

Discouragement Doesn't Have to Win

In October 2011 Lifeway Research reported these findings from a survey of 1,000 American Protestant pastors.

A full 98 percent agree with the statement, "I feel privileged to be a pastor"... Yet more than half (55 percent) also agree with the statement, "I find that it is easy to get discouraged," and 55 percent say being in pastoral ministry makes them feel lonely at times.

So nearly all pastors understand that it is a privilege to be called to ministry leadership, yet over half are willing to admit to discouragement and loneliness. I wonder how many are *not* willing to admit it because it sounds "unspiritual" to do so? I suspect somewhere around 45%.

Discouragement is a powerful foe in the life of a ministry leader. It can beat you if you are not careful. You enter ministry with exuberance and idealism, but then reality knocks your wind out. You start questioning your call and especially your call to a particular place. You start fantasizing about "greener pastures" where discouragement disappears and your ministry will blossom unabated. Fueled by the fantasy, it is not too long until you sense God "releasing" you from your present place of ministry. You just know it is going to be different at the next place.

Or how about this scenario. Leaving may not be an option for various reasons, but "checking out" is. Discouragement can dry up the interior life of a ministry leader. You stop reading and learning and trying new things. Prayer becomes perfunctory. Instead of a challenging vision, not rocking the boat becomes the order of the day. Personal habits tend toward the unhealthy. Ministry becomes more about maintenance. You start isolating yourself from peers to avoid painful questions.

Both of these scenarios are possible, but neither is inevitable. Times of discouragement will come, *but discouragement doesn't have to win!* You *can* stay where you are called and continue to be healthy and focused in your calling. As I talk to pastors who have done it, some common practices are emerging. This is a work-in-progress, but for now let's call it "The Tenure Top Ten."

1. *A clear understanding of your call.* This includes the general "call to ministry," but it also includes God's call to a particular place of service. The "place call" serves as an anchor in the storm. It is vital to know beyond any doubt that God put you where you are. This will give you staying power through the inevitable difficulties.

2. *A biblical definition of success.* Success is about faithfulness to the Lord's call in a way that honors Him. It's about what the pastor himself does, not what other people do.

3. *A focus on relationships.* People are given priority. The pastor intentionally builds relationships with church members, especially lay leaders. This does not mean the pastor is by nature an extrovert. It means that he disciplines himself to make being with people a priority.

4. *Appreciating the history.* Tenured pastors have taken the time to understand the past and how it affects the church's present. They both affirm and challenge with a sense of history in mind.

5. *Patience.* A common number that emerges in discussions of church health and pastoral tenure is *seven*. It usually takes about seven years before the pastor can influence the church in a strategic way. That means a lot of patience and long-term thinking is required in years 1-6.

6. *Displaying character under fire.* Pastors who stayed put often speak of a critical moment when their courage was tested. How they responded in that moment was seen as key to their future leadership in that church.

7. *Recognizing the fruit.* It is important to have some "wins" along the way, to recognize them, and to celebrate them. Don't get lost in the problems. Notice what the Lord is doing in people.

8. *Healthy habits.* This includes spiritual, physical, intellectual, and relational practices that form the framework for a healthy life and a lasting ministry.

9. *A support network.* In various ways peers, mentors, and encouragers outside the church have been important in the lives of pastors who made it to seven years and beyond.

10. *Taking the high road.* The temptation to lash out at adversaries or people who disappoint us is always great. Pastors who have served in their churches a long time frequently talk about how glad they are that they did NOT succumb to this temptation.

The bottom line: *Church health takes time and is most likely to happen when the pastor stays put, stays healthy, and stays focused on his call.* Discouragement does NOT have to win!