



minister

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FROM LAW TO MINISTRY— A BIG STEP?

By Alice Davis



At the farewell party my office gave for me when I left my job as a tax lawyer to attend seminary full-time, one of my co-workers suggested that the change in careers wasn't all that great. He said that in ministry I was going to be spending my time the same way I did as a tax lawyer—trying to get people to do what they didn't want to do. I thought what he said was funny but didn't take it seriously. My new role would involve inspiring others to become closer to God, not making them do what they didn't want to do.

I enjoyed the way I was practicing law. My job as the Director of the National Nexus Program at the Multistate Tax Commission was to get large companies involved in multi-state commerce to pay appropriate taxes to state and local governments. I found a level of righteousness in this kind of work that made me comfortable with being a tax lawyer. I wasn't out to steal from the public treasury for my clients or to make myself rich at the expense of the people. It was good work, and it paid well.

I was in fact out to get people to do the right thing, as my co-worker intimated. But I still rejected the idea that there was some connection between the two careers. Practicing law involved statutes and regulations both written and disregarded by people. Law involved monetary and criminal penalties, with a trial system that provided lawyers like me the support needed to get people to do what they didn't want to do. How

can you compare tax law to ministry? In my mind I was making a drastic change, like the conversion of Matthew the hated tax collector or Zacchaeus' coming down from the tree.

Now, ten years later, it's clear to me that there was more truth in my co-worker's remark than I realized. Much of ministry involves "inspiring" people to do things they really don't seem to want to do: encouraging them to attend church more regularly and to get involved; trying to get them to move from the pews out into the community; encouraging them to study their Bibles, to pray, and to meditate regularly; and, yes, getting people to tithe. Both these careers are about trying to get people to obey the law, whether it's the tax laws of the various states or God's law. At least as a tax lawyer I had the backing of the

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legal system, along with its civil and criminal penalties. It's easy to inspire a company CEO to pay local taxes when the law is on your side. In ministry, the penalties seem somewhat unreal. To some folks the impending doom of hell pales in comparison to the impending doom of civil penalties. Besides, isn't God always full of grace and forgiving?

So maybe the move from tax law to ministry wasn't such a big step after all. Take for instance the source of the laws for each profession. One of our discussion sessions in law school had to do with the source of our Constitution and other laws. I posed that there is a source greater than our own collective wisdom that imbeds in us our generally common sense of fairness. When the class discussion became religious, the leader quickly moved us on to another topic, but it was clear that the sense of justice that is the basis of our governance is the basic concept of justice and righteousness that derives from the Biblical laws expounded on by the prophets.

My schedule was hectic as a lawyer, and that didn't change when I moved to ministry. Successful attorneys are often seen as high-powered and driven, with little time for rest and relaxation. Ministers don't have a lot of time for rest and relaxation, either, but they are more often seen as simply overworked rather than high-powered. I'm not sure there's much of a difference. Overwork is overwork, regardless of the profession, and too many ministers still have this problem. When have I ever *really* had enough time to write a sermon?

Even preaching resembles the practice of law. I remember in moot court that my closing argument was really like a sermon, and the professor told me that was the best part of my trial practice. What is a good closing argument in a trial but a summation of what's right and fair and a way to persuade the jury to do the right thing? And any smart lawyer knows that a good Baptist preaching rhythm in a closing argument helps the jury believe that the lawyer speaks the truth of God.

But aren't ministers held to a loftier ideal when it comes to ethics? Unfortunately, our society

seems to have accepted as truth that no one should trust lawyers. Even more unfortunately, the difference is not so great with ministers. Jokes about crooked lawyers are increasingly matched by jokes about greedy and lascivious preachers. I recently saw a survey on which professions people respect most, and while preachers came in above lawyers, they were well below the most respected professions, which included doctors and teachers.

Since the two professions have so many similarities, you might think I'd be inclined to return to the one that pays the most. But I've never seriously entertained that thought. Ministry is a calling, and that makes it something more than a career. The ultimate difference for me relates to the one for whom I work. A lawyer is a mouthpiece for whoever is paying. A minister is a mouthpiece only for God. I became a licensed practitioner of the law by completing school successfully and passing a bar exam. In spite of all of my education and training, and in spite of my commitment and dedication, there was nothing I could have done to get the right to represent God. But God called me to do just that, and for that I am humbled and grateful. Speaking for God is a tremendous honor and an even more tremendous responsibility. I know that I dare not open my mouth to preach, speak, or counsel people without having prayed that God will lead me.

And believe it or not, ministry pays me more than tax law ever did. To me, the rewards are not only monetary. Every time I can see that someone has been encouraged to be stronger in their walk with God because of something I've said or done, I'm rewarded in more ways than money can buy. Every time a couple in premarital counseling understands that their sharing of God with each other is the foundation for a strong marriage, I'm rewarded. Every time I see the light in a child's eye that lets me know he or she understands it's okay to be good, I'm rewarded. Every time someone tells me they have more peace because I've reminded them that God will help them through their difficulties, I'm rewarded. Every time someone commits to participate in Bible study because they accept that they need to understand the Bible more deeply than an uninformed literal reading can provide, I'm rewarded tremendously.

The two highest commandments for life are those that Jesus gave us, to love God and to love each other. These laws are higher than our Constitution. They provide the prism through which all interpretations of both our religious and secular laws ought to be viewed. As ministers, we're called to encourage—to inspire—compliance with the highest laws, which puts us on the front line in the ultimate struggle of life. I'd rather be a champion for Jesus than to have all the riches in this world.

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MINISTRY BLUEPRINTS

By Don Ng



If my father had his wish, I would be an electrical engineer! When he returned home from serving the U.S. Army during World War II in Germany, he knew how difficult it would be to have a working knowledge of the English language. He didn't have it and didn't need it during the war years. All he needed to know was whose side he was on and how to aim and shoot. I still cherish the little pin that he received as a sharpshooter when he was in the Army.

I was told that the field of electrical engineering used the international language of numbers. It didn't really matter what language you spoke; as long as you knew mathematics, you would succeed. I grew up playing with dry cells and learning how to hook up wires to little motors that spun and whirled. One of my annual science projects was building a steam engine. And when I attended Boston Technical High School, I was on my way to becoming a "double E" major.

At "Tech," every student was required to take mechanical drawing or drafting every year. On large sheets of yellow paper, using 4H pencils and erasers, we would draw views of three-dimensional objects: front, end, and top views.

Any edges not seen would be represented by dotted lines. Spherical surfaces would require careful shading. I learned how to read blueprints. And I learned from drafting to print capital letters uniformly. But during my years at "Tech," I was also involved in the BYF (Baptist Youth Fellowship), the youth group at my church, the First Baptist Church of Boston.

By the time I was a teenager, practically all of the youth at our church were Chinese Americans, whose first-generation American fathers had served in the U.S. military during World War II. We were American-born Chinese. What was not available to our fathers was more readily available to us—going to school, playing sports, volunteering at the Jr. Red Cross, Scouts, Junior Achievement, and going to church. At First Baptist, Boston, we were very active in the youth group—planning programs, going on field trips, and "taking over the worship" on Youth Sunday. One of the main emphases of the youth program was to explore the many God-given gifts that we have. We published a youth newsletter that provided us an opportunity to write. The annual Youth Sunday gave a "poor soul" a chance to exegete a text and shout, "Youth are the church of today, not tomorrow!" By the time I was about ready to enter college, I was betwixt and between becoming an electrical engineer, or possibly an architect, and something that I discovered that gave me deeper meaning at church.

When God creates, God endows each of us with many gifts. God's creativity and diversity can be seen everywhere we look. It's not surprising to see that each one of us is then blessed with a number of gifts that can lead us to a number of vocations and careers. We often have choices to make. I could have been an engineer, or an architect, or a minister.

The disciples were fishermen first. When Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew going about their jobs as fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mark 1:17 NRSV). The disciples knew they had the abilities to cast their nets, haul in the fish, prepare the fish for market, and make a decent living. But in Jesus' eyes, these fishermen also had gifts to become his disciples. And after learning from the Good Teacher, the disciples became evangelists, preachers, teachers, missionaries, and pastors. After entering college, I soon realized that Chris-

tian ministry, rather than engineering or architecture, was the direction God was leading me. Out of the past 29 years of full-time Christian ministry, I have spent the last five years at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco. When I was called as the Senior Pastor in 1998, I was challenged with the responsibility of retrofitting and renovating an un-reinforced brick building, constructed in 1908, to comply with the city's earthquake-related seismic-safety codes. I had never experienced such a task before. And, in retrospect, my seminary didn't offer a course on building construction either. Our successful completion of a \$1.6-million-dollar retrofit and renovation project was the result of others who have been blessed with all the necessary gifts to do the job. We had a renowned retired soil engineer who taught at UC Berkeley, an architect, a contractor who owns his own business, a lighting specialist, a lawyer who could read the fine print in the contracts, and an employee in the city's planning department who was able to get our applications through quickly. About all that was missing were the pastors who provided prayer, encouragement, and vision to reassure ourselves of the reason for the project in the first place.

To seismically retrofit a building, the procedure is first to drive steel posts down into the bedrock. With these posts firmly in the earth, each floor of the building was tied to these posts with steel bars. These long steel bars had rods that bolted the old bricks on the inside as well as on the outside. Since the outside bricks would now have metal plates holding these rods, we decided to install decorative washers to make the outside appearance more attractive. The decorative washers appeared to look like a raindrop when positioned in a particular way. One of my few contributions to our retrofit project was to suggest that the installed washers should remind us of the Song of Moses,

*Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
May my teaching drop like rain,
my speech condense like dew;
like gentle rain on grass;
like showers on new growth
(Deut. 32:1-2 NRSV).*

Now, every time I look up at our sacred building and lead people to see what our project was like, I always point out the decorative washers that are becoming a visible symbol of the importance of teaching God's word in the world. Now our church building is encircled with the "raindrops" of God's teachings.

God gives us many gifts for ministry. Each one of us could have chosen a career other than full-time Christian work. I might have been a pretty good engineer or an architect. But when I heard God calling me to Christian ministry, I followed Jesus to be his disciple. But what is amazing is that I never lost my interest in how things work, and when it came time for me, along with others on the retrofit committee, to read the blueprints for our church building, I was able to do that too. All those days playing with a dry cell battery or doing mechanical drawings had not been wasted when I committed myself to ministry. These interests and skills are also the blueprints in my ministry today.

The Reverend Donald Ng serves as the Senior Pastor of the First Chinese Baptist Church, in San Francisco, California.

TRANSITION IN MINISTRY

By David Chapman



In 1988, after eleven years in ministry, with ten of the eleven years in the pastorate, I entered the School of Theology at Virginia Union University. This move proved to be the defining line in my transition in ministry. Since 1991, the year I graduated from Union, my twenty-six years of ministry have been defined in terms of Pre-Union and Post-Union.

My Pre-Union period of ministry began with my initial sermon in 1977. Four years prior to my initial sermon, I had graduated from Bluefield State College in Bluefield, WV, with a B.S. Degree in Secondary Education. I proceeded to spend 10 of the next 15 years in bi-vocational ministry.

These days, in my Post-Union era, being able to pastor full-time, I thank God for youth. Back when I started in ministry, I taught school, which required traveling 40 miles one-way each day. For the first two years of my ministry I pastored two small, loving congregations in the coalfields of West Virginia. These two churches offered me a great opportunity to learn what pastoring was all about. I know now that they were the training ground for my next transition.

During the next eight and a half years, I pastored a church that, when they called me as their pastor, had the worst reputation of any church in the area. The church had been without a pastor for three and a half years. When I arrived in January of 1981, there were strong power bases in place. I entered in prayer from the very beginning. The popular wager on my tenure was that I would last no longer than six months. I found out that the people longed for a strong pastor. Through much prayer and God's guidance, I stayed for over eight years. The church grew, prospered, and became highly respected throughout the Association and State Convention. During this period, I recognized a need to further my theological education. In 1984, I enrolled in Southeastern Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. By this time our family had grown to five. Like many ministers, I realize that the call embraces the entire family. During the summers of 1984 and 1985, I traveled to Southeastern for classes. This was when I realized how much I needed to learn. There developed in me an unquenchable hunger for more theological learning.

While attending Southeastern, I had a friend who had moved his entire family from Indiana. I also noticed that near the end of the summer term there were a number of families moving to the campus.

Over the next three years, I prayed that God would put a seminary near enough to where we lived so that we would not have to move. In July of 1988, my family and I packed up everything and moved to Richmond, VA, so that, at the age of 38, after 15 years of teaching and 10 years of pastoring, I could enter Virginia Union University to satisfy my hunger and yield to what I believed to be the will of God.

I don't have the time or space to tell all I desire to tell; suffice it to say that, as you and I obey God, God will never let us down. As the Apostle Paul

says in Philippians 1:20, "it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed" (RSV).

Our move to Richmond came at a time in my life when finances were stable; my church was blessed to grow and prosper; the young people I taught and their parents revered me; and my family was happy and contented. Then our income plummeted, and the house we had recently remodeled was left empty with an active note for the remodeling cost. For the first time in her life, my wife had to leave all she knew, and our children had to say goodbye to their friends. I know that even though we were moving, we were blessed because our move was voluntary.

After setting up shop in Richmond, my family and I traveled over 600 miles each weekend to and from the church I was pastoring. I'm ever grateful to that congregation for their support and understanding during that period of ministry.

After I finished my first year at Union in July of 1989, I received a call to pastor the Union Branch Baptist Church in Chesterfield, VA. Union Branch was a small, rural church that was basically in the maintenance mold. Upon accepting this pastorate, I challenged the congregation to allow me to have one full-time job—that of serving as their pastor. I started my ministry on October 1, 1989, at a salary of \$15,000 a year, and no benefits. My family and I have just completed our fourteenth year of ministry at Union Branch. The church continues to grow and prosper. Our children are all in college, in both undergraduate and graduate schools. My wife, Beverly, and I are in the midst of a second honeymoon. Financially, we are just getting back to the level of income we were realizing in 1988, but we have more today than we ever had. Like many of you who are reading this article, I know not what tomorrow holds as a minister and as a pastor, but I'm so thankful, I know who holds tomorrow.

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I'M STILL HERE

By Joe Kutter



The day before yesterday, I attended an ordination council. The candidate for ministry is bright and personable and full of promise and young. Her passionate love for the church and especially for the American Baptist family of churches was a warming thing to hear and stirred some old embers in my own soul. God is still calling some terrific people into the ministry of the church.

It was in May of 1971 when I knelt as hands were placed on my shoulders and head, and the ordination prayer of blessing and dedication was offered in my behalf. My father, ordained as a Northern Baptist pastor in the prior generation, offered the prayer, and I remembered that my mother's father had served as a pastor and professor in the generation before his. I can still feel the presence of that great cloud of witnesses even as I can still feel the presence of an uncertainty that has never quite gone away.

I remember being there because I had to be there, compelled by some inner force that simply would not let me move in another direction. But something else within me wanted to go someplace else, perhaps anyplace else.

The truth is that I felt like something of a fraud as I began my ministry. I did not know if I had enough faith and whether the faith I had was the right kind of faith. I wasn't much of a holy man, and I felt a profound absence of any inner spiritual authority to preach or teach. I wondered, "Who am I to tell people about God or what God has to say?" And some of those feelings have never gone away. And I really wondered whether a preacher or pastor could really make any kind of difference in this world or even in the church. Even in 1971 the death of the church was being predicted, and preaching was ridiculed as an archaic mode of communication.

And yet, that other something, that other inner force (I now suspect to be the Holy Spirit) simply wouldn't let go. So I survived an ordination council of my own in which it took the council members a very long time to authorize the Haddonfield (NJ) Baptist Church to proceed with ordination, and I knelt on that Sunday afternoon to be blessed by the saints who attended.

Now, thirty-one-and-one-half years later, still a pastor, the question has changed. In the beginning the question was, why are you doing this? Now the question is, why are you still doing this?

The Good Lord knows that I've seriously thought about other things. Some years ago, I actually took the LSAT, thinking that law school would be another option. I spent a year commuting to Princeton to study Greek thinking that a Ph.D. would be the ticket to a more acceptable vocation. When our fourth child let us know that he was on the way, I talked with people about more lucrative employment out of a genuine anxiety concerning our ability to pay the bills on a pastor's salary. And I have explored options within the denomination, both regional and national positions. There were times when I wasn't hired and times when I withdrew from the process knowing that it was not right for me.

So why am I still here, serving as a pastor of the First Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas? It still has to do with that compelling inner force that keeps me connected and fascinated by the tasks of ministry. I have a story that dramatizes, for me, the way this inner force works within me.

She knocked on the door of the house late one afternoon. "Mom is having a really tough time. Can you come over?" "Oh," she said, "she has asked for a scripture to be read at her funeral, and I don't know if it is appropriate. It's that passage about the sheep and the goats where Jesus said, 'When you have done it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.' Is that really a good funeral passage?"

“It’s perfect,” I said. “For your mother, nothing else fits so well.”

Let me tell you about Jerry (Mom). When we housed the homeless in our church building during the coldest days of January or February, she was there nearly every night. More than once, she stayed all night. When a neighbor church housed the homeless, she was there too. When an agency that cared for the poor in downtown Detroit needed help, she and her husband spent days helping to paint and repair the building.

Socks are important to homeless people. Wet or damp socks in the wintertime are deadly. So we cleaned and passed out dry and clean socks. One night we ran out of socks, and Jerry disappeared. When she returned, she had a sack full of warm, clean, folded socks. It was late, and the stores were closed. “How did you do that?”

“Paul can buy more tomorrow,” Jerry said, referring to her husband. “They need the socks!”

One cold, windy day Jerry saw one of her “clients” shuddering at a bus stop. She sat with her friend and sheltered him from the wind while Paul went home to get a coat. He could buy another one tomorrow!

And there was the “client” who needed a place to stay. Against our best advice, she and Paul took him into their home for a while to give him a chance. It did not work out well. The addiction was too powerful. But Jerry and Paul were there to try to give him another chance.

I walked over to their house, and the entire family was there. Paul and their two adult daughters had given wonderful care to Jerry, and they met me at the door. “Before you go in, we want you to know that she really looks bad. She has slipped a lot since you were last here.”

We went into the bedroom, and it was true. She was thinner, darker, more drawn and gaunt, for the disease was ravaging her body. They pointed to the lone chair beside her head, and I sat there and talked for just a few moments. The room was dark, with only a small lamp to give the light that created a kind of halo around her face. I asked if we could pray together.

Somebody moved, and I glanced that way to see what was happening. In order to keep her com-

pany through the night, the family had placed a mattress on the floor at the foot of the bed so that some family member could keep her company at all times. And there they were, all three of them, the father and his two adult daughters, kneeling like little children with hands folded, ready to say their bedtime prayers.

I am not blessed with great sensitivity to the Holy, but I must say that I was in the midst of something—Someone—profoundly holy that night. The intimacy, the profound love that overcomes even death, the faith that cannot be articulated and trusts God when God seems untrustworthy, it was all in that bedroom, and these incredible people had invited me to share the moment.

A daughter asked, “Joe, do you believe in angels?”

“Why do you ask?”

“As you were praying,” she said, “there was a light up in the corner of the room, and I wonder if it was an angel who had come to take Mother home.”

“Yes, Sue, I believe in angels.”

What keeps me in ministry? It is hard to say, but it has something to do with the fact that I am sometimes invited to share in moments of incredible intimacy, wonderful love, and indescribable holiness. In the midst of all of the nonsense of church work, all of the pettiness that church-folk can sometimes churn, and the grind-it-out work that simply must be done, I stay for the reason that I started. I am compelled by some inner force that just won’t let go.

It keeps me alert, wondering, even expecting, that in some conversation, some hospital visit, some wedding or marriage counseling session, some sermon preparation, or in the midst of some worship experience it will happen again. The Holy will appear even to this one who still knows full well all of the reasons that he ought to do something else.

The phone rang late this morning. (And I am not making this up for the sake of this article.) The phone rang, and the man at the other end said, “Joe, are you free to talk sometime today?” “When? You name the time.”

Some day, I may do something else, but it's nearly 3:00 PM now. He will be here in just a few minutes, and who knows what will happen. It could be something holy.

The Rev. Dr. Joe Kutter serves as the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Topeka, KS. He is currently President of the national Ministers Council.

AND THE CHILD GREW STRONG IN WISDOM AND GRACE

By Lynette Johnson



Oh, sing into the Lord, all Earth" Psalm 96:1

Psalm 96 encourages all of us to sing. Some time ago, I saw an article in the newspaper about...Elvis Presley...the one and only...Elvis! He sang and was heard throughout the earth. The article was about an event: the remembrance of his death in August 1977 and the activities that have occurred annually since the first anniversary of his death. People gather for a whole week to remember Elvis' successful career and music, and to sell objects, articles, and mementos. In the story, Elvis' followers were described as an homogeneous group of about 8,000 people, from the middle-aged to the elderly (people from 32-80 years old), all with one trait in common: an eagerness to adopt the look and the style of the 1960s and 70s.

The description of their devotion to Elvis seemed to me like the ritual devotion that might be given to an idol, the cult of a divinity, or the worship of certain symbols of celebrity manufactured through publicity to bolster the singer's career. The week-long remembrance includes a procession resembling a *via crucis*, in which people carry candles, leave offerings to Elvis' memory, hold vigils to mourn his death, and give comfort to one another. Through these actions, they adopt the symbols that distinguished him, such as dyed black hair, sideburns, black and gold colored clothes, chains, and boots. They even adopt his name and imitate his singing and motions.

All of it may be just for fun. But, to me, it is much more than fun. First, many people stressed their urgency to adopt "his likeness before they get too old." This may reveal a sense of life's brevity, a desire to grab youth and remain in it, because from Elvis' symbols they derive an identity that keeps them in the past.

Second, they said "they want to let Elvis know that we care." This means that their "king" still lives, and he can see and hear them.

Now, the composers and singers of the Psalter, in Psalm 96, gave a meaningful song to their people, who were going through very rough times. They were under the political, social, cultural, and economic dominion of foreign countries. Today, when the world clashes with more conflicts and challenges, when the leaders of the world are compromising the very existence of the planet, do we pastoral leaders have a port to anchor our souls when the winds and waters seem to blow forever, and our boats are flipping over? Can the people who look to us for guidance find a way to overcome? The composer of this song seems to have found an internal path to balance and strength that was not dependent on prevailing circumstances. Therefore, he could sing and rejoice.

Elvis' followers, in their quest for an identity, for youth, and for a living king, cannot find any of those. Of course, I do not believe that Jesus expects us to dress and look like he did, or like John the Baptist either, but as I consider my career and the pastoral role, I would like to offer four questions, as food for thought. First, do Christian communities promote a similarly intense sense of close contact with, and celebration of, the Living King, the Lord Jesus, when the community gathers for worship and service? Second, do the members of Christian communities remember the sufferings and pain of our King when encountering daily hardships, or do we remain focused on the aggravations and personal discomforts of the moment? Third, do the liturgy and the service generated in our churches provide the tools to construct an identity? In spite of the many differences in the body, the Scripture teaches about values and ethics, endurance and courage, the fruit and gifts that develop in our personality when we persist in seeking the Lord. Fourth, do the leaders of various ministries keep searching for God

wants them to become as leaders? What career and/or skills complement the plan He intends to develop?

These questions bring my mother to mind. As for the first, she was *convinced* that she had a Savior who gave his life for her, a Savior who gave her eternal life at an early age, an experience of eternal life that sustained her thereafter. Much later, she learned to age with grace and beauty, elegance and tenderness. With respect to the second question, my mother lived each day putting her only remaining hand within the Lord Jesus' wound. She was sensitive to the needs of those around her. Her fractured and amputated body was like her Master's, still worthy and useful and beautiful and complete, because His life kept flowing in her as a river of living water. With regard to the third question, I grew up watching my Mom growing in the Lord's wisdom. Later I witnessed the painful process in which, with courage, she learned to survive the daily struggle of existence. And by watching her I learned so much. She hung onto the Holy Spirit, trusting to be pulled up, beyond depressive thoughts, far above the roughness and insensitivity of some unfortunate people around her. She understood the importance of giving herself the space to breath spiritually and emotionally.

Finally, regardless of the knowledge we acquire by academic degrees or by experience, leaders are not called by God to become the idols of our families or the idols of our congregations. Instead, we are called to shepherd all—not to nurture the ego, but to be wholeheartedly present at all times. The transition from being my mother's *daughter* to becoming the *pastoral support* for my mother was a critical stage in my life. A legal and religious background was of much help to provide the quality of life she needed. By then, I had acquired the essential foundation for what was coming next.

On the other hand, the analytical framework for the legal and theological reflection to make responsible biblical decisions and to take action in the midst of current international circumstances is very difficult for me, and it is challenging when I am preaching and serving. It is harder as I see people turning inward into their individual concerns, disregarding other sides of the full picture. To non-Christians, I cannot—and I do

not try to—prove that there is a power above and beyond human beings, one who is willing, able, and capable of intervening in this senseless struggle for dominance and destruction. I have the faith and conviction that the Holy Spirit works in the men and the women who make decisions concerning the life of the world, causing them to have increasingly fractured and undecided minds, hearts, and wills with regard to destruction. I hang onto the possibility that the Holy Spirit's work will cause their wishes for war to a stall, while millions of conscious minds keep fighting the good struggle for peace and transformation.

During the past months, incredible hardships have shocked colleagues on my team. To come into close contact with the fragility of life unexpectedly can throw the strongest person off balance. But allowing the Almighty to guide our *whole lives* provides endless training for ministry. It gradually teaches us to be wholeheartedly present at all times, to offer someone a silent embrace, to provide someone with assistance, or quietly to keep someone company behind the scenes. May God keep us in Him, for the glory of Jesus.

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THE MINISTRY AS A CAREER!

By J. Wesley Shipp



I did not really understand, that day in 1956, when my pastor met with me and, in answer to my question about going into the ministry, said, "If you can do anything else and be happy, don't do it!" My reply was that I had struggled with this decision for the better part of two years and had become ill in the process. It was clear to me that I could not be happy without surrendering to God in this matter. His reply was simply this: "Then you really don't need to ask me what

to do.” He was right, of course, for I had wrestled with God for two years and had not prevailed.

I really did not want to do this. The prospect of attempting to go to college and seminary, while supporting my wife and two children seemed all but impossible. Nevertheless, in January of 1957, I entered the University of Richmond, VA, and began my work toward a Bachelor of Arts degree. It was August of 1967 when I received my degree. In 1970, I received the Master of Divinity degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC.

I had pastored churches in Virginia while attending the University of Richmond, and, when I entered Southeastern Seminary, I continued to drive 150 miles each way to continue pastoring in Virginia. Those pastorates were meaningful, and, apart from the usual difficulties, they were really a joy. They had meaningful ministries, and I enjoyed a degree of “success.”

In 1969, I was called to a church in North Carolina that was very near the Seminary. It seemed ideal. However, it was a move that would cause my family and me to endure the most painful period of my ministry. At the same time, the events of that pastorate and the decisions made there have helped to guide the course of my ministry even until now. It was a time of great racial tension. My stand for racial equality was not popular in many quarters. It was there in North Carolina that the bullets, which ripped through the window and walls of our home, together with my dismissal from my pastorate propelled me into almost thirty years of multi-cultural and urban ministry. That shooting and dismissal left me hurting by the side of the road of life, and then the Good Samaritan, the black church, took me in and helped me to understand how close one can grow up to a culture and not understand it at all. As I sit writing this article in my study at the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia, where I am presently Interim Pastor, it occurs to me that I am here partly because of those difficult events long ago.

So, out of my experience, what do I have to say about the ministry as a career? It is a calling that demands a kind of total commit-

ment—a commitment that few careers require. If one is looking only for financial rewards and material comforts, I would suggest that one look elsewhere. If, however, one is looking for a career with other satisfactions, then this may be the job one is seeking.

God does not seem to be very concerned about the comfort of his servants, for God constantly calls us to take unpopular stands, even when we have to do so in opposition to the members of our own church. Why is it so unpopular to preach the unconditional love of God for everyone? God sent her own unique child, Jesus as the Christ, into the world, so that in Christ all could be made alive.

The issues change, but the underlying sickness of prejudice and bigotry remain the same. First it was race—people were the wrong color—then there were women’s issues—they were the wrong gender, and now there are gay and lesbian issues—they have the wrong sexual orientation. We need to read again God’s admonition to Peter to “not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28, NRSV).

But there is also another side of pastoring. We really do have a license to meddle in people’s lives. I used to tell young ministers, as I was guiding them in their field education experiences, “When you are walking around in people’s lives, take off your shoes; you are on holy ground.” And when someone comes to you and says, “Thanks for that word; I feel better about myself now,” or, “I don’t know how I would have made it without you, pastor,” or, “Thanks for listening to me and still loving me; I guess if you can know this about me and still love me, then God can love me, too,” then it all seems worth it somehow.

This career, or calling, or business of doing ministry, as a pastor, is often a roller coaster ride. You are hated; you are loved; you are terrible; you are wonderful. You are shot at and fired one day, and thirty years later the town invites you back and gives you the key to the city. You have days when you are convinced that you have the most wonderful job in the world—and days when you wonder how you could have been stupid enough to follow this calling. As my friend, Carlyle Marney, used to say, “It’s not possible to believe that it is worth

it, all the time.” Oh, by the way, I am 71 years old, and I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.

The Reverend J. Wesley Shipp is presently serving as the Interim Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia, PA.

From the moment I experienced my call to

AN EXPERIENCE OF GRACE

By Bruce Dyer



ministry in February 1976, I assumed that I would always be a pastor. I am the grandson of an American Baptist Missionary. The Reverend Vernelle W. Dyer, Sr. served in Rangoon, Burma, at the Immanuel Baptist Church from 1919-1939. Pastoring is in my blood. From my ordination on September 13, 1981, when the theme of the sermon, “You Can Never Go Back Again,” took hold of me, one can only imagine the failure and despair I experienced when I preached my last sermon on November 4, 2001.

I pastored two churches over a twenty-year span. I ministered to two small New England congregations for ten years each. During those years I experienced great blessings. The privilege of entering into the lives of people, bringing to them the love and presence of Jesus Christ, is an awesome thing. I witnessed lives changed, healings, and the power of God revealed through my attempts to be a faithful proclaimer of the Gospel.

Yet, also, during those years I became increasingly more aware of the difficulty involved in meeting the expectations of the people in these congregations. Equally apparent to me were power struggles within the church leadership, conflicts between members of the congregation and me, a lack of vision and an understanding of ministry on the part of the people, and my own feelings of inadequacy as a preacher of the gospel. Notwithstanding the

fact that many of my colleagues struggle with similar issues, I felt increasingly more alone, more depressed and trapped, unable to fulfill my calling in the way I committed myself to Christ to do so. I can’t tell you how much I labored over sermons and agonized over disagreements with church leaders. Pastoral ministry is a place for those who are tough-skinned extroverts, and as an INFP (introverted, feeling, intuitive, perceptive) type, my desire for approval and my need for relationships always seemed overshadowed by the often harsh realities of pastoral life: meeting congregational needs on a 24/7 basis; preaching, teaching, counseling, and administering equally well; relating to young and old; and meeting the expectations of all—you know the list.

My Yankee blood and my “call” to ministry did two things for me: they reminded me that I am not a quitter and they reinforced the fact that after being in it for most of my adult life pastoral ministry was all I knew and all I could do. During times when I felt angry, resentful, depressed, and confused, identifying with Elijah in 1 Kings 19, I retreated into myself, felt comforted by God, and, in turn, experienced a rejuvenated vision that things would change, if only I could hang on. During my last pastorate, I can’t tell you how many times this cycle repeated itself, and also how much of a toll it took on my family as well as on me.

At a low point a few weeks before Easter 2001, I shared confidentially with my Pastoral Relations Committee and my Executive Minister that I was depressed and questioned whether I could continue to minister without some time away from the church. Anxiety within the congregation had been re-fueling anger and resentment on the part of the leadership. A laundry list of my inadequacies was given to me with the expectation that I would make the appropriate changes. The Executive Minister, who was a close friend of mine, concurred with the requested changes from the Pastoral Relations Committee. I was burned out and needed a break. I did my best to pastor my people and serve the needs of the congregation, and through God’s grace I lasted until the first part of July, when I took a much-needed month’s vacation.

When I returned in the beginning of August, I

discovered that meetings had taken place among the church leadership, the Pastoral Relations Committee, and my regional Executive and Area Ministers, without my knowledge. A church-wide meeting was to be held a few days after my return without my presence, moderated by the Area Minister. People were to be given an opportunity to share their “concerns” about the church and my leadership. Through the grace of God, I had been planning to spend some time at the Center for the Ministry in Newton Centre, MA (now in Dedham, MA). It was there that I came to a realization that I had been involuntarily terminated. I had no choice but to resign. I planned to leave without a job. Angry, saddened, feeling like a failure, fueled by inadequacies that told me there was nothing else I could do besides pastoral ministry, I prepared to say good-bye to the congregation and let go of my calling, my profession, and my identity for the past twenty years.

The Scripture says God’s “grace is sufficient.” “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV). I had preached that text many times, but now I was to experience its truth personally. Within two weeks following my resignation I interviewed for the position of Substance Abuse Counselor at the high school in the community where we live. I was offered the job and for two years have counseled kids and parents and worked with administrators and teachers, carving out a new role, undertaking a fresh calling, ministering with the spiritual gifts with which God has blessed me. I feel fulfilled, in that my ministry has expanded beyond the church, into places I could not reach as a pastor. God can and has been using me in this “secular” setting to provide hope and healing for young people and their parents.

God does work in mysterious ways. In September of 2003 I was called to the bedside of a dying friend who had attended the church I had pastored, and I was asked to participate in the memorial service. God used this event and the time I had back in the pulpit to remind me of his grace and of his desire for hope, for healing, and ultimately for resurrection. Out of death, there is life. It’s a gift from God to us all that comes to us in the most unexpected times, at moments when we need it the most. As much as I experienced anxiety and fear in standing

before the congregation on that Sunday afternoon, a peace, an inner healing, a letting go, and a renewed understanding that God is in control of our lives and of the life of the church filled me. I now feel a sense of confidence and privilege that God has called me to the place where I need to be right now. I feel a renewed freedom in serving Christ. I am invigorated each morning, looking forward to the challenges of the school day, knowing that God is using me to minister to those who hurt and are in pain. I understand that pain. Starting a new career at 46 has re-energized me and reminded me of the preciousness of God’s call in my life. I have discovered that it is all right to move on, that it is possible to bring with me the gifts and experience God has so graciously entrusted to me to share with others, and that it is O.K. to begin again.

The Reverend Dr. Bruce A. Dyer serves as Substance Abuse Counselor at Westbrook High School in Westbrook, ME. He is President of the Northern Baptist Educational Society.

The pastor was young, enthusiastic, and inex-



REFLECTIONS ON INVOLUNTARY TERMINATIONS

By David Haughey and G. Jean Wright



perienced. In his first call as youth minister to a badly divided congregation, he was determined to lead the youth program in the directions he knew were right for the young people of the parish. Despite opposition from lay youth advisors, who had their own notions of what directions they wished to take, he persevered in pushing his ideas and programs, confident in his knowledge that a minister should lead rather than be led in the areas of his responsibilities and training. Before too long, sufficient resistance to the

young clergyman's leadership was aroused, leading even the senior pastor, himself struggling with contending forces in the congregation, to side with the lay youth volunteers against his own assistant. Despite the resignation of certain of the most important youth advisors, the young minister seemed unable to rein in his strongly held convictions. Involuntary termination was inevitable and followed in short order. This is a sad story of youthful exuberance and hubris leading to an unhappy ending.

Even sadder is the story of the middle-aged and experienced pastor whose ministry had consisted of a series of small, semi-rural parishes, poorly paying and often demanding and ungrateful. This time he faced an aging and depleted congregation, burying many more members than he baptized. He experienced neglect and disdain from leading families in his church who refused to fund even the most necessary repairs and programs. The pastor supplied much of the needed money from his own pocket. He was even criticized by a student intern who shared in the disdain of the elderly parish for its self-sacrificing pastor. Adding insult to his many injuries, he was asked to resign for his failure to rescue the parish from its slow descent into oblivion.

Nothing can prepare a pastor for the experience of being fired. The feelings of loss and rejection are overwhelming. The sense of failure, the shame of public humiliation, the anxiety about the future, and the uncertainty and doubt about one's ministry take over one's consciousness. In the flux of conflicting emotions the capacity for reasonable thinking and sound decision-making are diminished. The pastor is in a state of shock, traumatized by the end of the struggle that had caught him or her up in its grasp. Involuntary termination does not usually come out of the blue. The pastor has known for a while, often months, that his or her ministry was in trouble and has likely been fighting against the very outcome that has occurred. What can be done now?

There is no limit to the advice given to the troubled clergyperson who will listen—advice that often comes from the parties that are responsible for the present predicament. Though it is

probably well intended, such advice is also biased by that party's personal interests and thus is often self-serving and frequently unhelpful. As in the case of divorce, a disinterested advocate is necessary to protect the immediate interests of those directly involved. Even more important is the protection of long-term interests that might not be quite so evident in the welter of confused feelings that are typical in such a crisis. In the case of divorce the advocate is often an attorney. Who, then, can the pastor turn to in the pastor's time of need? Who can think clearly, marshal resources, and provide useful and unbiased counsel? We would submit that an agency does exist to serve the discharged minister as an advocate and counselor to help with both short-term and long-term issues. That agency is the career development and guidance center, a number of which are located around the country.

The agency at which we serve, the Center for Career Development and Ministry (the CCDM), is located in Dedham, MA. The CCDM's mission is to provide career assessment and counseling services designed to promote greater understanding, effectiveness, and satisfaction in the vocational, personal, and spiritual lives of its clients. Our CCDM career counselors are both ordained clergy and vocational counselors; clergy and clergy candidates comprise 90% of the CCDM's clients. The Center was founded in 1968 as a service provided by MMBB and was one of three such ABCUSA-related centers located regionally across the United States. (The others are in Chicago, IL, and Oakland, CA.) The CCDM is now independently incorporated, serving all the major denominations as well as the laity.

The CCDM model integrates developmental spiritual formation with psychological assessment in its approach to career and vocational assessment. In brief, a standard program at CCDM consists of completing a substantial number of pre-program tests and questionnaires, two or more days at the Center in face-to-face discussion with a career counselor, a psychological interview with a licensed clinical psychologist, and conversational reflection upon the test outcomes. The program process concludes with a sharing of results and the mutual development of an action plan.

The Center offers third-party, professionally-derived sources of information and opinion as an aid to better decision-making. Such findings may carry great weight in the life of a client. The Center's primary concern lies with the client, who retains absolute control over all of the information that is generated in the program. Confidentiality is assured for the client through the client's right to refuse the release of information related to the client's program. This safeguard also permits the Center staff to retain an objective and unbiased role. Importantly also, as a third party, the Center is located some distance away from the pressures and personalities whose clashes often result in involuntary termination.

What have we learned as a result of our role in these situations? First, there are no typical instances. Every situation of involuntary termination involves a set of unique circumstances that contribute to a forced separation of pastor and congregation. These factors include:

- the history of the particular church
- the personalities of the lay leaders
- current congregational and community issues
- the role of denominational executives and their special interests
- the role of outside consultants and their findings
- the pastor's actions, personality, and family circumstance

It is often apparent that, except for certain particulars, the relationship between pastor and congregation would not have reached the point of irreconcilable differences.

One commonality, however, is that at the point of breakup the first tendency of all parties is to play the "blame game." Situations of relational distress always seem to require that someone be held responsible, to be the guilty party, and, therefore, to carry the onus of blame for the discomfort of all concerned. Besides, the pastor is one, while the congregation and denomination are many. Although everyone, including the pastor, has likely contributed to the outcome, the pastor is an easy and convenient target for blame.

There is also a tendency to try and reach a quick and non-disruptive solution, in order to limit the discomfort and inconvenience of the rupture in the life of the church. This tendency favors a "Band-Aid" solution to often chronic problems and difficult, long-standing, systemic situations to which a blind eye has often been turned.

While we understand that an involuntary termination is often a symptom of significant difficulties, we also see it as an opportunity to resolve long-standing issues of both a systemic and personal nature. We refer here to such issues as:

- the failure of a congregation to adapt to a region's changing demographics
- the surrender of church leadership to dominating congregational families
- faulty denominational administrative practices
- significant personal and emotional upsets in one or more individuals

These circumstances require careful and extended evaluation, intervention, and resources in order to attend to the legitimate interests of all concerned parties rather than the quick exchange of one pastor for another. Too often another involuntary termination will soon follow such expedient actions, thus reducing the resiliency and resources of all concerned.

What happened in the two cases mentioned above? Although the Center was not involved with the respective congregations, clergy participation in a standard program proved helpful. The long-suffering and self-doubting pastor was aided in seeing that he had more to offer than either he or his congregation had acknowledged. With a renewed sense of self-confidence, he sought a more hopeful and promising call with the support of his Area Minister, who was pleased to learn that concerns about this pastor were unfounded and that he could be recommended to a congregation with confidence. Certain early experiences that had sapped the enthusiasm and self-assertion of the pastor were placed in a new and more accurate (i.e., less self-blaming) perspective that enabled him to raise his level of expectation

and aspiration for his ministry. He was able to grasp pertinent issues related to his concepts about pastoral role, function, and identity that had prevented him from establishing appropriate boundaries in his pastoral role. His hopes were restored.

What about the eager but heedless youth minister? He was confronted with the fact that he had turned a deaf ear to the desires of the lay youth advisors in his church. His anxiety and his fear of failure had combined to rigidify the way he had responded to their concerns. We helped him see that his professional training had provided him with many more options for dealing with such situations than he had been able to use. We recommended that he supplement his training with a quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education in order to develop flexibility and understand the way other people face their world and its issues. We affirmed that this young minister could learn and adjust and communicated that he was a valuable pastoral resource.

In both instances interpreting to denominational administrators each pastor's way of facing conflict played a significant role in working out equitable solutions for the pastors involved, as well as highlighting important findings about their congregations and their long-standing problems.

In sum, the CCDM is a resource clergy can use when experiencing involuntary termination. Financial support is often available. We believe an unbiased, evaluative approach can lead to effective and fair resolutions in such crises. Strategic options for the clergy are suggested. The CCDM offers just such an approach in its spiritually-grounded and psychologically-based service to church leaders. Additionally, the CCDM is a resource for those clergy who would like to develop learning goals for ongoing professional and spiritual development. We believe such a program has the potential to circumvent involuntary terminations.

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TOGETHER IN MINISTRY

By Kate Harvey



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This magazine, *Minister*, is published twice yearly by your Ministers Council to explore issues that will inform, encourage, support and stimulate our membership. By doing this, we endeavor to fulfill our purpose, “to build up the Church of Jesus Christ by sustaining and improving the ministerial church leadership of the American Baptist Churches in the USA.” The Ministers Council and this publication are dependent upon your membership.

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