

Steve Harper

Unpack *Your Bags*

My first appointment after graduation from seminary was so small, the bishop apologized for sending Jeannie and me there. And yet, the years we served in that congregation turned out to be some of the happiest we have ever known. We had the privilege of serving a people who loved us and cared for us in the early years of our ministry. Some of them remain good friends nearly thirty years later.

As you read this article, half of the churches in The United States have less than a hundred adults in worship on Sunday. Two-thirds of the congregations of our United Methodist Church are like that. Christianity is a small-church religion. And yet, because of our Western propensities to believe that “bigger is better,” we often describe the faith in large-church concepts. In doing so, we create the false impression that “real ministry” begins when we get to a larger congregation.

Thankfully, there are pastors who feel called by God to serve small churches throughout their tenure of ministry. If you are such a person, I hope this article will encourage you, and help you catch a fresh vision for the tremendous value your service is to God. You are examples to the rest of us of faithful ministry, often given invisibly and without much institutional influence. I exhort you not to grow weary in well-doing, but rather to recognize your strategic place in the Kingdom of God.

But I am also writing for any and all of us who have fought the temptation to look upon the “early years” and the “little churches” as not much other than stepping stones on the way to larger (unfortunately translated “more significant”) appointments. I’m writing for those who will move along in the system, hoping we will not do so in ways that cause us to miss the wonders that are before us as we serve in smaller settings.

If you are serving in such a place now, I am writing to exhort you to fully invest yourself in the work.

As I drafted this article, I had to pray, “Lord, have mercy!” over my own tendencies to do this. What I want to say, to those of you who still have the time and the opportunity to live differently, is simply “unpack your bags.”

Learn the sacred art of being fully present among those you serve, as if they were the best and only congregation you will ever have. The question is, “how can we do that?” How can we respond to the Holy Spirit in ways that give us peace in our present circumstances and satisfaction in a job well done, regardless of size? How can we break the grip upon our souls to put advancement over investment? I can only share some of the things that have come to me along the way as I have struggled to break free myself.

First, *learn to love the local*. Eugene Peterson has repeatedly stated that the best thing we can say is, “I am a

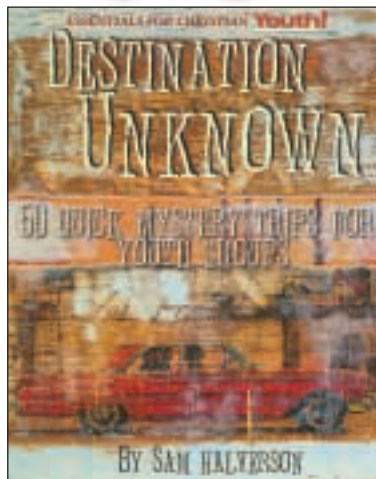
local pastor.” The adjective roots the noun in the context of a particular people. Years ago, I happened upon Charlie Shedd’s little book, *Time for All Things*. It was a Godsend for many reasons, but one thing applies directly to this article. Charlie wrote that we must get to the place where we can say, “I have been brought to this place, at this time, for this work.” Exhortations like this call us to become near-sighted—not so that we lose the Wesleyan sense that the world is our parish—but to the extent that we can see (really see) that “the world” is before us in our parish. We do not have to go anywhere else to be in ministry for God. We need to unpack our bags in the specific place that God is giving us to serve.

Second, we need to see *the holy value of ‘one.’* The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, gave me that phrase in his book, *The Christian Priest Today*. He enriches it with a beautiful exposition of how Jesus placed immense and ultimate value on the one man, the one woman, and the one child. Having served small churches during my years of pastoral ministry, I know for sure that even the smallest congregation has people who get sick and die, people who struggle with all sorts of problems, people whose marriages are failing, people whose children have broken their hearts, people who are losing their jobs, people who are

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lonely, and on and on. The challenges of even the tiniest congregation plunge us into ministry that is “over our heads” except for the grace of God. We need to unpack our bags and lay them at the feet of the one person who needs our prayerful attention.

Third, we need to learn the *sacredness of the present moment*. Theologically, I began to wrestle with this as I contemplated the implications of the divine name “I AM” as an expression of God’s nature and compassion for oppressed people. I contrasted it with my tendencies to be an “I used to be” or “I will be” kind of clergy person. Along the way, I

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came in contact with resources like Jean Pierre de Caussade’s *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* and Brother Lawrence’s *The Practice of the Presence of God*. I noticed John Wesley’s discipline to monitor his present circumstances to see how they were avenues of opportunity to live for God. Through it all I have come to see that God wants me to be an “I am” servant—one who is fully alive to the present as a sacred moment to minister in Jesus’ name. We need to unpack our bags and invest ourselves in what is happening right before our eyes. The paradox of ministry is that it happens most fully in the ordinary moments of each day.

Fourth, we need to learn *the uncertainty of the future*. We live in a death denying culture in ways that surprise even our contemporaries in other countries. While I am certainly not writing to commend any sort of morbidity, I have decided to end this article with a call to remember that the future is not guaranteed to any of us. I am sobered when I remember those in my own seminary class who are in heaven today—to say nothing of the clergy who were ordained at roughly the same time I was. But take death out of the picture

altogether and there is still a great degree of uncertainty as to how our lives will unfold. We cannot presume, predict, or control. Therefore, we must find our satisfaction where we are. Henri Nouwen wrote that two deadly words in the spiritual life are “there” and “later.” Instead, he challenged us to live “here” and “now.” His own untimely death is an illustration of the importance of that teaching.

Years ago, I was conducting a pastors’ conference in the Midwest. I had the opportunity to ask a district superintendent, “What is the number one problem you face with your clergy?” Honestly, I expected him to say, “There’s no way I can pin it down to one thing; the pastors of my district struggle with many things.” But that is not what he said. Rather, he responded, “The number one problem I have with my pastors is that they are always serving their *next* appointment.” He meant that too many were serving where they were with their eye too fixed upon where they might go later, especially if they “got noticed.”

To all who face this temptation, and we are many—I write as a fellow struggler on the path and say, “unpack your bags.” Stop believing that the gold is in “them thar hills” and see the Kingdom treasures which God has deposited right where you are. This gets easier to do as the years go by and God stores in our hearts the “precious memories” of those we have been privileged to know along the way. Their names, faces, voices, and circumstances become God’s way of telling us how fortunate we have been to be in each place—even the hard ones—and how blessed we have been to know every single person. But that can only happen when we unpack our bags, pull up a chair, and plan to stay awhile as servants of the One who did not make “rank” or “advancement” the measure of his ministry. May God help us to go and do likewise. □



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