

### unfinished (a woodworker's blog)

In woodworking there is always room to grow. This blog is like that doorframe where I mark my kids' heights from time to time. I hope it will someday be a record of my growth...as an artist, as a craftsman, and maybe as a person.



preacher

My dad was a minister in a church. My uncles were ministers. My cousin's a minister. About thirty of my best friends are, or were, ministers.

I was a minister, until I quit seven years ago. Probably forever.

It's difficult being a minister. In the hard times, I always felt like many of the people in the church didn't really understand us. Where our hearts were, how we were feeling, what our intentions were, how best to help us help the church. Which often felt dysfunctional. And I spent a lot of my down time

thinking about a list of things I wish the church understood.

But while I was in the position, saying them would have sounded only like whining. Or it would have been uncomfortably vulnerable.

Now that I'm seven years removed from ministry, with no chance of returning, I want to offer some of these things to you who attend church regularly, hoping that they might be received in a different, more constructive spirit. I've really got nothing invested here any more, except love and respect for my brothers and sisters who do this for a living. And a hope that I can make someone's life just a little better.

A disclaimer is in order. I ran these by a large handful of ministers this week, and most of them said something akin to 'Yes, *exactly!*' But there were one or two who responded saying that they've had a different, better experience with ministry, and that most of these don't apply to them. But I think it's fair to say that about nine out of ten ministers relate strongly to most of what's here.

It might also be weird that I've written them in the first person, as though I'm currently a minister. I'm not. But since I was born and bred and trained for it, and since I did it for so many years, I'm placing myself back into the fold for this post. Most of it comes from my own personal experience anyway.

So here's what your minister wishes you understood. Give it a read, give it some thought, and give him or her a bigger hug than usual tomorrow morning.

**1. Our greatest fear is irrelevance.** It's not losing our jobs, hurting your feelings, or accidentally saying

the F word during a sermon. Those fears are there. But they are nothing compared to the nagging fear that what we say and do is making *zero* difference in your life. That you are only showing up to church because of habit, or obligation, or mental illness. That we are laying ourselves bare to write and deliver a sermon every week that nobody is hearing. If your pastor has made an actual difference in your life *ever*, by word or deed or example or friendship, take some time this week to let him or her know, in as much detail as you can. You cannot imagine how far that will go.

**2. We are mama's boys.** Apologies to the female pastors, this one's just about the guys. I've read studies that higher than 80 percent of male pastors say they are much closer to their mothers than their fathers. This has a lot of implications, and it explains why we're more likely to play an instrument than fire a gun, have coffee with a friend than watch a game, read a book than restore an old Mustang. It also means that nobody in the church gets our attention as much as the old ladies, who can make or break our day with a kind word or a disapproving scowl. When you're dealing with your male pastor, keep in mind that he's more likely to speak the language of nurture over discipline, collaboration over competition, forgiveness over punishment. These aren't things he learned in seminary, these are things he learned in diapers.

**3. S/he sees you when you're sleeping.** Some people in the pews think there's a two way mirror between them and the pulpit, that they can see the pastor but the pastor can't see them. Wrong. We see you yawn, look at your phone, whisper something into your wife's ear. Sleep. Which is fine. If we're boring, it's not *your* fault, it's ours. But just be aware that we see you, and that *if* you can manage to at least look like you're a *little* more interested, it might actually feed some energy back to us and give us more zing. Energy goes two ways.

**4. We think about quitting a lot.** Behind closed doors, most ministers talk about moving on with regularity. The job is hard in a way that people who've never done it cannot understand. Not physically, or even mentally. But emotionally it can wreck you. I don't fully understand why, although I have theories. But just know, when you're choosing how to interact with her or him, that your pastor is probably hurting and tired and wishing s/he could quit. And that, in most cases, the only thing keeping him or her there is a sense of love and obligation to you. Be gentle, sensitive, and grateful for that.

**5. We envy people who can be themselves.** We wish we could cuss without it making headlines. We wish we could get drunk at a party, just *once*, without it resulting in an elders meeting. We wish we could be enthusiastic about a hobby without people raising their eyebrows about how much time and money we're spending on it. We wish we could make angry political remarks on Facebook. You know, all the things that *you* feel free to do *all the time*. You want us to be human, but not *too* human. Believe me, we know. And it's probably for the best that we are charged with setting a good example, it makes sense. But just know, we sometimes envy your freedom to just be yourself.

[UPDATE: It's August 12th. This blog has now received over 104 thousand views. And the wording of my point above has stirred up more controversy than the Zapruder film. See about half of the comments below to see what I'm talking about. Several readers misunderstood my intentions with the phrases 'We wish we could cuss...' and 'We wish we could get drunk...', apparently without reading much further to understand the point I was actually trying to make.

I'm very frustrated by this, but I'm willing to take responsibility for the poor wording. I suppose if I were to rewrite the article in light of this confusion, I'd say it differently. My emphasis was not on the *wishing to sin*, but on the headlines and elders' meetings that always seem to result whenever a pastor slips once and

does something a little too human. And the ensuing fear that the pastor and his/her family have to live in 24/7. And the envy we feel for those of you who do not live with that fear. Perhaps it would have been better to say, 'We wish that whenever we failed, just once, to live up to the standards that have been set for us, it wouldn't always result in major disciplinary action or public embarrassment.'

And by the way, if you ever wonder why your pastor isn't more vulnerable about his personal weaknesses, just read some of the comments below. That should make it crystal clear.]

**6. We are often spiritually starving.** Probably the most closely guarded secret among pastors is how spiritually empty many of us are. Like a worker at the chocolate factory who no longer likes the taste of chocolate, or the prostitute who gets no pleasure from sex, we deal with spiritual matters so much that they often no longer have much meaning for us. Worship, for us, is a program that must be organized and executed. It's work. It's not *for* us. It's for you. And then, when we're not 'on,' often the last thing we want to do is something spiritual. Because it reminds us of work. We can't read the Bible without thinking of sermon ideas. We can't pray without thinking of leading prayers. We can't meet with other church people without talking shop. So we'd rather play golf, or watch TV, or anything else. Which ultimately leaves us empty. Not everyone, not always. But often.

**7. We are sinful, no different than you.** We don't just think about sinning. We aren't just *tempted* to sin. We *commit* sins. The same kind you do. Believe it. But also understand that this doesn't make us less qualified to talk to you about sins, but more. If you've ever sat in the pew and heard a pastor rambling on about temptations and sin and thought, "Whatever, there's no way she understands what I'm dealing with," think again. It's very likely that she does, first hand. And that what she's saying comes from her own life, not just from a book.

**8. We are lonely, because it's hard to trust.** Pastors often have trust issues. As well they should. All pastors have heard stories about Reverend So-and-so who confided in someone in his church about his addiction to whatever, only to have that person tell the elders about it, which ultimately got him fired. It happens. We know it does. So every time we interact with you, even if it's in a prayer group or some very intimate setting, we're not 100% open. We can't afford to be. It's not your fault, it's not our fault, it's just a bad system that doesn't allow pastors to be as human as it should. You can't fix that, but you can have understanding and compassion for the man or woman who loves and serves you week after week, who counsels you and hears your confessions, and yet often has nowhere to go to get the same healing and relief.

**9. Ministry is a hard job.** Sometimes it's said as a joke, sometimes it's said in anger, that ministers don't work very hard. That it's a cushy gig. If that were true I doubt I'd know so many ministers who have quit swearing never to return, including myself. The best way I can think to explain why ministry is hard is to compare it to being the parent of a young child. From the outside it might not look like a lot of 'work,' but from the inside it's the most exhausting thing you'll ever do. Because it's not just about the *amount of things* you do, it's the total emotional drain of it. It's worrying all day every day about the people and programs you're in charge of, being on call and not ever feeling really free to be away, feeling like you live in a fishbowl with hundreds of eyes watching you all the time and never really knowing what they are all thinking of you (unless they complain, which some of them do with regularity). It's caring for people to the point that you have nothing left for your own family when you get home, yet expecting that they show a certain spiritually-put-together face to the church (because the church expects that). It's often feeling

empty, yet pretending to feel full. It's presenting yourself and your work to hundreds of people, several times a week, for evaluation, and often getting no feedback except 'constructive' criticism. And after all of this, after years of this, it's looking out at the people in your church and seeing little or no change. Ministry is very hard, albeit perhaps in a different way than your job is hard.

**10. We are more sensitive than you probably think.** Most ministers I know have one or two people in their congregations who send them stinky emails weekly, and another ten or fifteen who can be counted on to complain about things about once a month. Then of course there are handfuls of the angels, who hug and love and say encouraging things every week. But guess what. The people who complain are far more thorough and specific and persistent than those who encourage, and *they* are the voices that keep us up at night feeling bad about ourselves, wondering if we suck at this. Most ministers have skin that is way thinner than their congregants think it is. We *have* to be open and sensitive to you, because it's *you* we are charged with caring for. This means that the things you say to us can reach far deeper inside than they could otherwise. If you need to criticize your minister for something, please just be aware of this. Tread carefully, and with a lot of love and appreciation for her vulnerability. We are not above correction. Nobody is. But please make the extra effort to wrap it in as much care as you can.

**11. We care about you more than you can imagine.** The best moments of being a pastor for me, by far, were the times the ministers would gather for staff meetings and talk about the week ahead. Did we discuss worship and youth outings and air conditioning and budgets? Sure, for maybe twenty minutes. And then for three hours we'd talk about the people we were serving, what's going on in their lives, and how we might help them. I always wished the whole church could be in those meetings and just see how much these people care, how much their hearts break for them, how much time and emotional energy they spend wanting to help them. Those meetings are my most sacred memories of church, because those were the moments when I saw men and women who had every reason not to care, to phone it in, to even be resentful. And yet, in spite of all of it, at the end of every day, they still cared, sometimes to the point of tears. You might have no idea how much.

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