

recognizing that this is not home, but the place where God has sent me - and my congregation (even those born here). In doing it, finding God's presence and blessing flooding my life - and that of my congregation - in unexpected and unimagined ways.

Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness

Paul Beasley-Murray

The Four Seasons of Ministry looks at the life of a minister in terms of four seasons:²⁵³

- Spring (Discernment and Nurture) - the period when a minister responds to the call of God on his life;
- Summer (Adventure and Integrity) - the period when a minister begins ministry in his first church;
- Autumn (Endurance and Transformation) - the period when a minister is in 'mid-career' in ministry;
- Winter (Vision and Letting Go) - the period when a minister is coming toward the end of their ministry, and is in the process of looking forward to retirement;

What challenged me most about this book was not its approach to the seasons of ministry, but the thought of ministry as a period of *Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness*. This sub-title is taken from Phil 1.6, 9-11: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Pastors are called to keep on growing and developing in our walk with Jesus. We are to grow in love, as we constantly seek the good of those in our charge; we are to grow in discernment, as we seek to nurture and to guide those in our care; and above all we are to

²⁵³ Bruce & Katherine Epperley, *Four Seasons of Ministry: Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness* (Alban, Herndon, Virginia 2008).

grow in grace, exhibiting the kind of righteousness found in Christ, who emptied himself and became the servant of all.

But Paul wasn't writing to pastors, but to a church. He wanted the members of the church at Philippi to grow in love, discernment and grace. Since I had a commitment to speak to a church retirement group, I decided to apply some of the insights to them. I spoke about the need we all face to 'gather a harvest of righteousness'. It is an enormous challenge. Yet, as I reflected on Paul's words, I realised that it is not just a matter of us, by our own effort, producing fruit. It is about allowing God to do his work of grace in our hearts and lives: "I am sure that God who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1.6: see also 2.13: "God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose"). God it is who brings about the harvest. Or in the words of the authors: "God's transforming presence is most often subtle, gradual, and hidden, like the gentle growth of the mustard seed, until it bursts forth in moments of insight and clarity. Like all experiences of grace, one's call to ministry is lifelong and embraces silent preparation as well as intentional cultivation. God calls pastors to grow in ministry in every moment and season of life".

Towards the end of the book, three spiritual practices are recommended for those about to retire from pastoral ministry. In speaking to my retirement group, I encouraged them to engage in each of these exercises.

1. Writing a spiritual obituary

The Epperleys write: "While most published obituaries simply state the facts of a person's life in a dry fashion, a spiritual obituary enables the writer to look back upon her or his life and to look ahead toward the future in a way that enables the writer to see the interplay of the many values that shaped her and his life... The following questions can help you think about God's movements in the course of your professional and personal journey:

- What values have motivated your life?
- What is your image of God and how has it shaped your spiritual journey?
- What was your most heroic moment?
- What do you most want to celebrate in your life?

- [What do you most want to celebrate in your ministry?]
- Whom have you loved in the course of our life?
- What are your favourite hobbies and pastimes?
- What key phrases, scriptures, or aphorisms sum up your life?
- What do you plan to do in the remaining years of your life?
- What values or counsel do you leave to the next generation?
- What causes have you devoted to your life?

I encouraged my retirement group to likewise look back on their lives and see where God had been at work. “God, who began this good work in you, will carry it on until it is finished on the Day of Christ Jesus”. “Many of you,” I said, “have been followers of the Lord Jesus for many years. In that time you have sought to serve him. But has it occurred to you that in that time he has also been doing his work in your life? Look back, and reflect not on what you have achieved in your life, but rather on what God has achieved in your life!”

2. Expressing gratitude

The Epperleys write: “Thanksgiving is the cornerstone of a well-lived life. We can move ahead to an unknown future with confidence precisely because we have experienced moments of grace and gratitude in the course of our lives. As you look back over your life’s journey, for what relationships and events are you most thankful? In your current life, what are the grace notes and joys for which you are thankful? For what persons in your life do you feel most grateful? For what opportunities are you most thankful? For what ‘failures’ are you most thankful? Take a moment to write a prayer that expresses your gratitude [to God] for all life’s gifts..... Gratitude is experienced not only in our relationship with God, but in our willingness to thank all those who have mediated God’s presence to us in the course of our lives. Take time to write a letter or e-mail expressing your gratitude to those who have been pivotal in your life, if they are still alive. You may still write a note to a mentor or friend who is no longer living. If he or she has a spouse, partner, or child still living, you might send a note of remembrance and gratitude to that person.”

I encouraged my retirement group to do the same and look back with gratitude, becoming aware of the many ways in which God has blessed us. I challenged them to express their gratitude in writing - both to God and to those whom God had sent to help them.

3. Expressing forgiveness

The Epperleys wrote: “As you reflect appreciatively on the highest and best moments of your life, you are also invited to remember - and experience - moments of pain and disappointment. In the course of a ministerial adventure, at one time or another, most pastors have felt misunderstood, attacked, neglected, treated unjustly, or professionally abused.... While some wounds are so painful that they require the companionship of a counsellor or spiritual guide, we suggest the following imaginative prayer as a way of placing your wounds in God’s care. In the quiet of God’s companionship... take a moment to remember a painful moment - experience the event and your response to it. How did you feel? In what ways were you hurt? How has that pain shaped your ministry? Is it still a burden?...As you remember that event, imagine that Jesus is with you.... Visualize yourself sharing your feelings about the event and pain with Jesus... Now take a moment to place your burden in the hands of Jesus... Like the man Jesus encountered at the pool of Siloam, how do you respond to Jesus’ question, ‘Do you want to be healed’ of the burdens of the past? (John 9.1-7)”

I added: “It’s not just ministers who need to forgive - if we are end our days well, then all of us need to forgive. All of us, when we look back, can identify occasions when we have been hurt - indeed, when we have been injured by others. What’s more, some of these hurts and injuries have been experienced at the hands of Christian people. If God is to produce a harvest of righteousness in our lives, then we have to let go of these hurts”.

Interestingly the exercise which most challenged my retirement group was the final exercise - that of forgiveness.

A Late Harvest: Insights from Psalm 71

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When I left pastoral ministry in 1988, I began applying for jobs. As I scanned the adverts, I noticed that many of them were looking for company directors in their 20’s. At 37, I was well over the hill