SURVIVING Ministry
How to Weather the Storms of Church Leadership

MICHAEL E. OSBORNE

Being a pastor has its rewards and pleasures. But churches can be unsafe places. They are filled with broken, imperfect people. Many ministers of the gospel walk into a church naïve about the potential hazards of their vocation. They are vulnerable to difficult people, unresolved conflict, incompatible visions, hidden agendas, mission drift, and sin—their own and that of others. Other pastors feel trapped in a ministry hurricane and don’t know what to do. They feel like failures. They’re thinking about leaving the ministry. They are looking for help and hope—not from an “expert” detached from the real world of ministry—but from someone who has suffered through church hurricanes and lived to share the story. Moreover, they need to know they are not alone. Surviving Ministry: How to Weather the Storms of Church Leadership includes the author’s own story as well as true stories from other pastors who have been in the eye of the hurricane. Discouraged ministers looking for biblical, practical, gospel-centered advice for storm proofing their churches, homes, and hearts have found a friend. Surviving Ministry will equip them to stay resilient before, during, and after seasons of difficulty.

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“Surviving Ministry could be renamed Thriving Ministry, but that would defeat the purpose of this compelling book about the significant challenges, heartbreaks, blessings, pains, joys, good moments, and will-this-never-end hard seasons that are the reality of pastoral ministry. Mike Osborne—in sharp, sometimes humorous, but unfailingly humble, honest, and helpful prose—speaks the truth in love. [This book] is a must-read for pastors, seminarians, congregational leaders, and laity.”
—ROBBIE CASTLEMAN, Author, Parenting in the Pew and Story-Shaped Worship; Professor of Theology; Pastor’s wife

“Mike Osborne brings a wealth of pastoral experience and personal transparency to this discussion of ministry ‘survival.’ Even more, he brings a love for Christ and his church that makes these tales of church ‘hurricanes’ wise tools for serving, as well as surviving, the ministry.”
—BRYAN CHAPELL, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, IL

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WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon
To Rebecca, David, Jennifer, and Michael,
who survived having a pastor for a dad,
and to Suzy, the ultimate survivor and love of my life
Contents

Acknowledgments | ix
Introduction: A Perfect Storm | xi

Part 1: Crisis Readiness | 1
1 “It Wasn’t Supposed to Be This Way” | 3
2 It Is Supposed to Be This Way | 8
3 Know Your Church | 17
4 Know Yourself | 27
5 Build Up the Levees | 36
6 Focus! | 45

Part 2: Crisis Response | 55
7 Teamwork | 57
8 Tell the Truth | 65
9 Consult the Experts | 73
10 Pick Your Battles | 80
11 Pray | 88
12 Listen | 97
Part 3: Crisis Recovery | 105
13  Faith  | 107
14  Friends | 115
15  Family  | 125
16  Forgiveness  | 136

Epilogue: Joy Comes in the Morning | 147

Bibliography | 149
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This book is the product of what they, and so many others, have taught me about gospel ministry.

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Finally, I thank my editor, Judy Hagey, for her diligence and eye for detail; and the many friends who have encouraged and advised me in the writing of this book. You know who you are.
Introduction

A Perfect Storm

Before Joy Steele of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, went to bed that Saturday night she tried one more time to change her husband Phil’s mind. “We’ve been through these scares before, Phil,” she told him. “This storm will pass, just like all the other ones. Don’t you understand how inconvenient it is to evacuate?”

It was August 27, 2005. The Steeles had heard warnings about a hurricane heading their way for several days. So they’d boarded up their windows and put their valuables in a safe place, just like all the other times. But Joy wasn’t worried. Not this Saturday. Their neighbors weren’t going anywhere. Why should Phil and Joy pack up their two kids and head north? “It’s such a pain,” she said.

Sunday morning seemed to confirm Joy’s skepticism. Puffy clouds painted cotton bolls on a clear, sunny sky over the sleepy Gulf Coast town. “Still think we ought to evacuate? Really?” Joy asked.

Phil turned on the radio and suddenly everything changed.

Overnight, Hurricane Katrina had gone from a Category 3 to a Category 5 and was bearing down rapidly upon the Louisiana-Mississippi coast. It was “the Big One.” Joy shouted, “In the car, kids. Let’s go.”
Early that next day—August 29, 2005—one of the deadliest hurricanes in US history hit the shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. As Hurricane Katrina lumbered through the Gulf, her winds reached 175 miles per hour. “Katrina was a giant,” says one meteorologist. According to historian Douglas Brinkley, “Katrina was no mere hurricane or flood. It was destined to be known as ‘the Great Deluge’ in the annals of American history.” Her tropical storm-force winds measured almost 350 miles across. The National Hurricane Center said Katrina was comparable to Hurricane Camille back in 1969, only bigger. The day before it hit landfall New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin went on TV and warned, “We’re facing the storm most of us have feared.” He ordered a mandatory evacuation of Orleans Parish and opened the Superdome as a “refuge of last resort.” And if Gulf Coast residents weren’t already alarmed enough, the National Weather Service issued a bulletin, which read in part:

Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks . . . perhaps longer. At least one half of well-constructed homes will have roof and wall failure . . . Airborne debris will be widespread . . . and may include heavy items such as household appliances and even light vehicles. Persons, pets, and livestock exposed to the winds will face certain death if struck. Power outages will last for weeks . . . Water shortages will make human suffering incredible by modern standards . . . Few crops will remain . . .

The NWS was not exaggerating. Hurricane Katrina killed more than 1,800 people, displaced about a million others, and devastated the Gulf Coast’s economy, environment, and social structure. The storm surge reached over twenty-five feet in some areas. It overwhelmed New Orleans’s levee system. Eighty percent of the city was submerged under water. It became the most expensive

1. Brinkley, Great Deluge, Kindle Edition: Author’s Note.
natural disaster in US history. The total bill came to an estimated $135 billion.³

Hurricane Katrina was a perfect storm, a lethal combination of high winds, high tide, low barometric pressure, and breached levees that changed life forever for thousands of people.

My daughter and her husband moved to Gulfport, Mississippi, a year after Katrina. I visited them in September, 2006. I flew into New Orleans, rented a car, and drove east on I-10 through Metairie, over the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, past Slidell, and then down through Westonia, Mississippi, to US 90 on the Gulf Coast. Detouring around the washed-out bridge at Bay St. Louis, I continued along US 90 through the little beach towns of Pass Christian and Long Beach.

At times I pulled over to the side of the road and just sat there, astonished. Fishing boats pushed up by the surge still sat by the highway like carelessly tossed toys. Trees that had survived the storm were still bare. Massive piles of junk pockmarked what had once been pristine beach beauty. Pylons marked the graves of houses, restaurants, and marinas. Old stalwart churches had been disemboweled. And this was a full year after Katrina.

Reflecting on Katrina’s carnage, I think of the work of a pastor.

Don’t get me wrong. Pastoring a church has many rewards. The sights, sounds, and pleasures of pastoral ministry can take your breath away, just like life on the Gulf Coast. It’s thrilling to have a hand in God’s heart-healing, sin-defeating, marriage-mending, habit-altering, kingdom-building work. On the other hand, for pastors it’s always hurricane season. Every day, ministers of the gospel face the danger of an unexpected, devastating catastrophe. Churches can be unsafe places. They are filled with broken, imperfect people. The pastor has flaws and makes mistakes. Many pastors walk into a church naïve about the potential hazards

of their vocation. Like fishing boats during a hurricane, they get battered this way and that by difficult people, unresolved conflict, incompatible visions, hidden agendas, mission drift, betrayal, and sin—their own and that of others.

You’ve seen the articles and blog posts that say at least 1,500 pastors are leaving the ministry every month. Recent research casts doubt on the reliability of that gloomy statistic. “Pastors are not leaving the ministry in droves,” says Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research. Still, many ministers of the gospel say they are on call twenty-four hours a day, expect conflict, find pastoral ministry overwhelming, lack true friends, and have had a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry. The pressures and expectations on ministers of the gospel are greater now than ever, and many are not surviving.

Some of you reading this paragraph feel trapped in a ministry storm and don’t know what to do. Your boat is sinking and you don’t think you can bail any longer. Your church is not growing. In fact, it’s barely afloat. You feel like a complete failure. You used to feel God’s pleasure when you stood in the pulpit and taught God’s people. Now the eyes of your congregation seem like daggers of criticism aimed at your heart. You can’t stop worrying about what the elders really think of you. You berate yourself for everything, including worrying. You’re not sleeping well. Even in your dreams, you wrestle condemning Apollyon. You wake up in the morning feeling guilty, incompetent, and disoriented. Your spouse has shut down; you no longer pray for the church or talk about ministry together. You’re sure that because of you, your kids will walk away from the church one day. You’ve never wanted to watch so much television before. You don’t even like hearing the word church. You wonder how or when things got so derailed. You’ve been checking websites for openings in another field. You know exactly what David meant when he said, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would
Introduction: A Perfect Storm

fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest” (Ps 55:6–8).

If anything I just wrote comes close to describing where you are as a pastor, this book is for you. And if you think it’ll never happen to you, this book is for you too.

Jesus promised to build his church. He said that the gates of Hades would not overcome it (Matt 16:18). But for the church to prevail as Jesus promised, pastors need to be better prepared to predict and withstand the hurricanes of ministry. Surviving Ministry: How to Weather the Storms of Church Leadership will help you stay strong during seasons of difficulty.

In this book we will not focus on the personal or moral struggles often reported by pastors: sexual temptation, financial strain, marital conflict, spiritual lethargy, doubting one’s calling, and the like. Those issues are vitally important and certainly complicate your relationship to your church. If you are wise and hurting, you will not ignore the warning lights on the dashboard of your heart. You will get counseling and find appropriate friends, books, blogs, seminars, and other resources to get the help you need.

Instead, these pages are about the congregational conflicts and clashes that tear you up inside and make you wonder why in the world you came to this town, this church, this mess. In Part 1, we’ll talk about what you can do to get ready for, if not prevent, the next ministry storm. In Part 2, we’ll assume that the hurricane has come ashore at your church: what should you do? And in Part 3, I will give you four essentials of a gospel-based response to ministry crisis that will help you recover, pick up the pieces, and move forward with hope and courage. At the end of each chapter is a list of “survival strategies” that will help you apply what you have read.

I write as a pastor for fellow pastors. I’ll share my story and those of other church leaders I’ve had the privilege of knowing. Though the stories are real, I’ve changed the names of people, places, and churches along with some of the details. I’ll also tell you
Introduction: A Perfect Storm

about mistakes I’ve made. I’ve weathered a few “perfect storms” in my thirty years of gospel ministry. One of those storms was especially destructive—to the congregation, to me, and to my family. I hope that by reading this book, you will avoid a similar ministry-killing hurricane. Or, if it’s already come your way, I pray you will find things of beauty among the wreckage and recover the joy of your calling.

I did.

But let me start by telling you about my catastrophe.
Part 1

Crisis Readiness
Chapter 1

“ It Wasn’t Supposed to Be This Way”

I knew I was in trouble the day Suzy and I moved into our house in Edgefield, Missouri, to begin my work as senior pastor of New Life Church. It was a blazingly hot, humid July day. The house was a fixer-upper, so we were unpacking boxes, painting, hanging wallpaper, cleaning the pool, and a myriad of other things to get the place livable for our family of five. The phone rang. On the line was one of the elders of the church. “We need to talk to you,” he said. So I drove over to the church, where two New Life elders were waiting for me.

“We’re concerned about your love of money,” they said.

Huh? What had I done or said that made people think I was greedy? Not that I am 100 percent free of the love of money, but where had this come from? As they explained themselves, it became clear that there’d been a miscommunication about the timing of my first paycheck. But I left that meeting with an uneasy feeling: Was this encounter an early sign of a spirit of suspicion floating around my new church? Indeed, it was, as events were soon to demonstrate.

It had been a hard move for my family and me. We loved our former church in Tennessee. I’d been their pastor for seven golden years. Suzy and I had poured our hearts and souls into that church, raised our kids through their formative years, built a house, and seen God move in significant ways. The gospel of grace
PART 1: CRISIS READINESS

had gripped me profoundly, and I saw it take root in the hearts of many others.

But here we were in a new place, with a new calling. The drive up I-55 had been an absolute trip from hell. My wife cried all the way. I felt incredibly guilty for uprooting my dear wife and children. Typical of me, I told them to look on the bright side of life in Missouri. “We’ll visit St. Louis,” I promised. “We’ll go to the zoo. We’ll see the Cardinals play. And just think: Edgefield is one of the fastest-growing towns in the state. What a great opportunity for the gospel.” It didn’t help.

Within a few short weeks, I was asking myself the questions that trouble every pastor I know: Did God really call me here? Was I listening to his voice, or my own? Why did I leave a church where we were all happy?

I’ll never forget my first elders meeting. We moved through the agenda and then it was time for my closing prayer. I told the group that I customarily get on my knees to pray with my fellow elders. They could do the same if they wished. As I was getting on my knees, one of the elders stopped me and asked, “Why do you want us to get on our knees? Is there anything in the church constitution about that?”

Now wait a second. How could a spiritual leader object to praying on his knees? I explained that biblically speaking, getting on one’s knees to pray is a sign of humility and earnestness. But I said, “It’s up to you. You don’t have to get on your knees.” I was simply stunned. And worried. Was every suggestion of mine going to be put through the meat grinder of inspection? My worries turned out to be justified. That’s exactly what my five years at New Life Church felt like: a meat grinder.

We went from one crisis to another. An aggrieved husband sued the church. I had to fire a member of the staff who tried to sabotage the youth ministry. I fired another staff member for being divisive and stubborn. Both firings made me unpopular with segments of the New Life congregation. Our missions director, an apparently healthy man, collapsed and died from a heart attack. We had to discipline a member of the worship team. You’ve heard
of congregations that fight over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary? Our church really did.

In the middle of everything else, my father died of leukemia. My daughter was injured in a serious auto accident. My son had to have a delicate and risky surgical procedure. Two of our kids went off to college for the first time. One got married.

And of course, the normal responsibilities of pastoral ministry didn’t magically stop and wait for those tempests to subside. There were still sermons to preach and expansion plans to discuss. There were still the dying who needed bedside prayers, the hospitalized who needed a pastoral touch, couples who needed counseling, visitors who needed follow-up, staff who needed direction, and lost people who needed redemption.

Other upsetting tragedies struck New Life during my five years there. A couple of beloved ladies lost their battles with cancer. I did funerals for two brothers who committed suicide weeks apart, and another funeral for a man—a good friend—who murdered his two sons and then turned the shotgun on himself. Though these events were profoundly disruptive, most pastors can tell similar stories of brokenness and loss.

But then came the Category 5 hurricane that nearly broke me.

I had figured if we were going to attract a younger demographic, we needed to add a contemporary touch to the worship service. In my former church I had led singing with my guitar. So one Sunday I brought out my guitar and led one of the songs. I kept it up week after week. At first, people welcomed the novelty. Most of the elders were behind me. Some younger families began to visit. Many stayed. Musicians began to come out of the woodwork. We added another guitar player, then a bass player, a couple of vocalists, and finally a drummer.

That’s when the hurricane came ashore.

It started with little pockets of people gathering in the sanctuary after the worship service. I overheard them critiquing the music. Just the sight of drums in the choir loft made some of the old-timers angry. Several families left the church. Soon whispers
turned to organized protest. To respond to the complaints, we started a contemporary service at 8:30 a.m. and kept the traditional service very traditional. It took little time for the early service to outgrow the late service. There were calls from the young crowd to switch the order of the two services. Our music director, who had grown increasingly unhappy with the situation, resigned. My approval rating with the older set sank faster than a concrete canoe. Another colleague left to plant a church. Tension mounted. We had a congregational meeting in which I shared our vision for worship and let people voice their frustrations. One lady criticized me for playing a guitar in the worship service. A man said we were abandoning “true worship.” A young father stood to defend the new contemporary direction. One after another, unhappy people rose to give impassioned speeches. It was plain we were a church divided.

The elders and I knew a compromise had to be struck. We decided to have just one blended worship service. If the two sides can’t get along, we’ll get everyone together in the same room and make everyone miserable. And that’s exactly what happened.

Eventually I had elders telling me it was time for me to go. Gossip was everywhere. Someone told me what a poor leader I was. Another man told me I was unfit to be a senior pastor. I got anonymous notes and emails of complaint. They all started with words like, “I’m concerned . . .” Giving plummeted. I was crushed. My capital was all gone. It was clearly time to get out of there. But where would I go? What would I do?

One morning I wrote seven words in my journal: “It wasn’t supposed to be this way.” I had become a minister of the gospel because I loved Jesus and the Word. I loved administering the sacraments, equipping the saints, shepherding the flock, and helping people grow. Instead of being a pastor, it felt like I was a referee at a Stanley Cup final—or, more accurately, the puck.

I wish I could say that none of this was my fault. I wish I could tell you I responded to all these crises with the meekness of Moses, the steadiness of Joshua, the wisdom of Solomon, the prayerful spirit of Nehemiah, the courage of Paul, and the love of Christ. But
I can’t. The truth is, I was part of the problem at New Life Church. I went into that church naïve and unprepared. I should have listened to my wife. I should have asked more questions before accepting the call. I should have taken more time to build trust. I should have been more careful about introducing change. When Hurricane Worship Wars hit, I should have been more prayerful, less of a pushover, more loving, patient, and honest. The conflict eventually exploded in a “splant” (that’s a split disguised as a church plant) that hurt many people, including my family and me. It threatened to end my career as a pastor and seriously damage my marriage.

But through that catastrophe, I learned valuable lessons. By God’s grace I moved on, recovered a love for the church, and eventually assumed the role of lead pastor elsewhere.

In the chapters that follow I will reflect on my experience and share the lessons learned. My goal, if you will walk with me, is to help you recognize the signs of an impending catastrophe, limit its damage, learn from it, and live with gospel optimism for the future.

Let’s begin with seven words you should commit to memory.
Chapter 2

It Is Supposed to Be This Way

“TONY, you’re a liar. You’re going to have to leave the church.”

Pastor Tony heard the words, but they made no sense. It felt like he’d just been tackled by a 300-lb. linebacker—speared, more like it—and hammered into the ground. The eyes of six deacons seated grimly around the conference table stared blankly at their pastor. Tony gulped and said, “Excuse me?”

“You have a pattern of deception in your life, Tony,” said the chairman of the deacon board. “You’re a liar. You’ll need to resign.”

Tony Kendall had been at Bayside Baptist Church for just three years. The church had embraced Tony and his wife Emily with enthusiasm. They loved Pastor Tony’s passion in the pulpit and his knack at connecting Scripture with life. He had hit the ground running. He got the staff pulling in the same direction and sparked renewed vision among the people for blessing the city.

But before long, Tony knew there were problems at Bayside Baptist. In fact, the first sign of an approaching storm appeared the first week he was there. One of the trustees of the church took Tony out to lunch and told him the deacons and trustees weren’t on speaking terms. Tony was shocked. This had certainly not come up in the interview process. How could the spiritual leaders of the church allow such a thing?

When the deacons asked Tony to start a contemporary worship service, Tony accepted the challenge but warned them it
It Is Supposed to Be This Way

It would not be easy. And Tony was right. It was not easy. Beliefs about worship are about as hard to change as a Long Islander's accent. But as it turned out, the contemporary worship service was the least of Tony's problems.

Tony butted heads often with Bayside's assistant pastor, Matt Rhodes. Matt knew he was on the way out, and made plans to start a church elsewhere in the community. But he would not go quietly. Matt had an ally on the deacon board named Steve Boyd, who was also the board chairman. Matt had often run to Steve whenever he didn't like something Tony had done or said. Now Matt told Steve the content of his latest conversation with Tony. He had even recorded the conversation and sent Steve a copy. So several weeks later, at the next board meeting, Steve asked Tony about something he had told Matt.

“Did you say that or not?”

Tony honestly couldn't remember. The conversation was several weeks old. “No, I don't think so. I certainly don't remember it.”

Steve slammed his fists on the conference table. “Tony, you're a liar.” He pulled his iPhone out of his pocket and played the recorded conversation for all to hear.

“Well, I guess you're right. I did say that.”

Steve said, “You're going to have to leave the church, Tony. There's a pattern of deception in your life. You can either resign now or we're going to vote to kick you out of the church.”

Tony was speechless. Yes, he was wrong. He didn't have his facts straight about a conversation with his assistant pastor. But did this rise to the level of an irreparable breach of trust, a sin that merited dismissal?

What Tony knew that the other deacons sitting around the table that night did not, was that Steve had had a long-running dislike for Tony. He didn't care for Tony's preaching. He questioned Tony's motives for ministry. Whenever Tony looked at Steve from the pulpit, Steve would scowl back at him. Matt, the assistant pastor, had totally convinced Steve that Tony Kendall was a fraud.

Tony knew it was over. He could fight to stay at Bayside, but Steve held all the cards. Tony slumped in his chair and said hardly
a word the rest of the meeting. His brain was pounding with questions. “What will I do? Where will I go? What will I tell Emily and the kids? How will we sell our home? It’s underwater. How can this be happening?”

As he started his car and pulled out of the church parking lot, Tony knew many tears would fall in the Kendall home that night.

Let’s start with something very basic to pastoral ministry: It is supposed to be this way. Believing those seven words and rehearsing them often is an essential part of crisis preparation.

To be a pastor is to be called by Jesus into conflict. As one church leader put it, “Being a pastor is like death by a thousand paper cuts.” The great evangelist Alan Redpath once said, “If you’re a Christian pastor, you’re always in a crisis—either in the middle of one, coming out of one, or going into one.” It may be unjust, and it won’t be this way after Jesus comes back, but right now, storms of controversy, rejection, discord, betrayal, and opposition are inevitable. They are part of shepherding broken people in a broken world out of your own broken condition.

The Puritan Richard Baxter (1615–1691) pastored a church in Kidderminster, England, for close to twenty years. He wrote in his journal one day, “. . . the more I do, the more hatred and trouble I draw upon me.” Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) said in his farewell sermon to his Northampton congregation, “It often comes to pass in this evil world, that great differences and controversies arise between ministers and the people under their pastoral care.” Now make no mistake, some pastors bring hatred and trouble upon themselves. They preach or lead poorly, or fall into sin and bring disgrace upon their own and their Savior’s name. But Scripture, history, and experience all agree that a faithful minister will sooner or later find himself in the eye of a hurricane.

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