

The
MINISTRY
of
SMALL
THINGS

Wisdom for Those
Who Serve the Church

Reuben Bredenhof


P U B L I S H I N G
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Where relevant, Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”).

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To all my students, and to pastors everywhere.

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Introduction

Tend my sheep. (John 21:16)

A job description is useful: It sketches what is expected of a person when they take up new employment, whether selling tractors, doing audits, or teaching kindergartners. This is true for a pastor, too. A job description—even fairly informal or all but unspoken—details the activities he should be busy with. It sets his priorities for each week of labor in Christ’s church.

For many pastors, preaching has the principal position in their job description. This is what congregations expect of their pastors, and what most pastors want to do more than anything: preach the gospel. And this is what Scripture prioritizes: “Preach the word,” Paul tells Timothy; “be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). God places a high premium on the public ministry of his Word because he uses preaching to bring about saving faith. The words of Romans 10:17 are well known: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” So into the pulpit the pastor must go.

Closely joined to preaching is God’s confirmation of its message through the sacraments of baptism and Communion.

Together with prayer, these are designated as the means of grace in Reformed theology: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”* It is appropriate when the core aspects of a pastor’s job description revolve around these three ordinances: Word, sacraments, and prayer.

Every pastor knows that other tasks need his attention too. For instance, a pastor is expected to lead in elder meetings. He might have administrative duties to fulfill, like overseeing staff and managing finances. One pastor is expected to spend time each week making new contacts in the neighborhood, another to teach classes to the church’s youth or new members.

This book seeks to unpack one more significant element in the minister’s job description: pastoral care. Over the next thirty chapters, we’ll focus on the ministry of visitation, conversation, encouragement, and admonition. We do so because this is a ministry that the Scriptures command as vital for the spiritual protection, health, and growth of the Lord’s people. “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you,” Peter exhorted his fellow elders and pastors (1 Peter 5:2). This command echoes the mandate that Peter himself received from Jesus: “Tend my sheep” (John 21:16). As for Paul, he was a pastor who demonstrated tender love for his congregations (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:11–12) and who urged his fellow pastors to minister in a spirit of kindness, gentleness, and truth (2 Tim. 2:24–25).

On these pages we will explore what it means to shepherd the flock of God well, to tend Christ’s sheep, and to feed his

* Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 88.

lambs. What does such a ministry look like? How is it to be done from week to week? What does Scripture say about the convictions, attitudes, and practices of a good pastor when he is devoted to giving spiritual care?

This work of pastoral ministry comprises many small but significant moments. If you asked an ordinary pastor to describe how he goes about the work of tending the flock, he would probably mention phone calls, conversations over coffee, quiet prayers, Scripture readings, hospital visits, interactions in the fellowship hall after worship, text messages—a lot of small things.

The very simplicity of these activities sometimes calls into question their effectiveness. After yet another visit, yet another phone call, yet another Scripture shared, what has changed? Are these things helping at all?

Or perhaps the pastor would prefer to be at the front, commanding everyone's attention on Sunday morning. Perhaps he'd rather do something more notable than spending forty-five minutes chatting with an elderly sister, or listening to a husband and wife unload the burdens of their struggling marriage, or trying (for the fifth time this month) to connect with the straying member who clearly does not want to talk. These efforts can seem trivial. Do these moments actually matter?

But with this book I'd like to exhort pastors to embrace the small moments of gospel ministry. They may not seem extraordinary, but these are the kinds of works that God uses mightily to bless his people.

Perhaps you are a young minister, eager to learn what pastoral ministry is all about. Your new job description includes the line "spiritual care of the membership," which seems altogether too vague to be helpful. Or perhaps you are a veteran

pastor who needs encouragement to take up (again) the simple but essential work of visiting, listening, encouraging, and following up. For any pastor who wants to obey Christ's command to tend the flock and shepherd the lambs, this book will explore the God-given impact of a ministry of small things.

The following thirty chapters are organized loosely into three sections. Section 1 is called "Beginning the Work" and describes the attitude, posture, and expectations that a pastor should have as he ministers among the Lord's people. "Doing the Work" is the second (and longest) section, an exploration of the numerous small activities that a pastor will be busy with when caring for the church. Section 3, "Pressing On with the Work," addresses some of the challenges that a pastor will encounter and how his small ministry can persevere through them with God's mighty help. This threefold division doesn't mean that the chapters and sections need to be read sequentially. Each of the chapters stands on its own, and in fact this book is probably best read over a month or more, with time taken for personal reflection and prayer.

BEGINNING
the WORK



Have a Ministry of Small Things

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much. (Luke 16:10)

It has attained the status of a Christian motto: “Attempt great things for God.” Some people are surprised to learn that these words aren’t in the Bible but were spoken by the pioneering missionary William Carey. As disciples of Christ, we’re encouraged to aim high. We should be ambitious builders of God’s kingdom and bold wreckers of Satan’s strongholds. Go on a mission trip. Give away your fortune. Become a street evangelist.

There can be something commendable about desiring to rise above the ordinary and comfortable: “I want to do something *big* for God.” Certainly this is better than making an idol of our comfort and ease. But we don’t have to be notable and do notable things. In the pursuit of meaningful service for the Lord, we should remind ourselves that oftentimes the little things are the big things.

I have seen this in my own ministry. My wife and I and our family have had the burden of saying farewell to three

congregations over the past twenty years. After we had worked for some time among the believers in one place or another, God led our path somewhere new. The many joys of the bond between a pastor (and his family) and a congregation were replaced by the sharp pains of parting: tears, hugs, sadness, but also words of mutual love and appreciation.

When I remember what gets said during these poignant farewells, it strikes me that for many people, it's the little things that stand out. The congregation wants to say thank you for the work that has been done the past five or eight years. So what are things that they mention in these final conversations?

- “Thanks for checking in on me.”
- “Thanks for always remembering my birthday.”
- “I liked how you took me out for coffee.”
- “You took the time to answer our questions in catechism class.”
- “Thank you for baptizing our boys.”
- “You preached for us, week after week.”
- “We appreciated that you listened.”

Most of these things are neither exciting nor extraordinary. In my estimation, most of these things aren't that hard to do. Not that I did them flawlessly, of course, or always cheerfully, but by God's grace, I tried to do them consistently. Even so, shouldn't I be remembered for more? Maybe we would like to be appreciated for more impressive accomplishments:

- “Thank you for that brilliant sermon series on Ephesians—I'll remember those messages for the rest of my life.”

- “It was your article on evangelism that inspired me to go to seminary and become a missionary.”

It is humbling, but it turns out that it's not always these kinds of works that have the greatest impact. It is often the other works, the more ordinary ones, that really endure. You could call it “the ministry of small things.” The pastor's insignificant acts of care and his relatively minor moments of service—these are what Christ loves to use to bless and to help his church.

- You open Scripture and read a short passage with someone in order to counsel them: It seems like a small thing, but it's not.
- You spend time with someone as they pour out their sorrows, mostly just listening and offering a few gentle words to encourage: It seems like a small thing, but it's not.
- You pray with someone, bringing tears and worries and confessions before the throne of God: It seems like a small thing, but it's not.
- You reach out to say hello to a lonely brother, to assure him that you're praying for him: It seems like a small thing, but it's not.

This is what has a great impact: the faithful ministering of Christ's love and Christ's Word to his people. And in fact it's how Scripture teaches us to think about the work in God's kingdom, where he has always been accomplishing a lot with very little. For instance, in his parable of the yeast, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like something as modest as

a dash of leaven. Yeast is practically invisible, and you don't see it working, yet it has a formidable impact as it slowly permeates the dough (Matt. 13:33). In the same way, God can use our little works, patiently and consistently done, to bring about something weighty and good for his glory.

Even Jesus didn't look like much (Isa. 53:2), and his gospel sounds foolish (1 Cor. 1:18), and most of his people aren't remarkable by worldly standards (1 Cor. 1:26). Yet God was pleased to change the course of world history through the person and work of his Son and through the words and deeds of his blood-bought church.

This biblical pattern can change our outlook on the work we do in the church. God calls us to faithfulness in whatever labors he has assigned, whether they are apparently significant or seemingly small. In fact, it is a person's diligence in the small things that indicates how he might be ready to take on something more; Jesus said, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much" (Luke 16:10).

Sometimes pastoral ministry is marked by profound joy and satisfaction, while other times the work seems to be nothing but stress, frustration, and sadness. You don't know what message to bring in this visit, the next step isn't at all clear, and you feel utterly inadequate for the task that God has placed on you. But instead of feeling the pressure to say it perfectly, or instead of trying to meet a person's deepest needs, be sure that God can definitely use something little here, employ someone weak.

You might only drop in for a half-hour visit, read a short passage, offer a halting prayer, but you can have confidence that God can use this. If it is the Word of Christ, shared with the love of Christ, something good can happen. This is what Eugene Peterson observed too: "The 'unimportant' parts of

ministry might be the most important. The things that we do when we don't think we are doing anything significant might make the most difference.”*

In ministry, our calling is to love God with our whole heart and to love other people sincerely and actively. So show up. Take the time to listen. Share God's truth. Keep going. Keep praying. It's a lot of little things, but these are what God has assigned us to do today. So be faithful “in a very little.” Doing ministry with all our heart, we show that it is the Lord Christ we are serving (Col. 3:23–24). It's an act of faith, believing that he can use our time and love and service for a purpose that is far bigger than us.

Don't be ashamed to have a ministry of small things.

Reflection: How have you seen God powerfully use the little things in your ministry?

* Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (1987; repr., Eerdmans, 1993), 161.