the week you’re gone to preach at another church? Do you tell them it’s vacation? Do you tell them it’s personal time? Do you make up some other story?

Personally I’ve done this both ways, and I’m not sure which is best. In Kentucky I told my church that the following

Sunday I would be preaching in view of a call in Oklahoma. I told them that if the church voted “yes” we would follow God, but that if they voted “no” we were content to remain in Kentucky. When we moved from Oklahoma to Texas I did it differently. I told folks in Oklahoma I was going to visit family in Texas. This was true. I didn’t tell them I would be preaching at another church. Instead, when I returned home I told them that a church in Texas had asked us to move. I detail these two experiences to admit that I don’t know which is better. You’re going to have to consider your context and your situation, and you’re going to have to pray for wisdom. Lucky for you there’s a chapter about wisdom in this book.

Another challenge related to saying goodbye is knowing who to tell personally before telling the entire church. I believe that in most situations there is at least one person, probably several people, you need to talk to personally before you announce your move to the entire church. Maybe it’s your staff. Maybe it’s your leadership. Maybe it’s your friends. But you probably need to tell a few folks what’s going on before you tell the entire church. Knowing who to tell, and knowing who you can trust to keep quiet requires wisdom.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LEAVING

I wish I could give you advice that applied in all circumstances. I wish I could tell you exactly *how* to say goodbye to your people. Unfortunately I can't. No two churches, pastors, or situations are the same. What I can give you are a few suggestions to think about as you say goodbye.

First, tell your people that you love them. This shouldn't be the first time you as the pastor express your love for your people. But you should realize it might be your last opportunity to say these words to many folks in your church. Take time to tell them you love them, and tell them why. Even in the most difficult church situation, you should be able to find something praiseworthy and commendable. Encourage your people as you say goodbye, and realize they will be discouraged by the fact that you are leaving.

Second, explain that God has opened an opportunity for you to move. Don't blame the whole thing on God. Don't talk about what God has "told" you or how he has "called" you. Just tell them he has presented you with an opportunity. You don't have to detail the specifics about who contacted who first. Just tell them about the opportunity, tell them you've prayed for wisdom, and tell them you've made a decision. If they know you've prayed about the opportunity,

they don't need to hear you blame the move on God.

Third, don't stay too long after you announce your departure. Give two or three weeks' notice, but don't let things drag on. Your church entered limbo the minute you announced your resignation. The sooner you're gone, the sooner they can move on as a church. Also understand that part of leaving means you really have to leave. Of course you're going to maintain relationships with people at the church. Many people will still call you, email you, or text you looking for advice. But eventually you have to leave so that the new pastor can lead. Be dignified in your support of the new pastor. Even when he changes things you've put in place and messes up things you worked to establish, respect him as the new pastor. Be cautious about listening to your people criticize the new guy, and do your best to support his ministry from a distance.

Finally, expect the entire process to be hard, emotional, awkward, and even painful. Don't be surprised when you have second thoughts and doubts about your decision. If you've done your job as a shepherd up to this point, it isn't going to be easy to say goodbye.

PASTOR QUESTIONS

- Are you pastoring now in such a way that leaving later will be hard?
- Will you resist the temptation to “blame God” for your move?
- If you’re going to leave, are you really prepared to let someone else lead?

CONCLUSION

I offer these suggestions from my own education, my own experiences, and my own observations. Some of these ideas have been passed on to me, and I've been able to learn through the wisdom of others. Some of these ideas have been learned through trial and error, mistake after mistake. Some of these ideas come from watching other pastors fail and succeed in new positions.

On one hand, I admit that my perspective is limited. My education and experiences and observations are those of a young pastor who's still trying to figure it all out. I've never pastored a mega-church or been asked to speak at a national conference. On the other hand, my perspective is valuable because of my proximity to starting a new ministry. Having just walked through the first ten years of ministry in a pastoral role, these things are fresh on my mind. All of these lessons are recently learned. Additionally, the churches I've pastored are probably a lot like the first church you will pastor.

Being a pastor is not something I've mastered or figured

out. I certainly don't think my advice applies to any and all situations. Nevertheless, I hope and pray that these ideas, principles, and suggestions can help you learn how to be a pastor for the first time.