

Is ministry a career?

By [Doug Brouwer](#)

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I started with the best of intentions. We all did.

My seminary classmates and I absorbed a great deal of advice from—where else?—an older generation of pastors, and then we did our best to follow that advice, working long hours, honing our pastoral skills, sometimes even receiving additional and impressive-sounding degrees.

Today I look back and realize that we got a lot wrong. So, what follows is a confession—not the titillating sort you half-expect to hear these days from pastors and hypocritical religious leaders, but in a way more serious, more devastating.

When I was ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament—going on four decades ago—I signed up for a career. I wasn't aware of that at the time, and would have denied it, if you had pointed it out to me, but looking back that's what it was. Was it "naked careerism"? I'm not altogether sure what that is, but it sounds really bad, doesn't it? No, I'm certain it was not naked careerism. We thought we were doing God's work, laboring in the vineyard, building the kingdom, and even winning the occasional soul for Christ.

But the truth is, we were building careers and trying to be professionals—not doctors or lawyers or accountants, but professional clergy.

On my first day I was enrolled in a medical plan and, even better, a pension plan and what was called "a supplemental retirement account." I had a title and a parking place. I had an automobile allowance and four weeks of vacation. I thought of myself as a professional, even if I didn't look like one.

What was missing on the first day was a wardrobe so, as quickly as I could, I added suits and dress shirts and ties and of course a better haircut. I even bought myself a pair of black, size 13 Florsheim wingtips, which I polished every week to a nice, bright shine. It now seems clear, looking at the old photographs, that the off-the-rack suits looked silly on my tall, skinny frame but, no matter, I was on my way to

what I hoped would be a good, long career.

Lately, though, I have become aware of a radically new way of thinking about ordained ministry—okay, not new, but definitely a change from the previous generation.

I had lunch last week with a young pastor whose church in the U.S. has sent him and his wife to plant a church in Zürich, where I currently serve what we like to call an established church. I'm not altogether sure what that is either, but it's definitely not a church plant. When my new friend e-mailed me to ask about the possibility of renting space from us, I suggested that we meet for coffee.

A few days later I listened—convicted—as he explained to me what he is attempting to do.

He started the very first Sunday—jet-lagged and nervous—with worship in his small apartment, more of a Bible study, really, but there was singing and prayer and even an offering. As he explained it to me (the vastly more experienced pastor in this conversation), “There’s no better time to start than the first Sunday.” I nodded as though I knew this to be true, but really I was marveling at his courage—to move to a new city, a new country, and a new continent, and on the very first Sunday to hold worship, not knowing if or when an actual congregation might emerge from this small gathering.

The group, he tells me honestly, is still quite small, though it has outgrown his apartment, which is why he turned to me. Weren’t the numbers small at the beginning in Ephesus, he asks, and Philippi and Corinth and Thessalonica, for that matter?

I noticed that he neglected to mention a retirement plan or how much vacation he would receive. There is no parking place, apparently, not even an automobile allowance. He has no fancy degree, not even the basic seminary degree, and right now does not see the need for one. The Bible, he tells me, is the only textbook he needs.

My new friend is not alone, of course. Church planting seems to be very popular right now, and maybe, as much as anything, it’s a much-needed correction after a generation of pastors who have grown comfortable and career-oriented and entitled.

As Rick Warren tells the story in one of his books, he graduated from seminary one day and then took a map of the U.S., closed his eyes, and pointed his finger at ... yes, Orange County, California. The cynic in me wonders why the finger didn't point to western North Dakota instead, but my cynicism misses the point.

The point is that he planted a church in the living room of his first apartment in Orange County, not knowing if or when anything would come of it. He trusted God in a way that I never did. And today his tiny "church plant" is of course known as Saddleback Church.

One reason I do not despair about the future of the church is that there are many others like my new friend who have listened to God's call in their lives and then set out, like Abraham and Sarah, to a land that God promised to show them.

As long as there are pastors like my new friend, there will be a church, and thanks be to God for that.

*Originally posted at [Brouwer's blog](#)*