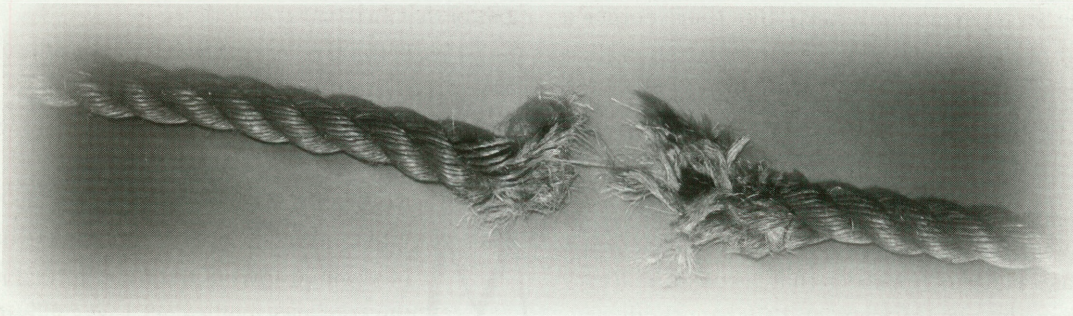


Discussed: company policy, integrity, shallowness, evangelism goals, congregations, clubs, innovation, loneliness, hope, irony



## Becoming Useless

*By Ryan Bell*

**I**t doesn't take long to learn how to be a successful pastor. Every pastor knows there are certain activities and accomplishments that get rewarded. These things include, among many others, conducting public evangelistic campaigns, keeping the church growing, avoiding major congregational fights, submitting all your forms on time, promoting conference programs, and not asking for too many favors.

Normally a wise mentor will clue a new pastor into these things. At least that's how it happened for me. As I was preparing to leave seminary after completing my master's of divinity degree, I spoke to one of my favorite professors. We talked about reentry and what it takes to succeed in Adventist ministry. His advice: "You have to think of your ministry as having two jobs. Your main job, for which you get paid, is to be the pastor of your church. Then you can

pursue the things that you really want to do in ministry on the side."

The not-so-subtle implication in his advice is that being the pastor of my church is a very prescribed undertaking. The expectations are clear and the path of ministry is marked out in advance. I am called there to implement "company policy." Then, in my spare time, I can pursue my calling. A smarter pastor would have realized that he could just implement the conference model of pastoral ministry and spend the rest of



his time relaxing at home with his family. But I was too driven, and perhaps too naive, to understand that.

For a while you can keep both worlds going, and in doing so be everyone's hero. But there comes a moment of decision, a crossroad where you realize that integrity means leaving some things out. The beginning of the end of my usefulness was when I realized that ministry isn't just a matter of techniques and methods, and I began learning to think theologically about the practice of ministry.

Once a pastor starts insisting that Jesus' ministry must be done in the way of Jesus and that methods are not atheological he has some hard decisions to make. Will I continue to be useful in the ways I've described or will I continue down the "rabbit hole" into deeper reflection upon and understanding of ministry?

Deeper reflection about the practice of ministry also leads to deeper reflection about theology itself. If I must think theologically about the practice of ministry, perhaps what ails the Church is not merely antiquated methods but wrongheaded theology. For example, it began to seep into my heart that the Church exists for more than simply brokering individual people's relationship with God or producing religious goods and services to be consumed by the discerning religious consumer.

The more I began to understand that the gospel is Jesus' teaching about life in God's Kingdom the more difficult it has become to talk about "accepting Jesus as my personal Savior" (indeed, I'm not sure anymore what this expression means). The more I understood the relationality of the Trinity, the more uneasy I began to feel about relationally bankrupt forms of church and methods of evangelism.

Gradually, the shallowness of my ministry began to settle upon me. As I started looking for others who felt as I did, a new world opened up to me—a world of people from myriad Christian traditions who believed the church should be more, that it should be a community of saints sharing their lives together, living in a way that contrasts with the way of the world but always for the sake of the world.

The deeper I go, the more uncomfortable I become about the duplicity of my ministry. I wonder, mostly to myself, "Is everything incompatible? How can I survive this metamorphosis I'm experiencing?" Then came the other questions from deep within me—perhaps I'm going

down the wrong road. Are these new convictions compatible with Adventism? Some of them, I found, have deep roots in Adventism but have been covered over with decades of American cultural values that now rival the most basic Christian convictions.

So it seems the more I delve into the mysteries of Christ, the gospel, and the church the more useless I become to the system that gave my ministry its start.

My first moments of clarity about this occurred to me in preparation for my annual review at the conference office. As I was filling out annual reports about my ministry achievements and goals for the coming year (always in the preset categories of administration, evangelism, pastoral care, and the like), it occurred to me that I am living in a different world with a different vocabulary.

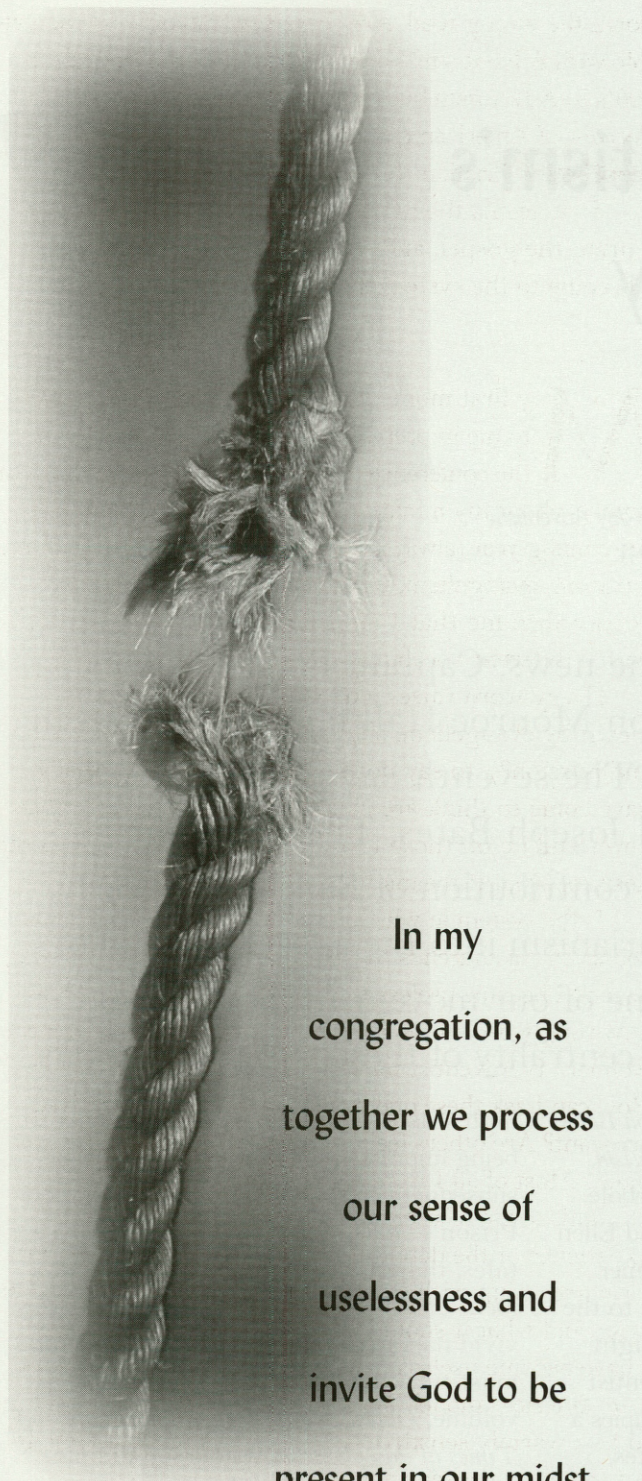
Every word raises a dozen questions (what is meant by evangelism, soul winning, leadership, vision, and mission?), to say nothing of all the issues that I have come to think are central to being a church that never end up on those forms. These concerns go to the heart of what it means to be the church.

If the system in which I find myself has convictions about what a church is that are so different from my own, haven't I become useless to that system? It seems I have unwittingly become an iconoclast to those who lead me. I wonder, "Is Adventist ministry something one outgrows?" How can I ask these questions without being perceived arrogant? Are others feeling this way or am I losing my mind? Most of all I wonder, "What do I do now?"

This sense of uselessness is not restricted to my experience of the denominational system. My members have grown up with expectations about what the church is for and what it should do. For some of my members, I have become useless. Some expect me to fit a "corporate America" model of a strong CEO. Others expect me to be a warmly sensitive chaplain. Others expect me to conveniently package and deliver God to them.

Finally, I have become useless to myself. After working for ten years to succeed in all the ways pastors hope to succeed (the proverbial "butts and bucks"), I find that my evolution has sabotaged any hope I had of being useful in all the usual ways. Although there are still some signs of those outward successes, I am seeking a life in ministry that ends up not feeding my ego the way I'm used to. Which leads me inexorably to the conclusion that I have become useless.





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With uselessness comes loneliness. Those who identify most with my struggle are outside the Adventist network. Even my closest friends in ministry struggle at times to understand what I'm talking about.

Where is hope to be found? Perhaps it seems too simple, but I want to suggest that the gospel holds out the greatest hope. Life comes from death, spring follows winter, God continually shows up in the most godforsaken places. The church appears to me to be one of those godforsaken places more often than not. And so it is that the congregation is the locus of my hope.

Most congregations share a deep sense (most often unarticulated) that together they have become useless to the world, to their communities. In my congregation, as together we process our sense of uselessness and invite God to be present in our midst, we are sensing some hopeful ways forward. The issue remains, however, whether the system can contain churches that are working through these issues. Can the denomination allow for churches and pastors who are growing and developing in unusual and unpredictable ways?

The Church today finds itself in a very different social location. Old methods are proving bankrupt, or at least innocuous. The onlooking world is merely amused by how seriously Christians take themselves, huddled together in their little clubs. In an effort to put this all in perspective and find a way to live in this place it occurs to me that perhaps pastors and church leaders *must* become useless in order to finally become useful to God and his church.

Maybe one of the most profound signs of hope is the sense of uselessness itself. If, by taking myself and my answers less seriously, I can learn to take God more seriously, then real innovation might be at hand. Reflecting again on the gospel irony that life comes only through death, I suspect that real usefulness comes only after we arrive at this place of uselessness. Maybe *there* is hope.

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