

How You Can Avoid the Top 5 Regrets of an 80-Year-Old Minister

After many decades of serving in ecclesiastical circles, I have often been around many older ministers. I have noticed that only very few seem satisfied with the way they prioritize their time in regard to their lives and ministries. I have made the following observations for myself, looking ahead so that I will not live my last days with regret, cynicism and denial.

1. I sacrificed my spouse and children on the altar of ministry. People come and go in a church, but there is only one guaranteed set of people for whom a minister will always be responsible: their spouse and children! Most ministers are so ambitious they sacrifice all to build a ministry with folks who may or may not be with them a few years down the road.

2. I put programs before people. Getting new programs off the ground can often be exciting, since doing so often promises to greatly add to the life and vision of the church. Unfortunately, most of the time, energy and focus needed to implement a program properly takes the energy and focus of the lead pastor away from spending time with the key people they are assigned to mentor, develop and release into their destiny. By the time most pastors realize that being program-based has unnecessarily robbed them of the greatest assets for their church's vision (key committed leaders and emerging leaders), they have already passed their prime and spent their greatest energy.

3. I spent most of my time attempting to nurture the whole church myself instead of concentrating on potential leaders. Lead pastors often spend most of their time counseling

emotionally needy, attention-seeking people who have no real desire to mature as disciples. I learned a long time ago that Satan will often try to wear me out with countless hours counseling someone who really has no interest in changing. Since the late 1980s, I have made up my mind that I would build our local church based on the priorities laid out by Paul the apostle in 2 Timothy 2:2, in which he instructed Timothy to spend his time with people who were:

1. Faithful.
2. Able.
3. Called to teach others.

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If any one of these three components Paul laid out is missing in a person, a lead pastor should not invest most of their time working with them. They should focus on those who fit the criteria in whom Paul admonished Timothy to invest according to this passage. This wise use of time is the most effective way to multiply leaders who can, in turn, shepherd the rest of the congregation.

4. I never befriended young people. Rev. Billy Graham has said in one of the meetings where I was present that one of his regrets is that he never prioritized making friends with younger ministers. He made that statement in his late 80s, when many of his friends had already gone to be with the Lord. This made a great impact on me. Hence, decades ago, I began focusing on mentoring young emerging leaders so that in my latter years I will be surrounded by people half my age who will continue to make an impact long after I transition to glory.

5. I raised up faithful church members instead of sons and

daughters. Years ago, a minister told me not to get too close to people in my young and growing church because it would create jealousy and division among church members who witnessed my favoritism. Thank God I never agreed with or took his advice. The Gospel accounts are replete with Jesus showing favoritism with the 70, then the 12 and then His inner circle of three whom He took with Him everywhere He went.

I have many titles in my life: doctor, bishop, pastor, reverend. But by far the title I believe to be most important is when someone in our church called me papi! God is never called doctor, apostle, bishop or the “great general in the sky!” He is called Father because a father (or mother if you are a female pastor) is by far the most important relationship any person could have with people in a church. (I am not counting husband or wife because you are only supposed to have one of those in a lifetime).

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In his twilight years, John the apostle once said the greatest joy he had on earth was knowing that his children walked in the truth (3 John 4). A few years ago, I was in a hotel room speaking with two ministers who were at least 20 years older than I. I asked them, “Do most ministers end well, and if not, what is the No. 1 reason they do not?” I was not ready for the answers they both gave. They said older ministers they meet are dissatisfied with their lives (some are even bitter and cynical) because they have few or no spiritual sons and daughters around them in their later years.

Consequently, when we do not prioritize and facilitate meaningful relationships, we will regret it in our twilight years. Most church members come and go, but spiritual sons and daughters remain part of your life for eternity, whether you stay in full-time church ministry or not.

Finally, when all is said and done and you are breathing your last breaths on earth, the only fond memories you will have and the things that matter most to you will be the key relationships you were responsible for. After all, in eternity we will not be able to take beautiful cathedrals, homes, cars, money and so forth with us—only the people we have won over to the Lord. Woe to the person who realizes this when it is too late!

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For more on this subject purchase my book, "Poisonous Power."