

7 LESSONS FROM LEAVING

7 encouragements for those still in a preaching / teaching ministry – blessings we may not fully appreciate until we leave

A lot changes when you stop being a church pastor, as I have recently discovered after thirty-three years (29 years at Dundonald Church in south-west London and 4 years before that as 'curate' at St. Mary's, Cheadle).

There are some issues in stepping away from a long-term pastoral role worth preparing for. For example, leaving a ministry is a significant change of identity not just for pastors, but also for our wives and children, especially if they still attend the church. And, of course, there are practical matters to consider, preferably with Elders & Trustees a decade before finishing (e.g. too many pastors/church workers sadly end their ministry without a home or facing severe financial pressure).

But I imagine most pastors and church workers reading this briefing will be hanging on for a summer break and could do with some encouragement. **So here are seven aspects of God's grace in being a local church pastor/church worker which we might not fully appreciate until we stop.**

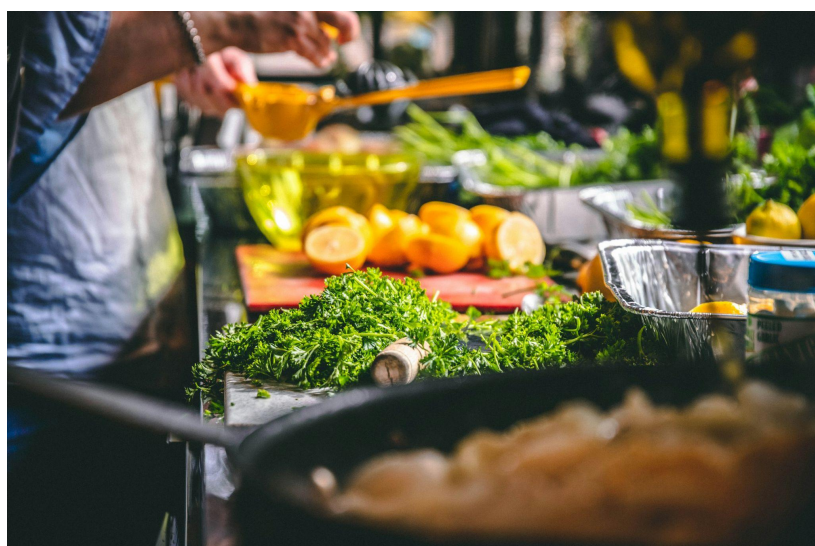
When you move house, as we have recently, there are some aspects of the old house we don't miss at all. In our case, we don't miss the flooding cellar or the cramped kitchen. But there are also other things we really do miss. Things we didn't fully appreciate when we were living there. Like the big garden and the dining room. It's a bit like that with the ministry more generally.

So here are seven reasons to come back after the summer with renewed strength from our loving heavenly Father – seven things about your ministry you'll miss when it's over, to give you a deeper sense of privilege and joy about the year ahead...

1. A regular preaching/teaching ministry is like cooking Sunday lunch for the family!

Until recently, every week for 33 years (except during holidays), I've prepared and preached Sunday sermons, mainly for the church family. I now realise my joy in regular Sunday preaching was a bit like my wife's pleasure in labouring over Sunday lunch for the family – a

way of loving them. As she prepared healthy, tasty meals for people she loves, the grind of peeling, chopping and stirring over a hot cooker rarely appreciated, and her roast chicken or lamb with all the trimmings gobbled up and quickly forgotten, she has derived a quiet satisfaction in gathering and feeding the family, by which they've grown up healthy and strong.



That's like preaching. I'm a useless cook, but regular preaching / Bible-teaching is like cooking Sunday lunch, a precious way of loving our church family. Indeed the moment I most enjoyed in every term was planning the preaching programme for the next term - like planning an exciting menu for the family (weighing up the options between, **'whatever was helpful for you'** and **'the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20)**). Whether we're preachers or children & youth workers, when we're serving God's children with his Word, especially if we do it over a long time, we'll experience the joy of watching the kids grow up healthy and strong in Christ. None of my sermons were Michelin Star. Most of them are long forgotten (though few of our infant church 'plant' have ever fully recovered from my exposition of Ezekiel in four tsunami sermons of 50 mins each!). And few will know of the struggle and stress so often involved (and yes - sometimes late nights and interrupted days off). But it's been incredibly rewarding watching God grow his family over the years on the spiritual meals which I and the other teaching staff have served them. For the Bible is **'the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified'** and the risen Christ employs his preachers to **'equip his people for works of service, so the body of Christ may be built up'** (Acts 20; Ephesians 4). God has done it! To him belongs any glory. But it's been a supreme joy to be useful to him in the saving and transforming work of God's Spirit through God's Word in God's children.

So perhaps as you try to relax on the campsite or in the cottage this summer, waiting for the rain to finally pass and the sun to emerge, and reflect on the last year, wondering if it's really worth carrying on in pastoral ministry with all the struggles it brings, may I encourage you to recognise the immense privilege of feeding God's children the Bread of Life each Sunday. We'll probably never know how many or how deeply God's people have been blessed and strengthened in Christ by our regular preaching / teaching. Perhaps we might resolve to renounce the self-pitying martyr complex which often builds up in us over time and stop to thank God for the joy of cooking up a storm for God's family each Sunday. And, comforted by those priceless dictums, *'There's always next week'*, *'The first fifty years are the hardest'* and *'better the living bread than a polished stone'*, resolve to **'Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction'** (2 Timothy 4) with a sense of quiet satisfaction and privilege which won't always be ours. Because we're feeding God's children healthy food. And one day, they and he will thank you for it. And one day you'll miss it as I do - a lot.

2. There's a special joy in teaching God's diverse church!

One of the most powerful testimonies to God's reconciling presence in churches is the diversity of the people in them (Ephesians 2-3). While some will lament their relative lack of ethnic diversity, most churches have members from a remarkable range of ages and backgrounds, like no other gatherings on earth. Recently, my wife and I were invited to the home of a South Korean family we know from church. The kids all gathered to share their news and then the parents served us the most incredible bulgogi (slices of marinated beef) with



kimchi (fermented cabbage) and a traditional wooden box with various columns of different kinds of fresh lettuce leaves. It was utterly delicious and a delightful evening. They're deeply grateful to God for our church, and sweetly thankful for my ordinary preaching over the years, because through our church they've been born again. Even doctors and teachers don't enjoy such gratitude. And it struck me, in what other line of work would people from such a different culture open their home to us like that? Again, as I walked the dog a few months ago, I was beeped by a passing car which slowed down so the smiling driver could call out to me. He was a young basketball-playing college student of mixed Jamaican and Aramaic ethnicity I know from our church. I've taught the Bible to his family over many years. I'm very fond of him and his whole family. And it seems he is fond of me and my family - because he's heard the Word of God from me. And it struck me again. In what other community would such a 'cool' young man with a huge afro slow down to greet a 'pale, male and stale' balding sixty-something like me walking his labrador? I'm sure we've all got stories like this - it's the familiar joy of pastoring a church. But do we take this for granted?

As I've got older in ministry, the privilege of being trusted and appreciated by people of all ages and backgrounds in a church family that has felt more and more precious. Of course, some pastors have abused that trust. And we're all prone to think it's because of something special about us. But the reason for such cross-cultural and cross-generational respect and affection is not my 'dad-dancing' at weddings. And it's not my dubious shout-outs in sermons to Taylor Swift and Stormzy. It's the privilege which comes from the respect and affection God's people have for God's Word and therefore for all who teach it faithfully. Especially if we've carried that responsibility for a long time. Many are the Children and Youth workers who will experience the joy later in life of being thanked by those they brought to Christ and taught faithfully as kids - if not here then certainly in heaven! And since Pastors have the privilege, often stressful at the time, of bringing the comfort or challenge of God's Word into the lives of his people at their most vulnerable - a couple who've just lost their infant son or a husband standing beside his dead wife, or in times of intense joy like baptising an ex-muslim or marrying an older couple, there are especially strong bonds of affection among God's people for faithful pastors. Pastors and Bible-teachers really are at the heart of their church family. So even if our teaching ministry feels difficult and wearying just now, may I encourage you to recognise the rare, special, lasting joy of sharing God's Word with his people of every age and background. We don't have to wait until we leave our ministry to enjoy and thank God for the privilege of teaching God's Word for God's people in all their diversity. Why not thank God for this privilege - because one day you'll miss it?

3. Jesus' approval is the only one which matters in eternity.

Some in teaching roles receive lots of praise and appreciation, during and at the end of their ministry. Some enjoy glowing reputations and public approval (though many of them will have suffered hidden costs, painful opposition and private **'thorns in the flesh'** (2 Cor.12) of which we are unaware). At the end of their ministries, some will receive generous thanks, perhaps a gift of money, a framed picture, garden furniture or a thanksgiving service with a film of appreciative anecdotes. Such appreciation fits with what the Apostle Paul wrote: **'the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially**



those whose work is preaching and teaching' (1 Tim.5). (Sadly sometimes congregations are seriously lacking in such kindness. I know of one pastor who after planting and leading a church for over a decade received just one solitary card.)

Of course it's important for us all to remember it was only ever by God's grace that we were able to be instruments of his grace in the lives of his people. And sometimes we may have to admit we haven't done a great job and the church will benefit from our departure - perhaps a fresh approach is sorely needed.

But then there are countless Bible-teachers who were outstanding servants of God and end their ministries not only uncelebrated but in great suffering - bombed in Nigeria, suffocated in Eritrea or tortured to death in North Korea. Reading the descriptions by Richard Wurmbrand in his memoirs (*Tortured for Christ*) of the horrific sufferings of so many Romanian church leaders in communist jails, reminds us how many brothers and sisters in teaching ministries like ours have and will end their ministries starving or beaten to death, not receiving garden furniture! Both during and at the end of our ministry, it's tempting to be overly concerned with what people think of our ministry. But Jesus' assessment of our ministry is the only one which really matters, because it's the only one which will shape our eternity beyond the grave!

While we're completely saved by Jesus dying for our sins and rising for our justification and not by our ministry, Jesus has promised to reward his faithful servants on the day of his judgement with eternal blessings. Clearly, his grace is so amazing he not only delights to save us, but also to reward us for service which his own Spirit has gifted and empowered us for.

Jesus teaches that there is *both* equality *and* meritocracy in these rewards - e.g. the Gospels record two versions of Jesus' parable about a departing king/master entrusting bags of gold, or minas, to his servants - each making slightly different points. In the first version (Matt. 25), the master entrusts *different* amounts to three servants. The servants are differently productive according to the gifts they've received. But the *reward* for the faithful servants is the same in each case, '**Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things. Come and share your master's happiness**'. This reminds us we're each entrusted with different gifts and opportunities and experience different outcomes in our ministries, but are all equally appreciated by Jesus. While we do care about ministry outcomes in people being saved and growing in Christ, and so want to learn wisdom from those who can help us be more effective in our ministry, this parable calls us to stop comparing ourselves competitively with each other. Only the Master can measure what we have done as the people he created us to be, with the gifts and opportunities he entrusted to us, in the circumstances he placed us. Many who may seem to have served well could have done so much more. Others who seem to have accomplished little will prove to have made a lot out of very little for Jesus. This parable reassures us if we're been faithful with what we've been given, investing ourselves and our resources in the work of his kingdom, whether or not anyone ever notices or praises us, we shall *equally* enjoy the extravagant joy of sharing in Jesus's happiness forever with those who seem more celebrated.

Unnervingly in this parable, the person who proves unfaithful, indeed not to be a Christian at all and thrown into hell, worked as a servant for the master! Everyone must have assumed his ministry was real and his reward inevitable. But his resentful unwillingness to invest himself in gospel work revealed an unregenerate man. He was a 'conservative' minister in the very worst sense of that word.

But in the later version of the parable (Luke 19), the servants are all given the same number of minas. Each generates different amounts of profit for the master. So each is rewarded differently! Even though the text says it was the minas (representing God's gospel) and not the servants who

generated the growth! Those who are faithful are both rewarded incredibly generously e.g. **‘Well done my good servant. Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities’**. But the one who is more productive receives more, which encourages us to try hard - to give ourselves zealously with sustainable sacrifice.

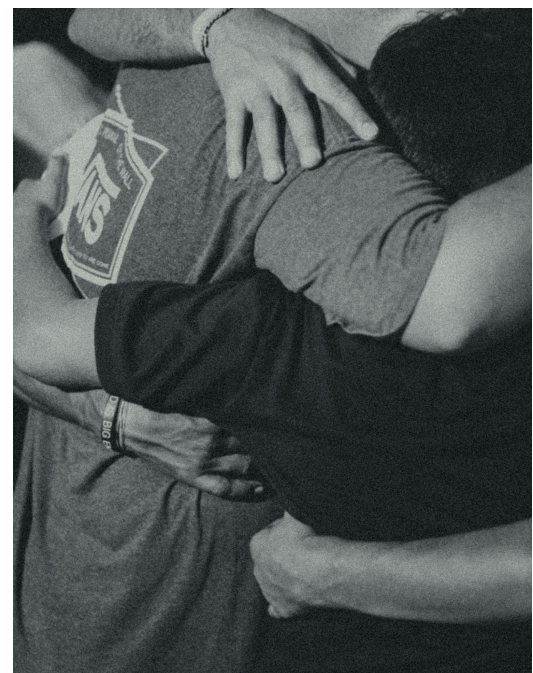
Jesus is clearly teaching that different levels of commitment to his kingdom will be rewarded differently. These parables encourage us to maximise our gospel effort, first for God’s glory and the salvation of the lost, but also for the everlasting reward of his approval and sharing in his happiness. To make the most of what the Lord has entrusted to us. Jesus’ praise for the two small coins contributed by the poor widow to the temple treasury cautions us against thinking we can assess how anyone else is serving. But we can all be sure that for all our mistakes and failings, all who’ve tried to serve him faithfully, however despised by godless families and worldly church members we may be, will one day be rewarded. We will personally see the loving and smiling face of our saviour and hear his precious commendation, **‘Well done, good and faithful servant’**. The precise words and tone of his commendation will surely echo in our minds and warm our hearts for eternity. **‘Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain’** (1 Corinthians 15). Don’t worry so much about what other people think - do your best for Jesus! He will see and commend you - and one day the opportunity to serve well will end. Do your best...for him!

4. The church family probably appreciate your teaching of God’s Word more than they currently tell you.

In Acts 20 we find Luke’s priceless example of the Apostle Paul’s **‘strengthening’** ministry among the churches he’s planted, training the Ephesian Elders. Having reminded the elders of the Ephesian church of his ministry - *teaching the gospel* (v.20-27), *guarding the church* (v.28-31) and *raising finance for his gospel ministry team* (v.32-35) - we read some unexpected words. **‘They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again’** (v.37)!

He’d only lived with them for less than three years and had just been away for months. These were hardly life-long friends or family. And the Ephesians had had to share his attention with other churches he’d planted in Asia Minor, including those in their own Lycus valley network. Indeed, this was the Apostle who famously taught all the Biblical doctrines we, and presumably they, find hardest - like predestination and male headship in church and marriage. He himself says he was relentlessly warning them against false teaching, **‘day and night with tears’**. He was hardly everyone’s favourite dinner guest!

Yet these men wept at the thought of never seeing him again! When we consider how often Paul’s ministry is condemned as heartless, even allowing for cultural differences, this reaction seems surprisingly emotional. It’s almost as if... they love him! People who caricature a healthy teaching ministry as overly cerebral and impersonal don’t know what they’re talking about!



Christians will always appreciate those who faithfully teach them God's Word, including the hard bits. Though in many emotionally reserved western cultures they may not tell you until you leave. But they will want to – either here or in heaven. Having just stepped back from 29 years as a Senior Pastor in South London, having made my fair share of mistakes, the church family filled up two books with hundreds of lovely messages. While there were expressions of thanks for long-forgotten welcomes and kindnesses, I was struck by how thankful people were just for my ordinary Bible-teaching ministry over the years. My point is simply that Christian people, young and old alike, are almost certainly more appreciative of your ordinary teaching ministry than they're telling you. Indeed, like Paul, you may be surprised to find people cry when you leave. Because though they may not tell you now, they love you for showing them Jesus.

5. Getting old is not so bad!

For those of us approaching fifty or beyond, the cultural music is pretty gloomy. However dedicated we are to the gym or 'The Human Being Diet', we will all feel the onset of old age. I'm having a half knee-replacement next week for my arthritic knee. On a weekly basis I need my daughter to help me with Bluetooth and my staff to help me with Google slides. And yes, I have been scammed. Once we get past 50, we can feel we're falling behind in terms of cultural credibility. Who cares what the old man (or woman) thinks!

But it's different in pastoral ministry. In Christian life and ministry, age brings priceless wisdom and experience. Job 12:12 says, **'With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding'**. Clearly such wisdom needs to know its own boundaries. An older pastor should probably defer to younger people when designing websites and door-to-door literature. I recall Tricia Neill, President of Alpha International, observing that old people love to come to things designed for younger people but not vice versa. But even if younger pastors are accessing the latest ministry thinking from a host of helpful podcasts, it sometimes needs the wisdom of older men and women in ministry to identify a danger or see a way forward. Often because they've seen it before.

I was showing an older pastor around our offices at church recently, and he pointedly asked me, **'But where is your study?'** He was warning me against letting business functionality replace careful study of God's Word. A wise pastor will be constantly investing in younger leaders, delegating, authorising, empowering and encouraging them. But we are also all growing in the wisdom that we will be able to share with young pastors/teachers one day. So don't despair at getting old! After all, if you think back over the joys and challenges of the last year and how much you've learned - imagine how much more wisdom you will have to share after another decade and then another!

Reheboam, King of Judah, is condemned in Scripture for his colossal mistake of ignoring the wisdom of the older men who'd served in the court of his father Solomon. **'Rejecting the advice given him by the elders, he followed the advice of the young men and said, 'My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier'** (1 Kings 12). It's striking, the older men were advising compassionate leniency while the younger men advised harsh discipline (I've seen this same pattern a lot). But wiser leaders will want to consult with older pastors from time to time. As Sir Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, **'Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it'**.



There are cultural issues here. Speaking in Nairobi recently, it was noticeable how respectful and interested younger pastors are to hear the thoughts of an older man or 'Mzee'. For, **'fools despise wisdom and instruction'** (Proverbs 1). I'm not sure if we're losing that respect in the UK? I get the impression the teenagers and twenties are more respectful of older leaders than for a long while - but the thirties and forties are not? Perhaps spiritual children find their parents more frustrating than the grandchildren (cf. 1 Timothy 5:1)?

This is in part why Reach Ministries has been established - to encourage pastors and their teams in godly and effective gospel ministries which reach the lost, with a team of experienced 'consultants'. Personally I'm absolutely loving mentoring and advising younger pastors up and down the country in all sizes and kinds of church. It's very rewarding. But we need more consultants. Do you know someone whose wisdom you greatly respect, who you want to commend to us?

More importantly, may I encourage you to offer yourself in future to encourage younger workers in ministry, with the wisdom God is giving you? **Aspire to become a ministry consultant yourself.** The great thing about wisdom which begins with 'the fear of the Lord', is informed by the biblical wisdom literature, is fulfilled in Christ 'in whom all the treasures of wisdom are to be found' and is proved in gospel ministry, is that it grows and improves as we get older!

Our usefulness to Jesus doesn't end when we step back from our church role. While Spurgeon was surely right to say, **'don't stoop from being a preacher to being a king'**, my point is there are many ways to continue 'preaching' the gospel and teaching God's Word without being a church pastor. Especially as a mentor to younger gospel workers.

So don't despair as your press-ups number drops and your running time decreases and your hair turns grey and falls out. Your wisdom is growing and increasing all the time. And you are becoming more valuable to younger workers with every passing day. Getting old is not so bad - you're becoming an 'Mzee'!

6. The church we briefly serve does not depend on us for its survival because Jesus owns it and will continue building it!

The church we serve was never ours. It was always Jesus' church - bought with his blood and built on his word - as a dwelling for his Spirit. We are simply immensely privileged to serve briefly as bricklayers in his magnificent building project.



When the Father revealed the gospel to Peter, who blurts out, **'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God'** Jesus famously responded, **'You are Peter** [lit. 'Petros'] **and on this rock** [lit. 'Petra'] **I will**

build my church and the gates of hades will not overcome it.' (Matt. 16). Jesus seems to rename Simon, **'Peter'**, in a different gender ['petros' (m)] to **'this rock'** ['petra' (f)], to distinguish between the Apostle Peter himself and the gospel which he has declared, on which he will build his assembly. He was probably also contrasting himself as the Messiah of grace on which God's church is now built, from the rock of the law given to Moses at Mt Sinai on which his old covenant assembly was built. In gathering his church in heaven, reflected in multiple local earthly congregations, upon his gospel teaching, Jesus is fulfilling his own parable in Matthew 7 about the wise man building his house on the rock. Every local church built on the gospel of Christ is a demonstration of his wisdom (Eph. 3).

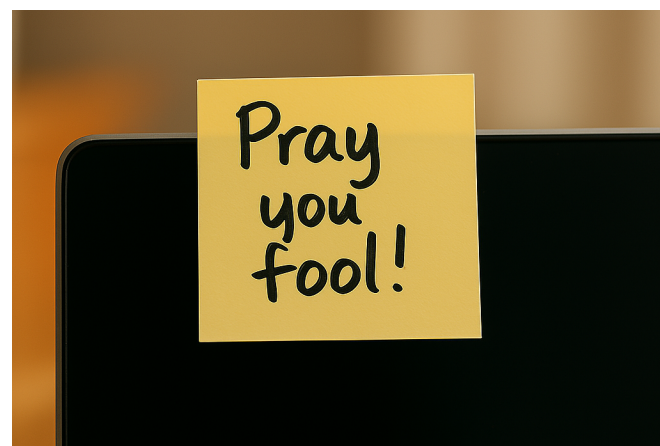
So when we ('pastors' and 'church leaders') step back, the church family will still be guided by the same leader and loved by the same pastor it always was: Jesus Christ who is always head of our church.

When we conclude a teaching ministry in a local church, and reflect upon all the **'edification'** (teaching) work we've been involved in, we'll become especially conscious as we walk away that the church we served was always his spiritual building project. He was always its owner, its architect, its builder and its holy occupant. We were blessed to briefly be employed as one of his bricklayers. It's a skilled trade. It's hard work. Alongside us, others have labored – like plasterers, electricians and decorators – different members of the church family contributing their ministries. And after us, the work will continue. A new generation of bricklayers and other workers will be employed to keep constructing this magnificent temple of Christ, **'a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit'** (Eph. 2) to the glory of God as new occupants of a house might extend the kitchen, go into the roof or dig out a cellar.

Laying bricks in Christ's house is an honourable role. But no-one should remember the bricklayers. While we worked on site, we may have felt important. Especially if we were there at the beginning. Our work mattered. But when we finish we realise, however busy and vital we felt for a season on site, the building work now goes on without us. Because the church was never ours. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, **'I planted the seed [of the gospel], Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are God's co-workers in God's service'**. (1 Cor. 3). So while we are brick-laying, carefully adding and positioning new bricks with our gospel ministry, let's rejoice in the privilege of being a bricklayer in the house of the Lord. But never think it's our house. This reduces our stress (we're not the saviour of the world – that role is already taken) and it melts our hubris and pride. As Count Zinzendorf wisely said, **'preach Christ...die...and be forgotten'**. Don't worry about leaving a 'legacy'. The church belongs to Jesus. We will quickly be forgotten – within a few years. But we can look back with pleasure at Jesus' church family we briefly served well. So when we finish, instead of feeling bereft, we can thank Jesus for the privilege and joy of briefly serving him in one of his magnificent home-building projects – his church. In fact, why wait til then – why not thank him now for the privilege of being a bricklayer!

7. God answers prayer – so pray!

One more reflection on a pastoral ministry – one more privilege – one more thing that looking back you certainly won't regret spending time on... prayer.



My godly father stuck a message to himself at the top of his laptop screen with a sharp reminder to pray.

After all, our ministry is **'the ministry of prayer and the word'** (Acts 6). Rico Tice jokes about John Stott's awesome ministry over thirty years at All Souls Langham Place in London, **'John had two unbreakable habits throughout his entire ministry; he rose at 5am each day to pray for an hour; and he always had a short nap after lunch; and in one of those disciplines I have studiously followed his example!'** John was a man of prayer. Again, I recall going to one of the early City to City conferences with Tim Keller at Redeemer church in New York. I was deeply unimpressed by the early meetings which lacked both prayer and ministry of the Word. I was becoming a bit cynical. Until Tim Keller was interviewed - in the course of which he was asked about his prayer life. Perhaps many of you already know his daily routine. I can't remember the details but it included an hour of personal prayer in the morning and a second hour of prayer after lunch (before he read 'the Greats' of theology). I was deeply humbled and thought to myself, here is a big clue to why God has so mightily blessed his ministry. My own disciplines have been much more modest. But may I commend the Lord's Prayer to your daily devotions? It's a work of divine genius - summarising our faith in the opening appeal, ensures we pray for God's concerns before our own in the first three petitions, and then perfectly articulates our needs for provision, pardon and protection in the second three petitions. We can pray it briefly or at length - and usually we end up praying more than we thought we would! After all it wasn't a suggestion but a command, 'Pray like this!' And may I testify to how often God answered our prayers as a church over the years to encourage you to do the same? After all, why would God bless a ministry if it is not in answer to prayer? People might think it was because of us instead of him! Or worse - we might think that! The only reason our churches and networks have grown is by God's grace in God's Spirit equipping God's people through God's Word for their ministries which grow the church. And so often he withheld what we needed until we prayed seriously to remind us where these resources come from. Why would God continue to bless us if the story we tell does not start with God answering our prayers.

So dear brothers and sisters, with love for you and your church, may I encourage you to restore your daily prayer discipline. Or as my dad would have put it,

PRAY YOU FOOL!

because God really does answer prayer and so the coming year can be an exciting time of watching God answer your prayers - to his glory alone!

Richard Coekin
Reach Ministries, July 2025

But what do you think? Do you agree with our writer? Why not share your own reflections and observations with our online chat-group for gospel ministers. If you are not already on the WhatsApp community, [get in touch](#) to request being added.