
MY BIGGEST MINISTRY MISTAKES

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

This is a short article taken from one of “Daniel’s Travel Journal” entries he made while traveling, sharing relationship and ministry with friends and churches in various parts of our country and overseas.

A pastor in Germany recently asked me about the three biggest mistakes I’ve made in ministry. She didn’t mean which particular incidents had I blown it the worse, but what patterns of thought or behavior caused the most wreckage or fruitlessness. Where do I begin? My top three mistakes in pastoral ministry were:

1. Believing the best about people, especially leaders, for too long.

I’m such an optimist that I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, and try to hold onto them in love. Too often I ignored the telltale signs that certain people, especially leaders, had become toxic to our church. I should have “released” some people away from church leadership months or years earlier than I did. The closer I was to people, the more dangerous and destructive it ended up being when I ignored the indications that they were dissatisfied with my leadership—or simply no longer suitable for leadership in the church as it had evolved.

2. Getting too close to too few people.

My formative model for church was established at UCLA among the dozens of student-believers who saw each other as peers (same age, same experience level, etc.). Leadership was fluid, voluntary and open-ended. I spent extra time getting close to and discipling different students, so when I pastored, I continued that pattern. Close discipleship works well for a few years (3-5 yrs), but NOT after that. I regret that I maintained closeness with a few pastors for too many years, and it soured. Some (but not all) of the pastors/leaders I loved the most, now despise me the most. Those in whom I invested the most years have caused me the most tears.

3. Not listening more carefully to my wife's discernment.

Because of my hope for people, I sometimes disregarded hidden issues in their lives. I thought their motives were simpler than they sometimes turned out to be. I didn't always realize what people wanted from me or *from having a position* in our church. In retrospect, there were too many times when I argued against my wife's unease with people—only to discover later she had been right. My advice to pastors, based on my mistake is, "Listen to your spouse, and don't move ahead with anyone about whom you cannot agree."

Wouldn't it be encouraging to attend a conference where the speakers only spoke about their failures, mistakes, and bad calls? Sign me up as a plenary speaker because I have some whoppers!!