

Voices: Learning pastoral ministry by fire

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March 17, 2022, fire erupted in downtown Ranger. Fueled by dry conditions and high winds, the fire spread quickly. Before it could be extinguished, at least five buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged.

One of those buildings was occupied by Second Baptist Church. It is the congregation I pastor, sharing the joys and responsibilities of shepherding and leading with my wife. We had been at the church for only nine months.

Those who experience tragedies of this sort often point out, “The church is more than the building.” They repeat this trite sentiment because it is true—theologically and experientially. Still, losing a building is more difficult than our rehearsed and oft-repeated truisms allow.

Our congregation had worshiped and ministered in that building for 83 years, and in that time, a lot of lives were shaped by its brick and wood, its high ceilings and creaky floors.

The building was a symbol of the town’s history, and in a melancholic way, it continues to be so. But it’s more important function is as the material setting for the most important events in the lives of its members.

Walking with a congregation through such a loss is, quite literally, a trial by fire. It is especially so for a new pastor.

At least in my case, it revealed how little I know about shepherding God’s people, and it reminded me of the importance of listening to the wisdom of others as I serve and lead our people.

In that spirit, I want to share some of the most important lessons to me and

my wife as we try to discharge our calling in a way that honors Christ.

Value and trust preparation

There has been a tendency among some Baptists and Pentecostals to equate spontaneity with the work of the Holy Spirit. But that has not been my experience. For me, the process of preparation is a spiritual discipline—an opportunity for me to connect with Jesus by submitting to the wisdom and authority of the Holy Spirit.

Never has that conviction served me better than it did the week of the fire. As I watched our building burn—on social media and television—I could not help but wonder what I would say to our congregation that Sunday morning. It quickly occurred to me God already had given me his message for his church.

I'm not saying God doesn't sometimes use our circumstances to change our plans. I am simply saying, in this case, the sermon series I had planned put me in just the right place to address what was happening in the life of our church. None of that would have been possible if I hadn't listened to the Spirit's voice as I planned our Lenten series.

Complicated crisis

Perhaps you have heard psychologists use terms like “complex trauma” or “complicated grief.” The same kind of terminology can be applied to the crises we face.

It would be so much easier if we could face each crisis one at a time, but that often is not how things work out.

Notice, for example, the way Jesus had to make his way to the cross. He needed his disciples to have their heads together, to understand what he

was up to and to support him in his work.

It wasn't that Jesus lacked empathy for the stress the disciples were facing, but he needed them to be there for him as he faced the humiliation and pain that came with dying for our sins. The fact they weren't there only made things harder for him.

We can feel the same way as leaders. Sometimes, it is not the main crisis that stresses us out. It is all the little crises that go along with it. These "little" crises—which often aren't really little—drain away our spiritual and emotional energy and distract us from the task at hand.

I don't have any magic formulae for disentangling complicated crises. It has helped me just to know this is how it is, and Jesus experienced the same kinds of multifaceted leadership problems we do.

Limitations

As a part-time pastor who does not live in the town where I serve, I am keenly aware of—and sometimes frustrated by—my limitations. Facing a crisis only highlights those limitations. As I told a friend the week of the fire, who knew I would need a master's degree in structural engineering to be a pastor?

But, as some writers recently have observed, limitations also can be our friend. They can remind us the church's fate is not up to us. Like everything else, it ultimately is in God's hands.

That doesn't mean we don't work hard. It doesn't mean we don't bring the best of our abilities to the task we have been given, and it doesn't mean we don't try to acquire new abilities when possible.

It simply means we can live and minister in peace, knowing we don't bear the sole—or even the primary—responsibility for the success or failure of

the organization we lead.

Connection, unity and empathy

It has been one of the greatest blessings of my life to see how people have come out of the woodwork to support our church. Not surprisingly, people have reached out to us via social media from around the world. That shows how social media can function for good.

What has been far more meaningful, at least to me, are the pastors, denominational officials and laypeople who have reached out by phone or through cards. They took the time and made the effort to forge a deep human connection with a church that needed it. That is what the body of Christ is all about.

These external sources of unity will be particularly important for some leaders. That is because a crisis can reveal previously unrecognized fault lines in a church.

The perception of disunity within the organization may not comport with reality. People simply may be venting their frustration about the crisis at hand. Whatever the situation really is, the perception of disunity wounds a leader.

External sources of unity may help ministers retain emotional stability during a crisis, and that, in turn, will make the leader a better decision-maker and caregiver.

We are incredibly grateful to the [B.H. Carroll Theological Institute](#) family for their prayers and support.

I hope you and your church never experience this kind of tragedy. If you do, my prayer is the insights I have shared above will help you lead and love God's people well.

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