

Commentary: Confessions of a middle-aged pastor

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Thirty-seven years ago this past month, I was called to my first church staff position at the age of 18. Thinking about those early beginnings has led me to reminisce about the peculiarity of my calling and my pastoral journey. Now, at age 55, I am a middle-aged pastor. My how time flies!



Barry Howard “Middle-aged” is an extremely relative term. [A recent article](#) in the *Huffington Post* defines middle-aged as beginning at age 35 and ending around age 58. In that case, I am upper middle-aged. Regardless of the definition, I suppose I am complimented by the term “middle-aged,” because I have reached that central season of life with exceptionally good health, with my sanity intact, and I still enjoy attempting to fulfill my calling.

Unique lenses

However, it does occur to me the way I see life and faith and church through the lenses of a middle-aged pastor is rather unique. I am neither a militant traditionalist nor a rabid post-denominationalist. I am not a hard-core fundamentalist or a soft-hearted liberal. I reject these kinds of labels as highly unnecessary and mostly inaccurate. My aim is to emulate the attitudes and actions of Jesus, whose mindset and mission cannot be

contained or described by any one label.

In the rural context of my home church, I “felt the call” to ministry at age 16 and preached my first sermon two weeks later. Since that time, there have been hurdles and a few monumental challenges along the way, but overall, I have been blessed with the opportunity to serve alongside some good folks in some great places. If nothing else, 37 years of service on the staff of Baptist churches means I have a little durability.

Supposedly everyone entering middle age goes through a stage of re-thinking life. For some, it is a painful, agonizing struggle, often second-guessing important decisions made along the way. For others, it is a time of re-direction, often resulting in a change in vocations, hairstyles, automobiles and occasionally, even spouses. For me, however, middle age, at least to this point, has been a time of reflecting, thinking about how I’ve changed and how much more room I have to grow.

The Top 10 ...

If confession is good for the soul, maybe I will be even healthier if I confess where I am and what I believe about church and ministry at this point in my life as a middle-aged pastor:

1. I believe the local church is where the action is. The church is where faith is nurtured, where community is cultivated and where missional initiatives are launched and nurtured to fruition.
2. Church is not a place but a people. Church is composed of flesh and blood, not constructed with brick and mortar. Being the church is more important than going to church, but I cannot fathom how we can do one without the other.
3. Church should be a clearinghouse where talents and gifts are developed, dedicated and deployed, never a warehouse where talents and gifts are

counted and stored.

4. Other churches and other ministers are my colleagues, not my competitors.

5. Credibility emerges more in the authenticity of a pastor than the authority of the pastor.

6. Doing ministry still energizes me. However, there are a few things that drain my energy quickly, especially attending monotonous meetings and dealing with high-maintenance people.

7. What we do inside the doors of the church building should make a drastic difference in who we are outside those doors.

8. I continue to discover the family of God to be much more diverse and inclusive than I previously imagined.

9. An open Bible and an open mind tend to cultivate a more engaging and enriching faith than a closed Bible and closed mind.

10. As a pastor and a Christian, I am called to be priest and prophet, not judge and jury. I am free to love, share and exercise grace toward all kinds of people without first judging their worthiness. I am relieved to know whatever final judgment looks like, I will not be the one holding the gavel.

More questions than answers

My full pastoral confession of faith is a lot longer than these 10 items. At this point in my life, I have more questions than answers. I get frustrated far too easily with petty complaint and criticism. Yet I realize I have far more to learn than I already know and far more to do than I've already done.

Even during my middle-age years, I love serving as a pastor. I have the

privilege of walking alongside folks from the moment of birth to the moment of death and all seasons in-between.

The Apostle Paul summed it up this way: “I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Although I have not arrived, I am intent on enjoying the journey of growing forward.

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