

**A Call for Pastors, Priests, AND Prophets
By Stephen Cady**

Dear Young Preachers,

I'm not going to lie to you. Ministry is hard. Almost impossible.

In what other profession is one person asked to do the kind of disparate things that a pastor does in the course of a single day? In one day, you can write creatively, speak publicly, balance the budget, counsel a couple preparing to marry (or divorce), visit someone in the hospital, raise money, figure out why the boiler is not working, and that's just the beginning!

Every day there is a small, a medium, and a large fire to put out. And often, nobody knows you're managing any of it.

You can spend an afternoon in the hospital with a family as their loved one dies and then walk back into the office only to be berated about the plants being moved off the altar.

You can make a hundred calls in the course of a day, only to come home and be reminded of the one call you didn't make.

Plus, in case no one has told you, you have to work on Sundays.

We do it, of course, because we are convinced that it makes a difference. Because we know that the world needs the good news of Jesus Christ, the promise that love leads to life—not for some people, but all people.

But ministry is hard. And the last few years have been some of the hardest.

Before the pandemic, I used to joke that church would be a lot easier without all the people. Turns out, it's not.

Those days of making decisions between really bad options, trying to weigh the safety of the community against the human longing for connection were heavy. It's no wonder so many of us got through it and then stepped away from ministry altogether.

To be sure, there were beautiful moments, ones that I hope you hold onto: connections across distance, a focus on what's most important, a strange revelation that by the power of the Holy Spirit and the miracle of modern technology the sanctuary could be empty and the church could still somehow be full.

But it wasn't just the pandemic. If that were the only thing we faced during that time, things might have been different, but as is so often the case, the illness revealed the deeper disease.

I say this not to scare you, young preachers, but so that you don't make the same mistakes we old timers have made.

Because the hard truth is that in those moments when we began to reconcile the racial inequities of our country so long ignored, when science was pitted against faith, when our political divisiveness turned from animosity to altercation, too many of us were caught flat footed—lacking the muscle memory for speaking into the brokenness of the world. All priests and pastors, few prophets.

Too many of us had become accustomed to certain ways of existing in ministry. We read the latest books and went to the conferences and spent our time focused on how to organize our next sermon series.

Then the world caught fire and we were so focused on the fourth week of our six-week series on forgiveness that we failed to notice.

The world was on fire, and we were too burnt out to respond.

The world was on fire, and we let people come into our sanctuaries pretending like they didn't smell like smoke.

And in that moment, the tide began to turn and the trickle of people who were leaving our churches became a deluge. Sure, some parishioners stuck with us—some habits are hard to break—but week by week they were fewer and fewer.

Oh, we had our well-rehearsed excuses. You've likely heard some of them.

We old timers like to bemoan Sunday morning soccer practices and farmers' markets and the draw of the next season of whatever new binge-worthy show has just been released.

We blame those who are not there. We look at the statistics of declining church attendance, particularly in young people, and shake our heads at their lack of faith, asking a thousand questions about the absent majority's lack of motivation or commitment or interest in the things we care so much about.

But the one question we, even still, tend to avoid, is really the only one that matters: Are the people not attending our churches really missing anything?

This is the question, young preachers, that I ask you to consider, not just today, but week after week.

By not showing up for worship, by not being a part of your particular community of faith, by not writing that check every week, is someone's life noticeably worse?

My fear is that the honest answer is no.

My fear is that we have created a system so concerned with sustaining itself that we have forgotten why we created it in the first place.

My fear is that we are so careful to walk some imagined line through the most dangerous topics that we end up never really going anywhere.

We consider not receiving an angry email success. We proudly share that our conservative members think we're too liberal and our liberal members think we're too conservative and use it as evidence that we must be doing something right.

But are we?

I remember once hearing a mentor talk about preaching during the Civil Rights movement—another moment in which it felt as though the world was burning. He said that there reached a point in which it almost didn't matter what he said because nobody was listening.

Well, at least he was saying something.

I fear that we face the opposite dilemma—a world full of people desperately listening for the truth and pulpits filled with preachers too afraid speak it.

But make no mistake, young preachers, only the truth will set us free—and we need to be set free.

As we know, in the absence of our voice, other voices ensnare us.

The demagogues promise belonging, marketers promise meaning, and politicians promise hope, but none of them actually have it to offer.

Are the people not attending our churches really missing anything?

Yes! If we're doing it right!

The gospel of Jesus Christ is fundamentally the promise of life, not for some people, but all people. Our call as preachers, week after week, is to point people in the direction of life; to remind people that we don't have to think the same way to face in the same direction; to be that voice crying out in the wilderness, the light shining in the darkness for a world that feels increasingly dark.

As the old preaching adage attests, our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, but my generation has failed to do either.

And so, young preachers, I put forward a challenge. Be a pastor and a priest. Yes, be with people in their moments of need, share in their suffering, walk alongside them through the vicissitudes of life. Order the church and ensure that there are structures and systems in place to sustain the life of the saints.

But don't forget to be a prophet as well.

To be clear, we have to earn the right to speak into people's lives, but we have to speak.

Don't stay silent while a man who spends his life in unrepentant greed, serial adultery, and compulsive deceit touts himself as a paragon of Christian virtue.

Don't stay silent when people lift the second amendment before the second commandment—love your neighbor as yourself.

Don't stay silent when the scourge of white supremacy rears its ugly head and leaves our siblings of color to suffer alone.

Not only does silence deny the call that God has placed on our lives—a call to be a pastor, priest, AND prophet—but it threatens to kill the church.

My generation ought to be a warning. When our voice was needed most, we suffered prophetic laryngitis.

I pray that you have the courage to speak where so many of us have failed. Ministry is too hard not to.

Are the people not attending our churches really missing anything?

If not, then now's the time to do something about it.