

WHEN THE HONEYMOON IS OVER

THE LAY PASTORS MINISTRY AND MARRIAGE HAVE AN EXCITING PHENOMENON IN COMMON, A HONEYMOON. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE HONEYMOON IS OVER?

The start-up of marriage is often idealistic, euphoric and unrealistic. The bride and groom have expectations that no human relationship can fulfill.

The discovery that one's partner is not perfect is painful. The reality of keeping houses, washing clothes and paying the bills hits hard. Undulating moods, not feeling well, heretofore unknown temperaments and habits are shockers. Disillusionment can settle in like a chilling fog at the end of a beautiful day.

At this point, many marriages break up. For such couples, what appeared to be love proved to be an illusion: a transient infatuation, romantic passion and physical attraction. Disillusion destroys the fragile relationship. Such marriages lack underlying substance.

At this point, however, instead of divorcing, other marriages mature. Waking up from the dream, the husband and wife can now see the real person across the table. And they begin to see themselves as they never saw themselves before. Without losing the romance, passion and physical attraction their marriage matures into an ever-deepening relationship, companionship and endearment. They adjust to their differences and pool their strengths while growing old together. It is evident that their marriage is blessed with underlying substance.

Most Lay Pastors experience three stages in their ministry. Let's name them: (1) *honeymoon* (illusion), (2) *no-moon* (disillusion), and (3) *full moon* (reality).

HONEYMOON (illusion)

This is the start-up phase of the Lay Pastors ministry. After they are equipped

and commissioned. Lay Pastors start "tending" their assigned number of church members. They begin their ministry wearing rose-colored glasses. Because they are inexperienced. Lay Pastors tend to idealize their caring role: *Praying* for their people faithfully, being *Available* to them, *Contacting* them regularly, and being an *Example* (PACE).

They start with a fresh burst of passion and energy, and enthusiastic thrust of commitment, and an adolescent-like mix of awe and fear. They have high hopes of an endless succession of fulfillment and usefulness. They expect to make a difference in people's lives. They fantasize what being "love with skin on" means.

They anticipate what the seminar lead assured them, personal fulfillment and a sense of significance. They believe what they were taught, that they are servants of God and authentic pastors of their people. But they haven't yet experienced the demands of serving, caring, and the inevitable disappointments.

Happy are the Lay Pastors whose honeymoon exuberance is blessed with an underlying substance such as the following:

1. A sense of being "on assignment" sent by the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ;
2. A compelling desire to serve the God they love;
3. A passion to obey Jesus' command to "take care of my sheep;"
4. A commitment to use their special Spirit-given gifts in serving others;
5. An eagerness to faithfully work in tandem with their leaders in one of the basic ministries of their church.

NO MOON (disillusion)

Sooner or later the moon goes under the clouds; the honeymoon is over. Lay Pastors suffer ministry shock similar to the culture shock felt by people visiting another country.

They discovered that the task is neither as easy as they imagined nor as exciting. It becomes clear that getting personally involved with people and

being there for them has a price tag. The delightful air of fulfillment, significance and usefulness is diluted by the acrid fumes of frustration and disappointment. Discovering that caring about people requires a personal and emotional investment as well as time and energy is not easy to deal with.

Some of the people assigned to them have problems which break their hearts. Some lives are hopeless life situations which depress a person who truly cares. There are church members who receive them with open arms, but the joy of this is soon neutralized by others' arms that are closed. The pseudo politeness of one of two people thinly masks what eventually proves to be covert resistance.

There are details which were not fully understood: reports, meetings, ongoing equipping and other expectations. And there is the matter of accountability. You were not aware of the ongoing nature of pastoral care and its ever-escalating demands.

It's at this point that some Lay Pastors quit. Removing the rose-colored glasses reveal either a weak underlying substance or the lack of it. Those who quit are like John Mark who deserted Paul and Barnabas when the going got tough (Acts 15:36-38). Or they are like Demas who deserted the Apostle Paul because "he loved this world" (II Tim. 4:10).

Having said this, I must hurry to add that there *are* legitimate reasons for quitting the ministry: (1) Discovering that he or she does not have the gifts necessary for this ministry, thereby freeing one's self to explore other ministries; (2) Believing that God is leading them to use their pastoral gifts in a different ministry; (3) Over-commitment, too much on one's plate, and it will take some time to divest himself or herself of some of it; and (4) Other reasons unique to the person, sometimes known only to God.

FULL MOON (reality)

To borrow from a mountain-climbing scene, there are *quitters*, *campers* and *climbers*. Some who get a realistic dose of the hardship *quit*. Others endure the hardship, climb a distance, look around and are satisfied with this height so they *camp*. Others glance at the top and keep *climbing*.

Most Lay Pastors keep "climbing" when the honeymoon is over. They climb right through the *no-moon* stage to the *full-moon* stage. Quitters perceive climbers to be people with no problems, doubts and disappointments. But climbers are people who go *through* the problems, are willing to deal with them and not run from them. Without losing the start-up passion, commitment and adolescent mix of awe and fear (which should always be with them), they press on to reach the height of mature ministry.

Instead of quitting as Damas and John Mark did, they follow on the heels of Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (II Tim. 4:7). And, as Jesus told his Father, climbers will be able to tell the same Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

There are three primary marks of a mature, "full-moon" ministry: know what your ministry is, know your people, and knowing who you are.

FIRST, YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR MINISTRY IS

On the one hand your ministry is neither honeymoon nor no-moon, neither illusion nor disillusion. For example, instead of fantasizing unrealistically about P A C E-ing your people, you are prepared to accept whatever their response gives you, joy or grief.

On the other hand it is *both* honeymoon and no-moon, a *mix* of illusion and disillusion. Your start-up passion and expectations steadily bless you are plagued with disappointments and frustrations. There will always be some of the euphoric because some of the euphoric is real (relationships deepen, you are making a difference in people's lives, and some people are visibly blessed by your care). There will always be some of the disappointment because disappointment is real (some people resist, you are not making a visible difference in some lives.)

Your glasses are no longer rose-colored. The ministry is still awesome, euphoric and indescribable, but it is more than that. It is work! To love others as though your life depends on it requires personal involvement with your

people and an exchange of selves regardless of their response. Caring is effective only to the extent you give yourself to your people freely, not counting the price you have to pay. Ego injury, emotional up's and down's, accountability, reports and meetings all go with the territory.

Now, looking through *clear* glasses, you see that it is a ministry with a cross. This doesn't deter you because you know that Jesus also had a ministry with a cross. He found great joy in enduring the cross (Heb. 12:2). You are surprised to discover that just as there is no ministry without a *cross*, there is no ministry without a *crown* (I Pet. 5:4). This all part of your underlying substance which keeps you climbing.

SECOND, YOU KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

They are a cross section of the membership of your church. Some are Christ-centered; some are self-centered. Some are spiritually mature; some are babes in Christ; some are spiritual; some are worldly. Some are active; some are inactive. Some are open to pastoral care; some are not. Some have overwhelming needs; others seem trouble free. Some are happy about their church; some are disgruntled. Some have an adequate support system; some do not.

Regardless of their state, they need you: your *Praying*, your *Availability*, your *Contacts*, and your *Example*. They are all included in the assignment from the Chief Shepherd, "Be shepherds of God's flock," because they are all members of your church, people who confess Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Saviour.

THIRD, YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE

You Know You are Committed. And your commitment is often tested. You are subject to disillusionment, the no-moon stage of ministry. You savor, doubt, fear and chafe under the burden. At times you are tempted to quit and at other times you are tempted to do only the minimum, just enough to satisfy your conscience. You don't like this side of you. But you are saved from

making the unwise choice to quit by drawing renewed commitment and energy from the underlying substance. Your wavering is real, but so is your compelling desire to serve your Lord. To be mature in ministry is to "endure hardship like a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (II Tim. 2:3).

You Know You Are Competent. Along with the Apostle Paul, however, you know that the source of your competence is outside of yourself: "Not that we are competent in ourselves...but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers" (II Cor. 3:5-6). You are learning all the skills, techniques and principles you can but as best they are only useful tools. You want to do all you can possibly do and you want to do it the very best you are capable of doing, but unless God uses what you do to make a difference in someone's life, your doing is noble but unproductive. One person who is only half trained and marginally gifted, but filled with the Spirit of God, will be far more competent than the one who is fully trained and maximally gifted, but not filled with the Spirit of God. God uses what you can do to accomplish what you never could have done. To be mature in ministry is to know that your competence comes, not from your self, but from God.

You Know You Are A Climber. You are not a quitter, not even a camper, but you keep pressing for the summit. At times most people's enthusiasm fades, vision dims, convictions waver and commitment weakens. In reading the counsel Paul gave to Timothy, we can assume that this young pastor also had those times: "I remind you to *fan* into flame the gift of God which is in you.....;" "You then, my son, *be* strong...;" "But as for you, *continue* in the things you have learned;" "*discharge* all the duties of your ministry." The words *fan*, *be*, *continue* and *discharge* are "climbing" words. To be mature in ministry is to resist being either a quitter or camper and to be daily renewed for the climb.

You Know the Substance Underlying Your Ministry. You know that it is your personal relationship with Jesus Christ, your sense of being "on assignment," your compelling desire to serve God, your passion to obey Jesus' command to "take care of my sheep," your commitment to use your Spirit-given gifts in

serving others, and your eagerness to faithfully work in tandem with your leaders in one of the basic ministries of your church that constitute the substance underlying your ministry. You are nurtured, nourished, corrected, emboldened and empowered by it. Knowing the value of this substance, you intentionally seek to expand it, enrich it and draw from it. To be mature in ministry is to be daily renewed by this Holy-Spirit-generated underlying substance.

And so, what happens when the honeymoon is over? Rather than quit, you accept the heartbreaks along with the euphoric. You are ever maturing in ministry because the hardships are teaching you new things about yourself, your people and your ministry. You are drawing from the love-giving energy of the substance underlying your ministry.