

A Long-Term Pastorate

Rev. Philip Meyer

When people ask how long I have been the pastor at Immanuel and I say, "Thirty-four years," there is often a stunned silence. They often reflect, "Thirty-four years is a long time to be in one place." It's the same kind of reaction that many couples get when they tell inquiring people how long they have been married. In our day we have become accustomed to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, often in serial form.

The relationship that a pastor and congregation have is a lot like marriage. When you are ordained and installed you will be asked a series of questions to which you will answer: "I do" or "I will with the help of God," or something very similar. They sound a lot like marriage vows. The congregation answers with similar words. In the rites of Ordination and Installation we have a parallel with marriage. You may feel as though you are taking on another wife. In the very best sense, this is true.

Marriage is not easy. Marriage takes a lot of work, and sometimes the work is very difficult. Just like a marriage, the relationship between a pastor and his congregation takes time to develop. There are frustrations and obstacles to overcome. The level of trust must be constructed and maintained by both. Patience must be one of the virtues exhibited by both a pastor and his congregation. Young married couples know this. Perhaps the need to be reassured that the spouse is not going to run out remains strong for some time. As time passes one realizes that the level of trust has grown and that each trusts the other.

As in any marriage, there are frustrations in a long pastorate. Things don't always go the way one hopes or wants. Sometimes we probably haven't liked each other very much, but we stayed with this marriage. It becomes very tempting to look elsewhere, to a new call. We begin to think that the grass is greener somewhere else. Of course, the pastor may become stagnant and lazy in his thinking and actions. He might be like the slovenly husband who no longer presents himself to his wife as though he is still wooing her. Congregations can treat their pastors with contempt, as though they can always get another. Neither should be looking for a way out of the relationship.

Happy husbands and wives learn to listen to each other and to treat each other with respect. Pastors and congregations need to have that attitude too. When they act that way toward each other, then love and respect grow and deepen through shared experiences—both good and bad. Expressions of love will always be found in a healthy marriage, and that's true of pastors and congregations too. Blessed are those congregations and pastors where concrete expressions of love are shown. And what a blessed example to the community around them. As we admire a marriage that has lasted twenty-five, thirty, forty, or fifty years, so we admire congregations and pastors who have lived together under God's blessings for long periods of time. It speaks well of the Gospel we proclaim. It makes the church attractive to prospects.

As I reflect on my thirty-four years at Immanuel, the joys certainly outweigh the frustrations. Some of the children who were my catechumens when I arrived have grown up, gotten married, and had children of their own. Now those children are my catechumens. We've had an intergenerational experience together. What a joy to see the people of the congregation journey through life under God's blessing and to be part of two, three, or even four generations. I have felt as though many of them were my own children, and in a sense, they are. I have baptized, confirmed, married, and buried entire families, sometimes three generations. We have walked together for a long time. We know each other well. We love each other because of Christ and because of this walk we have had together. For many of them, I am the only pastor they have ever known. I feel like a husband, father, and grandfather to these people. It is the blessing that God gives after many years, much like a husband, father, and grandfather experiences when he looks back on his life with his family.

Another of our joys has been participating in the vicarage program of our synod. We've had twenty vicars and have come to regard them as our children. We've had a part in training pastors for the church, seeing them struggle and grow, and this has been a distinct joy for us as parents. It helps connect us with the synod.

Change happens in this earthly life. We live in a world that changes so rapidly we can scarcely take it in. While our doctrine and practice dare not change, we rise together to meet new challenges. As pastor and congregation have learned to trust each other, encountering change is a much less threatening thing. We experience it together. Under our Lord's watchfulness, pastor and congregation are kept safe in His Word and Sacraments.

One day I'll reach the end of my pastorate here. It's possible that I might even establish the record for longevity in this place. I didn't set out to establish such a record, but by the grace of God and under His blessing, I'd be pleased to say that Immanuel and I have had a long and happy marriage. I hope that you experience this joy and satisfaction too.

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