

Whether or not you find that an appealing strategy, we will have enough true urgency when we have a message to tell. That's what preaching truly is.

The Bible promises that God will bring his word to us through his servants. We should not presume that each of our words is a word from the Lord, but in preparation and delivery, we offer ourselves to be used by him.

That's my six-point checklist. What would your six points be?

Letters to a Young Pastor

Ian Stackhouse

Pastoral Leader of Guildford Baptist Church and former Board Member of MTUK

Dear Timothy,

Thanks for your letter the other day. It is good to hear that you are learning at last to keep strict boundaries in terms of hours. You have a young family and, as you say, you don't want to join the ranks of absentee fathers. Actually, play your cards right, and there is no reason why you can't be home every tea time to help out with bath times and stories. For all the demands of having to be out so many evenings in the week, one of the things we pastors can do is be around when other people are still stuck on the evening commute. So try not to miss those times. You won't regret it - and your children will love you for it.

About this counting thing: I'm afraid it's impossible not to count. As soon as we are given charge of a flock, we find ourselves counting the sheep. It is an occupational hazard. But maybe there is a way of doing it that keeps your integrity intact. After all, God counts. In fact, we have a whole book in the Bible named after the fact that God likes to count: Numbers, of course. But here's the difference. When we count, all we are interested in, so often, is the total. Bums on seats. The bigger, the better, if you know what I mean. When God counts, however, he is interested in each one. Indeed, the word that is used in Hebrew for God counting, as that

delightful man Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, means 'to lift the face'. And it seems to me that as long as we too lift the face, notice and name each person whom we are counting, refusing to see them as anything other than utterly unique, irreplaceable even, then we'll be okay. Unlike King David, who counted his fighting men in order to buttress his power, when we lift the face we shall be counting for the love of God's people.

One final thing. When you meet a fellow pastor at a conference, don't let your first question be about the size of their church. And if they ask you the size of yours, be honest!

The Peace of the Lord, Ian

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Dear Timothy,

How good to receive your letter in the post the other day! I've been pondering it ever since, which is why it has taken me a while to reply. If I'm being totally honest, it has left me feeling a bit ambivalent. I know what your business friend is saying about the need for professional detachment. Indeed, I find myself agreeing with some of it. I'm sure I could have done with a bit of emotional distance myself over the last thirty years. I have lived too close to the coal face and have not always been able to offer good leadership as a result.

But Timothy, if by professional detachment your friend is trying to protect you from the pain of ministry, which I fear he is, seeking to help you circumvent the suffering that is so much a part of ministering Christ to people, then I'm going to have to object in the strongest possible terms. In fact, I need to say that if you think you are going to get through this thing called Christian ministry without getting hurt, then you had better get out now. You are going to have your heart broken many times, sometimes by the people you actually work with. I suppose you could try to emotionally detach. Many ministers do. The pain becomes so unbearable that they just disconnect. Sometimes they end up writing books on church growth because church growth methods can't quite reject you in the same way people can. But who wants a minister like that? That's like having a cardboard cut-out as a leader when what the church really needs are men and women who learn to carry the cross right into the mess of life, who know

also that they are not the messiah, and somehow carry on loving even when it hurts.

I know you know this. I wouldn't be writing so strongly if I didn't believe that. Meanwhile, I will think on. Maybe it is me, not you, who needs to hear your friend's advice.

The peace of the Lord, Ian

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Dear Timothy,

So you have someone in your church who doesn't approve of you – or, more accurately, doesn't like the new songs you are introducing – and seems intent on making your life a misery. I wondered when that would happen. To be honest, I am surprised it has taken this long. Clearly, you have had a prolonged honeymoon. What you mustn't do, however, is allow it to unsettle you. After all, it is not as if you are smashing up the church organ. All you are doing is introducing a few new choruses. I suspect his antipathy towards you is not so much the quality of the songs (he knows full well there are as many dodgy old hymns), but the issue of control. Sounds like you're the first person in a long while who has challenged him.

It feels unpleasant though, doesn't it? It feels ridiculous that one person can have such an impact on you, but it is remarkably common. Just to encourage you, most ministers at some time or other will allow someone in their congregation to have such sway over them that they become practically slaves to their opinion. No matter that 99 people in their church just love what you are doing; the fact that this one person is critical and most times peers at you disapprovingly from the pew robs you of any joy you might otherwise have. It happened to me once. It was a couple actually. Pretty much everything I did was not good enough and although they couched things in pious terms, it was precisely their piety that made what they said so devastating. I found myself pandering to them, hoping that finally I might persuade them I really was worth listening to. They ended up leaving.

Why we allow this to happen is an interesting question. Psychologists would have a field day. I am sure disapproving fathers would appear somewhere in their diagnosis - or disapproving mothers for that matter. Or maybe something to do

with desperately wanting everyone to be happy. Either way, finding oneself caught in this kind of thing is a most miserable business. 'The fear of man is a snare,' says the proverb. To be sure, the manipulation that is required to get you to fear is incredibly subtle, but that is what it is. And the only way out of it is to renounce it. The fact is that you can't please everyone. For as many as love you as their present minister, there will be others who lament the passing of the last, not to mention others who will be praying for the next. That's just the way it is. However, to let one person hold such power over you is the devil itself. Love is patient, of course. Love is kind. And love always hopes. It is always worth trying to gain understanding with people, but sometimes you simply have to let them go, pray God's best for them, and get on with what you have been called to do. It's painful, I know; but essential.

I told you about the couple who eventually left our church. Actually, by the time they left, I had truly got myself into a place where I was at peace about the whole thing. In fact, we met up one evening, so they could break the news to me, and I could honestly say that I was able to wish them every blessing as they went on their way. I can't say it was easy. Ministry in the church finds out every weak spot in you. Looking back, I gave them far too much power over me, for far too long, but I must admit I was quite proud of myself when I was able, with genuine strength, to pray for them and thank them for all they had given. I am sure I will be proud of you too.

The Peace of the Lord, Ian

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Dear Timothy,

I was so saddened to read in your letter about the young man in your congregation who took his life. He must have been very desperate to throw himself under a train, and not even leave a note. Hard for everyone to understand. As you say, it is surprising how many people before the funeral asked you whether he had committed the unforgivable sin. Medieval piety is more pervasive among us evangelicals than you think, but you did right to assuage their fears and assure them of God's grace. The truth of the matter is that sometimes life becomes simply unbearable. You can be carrying a pack of 10lbs one day, and then suddenly, the next day,

for no reason at all, you feel that you are carrying 100lbs, and the only way out is to jump.

What concerns me now, Timothy, is what happens to you. You have just been through one of the most challenging assignments a pastor has to deal with. There are few things more draining than having to deal with a suicide. As our American friends put it, you need to cut yourself some slack. However, if I know anything about church life, I suspect you have already got back into the swing of things, without any time off at all. In fact, this is the real danger of our vocation. Within a matter of hours, you can go from sitting with someone at the bedside as they take their last final breath, to a tricky meeting with a member of the congregation who is not happy about some aspect of the church's vision, all the way to celebrating, later that evening, the engagement of a young couple who have come to see you to fix a date for the wedding. In short, you can go through a whole range of emotions, and deceive yourself into thinking that none of this will affect you. At least that is what I thought. And I know a good deal of other pastors who act likewise. Indeed, the longer I have gone on in pastoral ministry, it occurs to me that ours must be just about the least supervised profession that I know. A friend of mine is a fireman, and following a particularly tragic incident which involved him freeing a dead mother and child from a crash scene, he told me that it was compulsory for him and his crew to attend a number of debriefing sessions. It was assumed that his work would stretch his emotions to the limit, and that he would therefore require safe spaces in order to talk through what he had experienced. I have heard of similar provision for doctors, lawyers and teachers, but for some reason, known only to ourselves, pastors feel that they can do without this, as if somehow carrying the cross makes good soul care an indulgence.

Twenty-five years on, I am not sure things have improved a great deal. Denominations make all the right noises about the pastoral care of its leaders, and structures most definitely have emerged to help pastors reflect on their work, but in reality, it is all a little ad hoc. The fall-out rate is enormous. Every week I hear of another casualty, and I am anxious that you don't become one of them. My advice to you, Timothy, is to make soul care a priority. It doesn't have to be that long. I am not suggesting counselling. But make

sure you have people nearby with whom you can share your ministry with.

The Peace of the Lord, Ian

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Dear Timothy,

As always, I feel very honoured that you should write to me so candidly about the things you are dealing with, but I am bit worried, I must admit, by your growing criticisms of the congregation. You may not like me saying this, but I put it down to these conferences your denomination insists on sending you to. Conferences about growing your church are all very well, but if you are not careful you will end up despising the congregation you are serving. The truth is, Timothy, we all feel disappointed from time to time by the place we have been assigned to, and it is very tempting to fantasise about being somewhere else that is more congenial to our personality, more alive in the Spirit, and - let's face it - bigger. But the tragedy of it is that all the while we are ministering to the people who are not there, planning for the people who we have yet to engage with, we are missing out on the wonders of the people who are there, the treasures that are sitting right under our noses had we but the generosity to notice.

I grant you it's not immediately obvious. Most congregations don't yield their treasures easily! Such is the look of passivity of the average congregation on a Sunday morning you could be forgiven for wondering if there is anything spiritual happening at all, but if you hang around long enough, you discover that even the most mundane saints are living out stories of epic proportions. Why, just the other day a woman, who hitherto had said very little to me over the years, other than the polite word or two at the door as she was leaving, came to see me about a quite personal matter. She spoke with deep emotion about a situation that was causing her a great deal of distress. And as much as her passion did not seem to match at all the person I thought I knew, it did confirm to me what I really did know, that here was someone who felt deeply about things, and prayed from the heart.

So here is a basic rule of thumb - or is it a rule of faith? Love the people God has entrusted to you. As well as worrying about the people you are not reaching, start appreciating the people you *are* reaching. Take them to your heart. Thank God for each one of

them. Don't let looks deceive you. There is far more going on under the surface than you can possibly imagine. And if at times the church feels a little weird, with more than its fair share of awkward people, just remember that this is the genius of the church. For all our attempts to make the church into a house of decorum, I guess it is always and ever will be a cave of Adullam.

The Peace of the Lord, Ian

Preaching as Proclamation – Singing a Different Song

Tim Marks

Former Board Member of Ministry Today UK

I work as Deputy Head of Counselling at The Well Counselling in Malvern, counselling and supervising. I have privileged access to the lives of many people in this quiet town, who live far from the church or Christian faith. Not only can they not find their way home, they don't know there is anything that might be home. I sometimes ask, "Are you a person of faith? Do you have a belief?" One woman said, "I believe in angels - isn't that wet? But I do, somehow." God is speaking to them in partial and piecemeal ways. They don't yearn for religion. They yearn for healing, for something better, for a new way of living, for some goodness and grace in their lives. It is as though our clients are shouting and whispering at the same time. They shout: "Stop the pain for me, it's driving me mad." They whisper: "Am I a good person? How has this happened to me? Will this be all there is?"

We also hear today voices of despair that penetrate the world of ordinary people, that there is no truth, no vision, no bigger picture. We just have to make ourselves up as we go along. Julian Barnes said: "I don't believe in God anymore, but I miss him." Similarly, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir: "If God is dead, then man is not free. He is just alone."

In William Fiennes' book *The Snow Geese*, he narrates his own story of following the great migration of snow geese from Texas to the north of the American continent. His own story is that of a