

LIBERATING
MINISTRY
from the
SUCCESS
SYNDROME

KENT & BARBARA
HUGHES



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CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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INTRODUCTION

Some onlookers thought it was unusual, but few noticed when the pastor wheeled into the church parking lot in a borrowed pickup truck. But everyone's eyes were upon him when he backed the truck across the lawn to his study door. Refusing comment or assistance, he began to empty his office onto the truck bed. He was impassive and systematic: first the desk drawers, then the files, and last his library of books, which he tossed carelessly into a heap, many of them flopping askew like slain birds. His task done, the pastor left the church and, as was later learned, drove some miles to the city dump where he committed everything to the waiting garbage.

It was his way of putting behind him the overwhelming sense of failure and loss that he had experienced in the ministry. This young, gifted pastor was determined never to return to the ministry. Indeed, he never did.

We wrote this book because of this story—and many, too many, others like it. We are concerned about the morale and survival of those in Christian ministry. Pastors, youth workers, evangelists, Sunday school teachers, lay ministers, missionaries, Bible study leaders, Christian writers and speakers, and those in other areas of Christian service often face significant feelings of failure, usually fueled by misguided expectations for success.

It is true that our Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries are flooded annually with bright and motivated students. But it is also true that every year thousands leave the ministry convinced they are failures, seduced by

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what William James piquantly called “the bitch goddess of success.”¹

We know what it’s like. We too almost succumbed to her enticements. It is our hope that the account of our subtle confusion about success, our near ruin, and ultimately our liberation through the truth of God’s Word will aid in delivering others from this unhappy goddess.

This book is an effort to encourage those in ministry. It is our gift to our fellow servants.

It has been twenty years since we wrote *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*. The young couple on the dust jacket has faded to gray over forty years of ministry. The lessons have worn well. And they have benefited thousands as the book has gone through ten printings. We have received a flow of letters and expressions of thanks with confessions like “I was ready to quit, and a friend gave me your book” or “It felt like you were reading our minds” or “We’ve read it twice this last month” or “our mission team is now reading *Liberating* together with great profit.”

Today we are convinced that the message of this book is more relevant and necessary than the day we wrote it due to the pervasive, sub-biblical emphasis on “success” that has fallen on the church like a black rain.

It is our prayer that what we learned about success will help you gain an ever-deepening understanding of what God desires from his servants—and a liberation from the gravity of this age.

Kent and Barbara Hughes

PART ONE

A DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

ONE

Disappointed Dreams

As I begin our story, do not suppose that this is the hardest thing that has happened to me in the ministry. It is not. The significance of my experience is not its hardness, but that it almost made me quit my divine calling.

When a man is forty-five he is said to be in mid-life, and I certainly am. It is also often said that he is in his prime, and that I am. I have been married twenty-five years to a woman who is not only my love but my soul partner. We have four children, all of whom love Christ and want to serve him in their callings.

Twenty-three of our twenty-five years have been spent in ministry. Preaching is my passion. Even on vacation, I enjoy books that have to do with the history of preaching and homiletic thought and theology. I feel as if I am doing the thing I was born for.

The ministry has made it possible for me to experience what some would (unwisely!) call success, as I have traveled widely, spoken to international conferences, written several books, and sat on the boards of Christian organizations.

Those who have served alongside me these past twenty-plus years say that they see me as a capable, solid, even-dispositioned pastor who has a positive approach to ministry—and all of life. And without hesitation I can say that they are right. Though I am not unfamiliar with dark

moods, such times are rare in my life—and always have been.

All of this is what makes the following account so enlightening.

I was not feeling well as I stepped from the car onto my broiling southern California driveway and walked, briefcase in hand, toward the shade of the front porch. There Barbara cheerfully greeted me through the kitchen screen.

Aware of my gradual depression, she had been observing me with increasing concern. My gait had lost its characteristic energy and I often appeared downcast. Barbara knew that it had to do with my work, for she observed that when things were going well at church I was OK, but otherwise I was discouraged. If church attendance was up, I was up; if it was down, so was I. And the numbers had been going down for a long time.

What Barbara didn't know was that I was seriously wondering whether I should continue in the pastoral ministry. Neither was she aware that the doubts troubling me were actually so repugnant that I could not bring myself to verbalize them. Nor could she know that as I further suppressed them, my depression itself had become increasingly ugly.

A covert, unarticulated animosity had crept through my soul. It was hidden from all. Years of honestly cultivated Christian civility served me well—for inside I was a very angry man.

The focus of my resentment was God himself, the one who had called me to this. I had given *everything*—all my time, all my education, years of ministry and true Christian devotion (he knew!)—and now I was failing. God was to blame.

Beneath my pastoral veneer, dark thoughts moved at will.

Inside I was embarrassed and fearful. At night, as I drifted off to sleep, the beneficent faces of my well-wish-

ers would slip in and out of focus—always smiling. They seemed benignly to watch me sink into a pit of miserable despair.

I wanted to quit.

How had I come to this? In retrospect, I can now see that much of it had to do with my *expectations*, which went back to the very week when as a twelve-year-old I met Christ at summer camp. . . .

I can still remember the glowing lens of my flashlight illuminating the delicate pages of my tiny Bible. After lights out, in the musty, gym-sock air of my sleeping bag, trembling with joy, I read and reread the great texts of salvation. I had come to know Christ!

Although I was not quite a teenager, I knew that I was called to preach. So sure was I that the next day I let everyone know. When I went home, I announced it to my family and gave testimony to it before the whole church. It was a precocious announcement, but it was of God. The call was never to leave me. It gave profound direction to my young life. God had saved me and called me, and in my youthful egocentricity, *I assumed he was going to do great things through me.*

Because of this my teenage years were full and focused. I wholeheartedly entered into the life of my local southern California high school and church—all the while happily growing in my pastor-to-be persona.

When just sixteen I preached my first sermon on Jonah and the Whale. I gave it a double title: "The Chicken of the Sea, or God Has a Whale of a Plan for Your Life!" So it was a sermon of dubious wit and doubtful quality! The mere doing of it established my identity as one called to the gospel ministry. Many kind and affirming people in my church predicted I would be a "good" preacher. And with their predictions, my anticipation of future success increased.

Despite my immature pride, my call was an intensely

serious matter to me. Virtually everything I did was with an expectant eye to the sacred goal of ministry.

I went to Whittier College. There I became deeply involved in studies and preparation for the pastorate. I directed Youth for Christ clubs, did some street preaching, and organized evangelistic outreaches to students at other colleges.

Meeting and marrying Barbara—my cheerful, outgoing, ministry-minded wife—deepened my commitment and the sense that the best times lay ahead.

Choosing to begin a family as college ended meant increased pressures. I attended classes, worked forty hours per week, and together Barbara and I began an exciting ministry with young married couples in our church that carried over into our years at nearby Talbot Theological Seminary. To be sure, our single-mindedness left us tired, but we were happy.

Seminary was all I had hoped for and more. There is a distinct romance to biblical study, "The Queen of Sciences," with its epic history, magisterial doctrines, delicately nuanced theology, its Greek and Hebrew. And I entered the romance completely, for studying the Scriptures and learning about Christ were heaven to me. Lifelong friendships with godly professors and students strengthened our resolve to serve God with all that we had. Seminary confirmed for me the rightness of my vocation. It also had the effect of heightening my expectations of success.

During seminary I began a memorable ten years of ministry in my family church, first as youth pastor and then as associate pastor. This was the sixties—restless, unsettled, but a time of wonderful spiritual harvest. Our Bible studies overflowed with teenagers honestly and earnestly seeking truth. Many not only met Christ but went on to become missionaries and ministers.

The highlight of that ministry is framed in a five-by-

seven photograph hanging in the hallway of our home. The photo was taken in 1968 in Parker, Arizona, during our high schoolers' Easter Outreach week. It was snapped in the intense low morning sunlight of the Arizona desert, which gives it almost surrealistic detail. In the background is the turquoise ribbon of the morning-lit Colorado River. In the foreground are five young men posed on a boat trailer. They are tan, windswept, and holding beers with postured male élan. Three of those young men would confess Christ that morning. Today two of them are in the ministry and the other is now a prominent Christian counselor. That picture demonstrates for me the sovereign, ineluctable power of God. Those young men, before that week completely unknown to me, not only were revolutionized by God's grace but have led unusually productive Christian lives and have been my good friends for almost twenty years.

If only all of Christian ministry were as triumphant as that photograph. Unfortunately, ministry is messy. One experiences a wide range of disappointments and criticisms in ten years of aggressive Christian service.

Even so, those were productive and satisfying years. But, having reached the age of thirty-two, I realized it was time for me to begin an active pulpit ministry. God's call was clear. And I looked forward, with an anticipation that had been years in the making, to what God would do.

The church I served decided to mother a new church with me as the founding pastor. In this adventure, the sponsoring church and its pastor were wonderfully magnanimous. Together we produced an excellent multimedia presentation to communicate to the congregation the potential of the new work. When the pastor urged all to respond who felt the call of God to commit themselves to planting this new church, twenty families decided to go with us. To top that off, the church gave us a gift of \$50,000 to get us started.

What a way to begin a church! Optimism ran high. As the fair-haired boy, I was told by friends that great things were about to happen, and it would not be long before the new church would be larger than its mother. Such talk enlarged my expectations. I believed it.

The people who gathered with us to begin the church were terrific. We left our initial meetings amazed at the array of gifted, hard-working, visionary people the Lord had brought with us. With such people we expected to grow.

And we did things "right." Our denomination retained a church growth expert who instructed us in the broad principles and minor subtleties of growing churches. They sent me to seminars on church growth. We obtained aerial photographs and demographic projections, commissioned ethnographic studies, consulted with the county, and chose the target community with painstaking and prayerful premeditation.

Beginning a new church is exhausting work, and we went for it with all we had. I found myself attending meetings, strategizing, canvassing, counseling, preparing sermons, and borrowing pianos, pianists, projectors, and pulpits. Then came the Sunday ritual of preparing the rented facilities for worship services—sweeping out the trash from the community center, helping Whitey Cary unload the big storage trailer containing the pulpit, microphones, hymnals, rugs, rockers, and playpens, and then in the evening working in happy Christian *bonhomie* with the entire congregation to disassemble and pack up our church for another week.

From the start, we had everything going for us. We had the prayers and predictions of our friends who believed a vast, growing work was inevitable. We had the sophisticated insights of the science of church growth. We had a superb nucleus of believers. And we had *me*, a young pastor with a good track record who was entering his prime. We expected to grow.

But to our astonishment and resounding disappointment, we didn't. In fact, after considerable time and incredible labor, we had fewer regular attenders than during the first six months. Our church was shrinking, and the prospects looked bad—really bad.

So as I walked up my driveway on this hot summer day in 1975, after more than a decade of ministry, I began to lose my equilibrium. My long-established world of bright prospects and success had melted around me.

I was in the darkest, deepest depression of my life. My memory of this time is of a gray, horizonless sea. A faint light falls from a threatening sky and I am treading water alone, sinking. Soon I will be below the surface. Melodramatic, to be sure! But that is how I felt. I wanted out.

Seeing Barbara's smile through the screen, I brightened, as always, and for the next few hours I was preoccupied with my happy young family. But after dinner, when the children were in bed, despondency crept over me once again.

Except for my wife, it seemed that no one cared. And on this hot summer's midnight of soul, I was ready to talk.

“One of the very best books I have read on the spirituality of pastoral ministry.”

Philip Graham Ryken, *Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia*

“I recommend that every pastor first read the Hughes’s book privately and then go over it with his lay leaders. Doing this will not be less than a milestone and might well be a watershed.”

J. I. Packer, *Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College*

“Born out of experience, based on the Word of God, and applied to real life, this book is just what weary and discouraged pastors and their wives need. And it wouldn’t hurt if critical church officers read it too! I highly recommend it.”

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Retired General Director, Back to the Bible*

“With wisdom gained from their own struggles and long years of experience, Kent and Barbara Hughes spell out the principles that can set God’s servants free from the yoke of unscriptural ideas.”

Vernon C. Grounds, *Chancellor, Denver Seminary*

“Bless you, Kent and Barbara, for saying with clarity and boldness what thousands of pastors and pastors’ wives need to hear. Your call back to the basics in ministry will free many from the false demands of ‘success’ and restore the proper measurements of achievement.”

Ray C. Stedman, *Former Pastor, Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA*

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CHURCH AND MINISTRY / CHURCH LIFE

ISBN-13: 978-1-58134-974-0

ISBN-10: 1-58134-974-2



9 781581 349740

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