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SHEPHERDING
The PASTOR

Help for the Early Years of Ministry

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1.

Get Ongoing Training



Young Pastor Rich Faces a Challenge

I sat and listened to a lecture in my pastoral ministry course on how to care for a church member suffering with an illness in the hospital. It sounded pretty cut-and-dried, merely theoretical. I wasn't a pastor at the time, but that day shortly arrived when I had to throw theory out the window. I stood at the bedside of a sick and dying member. While the lecture had some value, far more valuable were those times I walked with my pastoral mentor into a hospital room and watched as he cared for a sick member. No theory there, rather, I felt and sensed the way shepherds care for the flock in difficult times.

Consider medical training. Imagine you want to be a doctor. You apply to medical school, get accepted, and begin your studies. You learn everything you can possibly know about the human body and how to heal it. You know the textbooks front to back. All exams, aced. GPA, 4.0. You graduate with the highest honors. But throughout your entire experience, you never observe a surgery, you never meet with patients, and you never shadow doctors. You never listen to hearts beating and

lungs inhaling, never stitch up a cut, never set a broken bone, never diagnose a disease, never comfort a patient.

Then the day arrives when you become a practicing physician. How do you transfer book and classroom lectures into patient care? Your patients not only need your medical knowledge, but also your ability to care for them. Do you think you are prepared for longevity in your practice if you've not first walked with physicians who've endured the challenges of patient care? Do you think you might be a better physician if an experienced physician has mentored you?

Of course, medical doctors actually get this type of training. But it's often woefully absent for pastors. Here's how new pastors generally step into ministry, at least in America. A young man expresses a call to ministry. Then it's usually assumed he'll choose a seminary for training. He goes to seminary to learn theology, biblical languages, church history, and other important subjects. He even takes a class or two on "pastoral ministry." Upon his graduation, he looks for a job even though he has very little hands-on pastoral experience. He's never been mentored outside the classroom. No pastor has taken him under his wing to show him how to comfort the sick and dying. He's not learned how to navigate church conflict, or what the Bible teaches about a healthy church's polity. He made an A in his preaching class—he preached twice—but he's never done any sustained exposition under the watchful eyes of a mentor.

Typically, this is how a man gets trained for ministry. Certainly, his biblical knowledge has increased, but his pastoral skills remain underdeveloped. Before long, he'll learn that correct doctrine, as essential as it is, isn't enough for the long haul of pastoral ministry.

Church Confessions and Shepherding

For example, understanding the theological crisis that provoked the fourth century's Council of Nicea is important. It safeguards a biblical Christology: Jesus is the eternal Son of God and not merely a man, incarnate and not created. But shepherding a church member to navigate a relationship with a Jehovah's Witness—who denies the eternally divine nature of the Son—tests a completely different skillset. How do you help your church member distinguish a false sense of fellowship and instead pursue an evangelistic opportunity? That requires some pastoral skill.

Consider another example. Seminary teaches us that without sound doctrine a church veers toward disaster. In other words, it teaches us the value of a statement of faith. But how should a local church actually *use* its statement of faith? How should a new pastor evaluate a potential member's theology, using the statement of faith as his guide? Such a task requires more than classroom knowledge, and will be made easier with a mentor.

Mentoring gives an aspiring pastor the opportunity to observe how doctrine connects with practice. Obviously, pastors must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). But shepherding Christ's blood-bought people is both didactic and relational. In other words, it mirrors the ministry of Jesus who not only taught sound theology but shepherded wounded, struggling, and helpless sheep: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

Facing Reality

I thoroughly enjoyed seminary. I loved the give-and-take discussion, intense reading, and theologically rigorous assignments. But I really began to move from the theoretical to real-world application once I joined the pastoral internship at South Woods Baptist Church. The theology I was learning in seminary *and* at South Woods, coupled with practical ministry opportunities, trained me for the task ahead. The seminary taught theology in a lab; the local church brought theology into people's hurts, struggles, and spiritual needs.

Once I began pastoring, I realized I had much to learn (a decade later, that's still the case!). The internship gave me so much useful experience. I taught regularly. I preached a sermon series to the church. I observed counseling and, when appropriate, counseled others myself. I lent my hand to help on administrative projects. I visited the sick. I silently observed elders' meetings and membership interviews. I did all of this under the mentorship of the church's pastors, receiving encouragement and critical feedback along the way.

Mentoring allows future pastors to *make diagnoses, prescribe medication, and perform surgery* under the careful eye of experienced physicians. The patterns and practices I observed shaped my pastoral aspirations and formed a backbone for longevity. No matter a man's ministry setting—a church plant, a revitalization, or a church that's more-or-less healthy already—a man still needs training.

As I reflect on the last ten years of pastoring in a revitalization setting, I realize that without the mentoring before *and* throughout, my tenure might have been much shorter. I may

have given up. Even more, I realize that a young pastor needs *ongoing mentoring* throughout the journey. One need only read the Pastoral Epistles to see how Paul urged Timothy and Titus to continue with steady hands.

Evaluating the Journey

You might be thinking, *How can I find a mentor? What if my church doesn't provide this opportunity? What if by going to seminary, I must relocate and find another church to train me? How can I continue to be mentored after I start pastoral ministry?* This chapter will begin to answer these important questions.

I've talked with Phil and other pastors since then about how best to approach pastoral training. There's no one-size-fits-all approach. But certain principles will serve you well as you seek out pastoral training in the local church. In the following pages, you'll learn from Phil about some of the training he sought out when formal mentoring had not yet caught on.



Mentor Phil Offers Counsel

I came to faith in Christ as a fifteen-year-old. A year later, I sensed the Spirit's movement to preach the gospel. That was a strange desire for one who had a career in architecture in mind. But it wouldn't leave. I ate, slept, and drank preaching, even as a teenager. After some counsel from a couple of older friends, I announced this calling to a group of peers at an outdoor rally. My peers supported me, as did a few pastors from other churches in the area. My home pastor, however, offered no substantial encouragement or direction. He showed little interest in the newly converted teenagers, our passion to witness,

and the movement toward ministry. He seemed to think that if I graduated from college and seminary, I'd figure it all out.

Really?

Pastoral ministry can be studied in an academic setting. I certainly tried that approach. But it's not always learned well in that setting, as Rich mentioned, any more than a physician learns everything in medical school. Not knowing any better, I did the best I could. In God's kindness, I had the opportunity as a college student to serve for a couple of years on a church staff. It was the pastor and me handling the work of ministry together. Whether he realized it or not, he mentored me. He gave me ample opportunities to test my ministry skills. I'm grateful for the time with him and that church. I learned to love pastoral ministry as I preached, taught, disciplined, and shepherded the flock.

In my last year of seminary, I began pastoring a rural church almost three hours away. My wife, young daughter, and I spent each weekend living in a house the church owned while I preached twice on Sundays and made pastoral visits before returning to the seminary. Yet with my plunge into pastoring, I began to realize that Sunday came every week! Sermons would not prepare themselves. With a commitment to biblical exposition, I faced plenty of exegetical and homiletical struggles. I realized more and more that shallow wells won't sustain the pastor or congregation. If I would last, I had to grow in my spiritual disciplines, preaching preparation, and delivery. It didn't take long to realize that seminary classes alone couldn't sustain me. I needed the synthesis of seminary and mentoring, coupled with increased discipline, to keep up the pace of pastoral ministry even in this little church.

On graduation day, I moved “full-time” into this bi-vocational pastorate. And suddenly, I realized I could no longer see my professors during the week to discuss difficult challenges or unclear biblical texts. I felt alone. But so did another pastor a few miles down the road. We began a friendship as we experienced together the pitfalls and pinnacles of pastoral ministry. Every now and then, I would invite pastors to come in for a few days to preach. They were a balm to my soul, sources of wisdom in my multiple dilemmas. When I started as a pastor, I needed twenty years of wisdom to preach and shepherd. Of course, I didn’t have it! But I did have friends, wise counselors who helped me press on.

Necessary Recognition

A diploma on the wall can blind us to our unpreparedness for ministry. We think we know our stuff. We made decent grades, and even got a few compliments on our sermons. We’re ready to handle almost anything. Or so we think.

Sure, it’s good to have confidence as we face the daily grind of ministry. But wrongly-placed confidence will likely result in some unhealthy patterns. We become unteachable, impatient, and unkind toward those we’re supposed to serve. We claw away at trying to pastor when we’re unsteady and unsure of *how to pastor*. We may think it’s demeaning to admit inadequacies. But deep down, we know otherwise. Sometimes our flaws are glaring; other times, they lie beneath the surface. So how do we work through them?

Knowing a Few Essentials

I’m convinced that what we learn in our early years of pastoring does a lot to determine whether we’ll endure. I’ve known

countless pastors who started with enthusiasm, on fire for the Lord and the ministry he gave them to steward. And then, opposition comes. Or the enthusiastic pastor unexpectedly clashes with biblically unqualified leaders, or with longstanding power brokers who intend to put the new pastor under their thumb. Eventually, the pressure mounts and the pastor's tenure ends. Sometime the light flickers for a while; other times, it's seemingly snuffed out overnight. But the enthusiasm runs out, and so endurance ceases to be a viable option.

So, do you want to endure in ministry? Great. It's easy to say that—almost every pastor I've ever met says that. But if you want to actually *do it*, then you need to start preparing from the beginning. To that end, consider these five essential practices.

1. Maintain your walk with the Lord. One of the blessings of pastoral ministry is that it's our job to study and apply the Bible. And yet, one of the burdens of pastoral ministry is that it's *our job* to study and apply the Bible. In other words, it's easy to go through the motions. We prepare sermons, we pray at bedsides, we discuss the gospel with a new visitor. Outwardly, we may appear active and alive; inwardly, we may be dying or already dead.

To address this, we need to give attention to our souls. We need a regular devotional life, where we let God's Word bathe over us, where we meditate on it and pray through it, where we confess any sins the Holy Spirit reveals and comfort ourselves with the promises it assures. In doing so, we are steady and prepared for anything that comes our way—as 1 Timothy 4:7 says, trained for godliness. Without these patterns, we dry up. And when that happens, the enemy assaults us with vigor, trying to push us into sinful patterns that will wreck our lives

and ministries. So, brother-pastor, take care of your soul.¹ Make sure, in the process of diligently caring for others, you haven't dangerously overlooked caring for yourself.

2. Shepherd like Jesus. Jesus models faithful shepherding as the one who "lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). As you encounter Jesus in the Gospels, see how he cared for those around him. Notice how he showed tenderness to the downtrodden, spoke pointedly to the recalcitrant, and encouraged the fainthearted. Observe Jesus pursuing wandering sheep. Watch as Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Pause with wonder at Jesus laying down his life for the sheep.² He is our pastoral model.

3. Preach the Word with excellence. Give attention to preparing and preaching careful expositions from God's Word. Never allow preaching to become a secondary aspect. Preaching must be primary (see 2 Timothy 4:1–4). The pastor will need to discipline his life, arrange his schedule, and devote his energies to good hermeneutics, meditation, and homiletics. As he prayerfully prepares, his congregation's needs will be at the forefront of his mind. If he must let other things slide, so be it. But a pastor can't allow other demands to sidetrack him from faithful preaching.³

4. Grow in the grace of humble service. Pastors both old and young must regularly fight pride. It's a common adversary that has wrecked countless ministries. If you're a pastor, then you must always remember that you serve the sheep under the authority of the Chief Shepherd (see 1 Peter 5:1–5). Your members don't belong to you, but to the one who purchased them "with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Pastors must set the example in Christian service even as they regularly call on their church to serve one another. Humble service

battles against arrogance, ingratitude, and the sinful posture of authoritarianism.

Sadly, many churches are unhealthy because they've never enjoyed an extended ministry of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Similarly, many pastors have never enjoyed fruitfulness because they haven't stayed long enough to enjoy a congregation's love and trust. Put simply, more churches would be healthier if more pastors stayed longer. That doesn't mean the first church a pastor serves in will be where he spends his life. It could be, but that's unlikely. But it does mean pastors must learn to fight the temptation to climb the ladder of ministry to the neglect of the flock's long-term health. I suggest reading biographies of pastors who have exemplified endurance, such as those about John Calvin, John Bunyan, Charles Simeon, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, John Newton, John Sutcliff, Andrew Fuller, or Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Fifty Years Later

I preached my first sermon in 1970. Seven and a half years later, I began my first pastorate. In the first nine years of pastoring, I served in three churches. The past thirty-five years, I've served one church: South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis. Over the years, a few practical matters stand out that will help to frame the discussion for longevity in ministry.

1. It's okay that I don't know it all. Pastoral ministry is full of situations where a decision has to be made but it's not obvious what to do. How do we navigate these very important yet very unclear moments? Of course, we start with God's Word. Our ministry and decision-making must be Scripture-centered. But in addition to that, we must be teachable. We must be willing to learn from others. Which reminds me . . .

2. Ask questions of fellow pastors, especially those with more experience. Much of what I've learned in ministry has come through asking questions, listening carefully, probing for clarity, and then filtering the responses into my context. So make sure you have older pastor friends. It's important to talk with peers your age, but it's best to learn from those who've been tested in the fire of ministry. Which reminds me again . . .

3. It's critical to have mentors. Mentoring relationships don't need to be overly formal. In fact, mentoring is really just one facet of an otherwise ordinary friendship. Over time, the hope is that deep friendships with like-minded brothers will spill over into your life to encourage you and shape your ministry. The Lord has given us examples of this in the Pastoral Epistles. Impoverished is the pastor who lacks trusted mentors. If there's no formal mentoring ministry to apply for, then take the step of asking one or two older pastors to occasionally meet for lunch to talk over pastoral life.

4. Keep a steady flow of good books before your eyes. Read regularly, broadly, deeply, and with appropriate application. When mentors were not available to me, I found mentors from the past who spoke into my life through their experience. Become friends with these fellow laborers. Their context will vary from yours, no doubt. But you can learn from their endurance and faithfulness. Don't rely on them in an absolute sense, but let them fill the gaps, deepen your pastoral insights, and come to your aid in the hard times. You'll find a few recommendations at the end of this chapter.

Reflecting on the past fifty years, I realize how the Lord seemed to put just the right person in my path when I needed to be sharpened or corrected, encouraged or admonished—when

I needed a good laugh or a good cry. I'm thankful for his sustaining grace.



Young Pastor Rich Applies the Counsel

I want to mention two ways that the pastoral mentorship I received, especially from Phil, prepared me for my pastoral journey.

Comforting the Suffering Saints

Pastors are charged with comforting those who suffer, but how do we comfort the sick, the weak, and the dying? What should we do at the bedside of a man with terminal cancer? What do you say to an elderly lady whose health problems have mounted?

I remember riding with Phil to visit someone in the hospital. As we drove, he asked a question that had never crossed my mind: “What passage of Scripture do you think I should read?” That question shouldn’t have shocked me, but it did. I had no idea what to say. I assumed we would listen, talk, and try to give encouragement. Of course, we would pray. But read Scripture? Wouldn’t that be awkward?

About half an hour later, I sat in the patient’s room. I watched as Phil opened his Bible to Psalm 46. Every word he read washed over this saint like a healing balm. I learned an important lesson that day about pastoral care. We aren’t robots who calculate what Scripture passage to read in any given moment—*Here’s the problem and here’s the Scripture reference you need to hear*. Rather, we are mere people who need to pray for God’s wisdom and mercy amid trials, people who need God’s Word to strengthen their weary faith.

Sequential Exposition as the Main Diet

If a person eats a well-balanced diet, he will notice a difference in how he feels after an unhealthy meal. Indulging in a large pizza feels good for the moment, but a crash is coming. And if you eat a continuous flow of unhealthy meals, then the effects on one's health become obvious.

Preaching has similar effects on our spiritual health. If a congregation only hears topical preaching, then their maturity suffers. They become theologically lopsided and biblically anemic. Preaching aims, in part, to provide a well-balanced diet of God's Word. This seems best accomplished by preaching sequential expositional sermons through books of the Bible. How do we ensure we preach the whole counsel of God? We don't skip any of it. Thankfully, pastors modeled this pattern during my internship at South Woods, before I became a pastor of my own church, and gave the pastoral interns opportunities to practice.

On Sunday evenings, we preached through books of the Bible. I remember preaching through Colossians with my cohort. As we labored together, the congregation was fed as we received training under the guidance of the elders. In other words, our preaching practice happened *in the life of the church*, not in a laboratory. Not only did we encourage one another as aspiring pastors, but the congregation loved and exhorted us! The mutual edification was a beautiful sight to behold.

Find a Mentor

You may be the only pastor of the church you serve or will serve. But don't pastor in isolation. You need mentors, and the church you have the privilege of serving needs you to have mentors.



Mentor Phil Lists Some Next Steps

- Consider those whom the Lord has put into your life as mentors, whether formally or informally. How might you strengthen your mentoring relationships for the future? Do you need to discuss your spiritual disciplines and pastoral work with your mentors more frequently? If you don't have anyone mentoring you, spend the next few weeks praying for the Lord to raise up a mentor.
- What pastoral biography did you last read? How did it affect you? What did you learn and begin applying in your life? If it has been more than six months since you read a pastoral biography, secure one and start reading and learning from the past.
- In what areas do you find yourself impatient, frustrated, or despondent in pastoral ministry? Seek counsel from older pastors in how to handle these issues. Don't allow yourself to slump into sinful patterns in your walk and ministry. Deepen your time in the Word and in prayer. Confess your sins daily. Seek to walk in the Spirit. Add a good book on sanctification to your reading routine.
- Determine that you will bring pastoral mentors into your life as you serve Christ's church. Learn to be open with them about your struggles. Certainly, sift their counsel with the teaching found in God's Word.

Recommended Reading

Books about pastoring:

The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency by Charles Bridges

Shepherding the Pastor

Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr. edited by Grant Gordon

On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Living, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor by H. B. Charles Jr.

40 Questions about Pastoral Ministry by Phil A. Newton

Books about the spiritual life:

Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification by Sinclair B. Ferguson

An Infinite Journey: Growing toward Christlikeness by Andrew M. Davis

The Heart of a Servant Leader: Letters from Jack Miller by C. John Miller

Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices by Thomas Brooks

Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God by John Flavel

The Bruised Reed by Richard Sibbes (which breathes the air of servant-heartedness, following Jesus's example, when caring for the flock)

Pastoral Biographies:

Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther by Roland H. Bainton

Andrew Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian by Paul Brewster

Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners by John Bunyan

Spurgeon: A New Biography by Arnold A. Dallimore

Jonathan Edwards: A Life by George Marsden

The Life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones by Iain H. Murray

Charles Simeon: An Ordinary Pastor of Extraordinary Influence
by Derek Prime