

So, You Are Thinking of Becoming a Pastor

There are many people in churches across the world trying to discern whether or not God is calling them to serve as the pastor of a local congregation. This calling is not, in most cases, easy to discern. I remember struggling to figure out whether or not I was called to the pastoral vocation. In addition to praying, I sought the counsel of people who were seasoned pastors. Their advice was helpful to me as I discerned the call. Now that I have had fifteen years of experience as a pastor, those with a potential pastoral call are seeking my counsel. Here is what I tend to communicate to them.

- **3 Reasons *not* to Become a Pastor**

- **Egotism:** There will be times when our pastoral ego gets stroked. “Great sermon...you are so authentic...you are the best pastor ever” are, let’s be honest, nice sentiments to hear from the people we love and serve. However, if we begin to rely upon these comments to keep us going in ministry we will discover that no amount of affirmation is ever enough. What is more, God is ultimately after the crucifixion, and not the stroking, of our ego. Pastoral ministry, in time, is divinely designed to strip us of egotism. This process is painful but purifying. And, if we don’t submit to this stripping we will either resign or become a pastoral monster. Resignation is the better choice. Simply put, do not become a pastor to have your ego stroked.
- **Ease:** Lay people sometimes say to their pastor, “it must be wonderful to have a job where you just work on Sundays.” I always shot back, “and don’t forget about Wednesdays too!” Lay people don’t say this to hurt us, but the fact is there are some pastors who do get into this racket for ease. Let’s face it, lazy people can hide out in pastoral ministry for a long time in some churches. However, the pastors who seem to most effectively lead their congregation to embody the values of God’s kingdom in the world are among the hardest workers I know. They care deeply about the local church living up to its calling to make disciples who make disciples. They care about resourcing not just the stuff that happens on the church campus but community development as well. These hardworking pastors lose sleep over these concerns. Some of them get ulcers. Every one of them will be called to go into challenging ministry situations at the most inopportune times, usually after they finally fall asleep at 1:00 am. While pastors must seek to live balanced lives, most effective seasoned pastors will admit that leading a local church is anything but easy.
- **Equity:** Do not become a pastor to get rich. In most cases, it is not the most lucrative career choice you can make. Pastoral ministry is a calling and not a career. A career is chosen by you, but a calling is chosen for you. Most of us, if we were making the call, would choose a lucrative career. Why not? God calls the pastor to something more substantial than material wealth. So, if making lots of money is your life-goal, don’t become a pastor. I recently spoke to a pastor friend who said he hasn’t had a raise in seven years and has only had four raises in the twenty years he has served his congregation. What an outrage! My friend is among many pastors who have had similar experiences. The point is, don’t become a pastor to get rich. If any local church lay leaders are listening in, for the love of God and your pastor pay a generous wage to your pastoral leaders.

- **3 Reasons to Become a Pastor**

- **Commitment:** If you are the kind of person who has a hard time making or keeping commitments, I would advise you not to become a pastor. If you do, you will quickly quit and seek out a safer kind of job. There are so many joys in this pastoral line of work to keep us going, but there are also overwhelming challenges. People who lack commitment will quit during the intense challenges and, therefore, miss out on some of the immense joys of pastoral work. In the apparently non-committal culture many of us live within, “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong on behalf of those whose hearts are fully committed to Him [and his work]” (2 Chron. 16:9). To borrow from the recruitment phrase of the Marines, God is looking for a few good women and men with the commitment to be pastors. Similar to marriage, pastoral ministry requires a “for better or worse” level of commitment. If you are not completely committed, when the going gets tough, you’ll quit.
- **Compassion:** Several times in the Gospels we read “Jesus was filled with compassion.” The Greek word for compassion is *splagchnizomai*. The word does not imply a sappy kind of love. Instead, it is a deep pain in the bowels that results from empathy toward another person and causes one to act on behalf of that person. If you are considering becoming a pastor you must have the capacity to be moved with compassion for people. You might say, “well, I’m just not an affectionate and tender-hearted kind of person.” Compassion for people has nothing to do with personality type. Whether you are more of a thinker than a feeler or more introverted than extroverted, if you are called to be a pastor you are called to feel such deep compassion for people that you are moved to act on their behalf. If you become a pastor you can expect to experience, to some extent, the heartaches, frustrations, and disappointments of the people you lovingly lead. In other words, be prepared for some pain in your bowels!
- **Courage:** Leading a local church through the wilderness of status quo and into the promised land of their potential for missional impact takes lots of moxie. Think about some of the tasks of the pastoral minister. The pastor is expected to go into a hospital room and comfort parents who are watching their six year old son die of cancer. A couple you married comes to your office, without appointment, broken by marital infidelity and seeking your help. Every week on Sunday morning people gather desperately hopeful that you will have the courage to invite God to speak a word to them through you. An influential lay leader is trying to lead the congregation back to “Egypt” and away from the “Promised Land” of missional fulfillment. It will take a significant amount of courage to confront this person in love. Pastoral leadership is not for pansies!

Much more could be said. Faithful pastoral practice is not simply the avoidance of three E’s (egotism, ease, equity) and the embodiment of three C’s (commitment, compassion, courage). These considerations are, however, good beginning guides for the person who is contemplating saying “yes” to this frightening, adventurous vocation called pastoral ministry.

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