

An Epistle to Pastors
David Emmanuel Goatley

We are blessed to have been called to be pastors of churches. There is no higher calling than to lead communities of Jesus' disciples to worship the Lord; to be personally whole, in healthy relationships with others, and love our neighbors as ourselves; and to send disciples who are empowered by the Holy Spirit into God's world to touch lives with the transforming love of Christ. This is substantial and sacred work, and we are privileged to be equipped and assigned for this service.

Being a pastor is not for the faint of heart. This ministry does not position one for a life of comfort and success—at least as many in the United States would define it. Life for pastors does not set them up for affluence and accolades. While these may come to some, they are not what we aspire to, nor are they likely to come your way. A meaningful life is not measured by these standards. You will do well to stay alert and avoid the seduction of seeking these. Do not hold them closely should they come your way. If they do, be grateful to God and generous with others.

Pastoral ministry is a noble call, but it is not an easy job. An old spiritual song says it this way: "In this field it calls for labor . . . I'm glad I'm in this field." While the song refers to life as a disciple of Jesus called to work in God's field of service generally, the insights are particularly relevant for those called to be pastors. Although this field calls for labor, untold numbers of pastors across the ages have testified that "I'm glad I'm in this field."

Media messaging and casual conversations would lead one to believe that pastors are exiting in droves, but research does not support this perception. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports that 2023 surveys indicate about two-thirds of pastors have thought about leaving their congregations, the profession, or both; one third have never considered leaving; and conflicts in congregations and the absence of close congregational relationships are primary factors leading to thoughts of leaving.¹ The Barna Group reports that pastors in 2023 were more confident than in 2022.² Even though the situation seems to be slowly improving recently, this is a sobering situation.

Conflict is inevitable among people, and congregations are not immune from conflict. Friction in church life arises for many reasons. Personalities, preferences, projections, and more seem to contribute to conflict more than doctrinal and theological differences. While these struggles are unavoidable when people are in honest relationships, and some would assert that this is healthy, divisiveness is destructive. Social polarization appears to have divided many congregations connected with partisan politics with increasingly uncompromising positions on political and social issues. This ought not to be.

That Jesus is Lord is a consistent affirmation in the New Testament. This means that Jesus has supreme authority over life. Followers of Jesus are to commit themselves to trust and obey him with uncompromising fidelity. We love him because Jesus loved us first, and he demonstrated the highest degree of love by giving his life for his followers—his friends—of all ages.

For the earliest Christ followers to assert that Jesus was Lord meant that the emperor was not. This confession was unpatriotic and could have fatal consequences. Contemporary Christians would do well to return to the ancient Christian affirmation that Jesus is Lord. This means that no emperor or empire, politician or political party, ideology or identity has our highest allegiance. This would be quite a

¹ "'I'm Exhausted All The Time': Exploring The Factors Contributing To Growing Clergy Discontentment," *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, January 2024), https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Clergy_Discontentment_Patterns_Report-compressed_2.pdf, accessed 2 November 2024.

² "New Data Shows Hopeful Increases in Pastors' Confidence & Satisfaction," The Barna Group, 6 March 2024, <https://www.barna.com/research/hopeful-increases-pastors/>, accessed 2 November 2024.

An Epistle to Practicing Pastors
David Emmanuel Goatley

statement in the current United States context. It would be a refreshing and reviving turn to faithfully following the Lord of life. This would place the church on a pathway to good and faithful witness that is not consistently and conspicuously seen in contemporary times.

Social and political polarization seeks to homogenize thought and culture. Circles are drawn with firm boundaries intended to ensure conformity and compliance of those inside and asserting that those outside are physically, socially, religiously, and ideologically dangerous. Insisting on the uniformity of those within the circle is a high priority, and those with the political, financial, educational, cultural, and legal levers of power can exercise hegemony. They impose their particular worldviews as universally normative. These perspectives control people and consolidate power to ensure and enlarge the unearned privileges of the few at the expense of the many. This is evil and demonic. It is the enemy of good and of God.

Contrary to this hegemony and homogenization is the Christian view of valuing the vibrant variety of God. This is God's design and dream for the world. To align one's personal life and pastoral work with this holy approach can inspire and empower pastors to continue to serve congregations and equip them to share Christ's hope and health in the church and the world. This does not make the work less complex. Aligning our visions with this value of God, however, can put into better perspective our work of planting and watering until God makes things grow.

Perhaps an antidote to the toxicity of polarity is for pastors to embrace and advance valuing the vibrant variety of God in their lives and through their leadership. Scripture shows a vibrant variety in both God's design and dream for the world. God created the world good, animated living beings, and cares for the world and all that live in it. God loves the world, and love does not control the one that is loved.

No human is immune from sin—rejecting God's will for one's life and the world. Among other expressions, the sinfulness of rejecting the vibrant variety of God's good creation can lead people to conform the irreverence in the world. This submission to and imposition of conformity restricts the beauty and flourishing of God's excitingly diverse creation. This controlling conforming seeks to create people in the image of the powerful and privilege—a devastating defacement of what God made good.

Scripture bears witness to the vibrant variety of God's activity in the world. The creation stories show the generative power of God's word, the different yet interconnected parts of the world, and the distinctness yet compatibility across humanity. Abram and Sarai, through whom God chose to produce a people that would bless all people throughout the earth left Ur for Harran, and then Harran for the land of Canaan which brought them into cross cultural contexts. By God's grace, Joseph and his family flourished in Egypt with its multicultural context, although not without unfairness, imprisonment, and challenge.

Jesus crosses cultural and gender barriers in his ministry, and his apostles proclaim the good news in word and deed throughout the known world. God reveals to John the vision of completing what God began with gathering the diversity of humanity—from every tribe and tongue—who worship and serve God eternally.

God's vibrant variety has not escaped injury, assault, and violation. The goodness of creation is damaged by human disobedience resulting accusation and blame of each other and punishment by God. The prophets Amos, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah name and challenge social injustices resulting from exploiting power differentials. These injustices—manifestations of unfairness—are contrary to God's will for the world. In Jesus we see compassion that moves him to cross religious and cultural barriers with compassionate engagement, redemptive action, and liberating encounters with people who suffer physically and socially. Through him, they receive the love of God, are invited to follow Jesus, and are called to sin no more regardless of their stations in life.

God's vibrant variety is on the horizon when disciples of Jesus are responsive to the Holy Spirit who anoints and empowers them to bear witness to the risen Christ throughout the world. The Spirit

An Epistle to Practicing Pastors

David Emmanuel Goatley

arouses community in transcultural contexts, enabling God's hand to be seen through the growth of believers and their generosity towards those in need. The gospel is for all people in all of the world. It brings healing and hope to all who receive it. The word of the incarnation was, and is, good news and great joy for all people. The telos of God is the proclamation of the gospel to people throughout the world and for those of every tribe and tongue and nation to worship him.

Pastors can get caught up in the cultural conflicts that pull people apart. This causes people to choose sides, provide for those who confirm, and exclude those on the outside of the circle. Difference is seen as dangerous and deficient. Variety is seen as vice rather than virtue and aligned with what God values. Perhaps we can enlarge our relationships and our reading so that we can behold and benefit from the beauty beyond the boundaries so many choose to live.