

Matt Fuller

"Matt is a modern-day Barnabas."

*Sinclair
Ferguson*

The
Joyful
Pastor
(despite
everything)

Encouragement for the
Hard-Pressed Shepherd

“The apostle Paul summarised his ministry experience as combined agony and ecstasy: ‘death is at work in us, but life in you.’ Matt Fuller well captures this paradoxical balance. A modern-day Barnabas, he writes encouragingly but honestly, coupling the hard-earned wisdom of personal experience with the field-tested insights of past masters. *The Joyful Pastor* is a gift to pastors, present and future—as well as to the pastored.”

SINCLAIR FERGUSON, Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries; Author, *The Whole Christ*

“Written from the trenches, not the bleachers, *The Joyful Pastor* is a theologically rich, pastorally honest call to recover what we too easily lose: the breathtaking privilege of shepherding souls purchased by Christ’s own blood. Fuller doesn’t deny the sorrows. He simply refuses to let them have the last word. Every weary pastor needs this book. You will be glad you’ve read it.”

JUAN SANCHEZ, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, TX

“The realities of pastoral ministry are learned not in the classroom but in the trenches of the local church. Pastors reading this book will identify with so much that Matt describes and be encouraged to keep going, understanding that there really is no greater task.”

JONATHAN PRIME, FIEC Director for London

“Every pastor—discouraged or not—should read this. It is jam-packed with scriptural truth, personal pastoral experience and rich quotations from church history. An encouraging, practical, thoughtful and pastorally careful read!”

ANDY MASON, Mission Director, Co-Mission; Vicar, St John’s Chelsea, London; Author, *God’s Leader*

“This book may be written for church pastors but it is equally relevant for women and men involved in a variety of word ministries, Matt reminds us that ministry is a noble task, full of joys and sorrows, but that even the darkest of times can be used by the Lord to mould us into his likeness and thwart Satan’s scheming. Here is pastoral wisdom resulting from years of faithful ministry. It warmed my heart to read it.”

CARRIE SANDOM, Director of Women’s Ministry,
Proclamation Trust, London

“As pastors, we sometimes use the line ‘I have the best job in the world!’ I worry that sometimes we give the impression that it’s one of the very worst. Perhaps we sometimes believe it is. Matt’s book is a wonderful balm for anyone feeling the wear and tear of ministry. I am thankful to have read it. It’s done my soul and my ministry a power of good.”

RORY SHINER, Senior Pastor, Providence City Church,
Perth, Australia; Author, *The World Next Door*

“This is an unusual and beautiful book. It is semi-autobiographical, which is unusual for a Christian book. It is beautiful because it describes the life of a real pastor not at the end of their ministry but in the midst of it, finding joy to keep going. I will be encouraging the next generation of pastors, as well as those of my own generation, to read it.”

ROBIN SYDSERFF, Director, The Proclamation Trust, UK

“I wish I had had this book in the early days of my ministry. Matt is honest about the frustrations and challenges of ministry but shows how they are far outweighed by the privileges and delights of knowing and serving Christ. Biblically faithful and pastorally warm—highly recommended.”

PAUL MALLARD, Chair, FIEC Theology Team, UK;
former Pastor, Widcombe Baptist Church, Bath

“Here is a timely tonic for the pastor’s soul. The job is tough, and discouragements press in. What a help to be reminded of the many privileges of the role and to be called afresh to rejoice in the Lord. This book is at once theological and pastoral, and it manages to be honest, realistic and optimistic all the while. I want every pastor I know to read it.”

JONATHAN GRIFFITHS, President, Heritage College
and Seminary, Ontario, Canada;
Bible Teacher, Encounter the Truth

“A deeply encouraging and refreshingly honest book for weary shepherds. Drawing from decades of pastoral experience, Matt Fuller combines rich biblical insight, wise pastoral application, and the steady counsel of the Puritans and other faithful voices from church history to remind ministers of the privilege and joy of shepherding God’s people. It strengthens both the heart and the hands of pastors for long-term ministry.”

TONY MERIDA, Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, NC;
Author, *Love Your Church*

“*The Joyful Pastor* is like dinner with a dear friend—full of honesty, winsome discussion, deep encouragement and rich sustenance. But Matt Fuller has served gospel ministers by inviting us to dine not just with him but with those from centuries past who have served the same Lord. A must-read for anyone in ministry—and not just once but, I would suggest, annually.”

PAUL GRIMMOND, Vice-Principal, Moore College, Sydney

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The
Joyful
Pastor
(despite
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Encouragement for the
Hard-Pressed Shepherd

the**goodbook**
COMPANY

The Joyful Pastor

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*Dedicated to the many staff at Christ Church
who have shared the joys and sorrows of ministry
over 25 years, especially Sharon, Ben and Phil,
for decades of encouragement amid the chaos.*

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Chapter 1

A Sorrow Full of Joy

Before I went into ministry, I was a schoolteacher. I loved the job. I would happily have spent 40 years as a schoolteacher.

But one thing that I observed as a teacher was that a number of staff in their fifties had run out of steam. Not all, by any stretch—but quite a few were seeing out their time and, in the case of a couple of maths teachers, quite literally counting down the days until they retired. After years in the profession, they were tired, they were discouraged and, in some cases, they were bored. Consequently, the kids they taught were bored because there was no enthusiasm in the classroom; their teacher was just going through the motions.

With the reckless and naïve enthusiasm of a 20-something-year-old, I promised myself that I would never allow myself to feel that way.

Now I'm in my fifties, and after 25 years of ministry, I often think back to that experience. I'm certainly not bored, but sometimes I do feel tired or discouraged, or

both. There are certainly times when I don't seem to quite have the same energy levels as before. The early zeal and sense of expectancy in ministry can sometimes be buried by the sorrows and sadnesses. It's easier to focus on what's going wrong than to notice what has gone well.

To clarify, I remain 100% convinced that ministry is “a noble task”, as Paul put it (1 Timothy 3:1). At one stage I had thought of that as the title for this book. When I've been at my lowest ebb, I have never doubted that. I always still believed that ministry was an excellent thing to do—a noble thing to do; but I was in danger of losing my zeal and wanting others to do it instead of me. I can see in myself how easy it is to become the pastor version of those older teachers I was so sure I would not follow.

I want—need—to remind myself of the *joys and privileges* of being in pastoral ministry. I want to recover my enthusiasm and maintain my spiritual fervour. I want to be a shepherd as described by Peter, doing it “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be ... eager to serve” (1 Peter 5:2). I want to be able to say with Matthew Scott, a 19th-century English minister...

With all my discouragements and sinful despondency, in my better moments, I can think of no work worth doing compared to this. If I had a thousand lives, I would willingly spend them in it: and if I had as many sons, I would gladly [encourage them into it].¹

1 Matthew Scott, quoted in Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Pantianos Classics, 1831), p. 19.

I don't want to be a discouraged, somewhat grumpy pastor. I want to be a willing and eager pastor. A joyful pastor.

(By the way, throughout this book I'm going to use "pastors" as my primary shorthand for those in ministry: men and women, senior ministers, associates and juniors. The pressures and demands, joys and opportunities are not all the same for these different roles, but there's plenty of common ground. If you're in full-time church ministry and are not a "pastor", this book is still for you, and I hope that you'll forgive my shorthand.)

The Stories We Tell

I love one of John Newton's lesser-known hymns, "What Contradictions Meet", in which he beautifully describes the strange mixture of emotions in the life of a pastor:

What contradictions meet
In ministers' employ!
It is a bitter sweet—
A sorrow full of joy
No other post affords a place
For equal honour or disgrace.²

It has a wonderful realism to it: in ministry there is both bitterness and sweetness, sorrow and joy. But my theory is that lots of us pastors are well aware of the sorrows of ministry: we quickly notice them; we dwell on them; we dream about them. The joys? Less so.

² https://hymnary.org/text/what_contradictions_meet (accessed 2 March 2026).

How Not to Be “Quite Miserable”

Last year I began visiting an elderly retired minister who lives near me. He’s now fairly chairbound but delights in having visitors. The first time I went to see him, he asked what was going on in the ministry at Christ Church Mayfair, how long I had been there, and what I had seen the Lord doing. So I painted a brief portrait of the last few years, and his response arrested me:

Brother, you must be overflowing with thankfulness.

My response was along the lines of...

Hmm, I’m afraid I’m not. Most of the time I’m stumbling through from one week to the next, worried about some crisis or other.

He replied...

No, no. That’s no good. Brother, you must pause and give thanks. You’ll be quite miserable otherwise.

I found that a profoundly helpful word. And I have sought to do as he counselled.

My resolution to give thanks more frequently has been helped by the fact that while this elderly man still has a sparkling wit, his short-term memory is a little shot. So now, when I visit him every few weeks, I quite often relay the same stories I have already told him. He consistently comments, “Brother, you must be overflowing with thankfulness”.

And now I’m prepared and can reply, “I’m learning to”.
I don’t think thankfulness is my natural setting, and

I'm not yet overflowing, but gratitude does now trickle out of me.

What are the stories you tell yourself about your ministry, and what are the stories you share with other pastors? It's often easier to notice, dwell upon and talk about the sorrows than the joys. Bad news often comes as a sudden event, while good news often happens over a long period of time. The man or woman who is exposed as having an affair and leaves their family is a wildly discouraging event that looms large. By contrast, the believer who slowly grows in maturity as a Christian, who joined your church when they weren't a believer but ten years later is now leading Bible studies, evangelising in their neighbourhood and mentoring younger believers is very encouraging. You have to make an effort to focus on the slow-burn success stories.

Years ago, I remember asking Peter Horrocks, who was then head of BBC News, why they had spent days and days covering an English sporting victory as headline news.³ His words stuck in my head: "Most news events are depressing. Most of the time it's war, famine, disaster, political failure. Good news stories tend to take years to happen, and no one has the attention span. So when a good news event comes along, you have to squeeze every bit of joy from it."

Most churches will have some people in them who are quietly bearing fruit 30, 60 or 100-fold. As pastors, as we consider our ministry we need to deliberately

³ I want to tell you that this was England regaining the Ashes trophy by beating Australia at cricket in 2005 after 18 long years. I include this detail here just for Australian friends. I am also aware that 2005 is now a long time ago...

take time to notice these good news stories, to squeeze every drop of joy from the things that go well. I say this as one whose temperament is not naturally positive. Thankfulness is a discipline for me; I have to remember to do it. I have made it my habit to write down five things I'm thankful for in the past 24 hours. Similarly, in our weekly meetings as a staff team I insist that everyone has to share at least one encouragement from the previous week. We try to celebrate encouragements publicly at church. I constantly find it amazing how many petitions that we've prayed at church prayer meetings have been answered. It's encouraging!

It's not only within our own hearts and churches—we pastors can probably also be better at encouraging one another. It may be a British thing, but when we meet up, lots of ministers don't want to be perceived as boasting and don't want to discourage others who are in tricky seasons, so we don't list out the things we're thankful for. We don't give thanks to God for seeing him at work. We share everything that is going wrong and can easily lament over the things that are discouraging.

Perhaps we need to speak as much about the joys as we do the sorrows—as much about the sweetness as the bitterness. Newton's hymn is worth reading in full because it has a lovely balance to it:

What contradictions meet
In ministers' employ!
It is a bitter sweet--
A sorrow full of joy;
No other post affords a place
For equal honour or disgrace!

Who can describe the pain
Which faithful preachers feel,
Constrain'd to preach in vain
To hearts as hard as steel?
Or who can tell the pleasures felt
When stubborn hearts begin to melt?

The Saviour's dying love,
The soul's amazing worth,
Their utmost efforts move
And draw their bowels forth:
They pray and strive--their rest departs
Till Christ be form'd in sinners hearts.

If some small hope appear,
They still are not content,
But with a jealous fear,
They watch for the event:
Too oft they find their hopes deceiv'd;
Then how their inmost souls are griev'd!

But when their pains succeed,
And from the tender blade
The rip'ning ears proceed,
Their toils are overpaid:
No harvest-joy can equal theirs,
To find the fruit of all their cares.

On what has now been sown,
Thy blessing, Lord bestow;
The power is thine alone
To make it spring and grow;
Do thou the gracious harvest raise,
And thou, alone, shalt have the praise.

So, in order redress the balance a little, this book is going to focus on the joys and somewhat take the sorrows for granted. I'm not attempting to be balanced. This is meant to be a lopsided book! I want to spend the majority of the time dwelling upon the blessings and privileges of pastoral ministry.

At this point, another clarification feels in order. I have not reached some new level of ministry joyfulness and bliss. I'm not writing this from the beach while having happy daydreams because all is well. I'm writing amid chaos. On my desk are significant staffing issues, a domestic abuse case in marriage, a suicide attempt, a financial shortfall in the budget and a lack of leaders for various ministries. There are numerous issues at church that have rumbled on for years and seem intractable. I have had numerous critics in our church. As a family, we are waiting for a sibling to die of terminal illness, and we are worried about elderly parents. I certainly feel "hard pressed". In part, I am writing this to remind myself of why I am "not crushed" (2 Corinthians 4:8). In truth, I wonder if I'm writing this in part as a form of task avoidance. However, chiefly, I'm trying to pause and give thanks.

If I were the only minister in Christendom who feels like this, then I'd be thrilled. I would still write this book for myself; I need it. But I don't think I'm alone. I'm conscious that many of my peers in the UK feel a little jaded, and when I've told friends, especially in the USA and Australia, that I was planning to write this, they replied, "Yes please". The data that's available suggests that, worse than feeling jaded, somewhere around a third

of pastors consider quitting at some point each year.⁴ Often there are tragic stories behind some of that. Yet I wonder if, for many of us, there is no great drama; rather it's an attritional sense of becoming wearied, an anxiety over the fact that the finishing line is a long way off.

Of course, it's not only in their fifties that people start to wonder about their life choices! In one of his less encouraging passages, the 19th-century minister Charles Bridges observed:

A distant view of the ministry is generally very different from what is found when we are actually engaged in it. The young soldier, who has never seen an enemy, may form some general notions of what is before him; but his ideas will be much more lively and diversified when he comes upon the field of battle. If the Lord were to show us the whole beforehand, who that has a sense of his own insufficiency and weakness would venture to engage?⁵

It's a typically robust sentence from Bridges, but you may only be a few years into ministry and yet know the

4 It is hard to get accurate data here. Some of the articles I found with relevant information were the following (all accessed 2 March 2026):

<https://apnews.com/article/christian-clergy-burnout-pandemic-survey-24ee46327438ff46b074d234ffe2f58c>

<https://apnews.com/article/clergy-burnout-church-mental-health-summit-570e71ec96575abc92865ad5baf491e6>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/11/pastor-burnout-pandemic-barna-consider-leaving-ministry/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/2015/09/one-percent-why-so-few-evangelical-pastors-quit-lifeway/>

<https://www.ministrybrands.com/church-management/ministry-burnout>

5 Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, p. 105.

reality of what he is saying. When we enter ministry, it tends to turn out to be a lot more complicated than we thought before we started! Perhaps three years into ministry (or sooner), you have discovered that there are days when it's no fun and very different than you'd imagined it would be.

Perhaps you aren't yet several years in, though—perhaps you are reading this just as you enter ministry. Don't panic. It turns out that a sense of our own insufficiency and weakness can put us in a very healthy place spiritually.

As I've turned to previous generations of ministers (which we'll do throughout this book), I have been struck by the fact that there is nothing new here. For pastors, the temptation towards discouragement is always there. Two hundred years ago, Bridges wrote:

Unless we have a high estimate of the church; the constraining influence of the Saviour's love, and the upholding prop of almighty grace, what is there to preserve us from sinking in despondency?⁶

Despondency is often a close companion to those in ministry. Paul could write that “we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8). We need to take our time to raise our view of the church, the Saviour's love and the prop of almighty grace. We need to fight the natural drift towards sin and despondency. Although Bridges doesn't make the link here, it is often despondency that opens a door in our hearts for sin.

6 As above, p. 12.

All of a sudden, in our self-pity, we can begin to feel entitled to indulge unhealthy patterns of behaviour.

Instead of this, we need to hear the New Testament command to “rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). We need to heed the command to “never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11). It’s clearly very easy to stop rejoicing and to lose zeal! But we also need to remember why we can rejoice—why we can get up with a sense of zeal for what we are doing. We need to pause and give thanks so that we don’t end up “quite miserable”.

The Best Vocation in the World

Centuries ago, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin observed:

The work of the ministry is the best work in the world; God had but one Son in the world and he made him a minister.⁷

I want to recover the sense that I have the best job in the world. No one enters full-time ministry for the “big bucks” (or, at least, they shouldn’t). No one does it for an easy life. We entered ministry because we felt it was a vocation, not merely a job. Most of us presumably felt that nothing was more important than serving Jesus by preaching, teaching and shepherding, and taking out the message of the gospel. Here was a task that gave purpose to our lives.

⁷ Thomas Goodwin, “An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians” in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 1:563.

Brothers and sisters, that remains true. Consider Richard Baxter's 17th-century description of the pastor's task:

We are seeking to uphold the world, to save it from the curse of God, to perfect the creation, to attain the ends of Christ's death, to save ourselves and others from damnation, to overcome the devil and demolish his kingdom, to set up the kingdom of Christ, and to attain and help others to the kingdom of glory.⁸

That sounds good! The next time that someone asks me what I "do for work", I'm going to try and trot that out. It is true—we are not involved in trifling work that doesn't matter. We are about eternal work that transforms lives.

Think for a moment about writing your resumé. (I've avoided the need to do that by being in the same church for 25 years.) What an extraordinary job description every church pastor has:

- We are shepherds of God's flock (1 Peter 5:1-2).
- We are stewards of God's household (Luke 12:43).
- We are watchmen of God's city (Ezekiel 33:7).
- We are labourers in God's field (1 Corinthians 3:6).
- We are builders of God's house (1 Corinthians 3:10).

8 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* ((Banner of Truth, 1999 reprint), p. 112.

- We are ambassadors with God's message (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The obvious thing that these all have in common is that we are serving the living God by caring for his precious church, which he bought with his own blood. Have we lost the extraordinary, momentous dignity of that role?

I have a good friend who for a few years was a direct report to a US President. It was a demanding job. He would say that even though at the time he was aware of the honour, it is only with hindsight that he can appreciate with absolute wonder the privilege he had. To paraphrase him, "I had direct access to the most powerful man in the world, some of the most confidential information in the world and a budget of billions of dollars. Who on earth thought little me was worthy of that?!"

Those of us in ministry have the same access to God as every believer, but we have also been given time that we can set apart to study the most precious truths in the world and care for the most precious asset that the Almighty has on this planet: his people. Who on earth thought that you and I were worthy of that?!

Perhaps you need to pinch yourself and stand in awe at the privilege of being an ambassador of the Almighty. You may lack a luxury embassy; you may lack a large budget; you may lack a staff team to assist you. But... the one you represent is the incomparable King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light. There is no doubt whatsoever that he will vindicate and reward his ambassadors with absurd generosity and disproportionate munificence.

So the aim in this book is simply to slow down and appreciate the privilege and joys of pastoring. We'll do that mainly by concentrating on this short passage from 1 Peter 5:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

(v 1-4)

I want to address my own heart so that I am, once again, both willing and eager to serve. I'd love you to join me. Brothers and sisters, we have the best job in the world. It has its sorrows, yes—but also, despite everything, many, *many* joys.