

A Pastor's Dirty Little Secret

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In the past 14 years Iâ€™ve rubbed shoulders with more ministers than I can remember. Iâ€™ve talked with ministers of large churches, small churches, and every size in between. Iâ€™ve hung out with black ministers, Hispanic ministers, Episcopal ministers, Republican ministers, and yes, to my shame, even ministers who are Yankee fans. You name â€™em, Iâ€™ve probably picked up their lunch tab.

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When our conversations move past square footage and per capita giving and other things that keep God up at night, we slowly let our guard down and begin to talk from the heart. Inevitably, thatâ€™s when a well guarded secret is shared. For most ministers, itâ€™s a secret theyâ€™ve never shared with their colleagues, their churches, and sometimes even their spouses. I know I can count on one hand the people Iâ€™ve shared it with. Until now.

Regardless of how betrayed my fellow colleagues in the trenches might feel by me spilling the beansâ€¦I canâ€™t hold it in any longer. Iâ€™m coming clean.

Here it is: sometimes we wish we could quit.

There, I said it. That felt pretty good. Ministers, say it with me, â€œQ-U-I-T. Adios. See ya. Hasta la vista. Outta here.â€•

I think you get my drift.

You want to know what surprises me? Every time I hear someone tell me theyâ€™re firing up a resume, I am always struck by how similar the reasons are for why they are taking their hand off the plow.

Difficult People

Many ministers say theyâ€™re tempted to throw in the towel or move because of people. Problem people to be exact. I remember the first church I served. After a few months I was approached by a man who felt called by God to be my accountability partnerâ€¦without asking me. He offered to take me out to eat one day, so I accepted. Little was I prepared for what was about to happen. Setting down his sandwich he said, â€œBrian, there are a number of things you are doing wrong, but for the sake of time Iâ€™ve kept my list to 10.â€• I made the mistake of saying, â€œStart with number one.â€• Two and a half hours later I left with two things--30% less self-esteem and a really good case for why first cousins should never marry.

Like most ministers, Iâ€™ve regularly felt the sting of difficult people. Looking back on some of these situations Iâ€™ve come to one conclusion: in every congregation there are always 3 or 4 blessed souls that are there because no other organization in town will put up with them. Yes, I agree that itâ€™s hard to overestimate the damage some ministers have done to churches. I own that. I know Iâ€™ve caused my share of pain. But itâ€™s also healthy to acknowledge that many of Godâ€™s servants walk with a limp because no-one in their congregation had the guts to stand up to a known troublemaker and protect their leader. Itâ€™s at those times it becomes easy to question whether the price is too high, at least for me.

Those Highly Marketable Bible-College Degrees

A while ago I stumbled upon one of those well-known job search web sites. Supposedly it is the largest in the world matching thousands of employers with employees everyday. I was curious so I plugged in my education, experience, and the name of the mildly prestigious divinity school from which I graduated. Most ministers will understand my elation at clicking the button and reading a report that pointed me to a long, distinguished career at my local Krispy KrÃ¢me. When Iâ€™ve talked with colleagues, the feeling that is expressed is not necessarily one of resentment, but of being trapped. Even if they wanted to leave the ministry, what kind of job could they get? Could they make what theyâ€™re making now? Is it too late to start over? Try to remember the vigor and vision with which we entered Bible College. I literally would have become a Pastor if they told me Iâ€™d never be paid a single penny. I was sold out. But adding a few waist sizes has helped me recognize now what I didnâ€™t then: 18 year old kids suffer from what author Warren Bennis calls â€œDelusional confidence.â€• We didnâ€™t envision the day when we would have a mortgage payment, a car with 182,000 miles on it, and one too many smiles around the dinner table that need braces. Thank God for delusional confidence or we would have bolted to the local university mid-semester of our freshman year. Nevertheless, and Iâ€™m ashamed to admit it, but youâ€™d be surprised how many pulpits would be empty if someone offered ministers a job similar or better in pay than their current assignment.

Boredom

Finally, many a minister gets wanderlust because they have simply gotten tired of the â€œsame ole, same ole.â€• One minister confided in me that he thinks most of those in ministerial ranks change things in their churches simply out of boredom. If most ministers are telling the truth, theyâ€™ll admit there is more fact to that than theyâ€™d like to admit. Now, before you start rolling up your sleeves to throw stones, think about our typical week. Go to office. People. Problems. Study. Lunch time. More problems. More study. More people. Leave office. Not exactly the job for second-career NASCAR drivers. We ministers get into ruts. We get bored. We lose energy. We read the church openings. On Mondays youâ€™ll find us on the mountaintop ready to tackle the world, but by Friday at 4:45 p.m. weâ€™re cruising www.idonâ€™twanttospendmydayoffworkingonanothersermon.com. Too often, to our shame, spending time with our Creator becomes another â€œto doâ€• item on Microsoft Outlook. Ultimately, after a few years of hiking back and forth from the mountaintop to the valley and back, we ask ourselves, â€œIs this it? Am I wasting my life doing this? Would a move to another church cure this restlessness?â€• Thatâ€™s not the kind of thing you want to hear out of the person leading the charge, but more often than not itâ€™s the truth.

My Strategy For Pressing On

Iâ€™m not sure if this will help, but let me share a few things that have helped me stay in the game so far.

First, realize that no matter how hard it gets, itâ€™s only going to get harder. That may not be what you wanted to hear, but itâ€™s the truth. A mentor of mine once told a gathering of ministers, â€œHappiness is to be enjoyed like a sunny day.â€• Meditate on that phraseâ€“it will serve you well in our vocation. Look up the number of times Paul used military phrases to describe our task. Re-read 2 Corinthians and envision how that letter was written with hands broken multiple times preaching the same gospel we preach. Where in scripture did Jesus promise us a balanced, contented, pseudo-Buddhist journey? Take comfort in the fact that Jesus expects you to be faithful to your calling but not derive all your joy and satisfaction from your calling.

Second, make a vow. Almost a decade ago I picked up a book by a Presbyterian Minister named Eugene Peterson called, *Under The Predictable Plant: An Exploration In Vocational Holiness*. The book literally saved my ministry. In it he described how in the sixth century monks were moving from monastery to monastery looking for deeper spiritual communities and greater challenges. Things got too tough or shallowâ€they moved on. The problem of restlessness became so widespread that St. Benedict added to the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience a fourth: the vow of stability. My hope is that every minister who reads this, regardless of their situation, will place themselves under St. Benedictâ€™s tutelage.

Thatâ€™s my story and Iâ€™m sticking with it.

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