

Voices: Going the distance in the pastoral life

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Why does a person stay with the pastoral life? How does one endure when it gets [really hard](#)?

Most reading this will know the answer: the call of God. But what is it about the call that sustains a pastor in a life most people would abandon?

One of the elusive mysteries of life for many people is they never discover who they truly are and who God created them to be.

If the person actually is called to ministry, that mystery is settled when she accepts God's claim on her life to serve as a pastor. When he says, "Here am I," he begins to live with a uniquely clarified identity.

God's claim leads one to bypass vocational options in disregard of fanciful imaginings of an ideal life. You are seized at the depths of your being and drawn into the very center of God's work on earth.

Your life is bound to his mission. You can do nothing else. As you give in to this call, any ambiguities about the purpose of your life fade into the distance.

When my call was made clear

How does one sense such a singular and profound awakening to one's true self?

For me, it was one word from God: "You!"

I had started school at a local community college not knowing what to do with my life. It was one of those springs when friends were dying in an unpopular war, the culture and nation were in chaos, leaders were being assassinated, and buildings on college campuses were being blown up.

I was deeply disturbed by a world gone wrong and entered a season of questioning, lament and prayer.

One day, I drove to my favorite prayer spot by the ocean and, in a moment of audacity, began to tell God someone needed to do something to keep our world from coming apart.

Right then, God called me.

It was less than a whisper, but I heard God say, "You!"

God's claim on me went to the depth of every fiber of my being with that grasp I already knew would not let me go. But at that moment, it was like that double-grasp letting me know neither would he let me off.

I looked down at the New Testament I was holding in my hands and instantly realized I was called to preach and serve as a pastor.

Not always immediately clear

I am aware the awakening to how to live out a vocation is not always sudden and instantly clear for all. In fact, it now seems fairly common for God to lead his servants through a process. But for those led by God to be pastors, that tenacious and unyielding grasp is all-encompassing of every part of who we are.

When the call came upon me, it came with an enveloping peace. There was a rightness about it and a singularity of purpose that left for me no desired alternative. When I sensed that "You!" and surrendered my life, I instantly

was enlisted into the royal pastoral office of our Lord Jesus Christ to preach his gospel and serve his body, the church—the local church.

God's call sustains

Most candidates for the pastoral life are challenged by other pastors to pursue any alternative life or calling if they can. No pastoral candidate at the threshold of ministry or in the early days possibly could know what lies ahead.

From my own observation and anecdotal research, I can tell you only the called survive in the pastoral life.

Many superb men and women have stepped aside from the pastoral life for a season to preserve mental and physical health or pursue the calling in another way. For most, the call remains, and they continue to serve faithfully in ministries complementary to and flowing out of local churches.

Every veteran I know of the challenges and heartaches of pastoral ministry, the chaos and the battles, will tell you the call of God sustained them. No pastor can endure the immense stresses of the pastoral life unless they are seized at the depths.

The ordinary challenges alone can be barely survivable. Add the complex pathologies of human systems, compounded by the forces of evil, and it is just too much.

A hard yet magnificent calling

In my 18 years of teaching in a theological seminary following 30 years of pastoral ministry, I pondered and agonized about how much to share with younger pastors. I usually took the edge off such conversations and stories. I still wonder if that was what I should have done.

Too many already cross the threshold into ministry skeptical and averse to the pastoral life, because they have seen and heard too much in the church.

Early on, I dove deeply into the pastoral life and was jostled immediately by human pathologies and evil forces that threw me on my knees. Many nights I wondered what strange land I had entered and how I could journey on.

Always ... always ... for me at least, I sensed deeply and profoundly the grasp of God upon my life. I would not trade any life in this world for that.

I know my purpose and who holds me in it and for it. That is probably why I have taken some of the edge off when I talk to younger pastors. You have to be grasped deeply and forged in steel-like resolve to make it, and God does that work individually, uniquely and day-by-day.

The pastoral life is magnificent, but it is hard. Only the grasp of God upon your life will keep you in it. But no life is more meaningful and none more personally fulfilling. I have more on that in future reflections.

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