

# A Prayer for Those in Ministry

Entering into God's presence corporately means the body of Christ prays together in the midst of both thankfulness and sadness. It means some are rejoicing while others cry out for help. On the final morning of the Covenant Midwinter Conference in January, North Park Theological Seminary president **John E. Phelan Jr.** offered this prayer for pastors and those in ministry.

**I**t has been good to be here, Lord. It has been good to see colleagues and friends. It has been good to renew acquaintances, recall the old stories, and reclaim the old commitments. It has been good to celebrate the new life in Christ, to settle under the yoke of the kingdom once more, and to refresh our identity in Christ. It has been good to sing and shout and praise. For many of us it has simply been good to rest or stroll the 16th Street Mall or read a book or sit with a spiritual director. But we cannot stay. Someone else may be preaching on Sunday, but a flurry of activity awaits us. The demands of ministry press upon us even now as we contemplate our flights or long drives home. We pause to give thanks for one another, to pray for one another—to love one another as you love us.

Some of us are excited to get home. Ministry is going well. We have strong leaders who support our ministry. People are responding to the good news. Worship is a joy and we can't wait to preach and teach and pray. We are thinking about adding a service to accommodate the people eager to grow in faith, to bear witness, and to show compassion. We are humble and grateful and a little overwhelmed by it all. We seem to be riding

the wave of the Spirit and are hanging on for dear life.

But for many of us ministry is painful and difficult. We face indifference and even hostility. As hard as we work, as ardently as we pray, as carefully as we preach and teach, nothing seems to change. We are frustrated. Failure seems to dog us. We wonder what you were thinking when you called us to ministry—or did you? Give us hope today, O God. Renew our love for you. Renew our love for our congregations, our communities. Help our lives to take a gospel shape. Encourage us, surprise us with love. Surround us with colleagues and friends who pray for us, love us, and sustain us.

For some of us our marriages are rewarding, fulfilling, and joyful. Our spouses are supportive and partners in our work. Our children are doing well in school and growing in faith. We are so thankful and grateful and excited about what God is doing in our families. We realize how blessed we are when we see marriages fragmenting and families fraying.

But for many of us our marriages are full of strain, frustration, and anger. Our children are small and demanding. Our schedules are crammed with activity.

Money is tight and worries mount. Sometimes we find ourselves wondering what we ever saw in each other. For some of us the children are no longer small. Our adult children seem lost. Their futures are unclear. They can't seem to settle into their lives. They aren't sure about the commitment to Christ they made as a child. We fret about them, provide them with unheeded advice, and in the end feel powerless. Renew our love, O God. Remind us of your faithfulness. Help us to rest in your stewardship of our lives.

For some of us, O Lord, the smiles are painted on. People think we are doing fine. We tell them we are. But we are lying. We are sunk in depression. It is painful to get out of bed in the morning, excruciating to face the people who look to us for leadership. Cracks are beginning to appear and we don't know how much longer we can patch the façade. Give us hope, O Lord. Provide us with unexpected help, O Lord. Lift us out of the depths. Bring us into the light.

Many in this room, O God, are grieving. A much beloved wife has died. A longed for husband has been lost. A child or grandchild is gravely ill. A relationship has been broken beyond repair. A job has been lost. The call we thought we had did not come through. The interview went well, we thought, but they never called back. We are looking for a new opportunity for service and witness, but all the doors seem to be slammed shut. Encourage us today, O loving God. Surround us with the love of friends and family. Remind us of the hope of resurrection and the promise of your presence. Open to us a new future where hope is strong.

Some of us have recently graduated from seminary or are anticipating our graduation. We are excited about ministry. We are ready to serve and



love and give. But we wonder, is there a place for us? Will the right opportunity come? Will all the preparation, perspiration, and prayer pay off? Or will we languish? Will the phone remain silent? Will our hopes fade as the days pass? Remind us of your call, O Lord. Remind us that ministry may come to us in unexpected ways when we least expect it. Help us to see the unseen possibilities and to find places to use our gifts and pursue our passions.

Some of us are honored to serve the young women and men in the military. In the year to come we may find ourselves in harm's way. We may have to watch those same young women and men die or suffer disabling wounds, both physical and emotional. We will help them struggle with their loneliness, face their wordless fears, and perhaps find peace in the love of Jesus Christ. Protect us, O Lord, and them. Give us hope, O Lord, and them. Bring us home safely—bring them home safely. And give us and them and our battered world, peace.

For many of us this has been a difficult year financially. Many of our congregants are poor. They are perhaps immigrants whose jobs disappear

first. We minister in situations of poverty and desperation. We haven't been paid in two months. The church is behind on its rent. We have exhausted all of our resources and seem to have nowhere to turn. But you are there, O Lord. All the world is yours. We cry out to you. Help our people, O God. Help our church! Give us hope.

In spite of all these challenges; in spite of the pain, frustration, and fear, we still know great joy in serving Christ. On some Sunday mornings the songs of praise ring out and our hearts soar. The word of God is clear, the Spirit is moving, people are responding, and we know once again why we responded when God called. We are grateful and thankful that we have the extraordinary privilege of preaching the gospel, caring for the poor, teaching confirmation, planning worship, envisioning the future. We are humbled and honored when people open their lives to us and call us pastor. And we are blessed.

So we give thanks. We have hope. We grasp joy. We love you.

And we pray all this in the strong name of Jesus, amen. ■

**John E. Phelan Jr.** is president and dean of North Park Theological Seminary.