

JERRY B. CARR

Dreaded

APPOINTMENTS

Sooner or later, most clergy will second-guess a projected appointment, either their own or that of a colleague. We protest, “The cabinet should know my aptitude for that certain place, so why am I not being sent there rather than someone else?” “I’ve heard all sorts of tales about where I’m to go, and it will only lead to failure.”

The first time this happened to me was early in the process, while I was still in college. I was serving a loving congregation of sixty-two members, but they had no parsonage, and my fiancée and I were planning to be married in June.

The son of one of the parishioners lived in a town about sixty miles from campus, and their church needed a youth director. They would provide a furnished house and an attractive salary. Before even understanding our Methodist system, I was sitting with their committee and agreeing to being “called” to their staff, and taking little thought of the sixty-mile distance to campus.

We thought it was set, but on our wedding day, which was also the closing day of annual conference, the bishop read my name as pastor of a four-church charge with a parsonage just eleven miles from school. The idea was preposterous—a twenty-year-old newlywed with one year’s experience to serve as pastor of four churches? And carry a full course load as a college senior on top of that? Ridiculous!

It really wasn’t so ridiculous. The preaching schedule required the creation of only two new sermons each month, which was better for a busy student than the two sermons per week, as it had been the year before. Preaching the sermon in all four

churches afforded an opportunity to learn how to adapt the message to each congregation.

The preaching rotation included four Sundays per month, and the pastor got fifth Sundays off, because no church wanted another to receive more from the “preacher” than the rest. It was best to take a trip, get out of town, go see Mama, because even to worship with one church and not the others would be a show of partiality.

There were interesting similarities and some diversity among the churches. One had practically no male leadership, so their budget was raised by the women holding a bazaar and an annual Thanksgiving Dinner. Two were dominated by their long-standing Sunday school superintendents, one of whom was a bully, and the other a beneficent grandfather.

However, it was a good year, and some

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important lessons were learned. First, if God calls us to ministry, God calls us to prepare for ministry. The district superintendent explained that finishing college and going to seminary would be my priority for the next several years. The second lesson concerned family. He said that the long drive to and from school, had we been sixty miles away, would have taken the place of my time studying and being a husband. This gave us the resolve to move to the city of our chosen seminary after that year and to seek employment there, and the third lesson was

that people there needed and would partner in ministry also!

When I came to have administrative responsibilities years later, reflection on these experiences contributed toward an effort to assign ministers to serve only two, and never more than three, churches at one time, thus allowing every church to have a morning worship service with preaching every Sunday.

The decision of the cabinet to override my plan and send me to the four-point charge was right—better for the connection, I think, and much better for me.

I was never appointed to a charge where I absolutely did not want to go. There were such places, so I thought, but I was never sent to one. I did have some anxiety a few times. One of those came just twenty months after my seminary graduation when I was assigned to a newly developing subdivi-

vision to organize a new congregation. The District Church Extension Society had purchased a small lot (two and a half acres) and made a down payment on a parsonage. A survey of interest had been conducted, and permission

was granted by the county school board for use of a not-yet-fully-filled elementary school. But we had no members, no buildings, no organized structure, no committees, no choir. Did I have the necessary skills? Wouldn’t a more experienced pastor do better?

No matter the questions, it was time to get going, to knock on doors, phone and write to all interested parties, and to stay at it about sixteen hours a day. We did have some help. Several churches emptied their attics of usable baby beds and chairs of all

sizes, and the district office bought a new duplicating machine and gave us its old one.

The appointment lasted seven years and four months, but the love affair continues still. We received 1,280 members for a net membership of 840. I knew every person who joined, had visited in their home, knew where they worked, and knew every child by name. Only this ground zero approach could afford such opportunity. I was never able to know every member and family

member in any other appointment. This can be taken as an argument for longer pastorates and for a membership growth mindset and work ethic.

The other most anxious time about my appointment was when I followed a very able pastor who had cancer and died in the prime of his ministry. I was in my fourth year as a superintendent, the work was going well, and I wasn't thinking of moving. Why me? Why now?

More to the point, my wife was having real problems with the idea. She had waited until our children were established in school before accepting a teaching position, and on our last two moves she had given up her job and waited for a position to open in the new place. Now she was in the best situation she had ever had, and once again she was having to sacrifice, to give up her work. But, she has always believed in effective ministry, and she has always supported me in fulfilling a promise to itinerate. So we went, but with anxiety.

Preparing for the move, I recalled a pastors' meeting one September day several years earlier. The D.S. asked a pastor who had followed a very popular minister in a June move how he had been getting on during the summer in his new appointment. He answered, "Just as soon as I get that life-sized image of my predecessor down from the altar I'll be all right." He spoke in jest, because the two were very good friends. The fact is, he praised his predecessor and reminded the church that they were fortunate to have had his leadership. I took the cue. I could sincerely feel the church's grief and loss and said so, because the death of their minister was a terrible loss. We bonded, and we worked together for seven years.

I could not be my predecessor, nor did I need to be. I needed to be only myself. My friend, "Mr. Jones," followed the popular "Mr. Smith." The very first week, a layperson asked, "Are we going to have the pastor's breakfast?" My friend said, "What's that?" "Well," said the layperson, "Brother Smith always cooked breakfast for the men of the church on first Sundays." Without any hint of apology, Jones said, "Well, I'll call Brother Smith, and if he wants to come back and do that, it's okay with me."

Dreaded appointments can be like Job's lament, "Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me." (Job 3:25 NRSV) Or, by God's grace, they can be blessings. Attitude makes the difference. □

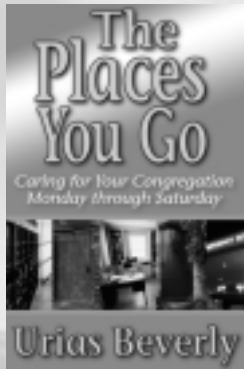


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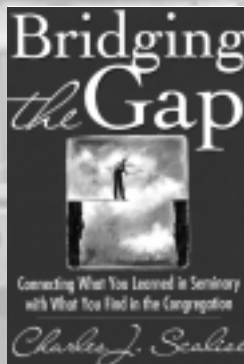
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