

Practical Thoughts on an Enduring Ministry, Part 1

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According to a recent poll, the average pastor twenty years ago stayed in his ministry at least seven years before transitioning somewhere else. Today his stay has eroded to barely five years.

Of course, in times past, the average pastorate was measured in decades. But apparently those days are gone, when the longevity of men like John Calvin (who ministered in Geneva for 25 years until he died), Charles Simeon (who served in Cambridge for over 50 years), John Stott (who pastored in London for over 50 years), Jonathan Edwards (who preached in Northampton for over 20 years) and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (who served in London for nearly 30 years) was the rule, and not the exception. Even in recent times, W. A. Criswell pastored in downtown Dallas for nearly 50 years and Adrian Rogers in Memphis for 32 years. There are others in large churches to be sure who have demonstrated long time endurance serving a single congregation, but they are rarer these days. Long-term pastorates in smaller churches are an even more rare exception to the rule.

I remember before I had even started my ministry here at Grace Community Church, my dad said to me, "I want you to remember a couple of things before you go into the ministry. One, the great preachers, the lasting preachers who left their mark on history, taught their people the Word of God. Two, they stayed in one place for a long time." These were two good pieces of wisdom. When I first came to Grace Church, most people thought that I would only stay a year or two, because I had been an itinerant communicator to youth groups. But in my heart, I knew I wanted to do the two things my dad advised: one was to teach the Bible expositionally, especially to go through the whole New Testament, knowing, secondly, that such a goal would require staying in one place over the long haul. I knew that was the only way I could continue to nourish my own soul, effect generations with God's truth, and manifest integrity of life through long visibility.

As I look back now on 40 years of ministry in the same church, I want to encourage you to embrace a long-term perspective in your church. While remaining in the same place may not always be God's plan, here are ten practical suggestions that may enable you to sustain an enduring ministry.

1. Don't arrive unless you plan to stay. Pastors of past generations, like Calvin and Edwards, considered a call to a church similar to a marriage. In a sense, they were betrothed to their congregations; and faithfulness and loyalty to that union sustained them even through hard times.

Pastors today need to learn from their examples. You need to see churches as more than stepping-stones to something bigger. No matter what size the congregation or challenges it presents, you must believe that God has called you to that flock. Even the greatest trouble and disappointment is God's means of humbling you and breaking your self-confidence. We are all truly powerful and useful only when we are weak. Accept the benefits of trials. If you're committed to stay when you arrive, and affirm that commitment regularly, you will prepare your heart to endure.

2. Learn to be patient. Humble patience with people may be the most important virtue you'll ever exercise. After all, your goal as a pastor should be to bring the convictions of your congregation into line with the full message of God's Word, and their lives to spiritual maturity. And this is a process of sanctification that takes time (decades not just months or years). It only comes from trusting the Spirit's power in using His Word as it is faithfully proclaimed week after week, year after year.

3. Don't be afraid to change. Not only will your people change as you instruct them spiritually, but you will also be changed. As you begin to unfold the Scripture, the Truth will alter the truths you teach and the way you conduct ministry. You cannot know everything that the Bible is going to say until you have dug deeply into it. You may think you have everything wired, but inevitably you will come to passages that change the way you think and the way your church must respond. You and your people must be flexible, allowing the Word of God to shape you and your church, as you submit to Scripture.

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