

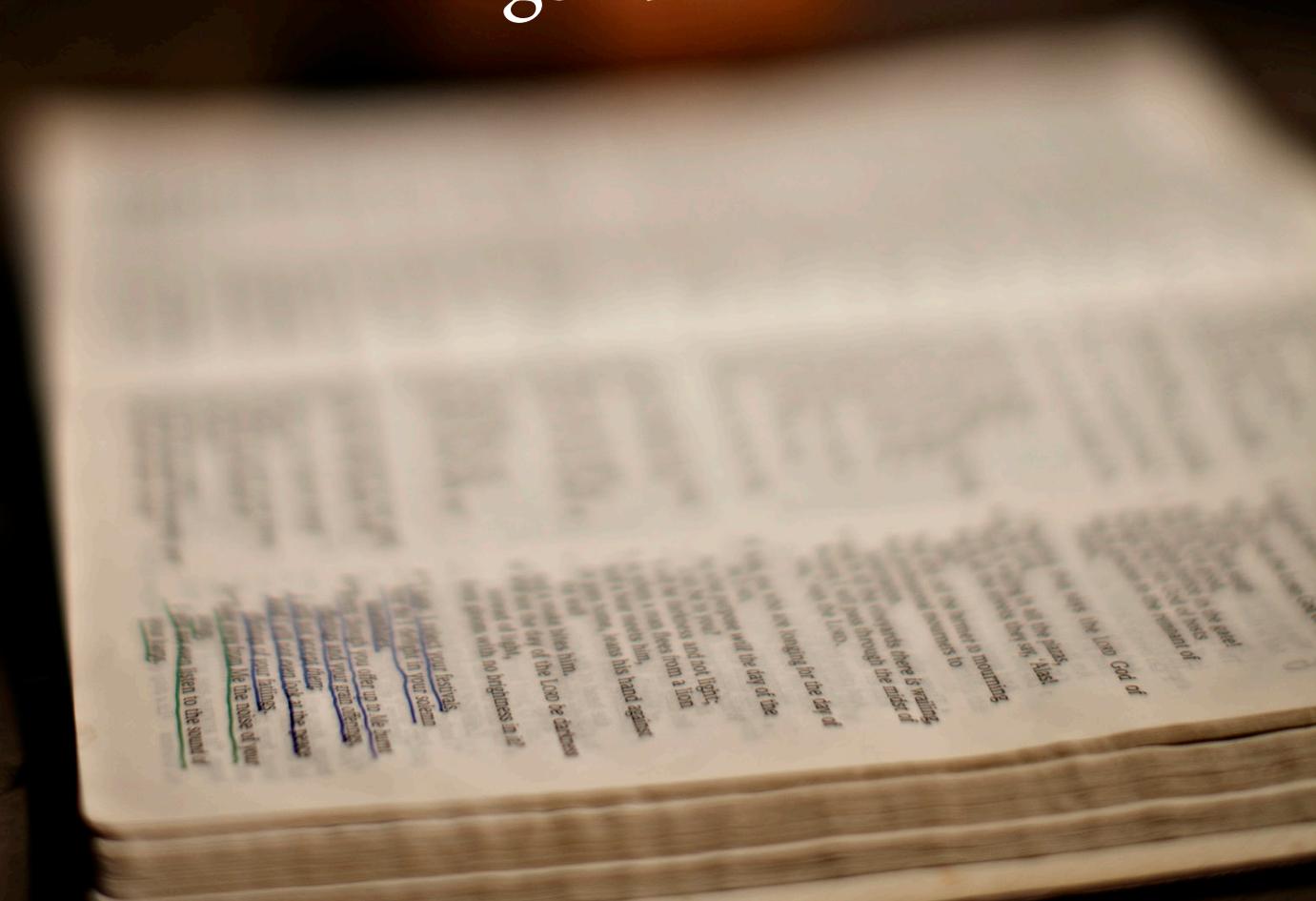


Pension Fund

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Ministry Still Matters

1 Kings 19



“Ministry Still Matters” Sermon

by David A. Shirey, Senior Minister, Central Christian Church, Lexington, KY

(originally preached at Pension Fund’s Ministers & Mates breakfast at the 2015 General Assembly).



Dear Friends:

It was our great honor to host a “Ministers and Mates” breakfast at the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church. At the breakfast, we invited our speaker, Rev. David Shirey of Central Christian Church in Lexington, KY, to cover the topic Ministry Still Matters. He did so to a standing ovation, in a speech that will likely resonate in many ministers’ hearts for years to come.

In his speech, David listed 6 “hurdles” to ministry (criticism, comparison, “next shiny brochure syndrome,” blaming congregations, isolation and depression). He also shared what “angel’s bread” can sustain and renew your passion for ministry, including:

- Self-care (body, mind, soul) and having “paper mentors”
- Affirmation files
- Staying connected with others (mentors, companions and mentees)

As part of Week of the Ministry, we share David’s speech with you now. We hope it will inspire and encourage those in ministry who find themselves under the broom tree and in need of a reminder of why their “labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

When Jesus asked the Disciples to “come, follow me,” he didn’t promise an easy road. Perhaps, at times, you’ve struggled with your own calling for one reason or another. Maybe you’ve faced criticism, comparison, isolation, or even depression, and—like the prophet Elijah—were tempted to admit defeat. We’ve all found ourselves at a crossroads, under the broom tree, at some point in our lives.

Ministry can be difficult! But ministry can also be extremely rewarding. At Pension Fund, we recognize it takes courage to answer God’s call to ministry and continue to carry out His good work. To do so without thanks is even harder.

To all of you who have dedicated your career to ministry and not bowed the knee: Pension Fund thanks you for all that you do.

James P. Hamlett

President

Pension Fund of the Christian Church



I. *Thank You, Pension Fund*

Thank you, Pension Fund, for the honor of this invitation. Thank you for your faithful stewardship on our behalf. Jennie and I sought out a financial advisor years ago. We were referred to someone with outstanding credentials, a graduate of the Wharton School of Whatever. She reviewed all of Jennie's and my "financial instruments" which at that time included a paltry savings account, a checking account, and some stock in a socially conscious mutual fund that was tanking. When asked about our plans for retirement, I said, "The Pension Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." I could tell by the look on her face she had her doubts. "I'll review that for you," she said. So I gave her all the information I had on the Pension Fund and their telephone number. When we returned for our appointment the next week, she said, "Whatever you do with your money from here on out, don't ever stop participating in this. This is outstanding." So, thank you, Pension Fund.

II. *Ministry Matters: Contest on Mt. Carmel*

Jim asked me if I would say something about the Pension Fund's theme of *Ministry Still Matters*. As I prayed over that phrase, our brother in ministry Elijah came to mind. I'm so glad I'm with a scripturally literate congregation this morning so I can simply say "Elijah and the contest on Mt. Carmel" and everybody knows the story. Right? Elijah called out 450 prophets of Baal. The rules were simple: First one to call on your God and have fire fall from heaven and light yonder barbeque pit consuming all those bulls wins. Ready. Set. Go! Not even a spark from Baal's prophets. Elijah then rather cockily said, "You might want to stand back, boys." And then, "God, show 'em your stuff." Voila! Gates Barbeque—Mt. Carmel franchise.

I'm sure that at that point, **feeling pretty good about ministry, knowing that *Ministry Still Matters*,** Elijah went right home and wrote a newsletter column about what happened. Then he blogged about it, tweeted it, and sent out an Instagram photo. Then he likely put together a web site at elijahtheprophet.com that invited other prophets from around Israel to come to one of his upcoming one-day seminars on how *You, too, can pray with results! And how You, too, can increase your church's false prophet defeat numbers! and how for x dollars a year your congregation can be a Partner Prophet Congregation in The Mt. Carmel Network and have access to resources throughout the year that will grow your church's effectiveness, fruitfulness, and influence, including two free personal email correspondences with Elijah himself. Because Ministry Matters!*



III. *Ministry Doesn't Matter: Pouting Prophet Syndrome*

Which didn't happen, of course. You and I know none of that happened. What happened next was: **"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done"** (1 Kings 19:1). Jezebel then texted Elijah, "So help me, I'm gonna have your hide by morning!" So Elijah slunk away stoop-shouldered out into the desert, plopped himself down under a broom tree, sighed, and **"asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD,'"** he said, **"Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep"** (1 Kings 19:4-5). A footnote follows in the NRSV --New Revised Shirey Version-- that says, [Some ancient manuscripts read, "And he fell off to sleep shaking his head and muttering, 'Ministry doesn't matter.'"]

Am I in a room of women and men who can identify with our brother Elijah? We have moments, do we not, when we question our calling, when we wonder if it's really worth it. In the Physician's Desk Manual (New Revised Shirey Version) what Elijah was suffering from is referred to as 'Pouting Prophet Syndrome'—PPS-- the feeling that ministry doesn't matter. Untreated, the prognosis is not good. The end result is throwing in the towel (and the stole and the ordination certificate). The growing conviction that ministry doesn't matter is why, according to the Pension Fund web site, "Half of ministers starting out will leave the ministry within five years." Elijah is frustrated, dejected, and alone. He'd rather die in the desert than have to return to Israel and attend one more board meeting.

So what happened? With Elijah's story as a case study, let's name some of the root causes of PPS. What leads us to believe ministry doesn't matter?

Criticism is one. The Scripture says, **"Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow'"** (1 Kings 19:2). Elijah was feeling pretty good about ministry, thank you very much, but then one nasty word of criticism from Jezebel pricked his balloon, sucked all the air out of him, and Elijah said, "I don't need this." I know we can be too sensitive. Somebody said, "Shirey, the trouble with you ministers is you want 100% approval. A politician only wants 50.1%. You need thicker skin." Okay, but sometimes the criticisms come at vulnerable moments and it hurts. I call 'em pew snipers. Their shots over time get to us. One of our colleagues, Kory Wilcoxson, preached a Good Friday devotional only to have someone say at the door, "You said, cenchurion. It's centurion" and walked off. Really? On my first Christmas Eve at one church I was handed a bulletin at the door on which was written in the margins everything that was wrong with the service. Taking a red pen to my ministry! Criticism can cause us to head for the broom tree.

How about **Comparison?** We start comparing our ministries to others' ministries and before long we're feeling our ministry doesn't really matter. After all, we always compare ourselves to those who appear to be "more successful" than us in all the ways the world and the Yearbook measures success, by what somebody refers to as the ABCs of Attendance, Buildings, and Cash. We always compare



ourselves to those who are doing “better.” Elijah says, “**It is enough; now, O LORD. Take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors**” (1 Kings 19:4). Hear that? I’ve done all I know to do the best I know how to do it and this is all I have to show for it. Not only am I no better than my ancestors, I’m worse. I remember a summer Sunday in Phoenix ten years ago meeting in an elementary school cafeteria trying to get Coolwater Christian Church started. We were three years in, I was 46 years old with 24 years of ministry, and we had 45 in worship. I spent the afternoon in a sour mood saying out loud over and over, “45 at 46. 45 at 46.” Randy Updegraff-Spleth had more than 45 after 3 years of starting Geist. Cynthia Hale had more than 45 after 3 years of Ray of Hope. Adam Hamilton sure had more than 45 at Church of the Resurrection. But David Shirey? How are you doing, David? Sigh. 45 at 46. My oldest daughter, Betsy, said, “Daddy, put a lid on it!” We all do the comparison thing and it can lead us to the broom tree.

How about what one of our colleagues, Michael Swartzentruber, called “**the next shiny brochure syndrome?**” We’re trying our best to get things going. We’ve discerned a compelling Mission, Vision, and Values. We just went to a Continuing Education event or a seminar or something hosted by elijahtheprophet.com and we try to put into practice at our home congregation what Elijah did at Mt. Carmel Christian but without Elijah’s results. So we conclude, “It worked for him or her but not for me. Must be operator error. Must be me. Ministry doesn’t matter because of me” and we blame ourselves.

Or instead of blaming ourselves, we start blaming our congregation. *I’m busting my behind. Anybody else ‘round here care?* God asks, “**What are you doing here, Elijah?**” Elijah answered, “**I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away**” (1 Kings 19:9-10). Hear that? *I’ve been zealous and they’ve been faithless. I’m the only one who cares.* We were called by our people to come and serve alongside them only to find ourselves speaking over and against them, blaming them. Them could be the elders, the board, or the rest of the staff. *I’ve been zealous and they’ve been faithless. I’m the only one who cares.*

Speaking of being the only one, **isolation** is a breeding ground for PPS. The text says, “**Elijah got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba; he left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness**” (1 Kings 19:3-4). He left his servant and went it alone. Look out! We can’t cut ties with our support system! In the Disciples of Christ we’re supposed to be covenantal, bound to one another in bonds of mutual support and encouragement, but given that so many of our churches are solo pastorates, we can become untethered, adrift from one another. And out there by ourselves, unaccountable, unsupported, we can become undone.

And for those of us who have spouses, partners, and families, our zeal for ministry can sometimes cause us to leave them behind. Not good! Within the first year of our call to start a new church, Jennie’s mother died. Then she asked me one night, “When is the first person going to come to this church?” Then, “I’m taking a weekend. I need to spend some time with my sister.” Next thing I knew we were



sitting in a marriage counselor's office and she says, "He's got his desk with new church stuff all over it in our bedroom." The counselor says, "Ooh." Elijah left his servant and we, too, can leave precious people behind, go it alone, and end up all by ourselves. Ministry really doesn't matter much if we end up all alone.

Of course, sometimes the sense that ministry doesn't matter may be a symptom of **depression**. All the signs are there in Elijah: Burnout. Sleeping. Needing to be told to eat. Feeling all alone. No longer experiencing any joy in what you're doing. Overwhelmed by the sense that nothing matters. Hey, Elijah asked that he might die. I won't go into it, but I'll just say I've been there, done that. Five years ago, my wife and dear friend Gary Straub urged me to go to a doctor. He did a full work-up and then gave me a "D" on my report card: Depression. With that diagnosis and a prescription, I drove two blocks to a Kroger parking lot, pulled in under a broom tree, and cried.

Hey, we've got a brother under a broom tree! We've got a sister in the mire! What led to it? Was it criticism? Comparison? Next shiny brochure syndrome? Did she get to blaming herself or everybody else? Did he isolate himself from his support system, friends, colleagues, and family? Was it the oh so common but oh, we don't talk about it slough of depression? Was it other factors? Elijah is sitting under a broom tree overwhelmed with the conviction that ministry doesn't matter.

IV. *Angel's Bread*

Is there a doctor in the house? Is there a Good Physician nearby? Is there ever! Listen: "Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again." The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, **otherwise the journey will be too much for you**" (1 Kings 19:5-7). Ministry is a long journey that can be too much, for sure! According to the Pension Fund web site, "Only 1 out of every 10 ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form." God sends an angel to weary Elijah so he'll be sustained for the 40-day (40 year?) journey of ministry. "Get up and eat" or you won't make it.

Eat what, though? What sustains us for the long haul? What reminds us over and over that Ministry Matters? What constitutes "eating angel's bread?"

Self-care, for sure. Taking care of ourselves body, mind, and soul is angel's bread.

As for our bodies, what's the first thing Elijah does? "He lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep" (1 Kings 19:5). I remember at the Pittsburgh General Assembly Fred Craddock--God rest his soul-- preaching on self-care and saying something like, "So you want to quit, huh? Why don't you take a nap first and then we'll talk." Join a gym. Take a walk. Watch your diet: fresh bread cooked in a hot stone oven and crystal clear water.



We need to feed our minds. Have you read a good book lately? Keep reading. Keep learning. I have what I call “paper mentors,” people whose poetry or prose I return to again and again. I make an appointment with them-- comfy chair, favorite beverage, book of my “paper mentor”-- and it’s angel’s bread. Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Maya Angelou, Howard Thurman, Eugene Peterson. Do you have “paper mentors?”

Are we feeding our souls? Have you read the Good Book lately? Do you pray? I can’t help but to note Elijah’s restoration was aided by a silent retreat spent listening for that mysterious, untranslatable “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). Had he forsaken regular times of silence and prayer and the exercise of earnest exegesis? My buddy Dave Emery talks about the danger of “Doing God’s work without God.” Making time for silence, spiritual retreat, prayer, and Bible study is angel’s bread.

How about an Affirmation File? One of my professors told us to make sure and keep an Affirmation File. He said, “Keep a running file of lives transformed, glimpses of grace, and expressions of appreciation received for something you said or did that made a difference.” Keep a record of when you hear someone repeat a few lines from a sermon that you actually said. You’ll be reminded at those times of Isaiah’s promise that “the word will not return empty, but accomplish the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11) and you’ll be encouraged. When you see that handwritten card thanking you for being there, eat it up.

Staying connected with others is angel’s bread. I came to the conclusion a few years ago that we all need to have three different relationships going at all times in our lives. We need Mentors, what I call Companions on the Way, and Mentees.

Mentors. I have a Spiritual Director and a handful of pastors who are further along the road than I am with whom I speak regularly for guidance and instruction, encouragement and challenge.

If mentors are people *we look up to*, **Companions on the Way** are people we look out to as fellow pilgrims. I like the etymology of the word companion. It’s made up of the prefix “com” (meaning with) and the Latin word “panis” (meaning *bread*). A companion is someone we break bread with. Got that? The folks we take the time to sit down with over a cup of coffee or lunch or a meal or a drink—break bread with—so as to talk about life, life in ministry, and life in Christ.

We also need to reach out to be someone else’s mentor. No matter where you are in your journey of faith there are others for whom you can be teacher, guide, example, and mentor. Barnabas was Paul’s mentor and Paul in time served as Timothy’s. Ministry is a pass-it-on, pay-it-forward enterprise. God forbid that any of us become what Glenn McDonald calls “Spiritual cul-de-sacs, accumulating God’s best stuff and holding on to it for our own purposes” (*The Disciple Making Church*, p. 76).

Bottom line: Being rested up, read up, prayed up, and friended up is angel’s bread—sustenance for the journey that is ministry.



V. They've Never Bowed the Knee

Now back to our brother in ministry, Elijah. **At long last, Elijah receives a word from the Lord.** “Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazeal as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha as prophet in your place” (1 Kings 19:15-16). With that, God flunks pastoral counseling. I mean, *really!* Elijah says, “I’m zealous. They’re faithless. Jezebel’s murderous. I’m no better than my ancestors. Take my life, see if I care.” You’d expect maybe God would play the part of the sympathetic counselor and say, “My, I hear you expressing a high level of vocational dissatisfaction with your role as prophet. You must be very unhappy.” But no. Instead, God simply says, “Go back to work!”

And God reminds Elijah of something very, very important: That he’s not the only one by a long shot. As for that *I’m zealous and they’re faithless - I’m the only one* stuff, God says, “**I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal**” (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah’s not the only one pouring himself heart, mind, and soul into ministry. He miscounted by 6,999. Elijah, you’re not alone. There are 7,000 others out there who haven’t bowed the knee.

I look out this morning and see so many of you I have known and admired across years of ministry. I want you to know your ministry reminds me that ministry still matters! You’ve never bowed the knee.

I think of **Margie Pride**, my colleague when I began in St. Louis 30 years ago. I looked up to her then and still do. Doing ministry on St. Louis’ north side at Memorial Blvd., forming the beloved community, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars for Week of Compassion. She’s never bowed the knee.

I think of **Kara Kleinschmidt Foster** out there in east Tennessee 60 miles east of where I began at Carthage, Tennessee. She’s the only female minister in the county as far as I know. She has no doubt put up with all kinds of nonsense, but she keeps on keepin’ on with verve and passion and good humor. Has not bowed the knee.

A few months ago, I got to go to Kansas City and spend an evening in Smithville with **Ryan Motter and Lara Blackwood Pickrell**. They had a Wednesday night Lenten program with a chef who started a five star restaurant in little Smithville. I wondered, “Do these people know what they have with a five star restaurant and the five star ministry being done by Ryan and Lara?”

JO Williams, long-time Associate Regional Minister during my decade in North Carolina. He was a “son of Encouragement” of my ministry. J.O. is a lifelong bridge between the predominantly Caucasian North Carolina Region and the African-American Assemblies congregations. Never bowed the knee!



I think of **men and women wearing the Honored Minister's pin** who in retirement have renewed, redeemed, and rejuvenated churches through interim ministries. Bob Franz is finishing up down at FCC, Wilmington. Jim and Judy Cox were among my pastors when I was in Arizona. They served modest-sized congregations throughout their ministry and then in retirement served scores of small churches in small places with large love. They and countless others-- even in retirement, not bowing the knee. Ministry still matters to them!

I think of the irrepressible **Erin Wathen**, my colleague in North Phoenix, now in Olathe, Kansas, burning up the blogosphere with her wonderful words and wit.

Bill and Mary Jacobs supported Jennie and me so tirelessly in Phoenix. Those two have served our church in every level in every way imaginable. They've served in untold thankless ways with immeasurable selfless grace. Ask Bill and Mary, "Would you...?" and they say, "Yes."

All my colleagues on the leadership team of **Bethany Fellows** – the Jedi Council – who taught me what it really means **"to pray without ceasing."** We only bow the knee for prayer.

Kathy Reinger, 7 years my associate in NC, who went on to serve the church in Ashland, VA, with imagination and pastoral excellence until her retirement. Never bowed the knee. Dr. Wayne Bell, past president of Lexington Theological Seminary, is 96 years old now and an active member of Central Christian, Lexington. Do you understand what I mean when I say I'm spending as much time at Gamaliel's feet as I can? On one visit Jennie and I made to Wayne, 96, and Virginia, 92, they offered us CDs from the recent class they audited... on string theory. That physics/ cosmology/ metaphysics stuff? I said, "What?" They said, "Oh, it has enlarged our sense of God's grandeur and deepened our praise." 96 and still ministry matters!

Millie Slack gave her entire ministry to decades of tireless, grace-filled service as the Director of the Five Church Association (now Isaiah 58 Ministries) in St. Louis. The woman is Matthew 25 incarnate.



VI. *Ministry Still Matters*

I guess what I'm saying is it's good every couple years at the Pension Fund breakfast to be reminded that we're not alone, that we're but ones in thousands who haven't bowed the knee.

I guess what I'm saying is *Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.*

I guess what I'm saying is "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

I'm saying, "My brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

I'm saying, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, thankful for you all making my prayers with joy, grateful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I know the one who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:3-6).



What I'm saying is what we all know:
Ministry still matters!

Thanks be to God.

Let all God's prophets say, AMEN.