

Dear Pastor,

I have been praying for you as you begin your new call. Working with you has been a great joy, and I look forward to all that God will author in your new context.

As I write this, Philippians 2:12-13 keeps going through my head:

"Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

You are called to do many things in your role as pastor—and you will be asked to do many more—but your first calling is always to work out your salvation in fear and trembling. Your calling is your whole life, and there are times when it is beneficial to look at the unspoken things that guide you and evaluate if they are worthy of your attention. In that spirit, I now offer you a few things to consider as you go off on your own.

In the funeral liturgy of our tradition, there is a prayer that begins with these words, "O God, before whom all generations rise and pass away." It is a fitting reminder for those who grieve that our God is the God of generations--of all people past, present, and future. We say those words at a funeral to remind us that God makes claims on all people, even those who have died.

But it is also a fitting reminder of the Divine's view of time.

Consider the divine perspective on time as depicted in the biblical story. In the Old Testament, neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob entered the promised land. Instead, the promise was that their descendants would enter there. Generations and decades passed before the promise was realized. Or think of the time that passed in the

Exodus--so much time that people doubted the promised land's existence and actually longed for Egypt. God's promises occur over generations, often even longer than we can imagine.

The Psalms echo this view of time that is outside the bounds of our imagination.

Psalm 90 proclaims:

"For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night."

The psalmist reminds us that God sees things differently than we do. It is a reminder that while we are bound by time, God is not. God's work stretches through all time.

In the New Testament, we have the Apostle Paul, who was sure Jesus would return imminently, and yet generations have passed of living into the call to be the Body of Christ while we faithfully wait for that return. I read scripture, and the unhurried nature of our God, with His eternal perspective, cannot be disputed. God's work of transforming the world is slower than we readily accept or keep before us.

But I am keenly aware that as we live out our callings as pastors, we live and operate in an era marked by the speeding up of time. We live in a time marked by hurry.

We live in a time of great technology, but all technology speeds up processes by its very nature. Just as the printing press sped up the dissemination of information, we are also inundated with technology that promises to help us do more in a shorter period of time. As a society, we are obsessed with productivity, and with that obsession comes a hurriedness to do more in a shorter period. It is helpful to remember that this is the dynamic in which many of our church members live, and it will certainly bleed into the church. The question is if it should.

We are also "connected" more than ever. The technology of cell phones, email, and social media connect us digitally in an immediate and unprecedented way. Our digital communication has never been greater, yet the U.S. Surgeon General reports an epidemic of loneliness in our country. In the proliferation of digital communication, we are not increasing the social connections that come from the hard and slow work of relationships.¹ We have sped up our ability to communicate, but real connection does not result.

The hurriedness of our communication and the demand for greater productivity bleeds over and creates an expectation, within your congregation, to be sure, but even within yourself, that you should be hurried. It creates pressure to move quickly, which you will internalize. You operate under its auspices unaware. When an email or text arrives, you will feel compelled to answer it right away when it might require a period of reflection. Many times, it may not even be the expectation of the person contacting you that demands you respond immediately, but you are constantly swimming in the sea of hurriedness, and so you expect it of yourself. You will feel that you need to make statements or take positions on certain topics quickly, especially on social media, without taking the necessary time to pray and reflect. You will be asked to reflect the culture around you rather than the gracious pace of God's own time.

Some of my greatest mistakes have been when I have felt pressure to act instead of taking the time for reflection that was needed. Several years ago, I along with the governing body of the church, made the decision to end a particular worship service. Few people were upset by this, but the ones who were became vocal and strident. In their anxiety and emotion, they demanded a meeting within days, which I agreed to. I knew that I needed more time to reflect before the meeting, but I did not say so. The

meeting was a disaster and relationships were harmed—all because I let the wave of immediacy take me in its wake.

Our current culture also runs counter to a long and sustained pastorate. The breakneck pace of our culture and its desire for immediate results can wear a pastor down. It can lead directly to burnout. Our pastorates often end with shorter tenures at our churches and an exhaustion that can lead some to leave the ministry altogether. We may do more, but at what cost?

This is my greatest concern--that the hurriedness of our culture will create a hurriedness within you as a pastor that can run counter to God's slow work through generations. I am suggesting that you stop swimming in the waters of rush and hurry and begin to turn again to God's view of things.

We are called to love and work for the transformation of the world. This hard work of loving people and accompanying them while the Holy Spirit works in their lives is slow. It takes time. It cannot be hurried. It takes sustained and critical theological reflection to teach, preach, and lead well. It is in patience and perseverance that true transformation occurs—both ours and our congregations. It is the work of generations, and your steadfast commitment to it is what will bring about lasting change.

I am suggesting that you intentionally create a theology of time that will run counter to the world around you and adhere to a pace that is slower and deeper. This theology of time should reflect the long slow nature of spiritual work. Remember, what you want in ministry is not performative change but a change of hearts and minds that can only be the work of the Holy Spirit. And so this theology of time advocates for a slow and thoughtful orientation to the world. It encourages you to rely less on your own work and productivity and more on the work of the Spirit.

It isn't easy to live in this way, with this theology, but it may be the best thing for your soul. After all, working out our salvation in fear and trembling cannot be rushed, just as the Holy Spirit cannot be rushed.

You will, dear Pastor, experience what I often do--an urgency born of our place in the culture. But I am encouraging you (and reminding myself) that rooting oneself in God's orientation of time produces real results and allows the church and its people to flourish. It is not easy to run counter to the world around us. It is, however, your calling.

May you find a pace of pastoring that reflects the patience of our loving God. And know I am here if you need me, engaging in the slow work of trying to love people and transform the world.

¹ *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, 2023,

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.