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**The 8 Stages of Long-Term Pastoral Ministry**

**August 6, 2020 – Phil A. Newton**

You’re a recent seminary grad, and you’ve just been elected to your first pastorate. What might a young pastor expect in the years ahead?

Or perhaps you’re starting year 10 and everything’s going well, but you feel tired, even stagnant. How can you continue to navigate the twists and turns of pastoral ministry and endure over the long haul?

Unique experiences and challenges grace every stage of ministry. If only I’d known the tendencies common to age and experience, I might’ve better navigated the sometimes rough terrain. If hindsight is 20/20, then allow some hindsight to offer perspective for a pastor’s future.

Here are eight lessons I’ve learned related to ministry stages.

#### 1. Seminary is behind me, and I’m ready. (Years 1–2)

Illusion engulfs many who venture into pastoral ministry. They’ve spent years parsing Greek verbs, wrestling with theological conundrums, and tracking through centuries of church history. Well-armed, they attempt to wield ministry tools with zeal—only to find disinterested congregations.

Most churches are happy to have a seminary graduate as pastor, but they don’t really care about the Puritans or the Synoptic Problem. They want to know how to hold their congregation together so it can live to celebrate another anniversary. Generally, size has limited their ability to keep a pastor for very long, so it’s hard to trust a new pastor, especially a fresh-faced seminary grad.

The young pastor starts with a handicap.

What must he do? Learn to shepherd. They’ll listen more intently if you love and listen to them. They’ll teach things you [never dreamed about in seminary](https://www.amazon.com/Things-Seminary-Couldnt-Gospel-Coalition/dp/1433558149/?tag=thegospcoal-20), things you’ll need for subsequent years.

#### 2. Why did I bother with seminary? (Years 3–5)

At this stage, you realize seminary prepared you for the study and pulpit, but not the grind of counseling, meetings, leadership struggles, conflict, and personal endurance. Seminary has its place. It’s needed. It loads your wagon for years ahead. But it cannot equip you for the interpersonal challenges erupting weekly.

Pastoral work is about relationships. No wonder it tests your mettle! You’re called to love and shepherd even the unkind and hardened. And that can’t happen without working on your own heart.

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What must a pastor do? Go deep in devotion and prayer. Fight your sin. Die daily. Learn to love as Christ has loved you. Some give up on pastoral ministry because they’ve met hard people and can’t continue shepherding in the face of rejection. But pastoral ministry is “a long obedience in the same direction,” to borrow Eugene Peterson’s phrase. At this stage, the best lesson is that you must grow as a Christian, too.

#### 3. Will the real church stand up? (Years 5–7)

After weathering some battles, in years five to seven the pastor is ready to see his congregation live like God’s people. He’s walked in faithfulness, learned about loving the body, grown in his personal disciplines, and now longs to see the church manifest the beauty of unity in Christ.

Glimmers of love, holiness, and unity emerge. He longs to see more. His passion for the church grows. His love for the people matures. He begins to see his congregation’s uniqueness and how it might best display the glory of the gospel in relationships, ministry, and mission.

What must a pastor do? Keep a steady pace to avoid burnout. Take breaks to recharge. Don’t grow weary in doing the work of ministry, and don’t try to do it all yourself. You can’t and you mustn’t. Some trees need years of pruning and care to start bearing good fruit. Fight complacency and weariness; your best days are ahead.

#### 4. I love these people! (Years 8–10)

You’ve said it before but now, after serving them for eight to 10 years, you mean it. You love these people because you’ve persevered through difficult days and perplexing personalities. You’ve suffered with them. And they’ve endured your quirky ways, ill-timed words, and youthful immaturity. Now you’re growing together.

The joy of worshiping with a people you’ve served for a decade of ups and downs, challenges and triumphs, makes you eager to gather weekly. But don’t presume now that the church—as a whole—seems to follow your leadership (if you’ve remained in the same church).

What must a pastor do? Guard your heart. Regularly review your spiritual disciplines to make sure you’re not sliding. Improve your preaching. Learn from older pastors about shepherding those difficult to care for. Prepare for worship every week as though it’s your last day on earth. Pay attention to your marriage.

#### 5. Lord, I want to be faithful. (Years 11–15)

If it hasn’t already struck, the greener-pasture syndrome may come calling during this stretch. You begin to take a look at other pastors your age. They’re in larger churches, living in nicer houses, and gaining more notoriety. Jealousy can slip in. Fear of running past your prime becomes nightly meditation. Seeing the same people and hearing the same feedback on your sermons may spur longing to jump the fence into another pasture.

What must a pastor do? Realize the other pasture probably isn’t any greener than the one you’ve served in. Across the fence, the years of laboring to get to this same point of liberty in preaching and acceptance of your leadership will start all over. While the Lord may have a transition for you, don’t make a rash decision. He may be teaching you what it means to deepen your faithfulness as a shepherd, grow in stature as a leader, and equip this church for the future. You’re starting to hit your stride in pastoral work. Delight in your ministry.

#### 6. Don’t let me get too comfortable and start coasting. (Years 16-25)

Serving this long in ministry sets a man apart in a day when so many give up after a few years. You’ve journeyed through the heartaches and joys of a congregation (or congregations). You’ve matured in budgeting your weekly schedule, not overreacting to criticism, counseling with more compassion, and shepherding with discernment. Your leadership skills, including leaders you’ve trained, enhance ministry endurance.

But you face a real danger. You can start coasting. So many people have come and gone, you can re-preach old sermons and no one notices! In zeal for efficiency, you can fall into patterns of repetition in what you do without continuing to press yourself deeper.

**Later in ministry, you face a real danger. You can start coasting.**

What must a pastor do? Make sure you’re mentoring younger men for ministry. They’ll challenge you while you prepare them for serving local churches. Embark on new expositional series. Read and meditate deeply. Listen to those who lovingly point out your blind spots. Make the remaining years of pastoral work count for Christ’s glory.

#### 7. Help me truly shepherd as I shepherd. (Years 26–33)

When you’ve neared three decades of pastoring, unless you’ve grown calloused or cynical (repentance is called for in such cases), then your shepherding failures and weaknesses become more glaring—not necessarily to others, but to you. You see how you failed to notice patterns in this man or that family who’ve grown sloppy in their participation. You paid little attention to the teenager who now has her own family but gives sparse thought to spiritual matters. You saw some fault-lines in a marriage, but you decided not to meddle. But now it’s too late; they’re getting divorced.

What must a pastor do? Don’t quit learning how to better shepherd the flock. At this stage, you have insights honed through suffering and gospel application. The body needs your tenderness and compassion even as you speak and shepherd them toward greater faithfulness.

So pay closer attention to the Good Shepherd. Think about him not crushing a bruised reed, praying for and assuring presumptuous Peter, and firmly correcting the doubts of struggling Thomas. You’re that shepherd now with your congregation. They don’t need you backing off and waiting for retirement. They need you to intensify your labors until you finish the race.

#### 8. Let my heart burn brightly for the church’s future. (Year 34 and beyond)

I’m in the beyond point in pastoral ministry, having served for 42 years as a senior pastor, with 33 in my present church. I realize age and health may catch up with me sooner than expected, so the challenge now is to not turn inward and surrender to the aches and energy drains of age. Or to twiddle away the days until retirement while watching the younger generation step up. Or worse, to hold onto a pulpit when the vigor for preparing and preaching the Word has slackened.

What must a pastor do? He must think of the church before he thinks of himself. What does the church need most from him? Train up those who’ll follow when he steps aside. Set an example as a follower of Christ. Model faithful ministry. Love and accept the younger generation that may do things differently than you do. Cheer them on. Hold them accountable to biblical fidelity. Teach them about the joys and trials in shepherding. Keep serving the local church even when you step down from the senior-pastor role.

### Opportunities for Growth

While these stages represent one older pastor’s observations, they’re worth pondering even if a few details shift from one stage to another.

Shepherd for the long run, brothers. Avoid living for the short blazes of glory. One day every shepherd will give an accounting to the Chief Shepherd. May we be able to offer a good report from every stage.

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