

5 Things I Wish I Had Known as a Young Pastor

I left my breakfast meeting with a young pastor and realized, with a measure of sadness, that I was no longer a "young pastor." He was facing a number of ministry challenges that seemed very familiar to me.

As I shared with him some of the lessons I had learned, he remarked, "I wish I had known this three years ago." It occurred to me that the lessons I shared with him were ones that I wish I had been told when a small country church that allowed a rough, unrefined college student to get his feet wet in ministry. As I look back, there are (at least) five things I wish I had been aware of when I was just starting out:

1. You are pastoring a parade. The first time I had a family leave the church I was leading, I was personally hurt. I thought that I had really messed up as a pastor, or in my more frustrated moments, I thought that they "just didn't get it." What I failed to realize is that, sometimes, God removes people from your ministry for your benefit. And, I am sure, sometimes he moves them for their benefit! It was John Maxwell I first heard say, "every pastor pastors a parade ... people are always coming and going." As I have watched people "come and go" over the years, I have learned to trust solely in the Lord to bring people that would add benefit to the church. It is, after all, his church to build. Indeed, God often removes someone in order to drive us to Him, and then blesses us with someone else who adds tremendous value to the church. So, as a young pastor, be prepared for the fact that **people will come and go**, and trust that God is doing so for your benefit and for the good of the body.

2. The people who demand the most serve the least. As a young pastor, my assumption was that the people who gave and served most faithfully would demand most of my attention. The truth was the exact opposite. The people who **demand the most are typically those who give the least and serve the least**. And, upon reflection, that makes sense. When people are faithful and obedient to give of themselves and their resources to advance God's Kingdom, they are far less inclined to believe they should have a pastor's undivided attention. So, don't be surprised when those most disappointed in you and who criticize you the harshest are those who have the least invested in the ministry of the local church.

3. You will see ugly behavior. I have to be honest; this lesson comes from my wife. I asked her what she wished she would have known when we first started out. Her comment was, "you will see the ugliest behavior you can imagine in the church." Now, please don't think of my wife as a bitter crank. She is not. Rather, as the wife of a young pastor, she was not prepared for the **ugly behavior** that she saw. As a young pastor it is important to remember that you are not the only one who hears the criticism of others. You need to be sure to help your family understand that such behavior is sin and we ought not return sinful behavior with sinful behavior. Instead, let the Lord defend you as you exhibit Christlikeness in the face of criticism.

4. You are irreplaceable (but not at church). A lot of pastors act as if they are irreplaceable at the church they are serving. That is why they cancel or postpone family outings and activities to attend to the latest need of a church member. But, being irreplaceable at the church is not what

is intended here. Rather, **you are irreplaceable at home**. Think about it: You likely were not the first pastor of the church you are serving and hopefully you won't be the last. But your role as husband and father are the only truly unique roles you will have in life. I first heard this idea from Andy Stanley at a critical time in my life. I spent nearly half of my pastoral ministry taking my family for granted as I tried to be the pastor everyone else wanted me to be. Thankfully, I have learned that it does not profit us to grow a "successful" church and lose our family. A careful examination of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 2:6 illustrates the importance the Lord places on you faithfully discharging your duties as husband and father as a prerequisite to serving as a pastor.

5. Preach the Word. Every year the market is filled with the latest books on how to grow a church. Some of that advice is really good, being based on solid research into churches that are growing. Others are not so good. The temptation for young pastors is to find a concept or idea that they resonate with and decide to run with it. Or, worse, **they simply attempt to copy what is working somewhere else**. However, while there is much to gain from missiologists and church growth practitioners, there is one thing that must not be forgotten. The only thing we have to say that is of any value to our people is found in the Word of God. No church growth gimmicks, slick presentations, or changes in style can replace the power of the man of God, hidden behind the cross, preaching Christ from all of Scripture.

When I was a younger pastor, I wish I had been warned about these things. As a more experienced pastor, I have to remind myself of them constantly. Regardless of which describes you, may we all be mindful to "not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).