

Staying Where You're Called

I am convinced that one of the keys to church health is pastoral tenure. I say this as a guy who has moved a few times. I understand that God does call us to new ministries. I understand that situations can get so toxic that a move is necessary. But I also understand this: *Church health takes time and is most likely to happen when the pastor stays put, stays healthy, and stays focused on his call.*

New Orleans Seminary conducted a comprehensive study of the health of Southern Baptist churches. One of the conclusions was about pastoral tenure.

The length of a pastor's tenure...was found to have a direct correlation to the health of a church. A church's likelihood to be healthy was much greater when the pastor had served there between five and 20 years. (Baptist Press, Nov. 15, 2004)

Lifeway president Thom Rainer came to a similar conclusion in his research.

The church in America is mired in unhealthy structures and traditions that cannot be reversed in a short period...Long pastoral tenure is not a panacea or the single answer to struggling churches across America, but I believe that long tenure is *one* of the key requisites for churches to move from mediocrity to goodness to greatness.

All of our breakout churches have or had long pastoral tenure. Similarly, all of our church leaders experienced some level of conflict in their ministries. The two issues are closely related...The breakout church leaders endured the pain and did not leave. They were tenacious. Their short-term pain brought long-term gains. (Breakout Churches, pp. 56, 58)

So why is ministry so hard and staying put such a challenge? After all, we know God has called us. We know He covers us with mercy and grace. We know the message is true and full of power. We know the Lord is with us and our security is complete in Him. So why the struggles that would cause us to prematurely move on to a "greener pasture" that, of course, turns out to be just as brown as the last one? Paul answers this question in 2 Corinthians chapter four.

First, "we have this treasure in jars of clay" (v7). *In ministry we are constantly confronted with our own weakness.* We ministry leaders know personally the weakness of affliction, doubt, discouragement, attacks, and temptation. We know in our heads that the purpose of our weakness is to show that "the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us," but that doesn't mean our hearts hurt any less. It doesn't remove our disappointment in our own fleshly selves.

Second, "our gospel is veiled...to those who are perishing" (v3). *In ministry we are constantly confronted with unbelief.* What pastor doesn't grieve over the lukewarm response to God's word? How

much greater the grief when the veil covers the eyes of many sitting in our own pews? To preach your heart out knowing that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (v4), and then to go out there again the following Sunday and give it your all again – no wonder frustration afflicts ministry leaders! We’re called to be bullish on faith in a bear market.

We see, then, that ministry leadership is a calling that is particularly susceptible to discouragement and therefore to “greener pastures” kind of thinking. How do we counteract it? Again, to Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter four.

- *We remember that the ministry belongs to God, not to us (v1-2).* He called us to our ministry setting - and not because we qualified for it! It is by God’s mercy that we serve and not for our own agenda.
- *We remember that God is doing His work through His weak servants (v7-12).* We are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” I’ve never seen an episode of dying that looked like fun, yet it is only in dying where God has planted us that we have the opportunity to truly live. Miraculously He takes our weak selves and draws people to Himself.
- *We remember to keep an eternal perspective (v16-18).* How easily we are blinded by “the things that are seen,” forgetting that they are transient and misleading. “The things that are unseen are eternal” and thus truly meaningful, though admittedly hard to quantify and keep track of from day to day. Be careful how you define success and what sort of score sheet you’re keeping.

I love pastors. It hurts me to see them hurt. Hang in there, pastor! Stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on your call.