

Ministry without God

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue

I have three kinds of conversations with clergy. I get an invitation to speak somewhere and afterward find myself drinking coffee or something stronger with someone who wants to talk to a stranger. Or I've written or said something that intrigues or irritates someone, and he or she wants to talk. Or, because I live in London, someone I once worked with passes through and suggests we catch up.

But they're all the same conversation: "Is it well with your soul?" We don't hum rousing melodies with a key change for the last verse. Instead we explore: "Is this turning out to be the vocation you were called to? Can you be a pastor and still be a Christian? Are you certain about the things you used to be vague about and flakier about the things you used to be sure about?"

Leaving aside those who want advice on pursuing doctoral studies in mid-career and those who assume that because I live in Trafalgar Square I pause at 4 p.m. to have tea with the queen, I find that these three questions yield three kinds of answers.

The first kind, which I encountered recently in Scandinavia and in Germany, said, "I feel like a civil servant. People pay their church dues, and membership is artificially high, but church attendance is low, and there's this huge disconnect where faith is something that's in the culture but no one expects or even wants me to talk about it. It's like I'm in a marriage where the love has gone and no one has the courage to separate or the initiative to reignite the fire. We're going through the motions. I'm experiencing slow asphyxiation."

The second kind, which I met not long ago in Hong Kong, said, "All your talk about the practices and habits of ministry sounds very pious and sentimental. I spend my life competing in a marketplace where people want products—a stylish wedding, a good educational experience for their child, a highly effective social care provider to which the local authority may subcontract services, a good price for a building extension. That's what church means here."

The third kind, which I find so widespread in the Church of England that I'd call it the norm, goes like this: "I went into ministry because I aspired to the privilege of being with people at the deepest moments of encounter or loss in their lives; to cherish the ways we meet God, and to be close to people when they feel the absence of God; to be a still point, a sabbath, for people who are run ragged; to be a prophet of abundance in a world of scarcity, a person who is not afraid when a community or an individual is staring down into the bottom of the pond. But the church is giving in to the culture of counting, target-setting, commodifying and circumscribing, and I have to fight to maintain the space truly to be a pastor."

I come away from these conversations humbled and full of admiration for my companions in ministry. But all three kinds of clergy, in different ways, seem to be facing the same pressure—or temptation: how to carry on in ministry, or make the church function, as if there were no God.

The first pastor is in the midst of a well-oiled but soulless machine that has accommodated church to state and society so comfortably that one seldom notices the crossovers. Like Immanuel Kant's notion of God as the moral law written on our hearts, the God of this machine has no particular personality or characteristics but simply facilitates a series of rites of passage and entitlements. It's hardly surprising that clergy in this system are living lives of quiet desperation: they might as well be running the train company.

The second pastor is so busy proving that the church can play with the big bucks in the big league, can mix it with contractors and commercial players, can hold its own in the market place of social forces, that the reason for the church's existence is submerged in the activity and profitability of its flourishing. It's like Pentecost without foregoing cross and resurrection. Christ hasn't saved us from anything or to anything—merely provided a dynamic and resonant brand name.

The third pastor is subject to a more subtle temptation—to withdraw into the apparent simplicity of the pastoral encounter and downplay the power and responsibility of shaping an institution, a community of disciples, a radical witness to a different hope, a new possibility, a cruciform truth. There's an introverted naïveté that risks substituting spirituality and inner healing for church and mission. For every minister who enjoys this third vocation, there are bound to be others balancing the books by striving to practice better versions of the first two models.

Every pastor has a family member who constantly says, silently or aloud, “You’re wasting your time.” Sometimes that voice is coming from the pastor. In the wilderness of unbelief or failure, we’re all tempted the same way Satan tempted Christ: to smooth respectability, superficial success or secluded intimacy. It turns out that all are understandable, well-trodden, but ultimately futile attempts to do what every Christian wants to do: avoid the cross.