

## Finding joy in the pastoral ministry<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

There are many books old and new that highlight the issue of clergy stress and clergy burnout.<sup>2</sup> Many pastors' conferences include discussion about the stress levels and well-being of clergy and have explored the possible reasons and solutions. Such research calls for further study and reflection by church leaders and everyone involved in clergy care. This paper is not focusing on the causes of clergy burnout, but seeks to identify and rediscover some of the sources of joy for the parish pastor in particular.

Recently I read a book on joy with the sub-title, *The secret of living a good news life in a bad news world*.<sup>3</sup> I think most people would find it encouraging, especially in life's down times, but perhaps pastors especially need to be encouraged not to let the lows of their personal and work world have the last say. In spite of everything the Apostle Paul faced in his life and work, he encouraged those he worked with, and those who have followed, with these words: 'Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart' (1 Cor 4:1; see also 4:16,17). The pastoral ministry can seem quite different, depending on whether it is viewed through the lens of the realities of the daily human grind, or from the perspective that God is at work in daily vocations—including pastoral ministry—doing his work in the world.

Some time ago because of a vacancy in our local congregation I took on some additional responsibilities. Leading worship, visiting parents who had requested baptism for their children, preaching, preparing an adult for baptism, preparing other adults and young people for the Lord's Supper, teaching confirmation, and listening to people's faith and life struggles. It was rewarding and enjoyable, but it was also tough going—and not just because of the workload. Pastoral work is difficult and demanding because it is a call to be a steward of God's mysteries to a world that sometimes neither wants nor cares for those mysteries. And when people do begin to care for God's mysteries and even seek to find out what God might want for their lives, the work of bringing the appropriate law/gospel ministry requires great wisdom, patience and gentleness (2 Tim 2:24,25; 4:2).

Many pastors today are struggling under the weight of vocational, ecclesial and personal expectations. The word that often seems to come to mind is struggle, not joy.

In one sense, however, the context of ministry has always been difficult (2 Cor 11:22–31). As pastors reflect on the pressures, and their own professional and personal resources, there is wisdom in revisiting their job description with the prayer that the Holy Spirit would renew in them a sense of joy in Christ as they serve him in all sorts of trials. Maybe it is not a word that pastors need, but a phrase,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has its origin in a presentation to clergy in the South Australian District of the Lutheran Church of Australia, Hahndorf, August, 2008. It is offered here as a resource for pastors and those who care for them.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Anne Coate, *Clergy stress: the hidden conflicts of ministry*, SPCK, London, 1989; Bruce G Epperly and Katherine Gould Epperly, *Feed the fire! Avoiding clergy burnout*, Pilgrim Press, Ohio, 2008; J Fred Lehr, *Clergy burnout: recovering from the 70 hour work week—and other self defeating practices*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2006. See also Robert Ramey, *Thriving in ministry*, Chalice Press, Missouri, 2000; Matthew C Swift, *Overcommitment, effort-reward, and burnout among Australian clergy*, a literature review and journal article submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Psychology, University of South Australia, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Harrison, *A little book on joy*, Lutheran Legacy, 2009.

and perhaps a phrase based loosely on James 1:2,3, joy in trial. Three things could help pastors in this respect: remembering the pastoral call, developing helpful responses to the difficult times, and living in Christ, the source of joy.

### **Joy in the pastoral calling**

There is wisdom in remembering who a pastor is and what a pastor is called to do and be. There are many expectations of the clergy today, and many conflicting views of what it is to be a pastor. If you ask people what they think a pastor does apart from Sunday morning, they might not think of a pastor:

- in the study or at the church's prayer desk praying morning prayer for, and with, the congregation
- listening at length to a Christian struggling in their marriage or vocation
- helping Christians use the ten commandments to confess their sins and to receive forgiveness with its peace and joy
- reading and studying the Word of God and the Confessions of the Church in depth

If those things do come to mind they may not be seen as priorities if there is something supposedly more important to do. But how does anyone define what is important? Is it simply the expectations and demands of the collective stakeholders? A brief study of the ordination rite is always a helpful place to start.<sup>4</sup>

A pastor once spoke with pastoral candidates about the joys and responsibilities of being a pastor. He had worked in the parish, in Lutheran schools, and in aged care chaplaincy. Other pastors valued him as an excellent pastor and role model. Under responsibilities he listed things like establishing a balance in life, developing a disciplined program of study, delegating appropriately, and taking adequate time for recreation.

However, it was the list of joys that both surprised and at the same time excited the listeners, because they were within the reach of every pastor.

- seeing people receive the Lord's Supper
- the joy of preaching—the integrity of being a pastor is you give it your best
- the joy of teaching—explaining ways to build up the people of God
- the privilege of being with people at significant stages of their life—sickness as well as celebration
- a sense of fascination/calling/adventure in being a steward of the mysteries
- having a plan for contact with others in the ministry near and far

What is significant is how closely many of these things are related to what is asked of pastors at their call and ordination. I list them here from the Rite of Ordination, not to add to any pastor's guilt or the burden of the ministry, but as a reminder of the key priorities of being a minister of word and sacrament.

- diligently study the word of God
- use the sacraments
- pray for God's people
- nourish people with the gospel
- be an example in faithful service and holy living

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<sup>4</sup> *Church Rites*, Openbook, Adelaide, 1994, 139–44.

- exercise the office of the keys and keep the seal of confession
- uphold the public teaching and practice of the Lutheran Church of Australia
- accept the pastoral and doctrinal oversight of your president

The installation order repeats many of these things and adds a few additional gems.

- lead the people in their worship and witness by proclaiming the gospel and administering the holy sacraments
- minister to the people entrusted to you by speaking God's word, listening to them and praying and caring for them<sup>5</sup>

This is the pastoral calling. Significantly, it is rare that pastors name many of these things as the main source of their pastoral struggles. Maybe that observation is part of the answer to clergy well-being. Pastors find joy in their core callings. That's not to suggest these things are easy; they are not. But they summarise the call to the ministry that God has given to the church; they have God's blessing, and when pastors focus on those things they have a good foundation for pastoral work.

Eugene Peterson once reflected on this in his book, *Working the angles*. He spoke of the ministry that God sets out before people, and then he reflected on the way that the culture both inside and outside the church leads people to question the ministry by placing all sorts of additional expectations on pastors. It is too long to quote the whole section here, but his final reminder is worth repeating. These are the words that he puts in the mouth of his people as they call him:

[Pastor], we need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. We don't trust ourselves—our emotions seduce us into infidelities. We know that we are launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith, and that there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. We want you to help us: be our pastor, a minister of word and sacrament, in the middle of this world's life. Minister with word and sacrament to us in all the different parts and stages of our lives—in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over us in a wash of sunshine and those other days that are all drizzle. This isn't the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. This is yours: word and sacrament.<sup>6</sup>

In times when pastors struggle to find joy in their ministry it is significant to remember what is taught, confessed and required in the Rite of Ordination. Pastors are called and ordained to be stewards of God's mysteries.

### **Developing a response to trials**

Much of what pastors do is mundane and unexciting. In addition, they face trials and suffering and struggles because sometimes that is part of the call to faithful ministry. In that context the words of St James are significant: 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance' (Jam 1:2,3).

What does he mean when he says that facing trials can be regarded as pure joy? This is a world away from worldly wisdom which sometimes looks on people who are suffering trials and struggles either as victims to be pitied or tall poppies getting what they deserve. Neither image is particularly helpful.

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<sup>5</sup> *Church Rites*, 147,148.

<sup>6</sup> *Working the angles*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, page 17.

Rather, trials and testings are part of Christian living, and it is worth repeating how the Apology to the Augsburg Confession regards trials:

In the godly [troubles] have another and better purpose, that is, to exercise them so that in their temptations they may learn to seek God's help and to acknowledge the unbelief in their hearts. [T]roubles are a discipline by which God exercises the saints. ... Therefore, troubles are not always penalties for past deeds, but works of God, intended for our profit, that the power of God might be manifest in our weakness (Ap XII, 151,160; Tappert, pages 206,207).

Struggles in the ministry can be part of the larger picture as the church as a whole may be under pressure or persecution for a period. Alternatively, individuals can experience trials when they are plagued by specific issues or problems. There are many useful resources available to help the pastor reflect on the concept of pastoral testing, trial, temptation.<sup>7</sup> Either way, people can be defeated solely by their response to the testing or trial that they encounter.

The connection between testing or trial and joy is found in God's purpose. Hard times for the pastor, if viewed not as problems to be escaped but as opportunities to experience God at work, can be times which lead people from depending on their own strength and resources, to depending on God. When do pastors pray most? When do they seek the absolution themselves? When do they long to kneel and receive the body and blood of Christ? When do they read the Bible more often and for longer than at any other time? Like everyone else, they do these things usually when they are facing difficult times. It is then that God's help, God's Word and God's blessing become a refreshing oasis in the vocational desert, and it is there that all people can find joy when there appears to be none in the daily grind.

That type of response raises the possibility that trials are not dismissed as inconsistent with a godly and faithful ministry, but they are seen as one of many opportunities for God to develop and grow and shape the clay jars he chooses as his ministers of the Gospel (2 Cor 4:7–12; see also 11:22–31).

### **The gift of joy**

As Zephaniah reflects on the coming Messianic age he says it will be a time of joy, because God will rejoice in us. He prophesies: 'The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save you. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing' (Zeph 3:17). God finds joy in us. It doesn't start with us; it starts with God. He loves us and rejoices over us. His people and pastors need to hear that too. The Word they proclaim also needs to be proclaimed to their own ears.

Jesus shows how that works out in practice. He teaches that the God who rejoices over his people also wants to give them joy as a gift. He doesn't demand in the first place that they find joy in him. Rather he offers them his joy. Jesus says: 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (John 15:9–11).

Jesus teaches what the relationship is between love, his Word (or command), and joy. Jesus says he is loved by his Father and he loves the world in turn with the same love. Part of that love is to further

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Steven A Hein, 'Tentatio', *Lutheran Theological Review* 10 (1997,1998), 29–47, and John Kleinig, 'Oratio, meditatio, tentatio: what makes a theologian?' *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66/3 (2002), 255–67. See also Kleinig's recent study of this issue in *Grace upon grace: spirituality for today*, Concordia Publishing House, St Louis, MO, 2008, 218–270.

reveal to his people the will of God, the commands of God. Jesus obeys his Father's will and command and in turn gives his disciples his commands and calls his disciples to obey them. And in their obedience to his commands of love he makes their joy complete.

Sometimes the mention of command or commandments produces a negative reaction. People often think of the burden of the law. Commandments are taken to mean giving up something, or ceasing to do something enjoyable. Commands are law, and law in theological terms is often associated with sin and condemnation. Lutherans are always keen to keep Paul's words in mind: 'Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1).

But God's law and commands are also good (1 Tim 1:8). Salvation is surely by grace for Christ's sake, but by living daily life with the Spirit's help in step with God's commands one can also find joy in life. So repentance is not just a pathway to forgiveness, but also to joy in the new life in Christ. By working and living as pastors according to Christ's institution of the ministry and according to the Scriptural teaching of the ministry, pastors can find joy in the ministry.<sup>8</sup>

This means that when life and ministry lack joy it is significant not to focus on human feelings and responses, but on Jesus' commands through his Word, and the way we may be responding to those commands in obedience or disobedience. It may well be that the pathway to joy is through the confession of sins and the gift of a clean conscience that comes with the absolution. As John Kleinig has noted in his pastoral advice, the key to joyful ministry is a good conscience.<sup>9</sup> To confess sins does not mean getting lost in a black hole of sadness and despair. It means to admit failure to live as God's child, and to admit the inability to save oneself. It means to return to God in repentance. It leads to receiving the forgiveness of sins, and finding abundant life, and receiving the Holy Spirit's help for a life of obedient discipleship in keeping with Jesus' commands. Jesus himself gives people his joy, and as he promises he makes their joy complete (see also 2 John 4–6).

In that light Paul's promises give hope. The fruit of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). The Spirit comes through the Word, and a fruit of the Spirit is joy, so people receive God's gift of joy as they receive the Spirit through the Word.

Bonhoeffer links this gift of joy from our heavenly Father also with the sacrament of the altar.

There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Hence the time of preparation for the Lord's Supper will be filled with [Christian] admonition and encouragement, with prayers, with fear, and with joy. The day of the Lord's Supper is an occasion of joy for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and the [believers], the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life and salvation. The fellowship of the Lord's Supper is the superlative fulfilment of Christian fellowship. (*Life Together*, SCM, 1954, 96)

## Conclusion

Finding joy in the ministry is not easy. Yet, in Christ, pastors can say with Paul, that they are 'hard pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed. We carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus so that the life of

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Matt 28:18–20; John 20:21–23; 1 Cor 11:23–26; 1 Tim 4:16; 5:11–16; 2 Tim 1:13,14; 4:1–6.

Pastors don't work for affirmation, but it might be significant for pastors from time to time to reflect on the way the Word of God speaks approvingly of faithful ministry (1 Pet 5:1–4; 1 Cor 4:1–5).

<sup>9</sup> J W Kleinig, *Pastoral Notes*, Vol 1, Issues 3, 2008, [www.doxology.us](http://www.doxology.us)

Jesus may also be revealed in us. So then death is at work in us but life is at work in the people we serve' (2 Cor 4:8–10,12).

Death is at work, yet there is life, and with that life, the joy of service. How is that possible? Because Christ is the source of the joy. He does not remove the trials but calls people back to himself, their source of joy. Life is not always full of joyful emotions. The pastoral ministry is not always experienced as a joyful vocation. Nevertheless, Christ remains our joy.