

Voices: Why some pastors are quitting, and many are not

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Presbyterian pastor Alexander Lang's recent article "[Departure: Why I Left the Church](#)" is a sobering portrayal of how one pastor has experienced the current high-stress moment for pastors and churches and has left the church.

I hope all church leaders—lay and clergy—will read the article. It is a case study from one pastor's experience, but it also vividly portrays several intense stressors most pastors are experiencing.

I am not endorsing Lang's full assessment, nor his decision to leave pastoring behind. But Lang has raised awareness about what pastors are going through right now and has given us his portrayal of a current inflection point in the pastoral life. In so doing, he tells what it feels like to be a pastor right now.

Stressors of the pastorate

Lang has attempted to explain joining the "Great Pastor Resignation," a phenomenon identified in the wake of the pandemic. He notes the now oft-cited [2022 Barna survey](#) that revealed 42 percent of pastors considered quitting in a two-year period.

Then Lang lists and reflects on some of the key reasons for many resignations: immense stress, loneliness, isolation, political division, effect on family, and loss of optimism about the church. He underscores immense stress and feelings of loneliness and isolation as the most significant causes for his leaving.

Lang's description of pastors carrying the burdens and secrets of so many, living with the unrealistic expectations of many bosses—"1000 bosses" to him—and giving one pastor's story of significant PTSD will resonate with pastors. He frames these stressors within a listing of various roles pastors must play—including speaker, CEO, counselor and fundraiser. It's a huge job.

The listing of pastoral roles is a well-known mantra, but we are learning more about the unusual challenges to pastors that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and also resulting from the political and cultural divide that has impacted our country and many churches.

We have entered a very different moment in the history of pastoral ministry, and we are seeing challenges pastors have not faced, at least in my lifetime.

I see another dynamic at work. After several decades of observing pastors, I have detected what I have termed a "high noon" moment in pastoral ministry. This is a moment in which the convergence of stressors on a pastor and her or his calling becomes intensified, forcing deep personal re-evaluation.

Usually after this defining moment, a person either walks away or walks on as a pastor. And some of the best people I have known have walked away. I am being descriptive, not judgmental.

God's strength to endure

Lang's article and others like it prompt for me a question other than why pastors are leaving. Lang's article smells of doom. The other question leads to hope.

This parallel question arises from careful research and close observation:

Why are so many, maybe most, pastors staying—and walking on in the pastoral life?

The auxiliary questions follow. What is it that compels a pastor to go the distance in ministry? What capacities must be developed for a pastor to walk lovingly alongside all the people—ornery and sweet?

What is it that enables pastors to stay in the ministry long enough to discover the deep and gratifying meaning of preaching the word of God—like fire in our bones (Jeremiah 20:9)—to a beloved people across years and years—even a lifetime—of ministry?

How does God grow the heart and character of a pastor, resulting in a more loving yet stronger person?

Those determined to go the distance seem to find answers to those questions in Scripture.

God told Jeremiah he could break him, but could also make him a fortified city, an iron pillar, a bronze wall (Jeremiah 1:17-18 NIV).

It was a pastor, Paul the Apostle, who gave the most succinct portrayal of God's strengthening process for pastors and all persons of faith: "We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character, and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4 NIV).

The message of God to and through those who have endured far more than any of us is he can grow in us strength and capacities for every challenge we face, and he promises he will be with us "like a dread warrior" (Jeremiah 20:11 NRSV).

God develops in those who persist in their calling their gifts, and also capacities and strength to persist in this calling.

Is this description of more resilient pastors unrealistic? In response to Lang

and those making a cottage industry of leaving church—with books, podcasts and films—I join my testimony to generations of pastors who say this is the reality we have experienced in the hands of God, who guards the called, holds us in grace and makes us stronger.

Forming enduring pastors

I know many pastors who have been hurt and wounded. An increase of personal and family damage serves as an indictment of many congregations. We need to provide much more help to pastors and families who have been hurt and wounded in ministry, especially among the current riptides tearing at the church.

So, how do pastors learn the arts and experience the many blessings of the pastoral life? I will mention two:

1. Teach and form in young pastors the rhythms inherent in pastoral ministry—learning even in a single day to move from distress to eustress (from draining to life-giving options of ministry).
2. Learn to lean into and not avoid the forging, strengthening and even reckoning that comes in a walk with God, leading toward maturity and wholeness as a pastor.

It's an old reality. God calls women and men to yield their lives, gifts and capacities into his gracious and forging hands, leading to a life of great meaning and purpose, and not without some treacherous days.

God intends to lead us to his place of promise and to experience a magnificence not known in any other life. Our Lord Jesus calls pastors and all disciples to follow him and give our lives over to him for the sake of the gospel and his body, the church.

Pastors go the distance, because they have God's call and claim on their

lives and live under his direction and in his grace and strength.

As we hear more about why some pastors are leaving, let's ponder why and how so many are staying and going the distance. It's a deeply meaningful and magnificent life. That's the pastoral life I see. That's the pastoral life I know.

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