

Signs of a Healthy Pastor

The assurance extended to Jeremiah concerning the house of Israel was,

'Then I will give you shepherds (pastors) after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding' Jeremiah 3:16.

This promise continues to be fulfilled as many pastors accept the high calling of leading God's people. Serving God and His people is both a joy and a privilege, yet perhaps there has never been a time when the demands of pastoral ministry have been greater than they are today. Sadly, these pressures have resulted in many casualties along the way.

'The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it' 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

Some of the most unlikely candidates for pastoring I have come across have turned out to be the best pastors, while others with outstanding gifts have not always lasted the distance. The Lord often takes the weak things of this world to confound the wise, 1 Corinthians 1:27-29. If you feel dependent upon the Lord, have the right attitudes and training, you are likely to succeed.

The following points need to be taken into consideration for effective pastoral ministry.

Leader

As the shepherds of Jesus day walked in front of the sheep, so pastors must also seek to lead their people.

They must have *foresight*. Too many pastors are nothing more than managers. They maintain the life of the church but lack the ability to see opportunities for service further down the road or to see possible problems before they occur. Learn to be pro-active and do not just sit around and wait for things to happen.

They must have a *vision* of what God wants to do in their life and through the church. Numbers in church can't always be a sign of success. Looking to the Lord is a key to becoming an effective and successful leader. A leader must have a high degree of single mindedness and commitment to a given task which may include a strategy for the future. This sort of approach is what separates the successful leaders from those less gifted. In other words, never lose sight of long-term goals while handling short term opportunities or setbacks, even though your surroundings are changing.

Devotional life

Christian service becomes easier if the pastor's motivation is one of joyful love. Never lose your love for the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It has been stated that every person who has fallen from the faith had a poor or no devotional life.

'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed' Mark 1:35.

If Jesus was utterly dependent upon His Father for sustenance and strength, how much more should we be desperate for that constant disciplined fellowship with the Lord Himself. No programme can substitute for an anointed touch which comes from meeting God. History is full of accounts where men and women would spend hours every day seeking God's face. It is recorded that Martin Luther would spend 2 hours a day in his devotions and when he had an extra busy day, he would rise an hour earlier still, to spend more time with the Lord in prayer to make sure he would effectively handle the responsibilities of his life. Don't let extreme examples of faith discourage you.

Integrity

Many books dealing with ethics in the secular business world write of the importance of integrity. There is no room whatsoever for shady deals in the life of a pastor or church. The devil is there to ruin your testimony and even so called 'white lies', will lead to bigger ones and may cause irreparable damage to the individual and the church.

'May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you' Psalm 25:21.

Servanthood

In John 13:1-17 Jesus set the stage for servanthood as He washed His disciples' feet. As pastors we are not there to promote ourselves, but to promote Jesus and others. This does not mean we become a 'door mat', but it means we are willing to take on menial tasks.

A story is told about David Livingstone. His brother, also a doctor encouraged David to stay home in England to make a name for himself. David eventually arrived in Africa and made his mark upon that continent. In time both brothers died. The Doctor Livingstone who stayed behind in the homeland now receives only one line in the Encyclopedia Britannica, while David Livingstone fills up fourteen paragraphs. Let God establish you in whatever way He chooses and do not compare your pathway with another.

Cost

The cost is high for any successful pastor. It includes at times severe criticism (sometimes from those closest to you), a loss of financial rewards at times and loneliness. Many godly people in Scripture experienced the same thing: Moses, Elijah and Paul just to name a few.

On the other hand, God has His way of vindicating and rewarding pastors. It may take a while, but it will come. It may come through meeting many fine people and best of all seeing people come to know and grow in the Lord. One day there will be a heavenly reward, 1 Corinthians 3:8, 2 Timothy 4:7,8, James 1:12.

Spiritual warfare

Never under-estimate the power of the devil and demons.

'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm' Ephesians 6:12.

Those attacks will at times be obvious, but often, they will be subtle and devious. Many a pastor has had to leave pastoral ministry through ill health, wrongful handling of money, unhealthy sexual attractions and pride. Some of these attacks are devil initiated. Beware!

Discernment

Paul prays in Ephesians 1:18 *'that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened'*.

That is a good prayer for pastors to pray for themselves. Be open with people, but do not expect the worst or best from them. If you do not expect them to be infallible, then you will not be disappointed. This is both practical and wise. Be careful about what you share with people, with whom you share it and when. There is a right and wrong time to share a vision or personal problems with others.

If you are not so strong in discernment, pay close attention to what your spouse and other leaders share with you. Nevertheless, although intuitive people are known for their discernment, it needs to be stated that they are not always correct in what they say, no matter how deeply they may feel about something. At the same time do not ignore your hunches regardless of how trivial they may appear to be as pastors take final responsibility.

Faith

Faith in God's ability to carry you through all trials is necessary if you are to come through the rough spots successfully. Meditation on Scripture strengthens one's faith.

'Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ' Romans 10:17.

'Word' in the Greek is **ρημα** which refers to the *living spoken word* of God. It is that which gives life and hope. This comes through:

1. reading Scripture.
2. meditating upon it.

3. claiming it through prayer.

Have a realistic understanding of your giftings in God and do not lose your confidence (Hebrews 10:35-36). Develop the eye of faith.

Failure

Learn to cope with failure. Joseph, Moses and others thought that they had missed the mark, but they were wrong. They were just in God's training school. It took time, but they accomplished God's purpose for their lives in the end.

Scripture suggests that there are times when we must release a vision and allow it to die. This can be deeply painful. Many pastors have felt broken and even resigned from ministry, believing everything was lost, only to later discover a renewed path where that vision is restored and bears fruit, though perhaps in a different form.

Apparent failure is not the last word. Ask yourself the question, 'what led to this failure?' Learn from it and stand against self-pity otherwise it will destroy you. If other people are involved, you *must learn to forgive*.

Ken Pike born in 1912, was the son of a country doctor. His was a large family and had little money. As a youngster he appeared unpretentious. He was gangly and awkward and had a fear of heights. Intellectually however he was bright and he excelled at college. His desire was to serve the Lord as a missionary so during his training he applied to China Inland Mission. He was accepted as a candidate, but when the term was over, he was rejected for missionary service. It was a devastating blow for him, especially as his intentions of serving the Lord were widely known. They rejected him for two reasons. The first was due to his nervous disposition, while the other was the problem of his language difficulties; particularly due to his inability to grasp pronunciation. He really felt this rejection.

Later, Ken attended a Wycliffe Bible Translators Summer camp, but his performance was not particularly impressive. However, after training he was assigned to Mexico and studied a frustrating tonal language. The mission leaders after a time became so impressed with Ken that he was invited back not as a student, but as a lecturer. Over the years Ken Pike excelled in linguistics and became one of the finest and most honoured linguists of this last century in secular and Christian circles alike.

God has chosen you not because you are great, but because He sees the potential in you. Your success is not determined by any outward signs, but by your faithfulness to God's call upon your life, to lead His people with 'knowledge and understanding'.

Winston Churchill once said, 'Success is going from one failure to another without losing enthusiasm.'

Grace and peace.