

## RESHAPING GREAT EXPECTATIONS

I've been a pastor for over twenty years. Today I pastor a church that isn't growing numerically as seminars tell me it should.

Though asked to preach here and there once in a while, I haven't hit the speaking circuit.

A few years ago, I spoke at a midwinter Bible conference. When I didn't bring a box of my wares to sell, the book table manager asked, "Are you sure you haven't written anything we could sell?"

"No, sorry. I haven't written any books," I replied.

I am reckoning with my limitations. I'm not a fund raiser, and I lack entrepreneurial zeal. I'm characterized by understatement, not the overstatement that seems to go over so well.

I'm mediocre at personal evangelism. I'm reasonably good at preaching and teaching, though as much as I'd like to use only outlined notes, I still carry almost a full manuscript into the pulpit. I teach an annual homiletics class at our local seminary extension, but I have to toil at it.

My family remains intact. I've never been unfaithful to my wife of almost twenty-five years. We have a good and fulfilling marriage; still, it doesn't seem to have the zip popular books say it should have.

My two kids are a joy to me, and they are people of faith, but at this point it doesn't appear they'll be super-achievers. We get along well, but we've had our share of family squabbles. And even though we pray together periodically, we've not had daily family devotions since my children's schedules went wild.

I belong to a movement that has traditionally emphasized high standards of spirituality. Though I've recently received a fresh vision of what prayer and the presence of God mean, I'm still not as much of a "prayer warrior" as I feel I should be.

So what do I do with my mid-life, mid-career expectations and realities?

- *I celebrate the wonder of grace.* I believe in grace more than I ever have. I have to!

I ponder grace, praise God for grace, and preach grace. I promote grace as the ideal in Christian relationships.

That's one way to remain confident and upbeat even when my life hasn't lived up to expectations. God loves me faithfully just as I am and right where I am. I can accept myself and my ministry with its strengths and weaknesses because I am fully accepted by a gracious God.

That isn't an excuse for sloughing off or mediocrity; I deal more constructively with my failures when I'm not overwhelmed with guilt.

Whereas in earlier years I focused exclusively on

product, now I pay more attention to process as well. I understand that it's not just getting somewhere but also how you get there that counts.

- *I try to celebrate what is rather than what might have been.* I rejoice in whatever progress is being made rather than berating myself and the church for what isn't happening.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, "If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty . . . then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ."

A friend acquired a plaque that reads, "So this isn't home sweet home — Adjust!" My environment isn't all I expected or wished, but I can often make it better by accepting reality and adjusting.

For me, this means that rather than always wishing for intimate and meaningful time with my family, I'm grateful for such moments that do come along.

It also means I keep a file of appreciative letters. With few exceptions I read, then toss, letters of criticism.

- *I keep a sense of humor.* Norman Cousins calls laughter "internal jogging." I find I need several laps daily.

Taking myself or my church too seriously pains not only me but also those on whom I inflict an unduly sober face. It also indicts my faith; George MacDonald said that the heart unsure of God is afraid to laugh.

I've found that a good laugh relaxes the atmosphere and restores perspective better than sober pontifications. I more genuinely reverence the holy things of life when I treat many of the lesser issues with gentle irreverence.

- *I appreciate the gentle but wise cynicism of "the Preacher."* Ecclesiastes corrects the unduly high expectations of this world. With great expectations, the Preacher indulged in wisdom, pleasure, riches, achievement. But he remained unsatisfied. He concludes that life's meaning is to be found elsewhere than in success and achievement: "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccles. 11:8; 12:13).

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