

Reflections from
an unemployed pastor

In the Time of

The Evangelical Covenant Church has been experiencing record growth in numbers and diversity for more than a decade, giving us much to celebrate. Yet every upswing also has a corresponding downswing.

While our growing denomination attracts new clergy and seminarians from many places, we are also experiencing a time of few retirements and, overall, little pastoral movement. As of mid-November, the denominational website listed eighty open positions for ministers, whereas 336 people on the same site identified themselves as “actively seeking call.” Many of these pastors currently hold a position but would like to make a change, or are seminarians looking for their first call.

Given that non-Covenant pastors may apply for Covenant positions, the applicant-pulpit ratio becomes even more difficult. Each pastoral opening could have dozens of applicants. This ratio has created a difficult phenomenon for the Covenant Church—an increasing number of unemployed clergy. Today pastors run the risk of finding themselves without a call, including pastors with years of experience and proven denominational loyalty.

Pastors are unemployed for many reasons. Some are asked or told to leave their church after misconduct, misunderstanding, or a divergence between their abilities and their church’s needs. Some pastors prayerfully decide their departure would be best for their congregation and say goodbye without first securing a new pulpit. Some pastors have guided “legacy” churches through the painful decision to close their doors after decades of ministry, deliberately working themselves out of a job. Others have been sent into churches in transition, trauma, or conflict to help the congrega-

tion prepare for a new clergyperson. These interim pastors must then gracefully step aside when that assignment is done and wait for the next interim or permanent opening to come along.

Unemployment is a crisis for anyone, not just clergy. Yet because clergy operate under a different tax structure, we do not receive unemployment payment. As with other jobless folk, there are no pension contributions or health insurance for pastors when they are not working. Without a severance package, life can get grim fast, unless one has a working spouse or is independently wealthy.

My own experience with unemployment has lasted more than a year now; in fact, I have been in search of a permanent church for several years to no avail. This past year has been one of the most difficult in my life as I have begged God for a place to serve, seen our finances dwindle, questioned my call, and watched my spouse work harder to compensate for my lack of income. Besides applying to many churches, Covenant and otherwise, I have applied for various chaplaincies.

I have also sent out countless secular job applications in an effort to generate some income during my search. Eyebrows have been raised at places like the mall, a call center, and even a pizza parlor when my résumé has come before the supervisor. “Why would you want to work *here*?” “Don’t you think you’d just leave again as soon as you get a church?” “Uhhh, we really want some high-school students.”

Applying for a management position in a non-profit would mean the devastating admission that my church ministry is over. Leaving such an organization in the lurch if a church job came along would be unethical. Building a coaching business takes time and the cultivation of hundreds of leads and connections, which would all be abandoned as

Darkness

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soon as that elusive search committee calls my number.

I struggle, as if mired in jello, unable to move forward, seemingly powerless to move even to the side.

Financial realities take over, as they do for all people, clergy or lay. We are packing up our belongings to move to a more affordable home, but that is not the worst thing about being jobless. Far worse is the feeling of uselessness and an inability to give financially to the many ministries I have supported in the past. I know their coffers suffer too, and I grieve that I cannot do my part. While I am profoundly grateful for my spouse's job and hard work, the fact that I am not contributing to the financial success of our family fills me with shame.

Sunday mornings are often difficult as I worship in someone else's sanctu-

tion for a few people I know. While necessary work, it doesn't address the issue of unemployment, nor does it allow me to share from the breadth of my call the way I can in parish ministry. Does such a statement sound selfish and short-sighted given the size of God's kingdom? How do I explain in words the joy I know when doing what I was born to do? I grieve the loss of that joy.

Some time ago I was describing my situation to a sympathetic colleague and the whole long story of my job search blurted out. I emailed him the next day to apologize, ashamed of what must certainly have seemed like whining. He immediately called me and said, "You were not whining. You were lamenting, and there is biblical precedent for that."

Indeed, the psalmist seems to

have been singing my song: a song of despair, a wail of fear, a cry for blessing and help

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ary. Tears well up at random times as other people read, preach, or pray. I hear the inevitable question at coffee hour, "Any news on a church yet?" I do occasionally preach or teach at my local church and receive much affirmation, including the frequent question, "Really? Nobody's hired you yet? Why not?" It's a question I ask myself every day.

Some people suggest alternatives: "Maybe you could go start a church." I have considered this, but God has not laid this call on my heart, nor does it fit my skill set.

Others offer assurances: "The calling of God is irrevocable." Yes, I agree, but apparently the paychecks are revocable.

Others exhort: "Do God's work anyway! You don't have to be employed to do that." True enough. I am active in the wider church, volunteer at a local ministry, and provide some pastoral care and spiritual direc-

tion from God when the church has seemingly gone on without me. Do other unemployed pastors feel this way? My conversations with other unemployed or temporarily employed colleagues lead me to say, yes, they do. Our lament before God is very real. As a pastor, I have often sent parishioners to the psalms, for they include a wide array of human emotions in times of trouble as well as in times of praise.

Lately, however, I have begun to read them with new, warier eyes. While more than one-third of the 150 psalms are psalms of lament, only a small handful of these actually end in lament. The vast majority pivot at some point, changing the song of sorrow into a song of assurance, thanks, and praise. In the nick of time, God swoops in and rescues the psalmist from trouble. The desire of the heart has been granted. One's righteousness has been rewarded. The nation is saved. Though beautiful, these psalms

are not speaking to me in this season of my life.

Rather, it is the psalms that continue their lament that seem to be my home this past year. A friend once told me he was having a "Psalm 88 kind of day." This psalm is one in which God doesn't appear to show up at all. The psalmist pleads with God, citing his terror, fear, rejection, and overwhelming troubles. Indeed, the psalm ends with the plaintive wail, "Darkness is my closest friend." Thank God we have a Holy Scripture that includes such brutal honesty. May the church never lose the ability to lament in this open-ended way.

The Apostle Paul famously tells us that the church's body is comprised of many members. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). Paul understood the theological dimensions of both lament and joy as activities of the entire body. Lament is a social activity, not just an individual cry. If the community does not surround the suffering, the sufferers' voices are silenced, and they become isolated in their pain. Likewise, at some point, the sorrowing must look beyond their own suffering to see the larger picture; how the community benefits when another is honored or raised up.

Does the church, especially the Ministerium, suffer with its unemployed brothers and sisters? How might we demonstrate more than empathy? Working clergy can remember to invite the unemployed to preach, to teach at workshops, and to offer opportunities to lead, especially where they might earn an honorarium or make connections. The Ministers' Crisis Fund administered by the Board of the Ordered Ministry, which makes funds available to pastors in need, is one manifestation of shared suffering. Clergy who are unemployed due to misconduct find help from the

care and discipline of the board (with an emphasis on *care*). Counseling is arranged to help pastors who have left their church due to personal or family crisis. Such concrete solidarity can mean a tremendous amount to the unemployed.

Conversely, can we who are without work rejoice when colleagues get interviews and we do not? Can we genuinely be glad as they get hired and develop relationships with their people while we remain onlookers? Can pastors mature in years and wisdom smile and be glad when younger clergy are given priority in hiring? Can women clergy rejoice for their brothers, even when they suspect that their profile will not be read because of their gender, that a fearful voice on a search committee has won the day, consigning their carefully written profile to the bottom of the pile?

Rejoicing with others takes deep humility and trust that God's intentions for our calls are good, despite what our eyes see. I pray for such grace; it is hard won.

With the use of Sustaining Pastoral Excellence funds, the denomination generously sent me to the Midwest Ministry Development Center for a mid-career checkup. During three intense days my spouse and I underwent many vocational and personality tests, individual and couples' counseling, and even homework assignments to help us understand how we can better face this painful time together. The reaffirmation of my call was very strong, for which I was profoundly grateful. I needed to hear those words from professionals who work exclusively with pastors and missionaries.

At Midwinter, our denomination's annual clergy conference, pastors in search of a call make appointments with the conference superintendents, going from table to table to table, spending thirty minutes face-to-face with those persons who work most closely with local search commit-

tees. This musical chairs exercise is an opportunity to hear which positions are open or might soon open, and to contemplate what might be a match for one's particular gifts and call. The superintendents are kind and supportive, spending time also in prayer with each applicant. Yet many unemployed clergy are unable to afford this conference; for them regular emails and phone meetings must suffice. I am grateful for the superintendents' support and encouragement, as well as for their advocacy on my behalf with search committees. Better than anyone, they know that our denominational polity leaves churches in control of the candidates they will choose to pursue, and that there are no guarantees.

My own desire to share the suffering of the body and put my own situation in perspective has resulted in regular prayer for the persecuted church and its pastors. These are brothers and sisters the world over whose challenges far exceed mine and yet whose witness is often more joy-filled, more heartfelt. I pray that their witness will have lasting effect, that they will gain an audience among their persecutors, and that they and their families will receive courage and provision. They are, as Hebrews 11 says of the saints of old, sore oppressed: "Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground" (vv. 36-38, NIV). The spiritual gift of contentment in all things is hard to fathom in the face of such difficulties. Their courage is a

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lesson to me as I awake each day in a culture that rarely resorts to violence to solve its internal differences.

What can local congregations do for the unemployed clergy of the Covenant? If you are on a search committee, please read each word of each profile carefully. Someone's livelihood is in your hands. Don't assume that because a pastor is unemployed, he or she is not a good pastor; the reality is so much more complex.

Interview lots of people—if possible, face to face. Personal presence cannot be replaced by a profile or a telephone call. Please don't assume that clergy in their fifties or sixties are past their prime or that they cannot relate to youth or young families. Give women an equal chance, and give clergy who have come through a hard stretch the benefit of the doubt. God works in many ways.

I would invite all readers to pray for unemployed clergy, for our future employment, the emotional and financial health of our families, and for our ability to trust in the God who called us. While you're at it, please pray for persecuted clergy, too, for their suffering is greater still. Pray for the pastor who just got a new job and for the one who is contemplating retirement. Pray for the overwhelmed pastor who thinks of quitting every day and for the one whose call brings joy and meaning. Pray for our superintendents as they match and present candidates. Pray for search committees, that they will allow the Spirit to guide every bit of their discernment. All these servants need the prayers of the church. We are a part of you and are grateful to be in the body together. ■

The author is a Covenant pastor awaiting call.