



Reflecting on 40 years of Christian Ministry

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Richard Warner and Pauline have been married for 48 years. They herald from the UK having immigrated to Australia at the call of God in 1969. From the outset they have unstintingly served God and the Church of Jesus Christ. Their journey includes Western Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and for the last 36 years, Victoria. The blessing of God has certainly been on their ministry having seen growth and fruitfulness in every situation they have found themselves. Their story is breathtaking, and yet surprisingly, they are not showing signs of slowing down. Richard here gives us a few snapshots of their journey revealing some precious jewels of leadership and spiritual growth to boot. These reflections are like Richard himself, dynamic, focused, exciting and inspirational. Read on and be blessed!

I have three immediate reflections as I look back over the last 40 years. First, that the grace of God has been super-abundant upon me; second, that I am most unworthy, unlikely and undeserving; and finally, that I have failed Jesus so much, yet despite this, He has used me. You may not want to read any further as these preludes, may preclude any incentive to discover anything worthwhile. But maybe I'll add a couple more things of interest

At the age of 4-5 years, I was a beggar-boy in the slums of Birmingham UK, then dumped into an orphanage for eleven years wondering who I was, and what life was about. A brief relationship at the end of WW 2 between a cognitively impaired woman and a whimsical man (who worked little), produced me! There began a journey not unlike Saroo in the "Lion" movie, but my plight was sadder in many respects.

The feeling of mental (and general) inferiority plagued me throughout my school years and beyond. But God used this to put a 'vulnerability' to Him in my heart, when at age 18-19 years in a little Gospel Mission in Birmingham led by the late Pastor Jo Griffiths, I surrendered my life to Christ, and became a brand new creation (2Cor. 5:17). Such was my transformation, I found a true Father, Friend, and family in God, Jesus and His Church, I discovered my true identity, no longer an orphan, lost, hopeless and without purpose. I picked up a guitar and taught myself to play as I worshipped, composing many songs in those first few months. I devoured the scriptures, began to witness, preach, serve, and do whatever I could as a young firebrand for Jesus.

I never dreamed, or had any ambition to be a 'pastor'. I was so happy serving in any capacity I could amongst children, youth, platform, music, and eventually on the church board of elders. I had masses of 'unredeemed residual' in me that involuntarily manifested in many embarrassing moments; temper, discouragement, foolish talk, prideful motives, lust, inferiority, and even rebellion. But God was gracious and merciful, leading me out of these strongholds by His love and power. I never asked for a ministry or position (and I've never since), but God gave me an abundance of opportunities to serve Him, and I learned quickly that '*Promotion comes from the Lord*' (Ps. 75:6).

God miraculously led me to my wonderful wife Pauline, and called us to serve in Australia, at first helping to pioneer the Armadale Assembly of God in Western Australia, then leading the WA State Youth Alive. Then, after an invasion of His Spirit in my life, He led me to train formally for ministry at Commonwealth Bible College in Katoomba, New South Wales. All of these episodes were filled with miracles of His grace!

We were invited to Townsville Queensland, to assist the late David Cartledge (what a man!), then a brief period of itinerant ministry followed before taking on the struggling work at Devonport, Tasmania. In all of these ventures we saw the gracious hand of God in blessing and increase. I was privileged to consider three invitations to pastorates around the country before accepting the unrelenting one from Pastor Ken Magrath at Springvale, Victoria. Again, we witnessed phenomenal growth and blessing in those 'heady eighties'; planting churches, sending out missionaries, buying a ten-acre site for our new church building and school, Lighthouse Christian College.

Today, 36 years later, our 10 acres of land is full of school and ministry buildings. We have planted seven churches (some of which have their own daughter churches), sent out over 100 full-time workers for the Gospel, three more schools with three more underway, reaching thousands of young people with 30+ hours per week of continuous discipling for Jesus. It's been quite a ride! God has seen fit to use a 'Mr. Nobody' and make him a 'somebody' for Him. But I've picked up some things on the way. Here are a few things I've learned since I thought I knew it all!

1. *Don't Overwork - overflow!*

I don't like working for God. I only want to work WITH Him! He came as a babe – *Immanuel*, meaning *God with us*. He said "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*"

(Mtt. 11:29). Recent statistics for Pastoral Ministry 'burn-out' and the like are horrendous and regretful. The following is a sampling of those provided by Expastors.com:

- 90% of pastors are overworked;
- 70% of pastors feel underpaid;
- 90% feel unprepared;
- 70% struggle with depression and discouragement;
- 80% believe pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families;
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend;
- 50% of the ministers starting out will not last 5 years; and
- Only 10% of ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form.

These staggering figures suggest that Pastors are an endangered species. They certainly contradict the Gospel we are supposedly espousing. *The yoke is heavy and there ain't no rest for my soul?*

I have learned that unless God empowers us: we are not going anywhere (Ex. 33:15); our labour is in vain (Ps. 127:1); we can do nothing (Jon. 15:5); and we are heading for a breakdown! I am besotted with Paul's consoling words:

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2Cor. 4:7); and

"I worked harder than all of them... yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1Cor. 15:10).

In other words, *don't overwork – overflow!*

2. Give God Something to work with

If it wasn't for God supernaturally intersecting my life (and probably yours), then I wouldn't be here today, certainly not on the Lord's side. As the young Christian matures and ascends into leadership, a strange deceptive declension unfolds:

- We preach against backsliding, yet we drift away from our moorings (Heb.2:1);
- We begin in the Spirit, but end up in the flesh (Gal. 3:3);
- We begin with 'foolish' and sometimes reckless abandonment, then end up with caution and prudence, under the guise of wisdom (1Cor. 1:21);
- We begin with the adventure of vision, and end up with the skills of administration and legal compliance (Prov. 29:11); and
- We begin with supernatural practice, and 'drift' into theological theory (Heb. 2:1).
- Etc. etc. etc....

Why and how does this 'drift' take place? I have learned just this one thing:

Religion Replaces Relationship

- Religion knows *about* God, relationship knows God;
- Religion works *for* God, relationship works *with* God;
- Religion produces *performance* – relationship produces *works of love*;
- Religion overworks, relationship overflows;
- Religion is *self-driven*, relationship is *God-driven*;

- Religion *dries you up* on the inside, relationship *fires you up* on the inside; *and*
- Religion leaves you *condemned*, relationship leaves you *restored*;
- Etc. etc. etc....

As a Pentecostal pastor, I have a special responsibility to stay 'alive in the Spirit'. To do this I must live the sort of life that the Spirit can indwell. The Spirit life is unpredictable, supernatural, holy, vision-filled, creative, bringing order to chaos, seeing as God sees, prayerful, and often contradictory to natural *modus operandi*. If one lives a life that is only filled with good business practice, well-proven strategic planning, comprehensive risk-management policies, best proven leadership principles, the most lucrative marketing policies, and the latest sales techniques that will guarantee your targets for the month, you will die a slow death by disappointment and burn-out! The checkpoint to avoid such a tragedy is '**Giving God something to work with**'.

What are you doing that, if God wasn't with you, you are sure to fail? Pastors especially need to come back to the life of faith. God wants to work WITH you, but can't if you've got it all tied up tuned up and wrapped up. You're simply doing God's work with worldly methods and as good as they are, they are no match for the mighty strategies that God provides, to pull down strongholds, invade hearts, change nations, and prepare us for eternal glory.

The life of faith (spelt R.I.S.K.), is the only life that pleases God, attracts God and guarantees the results of God. Supernatural signs are God's natural pleasure. Such a lifestyle enthuses, empowers, and encourages. Great deterrents to burn out!

3. Keep Short Accounts

Yes, I know what it's like to be offended and discouraged. I keep up with the national average; I have an offensive encounter about once every month and occasionally have a 'mini-depression' attack. I have to admit that I have had two occasions when I was thinking of giving it away. However, such hardships produced two things; firstly, they drew me closer to God – humility, surrender, purification etc... and secondly, they forced me to draw on great mentor relationships that I had already developed.

These two actions were used by God to pull me through. He's always vindicated me and lifted me out of the miry clay. I note that Jesus was insulted, misrepresented, let down, despised, etc. and he is '*touched with feeling of my infirmities*' (Heb. 4:15). How consoling!

There are four things that I cannot do if I hold malice and bitterness:

- 1) I cannot partake of the Lord's supper (1Cor. 11:28-32);
- 2) I cannot be forgiven (Mk. 11:25);
- 3) I cannot pray (Mtt. 5:23); and
- 4) I cannot sleep at night (Eph. 4:16).

Forgiveness is my God-given privilege. If I don't forgive, I'm usurping God's authority. He's the only judge. I'd prefer a good night's sleep!

Conflict contains treasures; if you are humble enough to discover them.

- It challenges your views and reveals your need to improve;
- It tests your EQ and enables it to be strengthened;
- It gives you opportunity to draw on God's incredible grace;
- It tests your faith, and hones your sense of calling and identity;
- It strengthens your resolve, to go on, endure and win; and
- It intensifies your love for God, His work, and others.

The last thing to do in conflict is to get bitter and unforgiving. Every conflict is a catalyst for either depression and darkness or growth and victory. **Keep short accounts**, and live long!

These three keys - ***Don't Overwork - Overflow, Give God Something to Work With, and Keep Short Accounts***, are just three of so many that I have found not only keeping me in the 10% of pastors who will retire as a pastor, but more importantly, kept me fresh, relevant, and fruitful for Him. I have proved His word so true:

"I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 37:25);

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green" (Ps. 93:12-14); and

"...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour" (Is. 61:3).

I started life begging bread, useless, with poor longevity; I am finishing prosperous, fruitful and abounding in His grace.

To God be all the glory!