

GROWTH POINTS

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Murphy's Symmetry Principle

In the work of pastoral leadership, there are certain principles that reveal themselves not in textbooks, but in the trenches of ministry life.

One such idea—borrowed from the realm of organizational behavior is *Murphy's Symmetry Principle*. Though often overlooked, it quietly explains a great deal about the challenges pastors face in growing healthy, enduring congregations.

Murphy's Symmetry Principle states: "It takes just as long to unlearn something as it did to learn it."

In other words, behaviors, patterns, and habits that were developed over a long period will not be changed overnight. What was learned in five years will take five years to undo. What took a decade to build will take a decade to redirect. This principle can frustrate the impatient leader—but it can also empower the wise one.

Pastors often arrive at a church with a heart full of vision and a head full of strategy. They've prayed, prepared, and planned. And yet, within the first few months or years, they run into walls that feel immovable.

Why? Because the people they are called to lead have been shaped by years, even decades, of habits, assumptions, and cultural norms. Some of those norms are healthy. Many are not. But nearly all of them have taken root over time.

Murphy Meets Ministry

Imagine a church that has grown inward over 20 years. It's not hostile to guests—it just doesn't know how to welcome them anymore. The bulletin is full of insider language. The greeters know each other more than they know new faces. The music, while dear to long-timers, feels foreign to the unchurched. Now, a new pastor arrives with a passion for outreach. They preach missionally. They create outreach teams. They update signage and start small groups.

Yet change is slow . . . frustratingly slow. The culture that formed over 20 years is not going to shift in 6 months. According to Murphy's Symmetry Principle, it may take another 20 years—or at least a substantial stretch of faithful, consistent leadership—to see meaningful change.

That's not discouraging—it's clarifying.

It means that pastors must be in it for the long haul if they want to reshape embedded patterns. They must preach, teach, model, and love consistently. They must understand that one of their greatest tools is time. And they must resist the temptation to give up too soon simply because results don't come quickly. [See last months issue on Pastoral Tenure.]

There's a second layer to this principle as well: the longer people have learned to do ministry in an unhealthy way, the more difficult it will be to unlearn that way.

Whether it's how decisions are made, how conflict is handled, or how leadership is perceived, undoing those behaviors requires patience, grace, and intentionality.

This is why pastoral tenure matters so much. Short-term pastors rarely stay long enough to overcome the symmetry. They leave during the “unlearning” phase—often just before momentum begins to turn. Long-term leaders—those who stay for 10, 15, or 20 years—can shepherd a church through the full cycle. They lead the congregation not only to learn something new, but to unlearn what no longer serves the mission.

For pastors who are *hardy* enough to remain, to teach with grace, to lead with humility, and to walk with their people through the slow arc of transformation, the fruit can be both deep and lasting.

Psychological research offers a helpful insight on the *Hardy Personality*. The concept of *hardiness* describes a mindset, a way of relating to life's pressures with resilience and resolve. It's about a set of attitudes that allow people to thrive under stress. And for pastors, these attitudes aren't just helpful—they're essential.

The Hardy Personality is built on three pillars, often referred to as the “3 C's”: Commitment, Control, and Challenge. Each of them, when viewed through a biblical and pastoral lens, aligns with the heart of Christian leadership.

1. Commitment – Stay Invested in Your Call

Commitment is the tendency to stay involved in one's work and relationships, even when things get difficult. For the pastor, this speaks to something more than duty—it speaks to *calling*. A hardy pastor doesn't withdraw when the budget is tight or the attendance dips. They press in, because they've committed not just to a job, but to a people, a mission, and a Lord who has called them by name.

2. Control – Believing You Can Influence Outcomes

Control is the tendency to take action through prayer, wise choices, and perseverance. Pastors with a hardy mindset don't fall into helplessness or play the blame game. Even when facing declining attendance or toxic conflict, they ask, *What can I do? What does faithful leadership look like here?*

3. Challenge – Seeing Change as Opportunity

Challenge is the tendency to view change as a chance to grow, learn, and innovate. This mindset is essential in today's shifting ministry landscape. Culture changes, technology changes, expectation changes, but the hardy pastor sees it as an opportunity to reimagine ministry for a new season.

Murphy's Symmetry Principle tells us that what can go wrong, often will. But the hardy pastor faces those challenges with hope.

Hardiness is not about being tougher—it's about being grounded. Grounded in one's call. Grounded in action. Grounded in hope. And, most important, grounded in the God who said, *“I will build my church.”*

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