

**W H E N  
B A D  
CHURCHES  
H A P P E N T O  
G O O D  
P A S T O R S**

**WHY PASTORS LEAVE AND  
WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT**

**DAVID AND LISA FRISBIE**



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ONE  

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FROM  
GENESIS  
TO  
EXODUS  
AFTER BRIGHT BEGINNINGS,  
WHY DO SO MANY PASTORS  
LEAVE THE MINISTRY?

Popular speaker and author John Ortberg gave the commencement address as Bethel Theological Seminary sent the Class of 2001 out into ministerial service. The seminary's beautiful chapel was packed with graduates and their families. Some of the graduating students were already serving assignments in pastoral ministry; some of these had cheering sections from among the congregations they served. The optimism and enthusiasm in Bethel's great hall was tangible and real.

Ortberg framed his remarks from the theme of one of his best-selling books. “If you want to walk on water,” Ortberg told the crowd, “you’ve got to get out of the boat.” His message was a stirring tribute to faith in action, a testament to leaving comfort behind and choosing to follow God even if facing danger and uncertainty.

Ortberg, one of the masterful speakers and authors of this generation, held the crowd’s attention with stories, examples, and a well-crafted narrative. A former member of the teaching staff at Willow Creek Community Church, Ortberg was then serving as the lead pastor of his own congregation in California. His name was well known to the graduating students, and his commencement address was met with rapt attention and a flurry of note taking.

One of Bethel’s stirring traditions preceded the ceremony. By long tradition and practice, Bethel’s graduating students don their robes and regalia in a nearby building, a short walk away from the great hall. When they are decked out in their caps and gowns and lined up in correct alphabetical order, the graduates are then escorted outdoors through a grassy area en route to the setting of their graduation. An inspiring and special gift is waiting for them.

As they leave the robing building and emerge out into the sunlight, the graduates are met by a smiling gauntlet comprised of faculty and administration, all cheering loudly and applauding the success and future prospects of these soon-to-be graduates. The moment is unexpected and never fails to elicit a sense of shock and awe among the surprised students. Tears of joy are not uncommon among the more expressive.

It was the same on that spring day in 2001. Before seeing Ortberg, before hearing the commencement address, before the crowd could even see them arrive, graduating seminarians were spontaneously applauded and loudly cheered by their professors and faculty advisers. For many, this surprise ovation became a highlight of their entire seminary experience.

Meanwhile on that bright spring day there were other ovations to follow. There were raucous cheers for the group as a whole, as family members or friends smuggled air horns and other noisemakers into the building. There were prolonged cheers for the individual graduates as each name was read aloud by the faculty. There were photos *of* the graduates and *with* the graduates; photos of graduates standing next to proud parents or smiling spouses or restless children.

The aura of celebration and affirmation on that day was entirely appropriate and was typical of many other seminaries and Bible colleges in that same season. A fresh class of ministers was being deployed into service to local congregations, missions boards, and other settings of Christian service. The completion of all academic requirements was a cause for joy and relief among the students and for respect and congratulations among those who loved them.

Fittingly, with an author as the main speaker, a group of graduates was moving from one chapter of their lives to the next chapter, ready to experience the fulfillment and fruition of their life's calling: becoming a pastor.

With applause and affirmation echoing loudly throughout the whole campus, the brand-new graduates were sent out to serve.

Few of the graduates thought to wonder: How long will the cheering last?

## **Perhaps a Smattering of Applause—In the Beginning**

Although traditions vary, there are some congregations that choose to welcome a new pastor with applause and affirmation. A new minister may be installed by a superintendent or bishop; there may be an all-church dinner or other event to celebrate the occasion. When a minister is being installed, there may be words of affirmation or even an invitation for the assembled group to applaud their new pastor a time or two. In larger churches there may be correspondingly larger celebrations.

One pastor, arriving to serve the largest congregation in his denomination, was driven onto the church campus in a convertible. Along a tree-lined drive the shiny new convertible made a slow and regal entry. The parade resembled halftime at a high school football game, as the campus royalty is escorted onto the field. The new pastor and his wife sat in the back of the convertible and waved to the crowd; the entire event looked much like the crowning of a homecoming king and queen.

Although some (particularly in smaller congregations) might find all of this a bit theatrical and “over the top,” the celebration seemed to fit within its context. A very large group of people was welcoming a new pastor to a very prominent place of service and ministry. Since it can be difficult to individually meet and greet five or six thousand people, having an outdoor “coronation arrival” might make sense. The size and scope of the happy celebration also sends a signal to the new pastor that he or she will be appreciated, valued, and cherished. Smaller-church pastors may need to be content with a potluck dinner.

Welcoming traditions vary by theology and geography, by size and setting, and by demographics of all types. The point is, there is sometimes a smattering of applause as a new pastor arrives to serve a congregation. While usually not as raucous and celebratory as the cheering at a graduation ceremony, there can be—and arguably should be—heartfelt and spontaneous gifts of affirmation when a new minister is welcomed.

Whether by choreographed parade or lukewarm potluck, as a new minister is welcomed, there is generally a positive interval during which the arriving pastor is appreciated, or at least in which most criticism is muted or postponed. Even a highly conflicted church can call a truce or a cease-fire to welcome a new leader.

In cases where a minister is elected by a congregation, the margin of victory may signal the intensity and tone of the welcome. Where there is a clear-cut majority voting to affirm the call, there may also

be a sense of affirming welcome. Where the margin of victory is inconclusive, or where a church seems divided over the choice of a new minister, the warmth of the welcome may seem more subdued.

## **How Long Will the Honeymoon Last?**

In the literature of pastoral service the positive interlude after arrival is often described as the “honeymoon” phase of ministry. A new pastor has just arrived; he or she may be affirmed and welcomed and greeted with gifts. There may be a small or large cavalcade of positive feedback—affirming smiles, warm handshakes, and other tokens of genuine affection.

While a honeymoon phase is fairly typical of pastoral service, it is not assured or automatic. For example, when following a popular pastor who has had a long service in a particular place, the next to serve may lack a honeymoon. There may instead be a lengthy period of mourning that needs to occur before a new pastor—any new pastor—will be welcomed and appreciated.

For this reason, some in pastoral supervision (bishops, superintendents, and so on) prefer and enforce a lengthy interval following the conclusion of a longer-term pastorate. Within this interval some prefer to place established interim pastors, often retired ministers who have no personal ambition and also no interest in serving the church on a regular basis. The mere designation of someone as the interim pastor may relax the congregation and allow it to receive ministry, without making direct comparisons to what has just been “lost” in the pulpit or parish.

The situation can become particularly complex when a pastor or leader is elected to a place of regional or district denominational leadership, vacating his or her church and yet now being in presiding jurisdiction over the church and its process of pastoral replacement. It is so difficult to serve well in this situation, and stories of trials and tribulations are not uncommon in this specific situation. Some



have done this well and should be congratulated and studied. Others have not fared as well in navigating these challenging waters, with resulting problems and issues in the church and with regard to the next pastor who serves it.

Despite these and other exceptions, the general trend in pastoral ministry is for the new leader to enjoy some sort of honeymoon period as he or she arrives to serve in a new setting. During the arrival process, the congregation may tend to notice the strengths and gifts of a minister instead of focusing on what he or she seems to lack in skill sets or aptitude. The resulting season is not unlike the early days of a good marriage, before reality sets in.

It is entirely possible to move from being a celebrated seminary graduate, applauded and affirmed, to being a new pastor in a new place, welcomed and appreciated and valued. Such a process and outcome is not uncommon, yet it would be a huge mistake to interpret applause and affirmation as illustrating the normative pathways that one travels in ministry. Rare is the pastor who generates ongoing applause and affirmation over a long-term service to a congregation. Instead the more usual pattern is for a new minister to be warmly welcomed, genuinely appreciated, and then over time to be somewhat taken for granted, or perhaps even opposed outright as he or she attempts to lead and guide the church.

It may be quantifiably accurate to suggest that for most pastors in most places, the honeymoon phase will be a season of ministry but not an enduring and ongoing reality. When the honeymoon is over—whether it lasts three months, six months, twelve months, or eighteen months into the new relationship—it may be replaced by apathy, malaise, criticism, or political maneuvering among the congregants.

Much like someone who is sipping an energy drink and enjoying the buzz, pastors may discover that after the initial surge or rush is over there is a falling off, a winding down, or a lapse of the overall energy level. Depending on the situation and setting, there may even

be a crash or a sense of depression that sets in as the caffeinated energy burns away and reality emerges into full view.

## Speed Dating

Although it's a topic for quite another book overall, pastoral ministry is a great environment for growing up, for maturing as a person, and for conforming more fully to the image of Christ. Yet we should also note that some persons arrive in pastoral ministry having only recently begun—or perhaps having not quite started yet—the difficult path to maturity. The less mature the pastor, the less perceptive he or she may be in realizing that the end of the honeymoon phase is a normal adaptive process that both the pastor and the congregation must work through.

Accordingly, a less mature pastor may find himself or herself in a fight or flight mind-set, engaging too quickly in conflict and disagreement or fleeing too swiftly to another church or setting. We'll discuss the fight options in much more detail within the second section of this book. For this chapter, we'll look at the tendency to take flight and move to another setting or leave ministry entirely.

One pastor in the Midwest had served three settings in less than five years when he announced his resignation from the third setting. He was able to find yet another opportunity, then yet another, and at the ten-year mark of his ministry he was ready to resign from his fifth church. This particular pastor seemed intelligent, sincere in his faith, and in many ways gifted for ministry. Yet time after time and place after place, this pastor showed up for the "Sunday night surprise," announcing a resignation that caught the congregation off guard.

This pattern may be possible to sustain for a brief time, especially if the minister is young or seems highly gifted. However, it is not possible to sustain this pattern over the longer term. Sooner or later bishops, superintendents, or other denominational leaders are not willing to install such a temporary minister, forcing yet another

congregation to grieve a premature loss. Taking flight very swiftly from one church to another may work for a season; it will probably not hold up for a lifetime of service.

In quite a few other cases there is a similar dynamic in play, yet with longer terms of service between the changes in assignment. This occurs because some pastors are savvy enough to realize that a series of short durations in ministry may look bad to those in denominational supervision. There is a widely held belief among pastors that departing a place after two years is too soon while leaving after three or four years is acceptable. Therefore the more astute disappointed or disillusioned pastors may simply wait out the duration before taking flight to a new location or setting. During the gap between “too soon” and “acceptable,” many of these ministers may merely be marking time. While continuing to serve, they are busy sending out résumés in hopes of gauging interest in their services.

Ministry professionals talk about the “aquarium shifting,” which occurs when believers move from one church to another, simply transferring Christians (fish) from one church (tank) to the next. Yet there is a similar phenomenon by which ministers shift tanks too—running from one disappointment to a brand-new setting, only to be freshly disappointed. Ask any working superintendent about this, and he or she can describe many such cases, usually from recent or current memory.

Such pastors are doing something like speed dating, rushing from one relationship to the next relationship, not stopping long enough to ever become fully or meaningfully connected. Or as one retired denominational leader described it, such pastors are like “serial adulterers” (his words) because they won’t stay faithful to any given assignment but are quickly bored, disinterested, and looking around.

“I wouldn’t hire those kinds of pastors,” the same retired leader tells us as we interview him for this book. “I inherited a few who wanted to always keep shifting around within the districts I served,

and sometimes that did happen,” he admits. “But I wouldn’t bring in that kind of mind-set from the outside and add it to my existing pastoral team. I was more protective than that! I wanted my pastors to learn from each other in a positive way. I wanted them to see and emulate positive patterns in ministry—not serial adultery!”

Whether from immaturity, disillusionment, or unrealistic expectations, some ministers change places often and repeatedly. They thrive on the buzz of a new relationship, and then when the inevitable crash occurs, they move on. So perhaps instead of speed daters or “serial adulterers,” these ministers could be thought of as “adulation addicts” or “honeymoon hoppers.” Regardless of the tag or label we apply, this kind of behavior in ministry can be a career killer.

## **Just One Door—No Revolving**

Still other pastors leave ministry altogether when the going gets tough, finding other ways to feed their family. In these first few decades of the twenty-first century, there is much more “exodus” than there is “genesis” in pastoral ministry—that is, more men and women are departing from ministry than are enrolling in ministry. This results in the closing of churches, the consolidation of parishes, and in some cases a return to the long ago “circuit-rider” model by which one pastor serves more than one congregation.

Up close, the patterns and trends are not encouraging. Data from the Fuller Institute, the Barna Group, and other observers affirms the following census of pastoral realities:

- More than four thousand new churches are planted each year, yet more than seven thousand existing churches are closed annually.<sup>1</sup>
- More than seventeen hundred pastors exit the ministry each month.<sup>2</sup>
- Many denominations report an empty pulpit crisis—that is, there are not enough trained pastors to serve the churches that already exist.

While the above data is focused on Protestant expressions of the Christian faith, the Roman Catholic Church finds itself in a similar situation. There are not enough priests to supply the parishes, with the result that the laity or other religious workers such as nuns are pressed into essential clerical duties.

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few,” Matthew reports in his Gospel account (9:37). While written two millennia ago, Matthew’s analysis accurately describes our contemporary church life. There are not enough laborers (pastors) to serve the churches that already exist. Pulpits stand empty and parishes close or consolidate. Viewed through the lens of doing pastoral ministry, one aspect of the problem is that so many laborers are leaving the harvest fields. Without passing judgment on these once-called servants we can merely note that the supply of laborers seems to be decreasing, not increasing, which means the problem will only get worse.

While it may be impossible to address all of the related issues within the context of one volume, this book arrives to discuss the cluster of problems that occur when a pastor encounters a difficult place to serve. Even while doing the research and writing for this project, we’ve received many suggestions that we should write a sequel called *When Bad Pastors Happen to Good Churches*.

To be sure, there are difficult pastors also. There are immature ministers and youthful seminarians with unrealistic expectations about life in the ministry. There are stubborn and hardheaded pastors, for whom “my way or the highway” seems to be an operating mantra. There are dictatorial pastors and lazy pastors and a wide range of other types of misfits in ministry. Since the pool of pastoral ministry is drawn from the wider pool called human beings, such results are inevitable.

In the experience of these authors, the overwhelming majority of pastors that we encounter are well-motivated, well-intentioned, and often also well-trained. They are reasonably mature (adjusting

for age and experience) and usually flexible in their approaches to problems and solutions. And although our work as counselors often connects us with pastors in crisis, situations in which we may see pastors at their worst, the broader reality is that we have immense respect for those who serve in ministry. Over time, and despite our experience with casualties and cases, our respect for pastors has only grown deeper and fuller.

We love, respect, and value those who serve us in pastoral ministry. They are competent, caring men and women with huge hearts for God, genuine compassion for others, and a desire to see the body of Christ built up and encouraged.

These great men and women enter into pastoral practice with high hopes and a true desire to make a difference in this world. Yet all too often these same men and women find themselves depleted, exhausted, and searching for an exit strategy. The culling process by which pastors depart from pastoral ministry is in no sense Darwinian in nature—it does not seem to be the “fittest” who may survive, and it does not appear to be the “misfits” who may depart. Instead, a look at those who leave pastoral ministry reveals many types and temperaments, many levels of intelligence and education, many backgrounds and prior experiences. What these departing servants seem to have in common is their departure—and little else.

So although this book begins with Genesis—a joyous and celebratory graduation day at a seminary—the bulk of the book deals with Exodus instead. Our primary focus in these pages will be this one: Why are so many pastors leaving the ministry in this current hour and what can we do about it?

\* \* \*

## Questions for Reflection

In each chapter, we will include questions geared toward three different leadership groups within the church: pastors and ministers, local churches and church boards, and denominational leaders (superintendents, bishops, and so on). These questions will help you apply the lessons learned in each chapter to your own life.

### Pastors and Ministers

1. In the course of a typical month, how often do you mentally consider leaving your current assignment and seeking a new congregation to serve and lead? How much time do you invest in thinking about these types of possibilities?
2. In the course of a typical month, how often do you mentally consider leaving the ministry and becoming employed elsewhere in a religious or secular setting but not in direct ministry to a local congregation? When you have these thoughts (if you do) how long do you typically indulge the underlying feelings? How long do these thoughts tend to last?
3. How many of your friends or former classmates have started out in pastoral ministry but have since left that venue of service and chosen another profession, vocation, or calling? In your view, did God himself call these pastors to depart from pastoral ministry, or did these persons merely get tired, discouraged, worn out, or exhausted from constant conflict and ongoing issues within their local settings?
4. If you chose to depart from pastoral ministry, do you believe that your spouse and family would be supportive of this change? If you left pastoral ministry as a vocation, do you believe that your parents, mentors, former college or seminary professors, and others would understand?

5. If you have ever departed from one congregation in order to go and serve another, were you restless, searching, or ready to leave before the departure actually happened? If so, about how long were you restless before the “deliverance” occurred?

6. If you have ever departed from one congregation in order to go and serve another, did upward mobility—that is, moving to a larger church, a better rate of pay, or a more prominent place—factor into your decision?

7. In order to leave pastoral ministry as a vocation, would you personally need as strong a sense of calling from God in order to depart, as you did in order to accept God’s original call? Why or why not?

8. Informally, some churches have come to be called “clergy killers” because of the number of ministerial casualties reported there. If you were in supervision or jurisdiction over a church with a “clergy killer” reputation, how might you approach the congregation or its leaders? Would you knowingly and willingly serve such a church as their pastor?

## **Local Churches and Church Boards**

1. When a pastor decides to leave your congregation, are you usually surprised by his or her decision, or have you usually seen it coming with regard to the prospective departure of a pastor who is serving you?

2. Although a congregation gets to vote when a pastor is called, in most cases a congregation does not get to vote on whether a pastor can leave to accept a new assignment within the denomination. To what extent—if any—do you wish that a congregation could vote to allow a minister to leave or vote to prevent this departure?



3. When there is conflict in the congregation, or when a pastor gets crosswise with key leaders within the church, there is often a pastoral departure without going through any kind of formal process or mediation. In traditions where pastors are reviewed every few years, a pastor may choose to depart after having a bad review. Still other pastors choose to depart before being formally and officially reviewed so that a bad review does not become a stain on their permanent records. Do you wish that there were some kind of intervention by the district or the denomination when a pastor's ministry seems to be derailing or losing traction, with the goal of helping the church hold and keep its pastor for effective service? Or are you more comfortable simply letting pastors go and hoping for the best in your next minister?

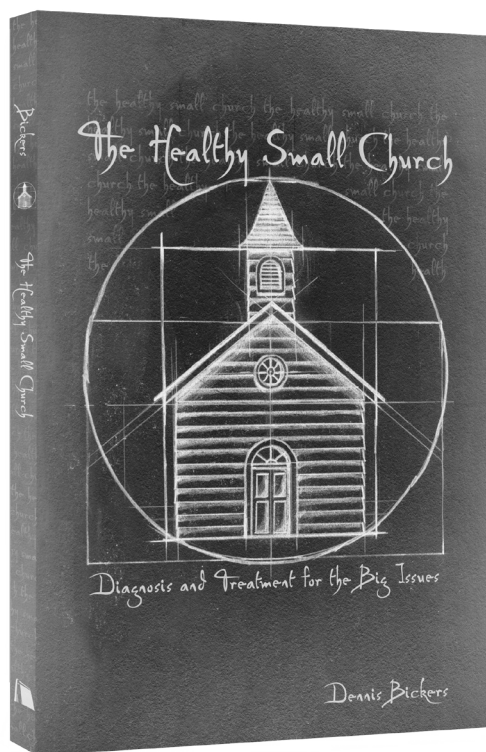
4. How often does the presence of a new (incoming) pastor resolve the core or underlying issues or tensions within a congregation? When you change the face in the pulpit and the pastor's name on the church sign, does the church itself change, or is the congregation still much the same in terms of its overall dynamics, health (or lack of health), and issues?

5. In your view, do pastors leave too often, or not often enough? In your view, is it even possible for a church to keep a pastor for the duration of his or her ministry, or are you already resigned to the fact that your better and more effective pastors will probably keep climbing the ladder to bigger and better places of service?

## **Denominational Leaders**

1. Across the arc of your leadership and service, would you say that the pool of available pastors who might serve a local congregation has increased or decreased, in terms of quantity? Is it easier or harder to fill a church now?

2. Would you rather populate your own district with new (inexperienced) pastors or with pastors who have served for a decade or more? In your view, which category of pastor (inexperienced versus experienced) is a better fit for most of the churches under your direct care?
3. To what extent do you believe the global church (denomination, movement, or organization) would be wise to retain and revitalize those who are already serving in ministry, versus allowing the exodus to continue? Are you aware of any positive or successful efforts (structured, ongoing) to retain pastors for ministerial service?
4. How thorough are the exit interviews that you conduct when someone leaves a place of ministry on your own district? To what extent do you attempt to personally drill down to explore the underlying causes behind or beneath the departure of a local pastor? Do you believe that you are usually successful in understanding the true dynamics that are in play when a pastor leaves?
5. When an experienced pastor wants to transfer into your district and wishes to be available to serve a church under your care, what are the key issues that you try to understand regarding that pastor's previous service to other congregations in other places? To what extent do you explore or consider congregational conflict or unresolved issues of pastoral health (emotional or spiritual) as you consider welcoming a transferring minister to your district?



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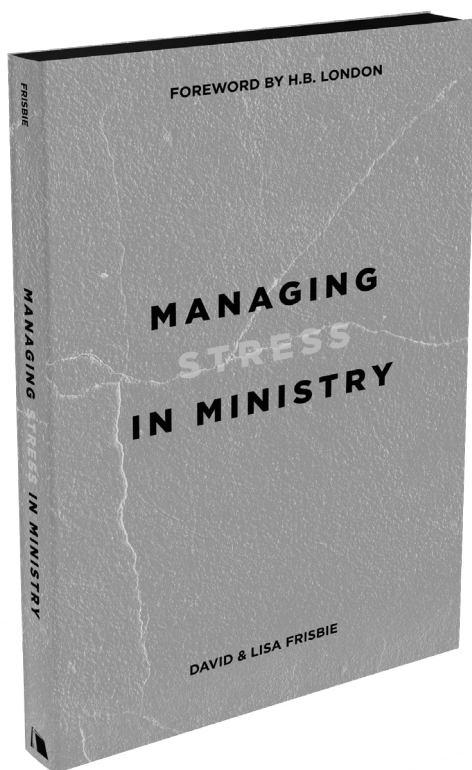
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**stress:** (noun) a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc.

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