

ON YOUR MARK, GET SET, REFLECT



Let me begin this book about getting off to a good start in a new ministry with three of my favorite sayings from the ancient philosopher Socrates. Socrates says,

- “The unexamined life is not worth living.”⁴
- “Life contains but two tragedies. One is not to get your heart’s desire; the other is to get it.”⁵
- “Know thyself.”⁶



If you have picked up this book, chances are you are just finishing your preparation for ministry and you are getting ready to start your first ministry position, you are considering making a move to a new ministry, you are in the midst of a transition to a new location of ministry, or you have just made the big move and you are already looking for help. If you have already moved or have already made the decision to move, you can probably skip to the second chapter, but if you are just starting out in ministry or contemplating a transition, I want to give you some things to consider as you pray for God's guidance.

First, the Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is the calling of the boy Samuel in 1 Sam. 3. The first three times the Lord called out to Samuel, he ran to the priest Eli convinced it was he who had called out to him in the night. But finally, with Eli's help, Samuel was able to discern that it was the voice of the Lord calling to him and not Eli or even his own imagination. Correctly discerning the voice of God is a tricky thing. One of the

most challenging aspects of being human is our amazing ability for self-deception. Especially in the church where our conversations are often wrapped in God language, it is easy as a pastor to claim God is calling us to a transition when in reality it is our family who wants to move. We say it's God's will, but it is really the desire to escape a contentious board member at our current assignment. We say it is God's leading, but it's really the tug of our own ego. Isn't it amazing how often God's leading also includes a significant salary increase?

It's not that family pressures, emotional exhaustion, or even financial needs aren't legitimate issues and may even be part of the reason why God might lead a pastor to a new place of ministry or why a first-time minister might consider one opportunity over another. There are literally hundreds of factors to consider when one seeks God's wisdom about a ministry move. The point I want to make is simply this, take the time necessary to prayerfully examine and explore the reasons why you are considering a ministry transition or why you are thinking about a move to a new ministry or a new location.

I grew up in a family full of ministers. When I was young, my father made several ministry transitions. By the time I was thirteen, we had lived in thirteen different homes and my dad had served as a pastor in eight different churches. Needless to say, I was used to making transitions. Thankfully, my parents stayed in their eighth ministry assignment for almost twenty years, but I was at home with them only for the first five before heading off to college.

I have now been in ministry for twenty-five years, and here is what I have discovered about myself. After about three years in one location I start to get antsy. It is as though an internal alarm clock goes off somewhere deep inside me and a voice from within says, “Okay, Scott, isn’t it about time to move? I think you are ready for the next adventure! It’s probably time for us to start moving on . . .” I have listened to and obeyed that internal voice several times. And even when I haven’t obeyed that voice, I have had strong arguments with it. Sometimes I have named that voice as the voice of God. It may have been. But it also may have just been my life-long habit of transitioning to a new location every three



or four years, pushing me to make moves that may or may not have been in God's wisdom and will for me.

It took some time for me to figure out what was going on. My wife, some good friends, and even some good counselors have helped me to see what I could not. God has helped me recognize all kinds of reasons why I have a tendency to live waiting for the next big opportunity. These discoveries about myself are helping me to be happier and more content where I am and with what God is doing in the location he has me in right now. Most importantly he is helping me become a better finisher. One of the things moving frequently helped me to become was a good starter. (It is part of the reason I can write this book.) But to this day, I have yet to experience the joy of being a good finisher. I'm hoping that is what God is helping me to become now.

The point is not to try and talk you out of the ministry transition you sense God may be calling you to make at this moment. The point here at the start is simply to encourage you to take time to examine your life, your motives, and where God is working. "The unexamined life is not worth living," and the unexamined ministry is

a recipe for disaster. Before you make any ministry transition, take time to pray, listen, and ensure you know it is God who is leading you and calling you to a new location, a new ministry, and a new adventure with him.

Second, Life Contains but Two Tragedies—One Is Not to Get Your Heart's Desire; the Other Is to Get It

I love to ask fellow pastors about their ministry careers. This is anecdotal, but I have often found it to be the case that when ministers who are retired or near retirement reflect over their pastoral careers, they look back at one location of ministry as “the one that got away.” Here are three examples from recent conversations I have had with pastor friends.

When I look back over my ministry career, I realize that I made a mistake leaving First Church when I did. I was young. The church was growing rapidly. I began to feel like I was in over my head. We had outgrown the building we were in, and I wasn't sure what to do next. What I needed to do was ask for a six-week sabbatical to go visit two or three churches that were doing ministry at the next level up and



learn from them. Instead I got overwhelmed and tired and when an interesting opportunity came along, I took it. God has redeemed that hasty decision. But looking back I realize I left before I should have.



I think of the years we spent at the Riverside Church as the pinnacle years of our ministry. Our kids grew up while we were there. The church loved us as a family, and the ministry was really thriving. But one day I got a call telling me that I was being offered a significant administrative role in the denomination. I was raised to respect authority, and here I was with an authority on the phone asking me to move. As I look back now, I realize I was doing more to help the denomination while I was leading that church than I ever did in that administrative role. What I needed at the time was the courage to say no, but I didn't have it.



My greatest regret looking back is leaving Main Street Church when we did. We had taken the church from almost nothing to a very significant congregation. But then I got a call from a bigger church with a better salary. What I soon discovered was it had bigger problems. So I left a church where I was loved and went to a church that nearly killed me. Looking back I should have been honest with the church leadership about my financial needs and about the need for the church to learn with me how to operate at the next level of leadership and administrative structure. Instead of helping them move ahead I took an easy exit and it damaged both the church and my family in the long run.

Again, my goal is not to get you to change your mind about making a transition but to encourage you to take the time needed to reflect and pray. It takes time and most likely the input of a few Elis in our lives to learn to hear God's voice clearly. We also need to heed Socrates' most famous piece of advice.

Third, Know Thyself

I have a theory that there are four categories of ministers. There are activators, rebuilders, sustainers, and maximizers.

Activators are those leaders with the strengths necessary to create something out of nothing. They are great at church planting. They are able to go into an existing congregation and create a youth ministry where there has never been one or launch a music ministry where no one has ever done more than pick a couple of hymns to sing. Like God, who created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), activators are driven and have the qualities necessary to start new ministries.

Rebuilders are those ministers who read Ezra and Nehemiah and get inspired. Like those two great leaders who directed the people of Judah in the reconstruction of Jerusalem's worship and walls, rebuilders have the ability to go into a ministry situation that many, if not most, have written off as hopeless and bring new life to it. Rebuilders thrive on and have the strengths to put the pieces of a broken ministry or church back together.

It is a unique leader who can come into a ministry that is growing and vibrant and keep it moving forward. Sustainers have the wisdom and sensitivity to enter into a healthy church or ministry and not mess things up. Like Samuel, sustainers have the heart of a priest, and they know how to love others and keep people united even through transitions in leadership.

Maximizers are those leaders who look for situations that are healthy but are ready to explode and move far beyond where they are right now. Maximizers have the ability to motivate people to follow a big vision, and they are self-assured enough in their own strengths to willingly surround themselves with the people capable of bringing that big vision to life.

It is my theory that most ministers fall quite naturally into one, or maybe two, of those four categories. Most of us are by nature activators, rebuilders, sustainers, or maximizers.

Not long ago my wife remarked to me, “Have you noticed that we have had a knack for leading very broken ministries?” I don’t think she meant that we have a gift for breaking healthy ministries, but I think she

meant that in most of our twenty years together we have partnered in ministries that were rebuilding projects of one kind or another. She was right. With just one or maybe two exceptions, my ministry has been about entering into a fairly broken or damaged ministry location and bringing health to it. What was interesting about her comment was not just how insightful it was, but that it was in the context of how much we actually enjoy being part of rebuilding ministries.

As I have come to “know myself,” I have come to realize that God has gifted me in ways that make me a strong rebuilders or a maximizer. And because of that, my most gratifying opportunities of ministry have been where I’ve been able to put those strengths to work.

I love to hear stories about people who moved into a neighborhood and planted a church and their ministry took off and is doing amazing things. I am so deeply envious of activators. It is truly a gift to have the ability to start something from nothing. However, I know I do not have that gift, nor do I have that temperament. I am just introverted enough to fail miserably as an activator.

I am a huge fan of author Jan Karon's Mitford novels. Karon's books are about Father Tim's experiences as a pastor in the quaint small town of Mitford. The stories are delightful, beautiful, and profound. Father Tim lives the sacred priestly life of the sustainer in the Mayberryesque community of Mitford. I am drawn to these books because I am drawn to the powerful integrity and profound simplicity of the sustaining ministry of Father Tim. Although I currently live in one of the world's largest cities, if I received a call from Mitford First Church on just the right Monday, I might just be tired enough to take it. But I know in my heart that I would last about nine months in Mitford before the maximizer in me would go insane. I can't tell you how much I wish I had the strengths of the sustainer. I think pastors whom God has given the gifts of a sustainer are truly the salt of the earth. But I simply do not have the strengths or temperament of a sustainer. It's not how God formed me.

That is simply my point: “Know thyself.” Try to figure out how God has gifted you, and reflect over what may be the right fit for you given your strengths, passion, and temperament. There are many temperament

and strengths assessment tools available these days to assist you in this process. One that I have found particularly helpful is the StrengthsQuest materials sponsored by the Gallup organization.⁷

It is also important to understand the right cultural fit. There are multiple aspects to culture, far more than I could list here. No matter where you transition, there will be aspects of a new culture or setting that you will have to learn and adjust to. But there are deeply rooted cultural preferences within each of us that we ought to be aware of. When pastoral tenures fail rapidly, these are the kinds of comments I often hear:

- “She was an East Coaster at heart, and she never understood the laid-back West.”
- “Pastor Hall never quite adjusted to being part of a ‘professional’ church. I’m not sure he even owned a suit.”
- “I think Rev. Miller wanted to spend his time with young people, and we just are not that youthful of a church.”

- “Pastor Wright just kept talking about the way they used to do ministry in Chicago. But we aren’t like the big city, and we don’t want to be.”
- “She was too academic, and we’re just simple folk.”
- “He was so simplistic, and we’re in a thoughtful, educated college town.”
- “I don’t think he could ever get over the reality that we were never going to raise our hands in worship.”

Rural or urban, conservative or progressive, professional or casual, diverse or homogeneous, scholarly or practical, youthful or multigenerational—these are just scratching the surface of the different cultures a church embodies. And it is important for a leader to understand what kind of cultural fit works best for him or her.

It took twenty-five years for me to recognize that I am most invigorated when I get to do ministry in a highly secular community. Although there is much that I love (and miss) about living and working in what is often referred to as the Bible Belt, I know enough about myself now to know that I prefer doing ministry in a



setting where it is a challenge to be a Christian and where churches of various denominations are forced to work together instead of competing with one another. For some, the huge cultural challenges and the often slow growth of secular urban settings would be overwhelming. For me it is energizing. That doesn't make one temperament bad and another one good. It is simply the product of nurture and nature. And I believe it is important to think seriously about cultural fit before making a transition.

So take this initial advice as a word from the wise Socrates: "Know thyself."