

“What Brian Croft and Ronnie Martin have accomplished for ministers here is astounding—a deeply personal work that sensitively reaches into the humanity of pastoral ministry while remaining rooted in the supernaturalizing ministry of the gospel. Slow down, read it prayerfully, and have your heart strengthened by grace.”

**Jared C. Wilson**

Assistant Professor, Pastoral Ministry, and Author-in-Residence,  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Pastor for Preaching and  
Director, Pastoral Training Center, Liberty Baptist Church;  
Author, *Gospel-Driven Ministry*

“*The Unhurried Pastor* provides a practical and biblical prescription for a healthy and productive pastoral ministry in the face of a discouraging diagnosis and pathetic prognosis of pastoral ministry. With their weathered honesty, authors Brian Croft and Ronnie Martin urge pastors to be about their Father’s business in an unhurried manner. Their work offers fresh, new ways for traditional and nontraditional pastors to reclaim spiritual disciplines that prioritize *being* over *doing* while encouraging sustainable pastoral journeys.”

**Dr. Robert Smith, Jr.**

Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School,  
Samford University

“This book is much more than a compendium of tips to slow down your life and ministry. It is an invitation to minister not just at the pace of Jesus but also in the presence of Jesus. Written from a trial-and-error perspective, Ronnie and Brian honestly examine how the practices of contemplation, prayer, and silence can work against our ingrained habits of speed and productivity in order to take us deeper into the wisdom of God. More importantly, they repeatedly draw out insight from Scripture to recalibrate our hearts to hum with grace. I hope you’ll read this book and pray as insights land on you in each chapter, so you can be formed on the spot by God’s beautifying word.”

**Jonathan K. Dodson**

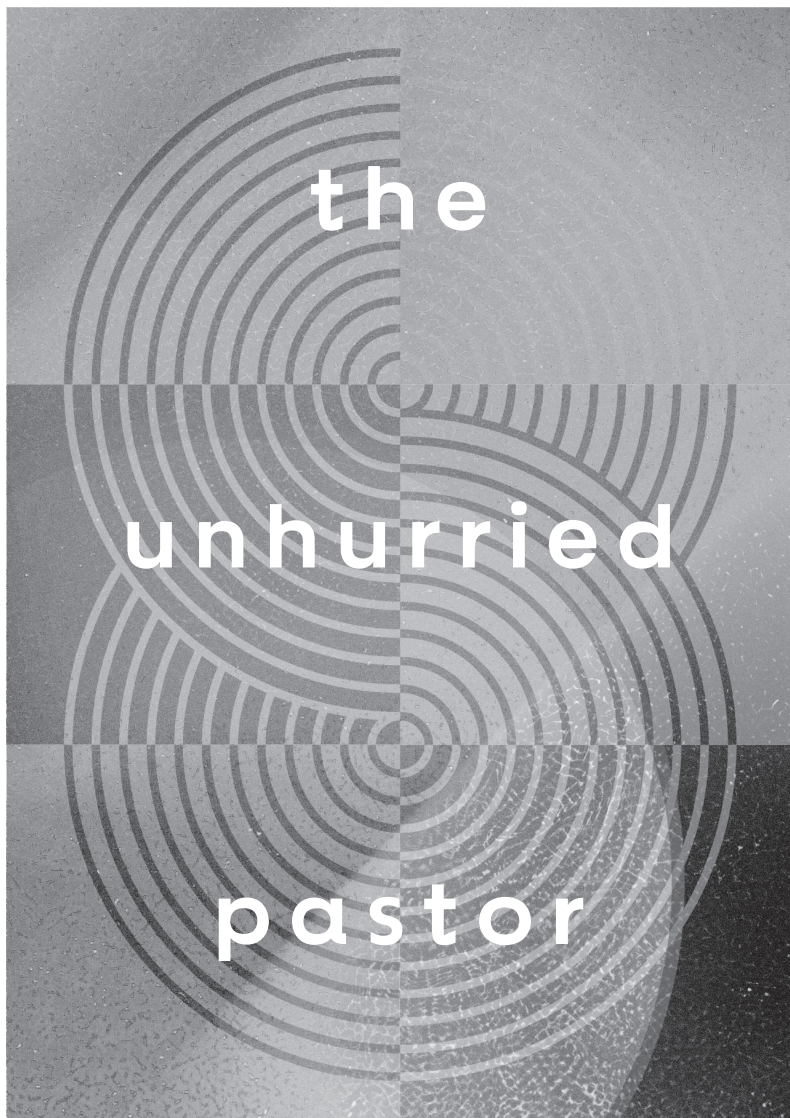
Theologian-in-Residence, Citizens Church;  
Author, *The Unwavering Pastor*

“*The Unhurried Pastor* is a helpful and needed foundational guide for assisting pastors in structuring their life and work as a pastor. Brian Croft and Ronnie Martin’s wisdom offers a practical road map for forming a rule of life for pastors that will prevent pastoral burnout while fostering a truly Christ-centered human approach to pastoral ministry that has staying power and presence. This book is an essential read for young pastors and a needed refresher for pastors with years of ministry.”

**Richard Plass**

Founder, CrossPoint Ministry

Brian Croft and Ronnie Martin



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*To the late Eugene Peterson,  
upon whose unhurried shoulders we now stand.*

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# Introduction

BY BRIAN CROFT

**B**ob stepped into my office. He was in his mid-forties with about 15 years of hard pastoral ministry under his belt. He had a look of despair in his eyes as he shared why he had come: “I’m holding on by a thread. I don’t think I can do this much longer. I’m not sleeping much. I work all the time, but now struggle to even hold thoughts in my head to write a sermon. I have no joy in my work, which I once loved. Some days, I can barely get out of bed.”

That same week Sam, another pastor in his forties, called me on the phone to talk: “I just got back from the emergency room. My wife took me because I thought I was having a heart attack. They ran tests and confirmed my heart was fine but told me that I had experienced a panic attack. Until recently I had never had a panic attack in my life, and yet now it happens every time I drive to the church. I haven’t preached in the pulpit since. I don’t know what is happening or what to do.” Unfortunately, these are all too common scenarios, which Ronnie and I (Brian) both face in our ministry to pastors.

It is no secret that we are in the middle of an time of unprecedented pastoral burnout. Here are just a few of the startling statistics:

- 42% of pastors considered quitting in the last year.<sup>1</sup>
- 50% of pastors do not make it to five years in the ministry.<sup>2</sup>
- 80% of pastors do not last ten years in the ministry.<sup>3</sup>

These numbers are taken from the US but similar statistics show that this is not just an American problem. Such numbers reveal many things, but here are two primary observations about why so many pastors have such seemingly short tenures. First, being a pastor is just hard. There are the demands of 24/7 availability. The pressures of the workload. The mental toll of preparing several sermons or teachings every week. The emotional anguish that accompanies bearing the burdens of suffering people, while also carrying your own personal burdens. The financial compensation is commonly not adequate. Added to all this, pastors are trying to love and care for sinners—many are redeemed sinners, but they are still sinners. The fights, criticisms, complaints, conflicts, and petty disagreements that pastors moderate is enough to cause a relatively healthy person to lose their minds. The work of pastoral ministry is uniquely hard, and it always has been.

But second, the way modern pastors engage with their ministry is unsustainable in the long-term. These numbers reveal an undeniable flaw in the manner in which the 21st-century pastor does the work of ministry. The rest of this book will unpack this dynamic, but here it is in brief: in our work with many depressed, burned-out pastors, we see that the common link between them is an inability to see their limitations and embrace them. Whether it's because of the expectations placed upon us by our church's culture or our own internal drive (or a combination of the two), too many of us operate as if we are superhuman. The problem is that we are not superhuman.



Now, thankfully, this reality has begun to get the attention of the broader evangelical movement and the churches these pastors serve. There now exists a growing number of ministries seeking to address the care of pastors and their families. In fact, both of us serve with ministries trying to accomplish this very thing.<sup>4</sup> We see a growing number of churches learning to better care for their pastors, creating capacity for breaks and sabbaticals, and providing resources for mentoring and counseling. There are encouraging signs that Bible colleges, seminaries, and other pastoral-training institutes, are also waking up to the need to care for pastors, and for that, we are thankful.

However, despite the progress and attention now being given to the care of pastors in the ministry, as well as of those aspiring to it, this still does not solve the greater problem. The greater problem is a long-held acceptance of how pastors are expected to do their ministry in the modern era.

And it is not sustainable.

### **The Prophetic Voice of Eugene Peterson**

Eugene Peterson was the pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland for almost three decades and the author of many books. You may recognize his name as the author of *The Message* Bible paraphrase. Or you might only know Peterson from a few controversies that popped up on social media in the final years of his life.<sup>5</sup>

But what you are less likely to know is that Eugene Peterson was one of the first to push against the busy, noisy, frantic, and unsustainable ministry practice that pastors in his generation were expected to embrace. Without a doubt, this ministry approach still exists on steroids today.

In the late 1980s, Peterson wrote a book entitled *The Contemplative Pastor*, which included a chapter he called “The Unbusy Pastor”. Some years before this, Peterson was

a self-confessed “busy pastor,” which eventually brought him to the brink of burning out and quitting. But he didn’t quit. Instead, he made some significant changes in his life and schedule and, most importantly, to his understanding of the work of a pastor and what he needed to do to be truly faithful in it:

It was a favorite theme of C. S. Lewis that only lazy people work hard. By lazily abdicating the essential work of deciding and directing, establishing values and setting goals, other people do it for us; then we find ourselves frantically, at the last minute, trying to satisfy a half dozen different demands on our time, none of which is essential to our vocation, to stave off the disaster of disappointing someone. But if I vainly crowd my day with conspicuous activity or let others fill my day with imperious demands, I don’t have time to do my proper work, the work to which I have been called. How can I lead people into the quiet place beside the still waters if I am in perpetual motion? How can I persuade a person to live by faith and not by works if I have to juggle my schedule constantly to make everything fit into place?<sup>6</sup>

Peterson’s resolution to resist the commonly accepted uber-busy life of a pastor was prophetic for two main reasons. First, he saw the unsustainability of this even in his day and had the courage and foresight to push against it. He saw with spiritual eyes where it would lead. This one chapter of *The Unbusy Pastor*, which was also published as a *Christianity Today* article, remains one of the clearest flags of warning to a pastor of his statistically probable demise.

Second, what makes Peterson’s observations all the more remarkable is that they predate the internet. And yet, if this redefining of the pastoral work was ever needed, it is now! In the last few decades, the internet and social media have

caused an already busy, hurried, and unsustainable approach to pastoral ministry to become *even busier*, more hurried, and more unsustainable. Peterson could not have imagined how fast the world would change with this one tool, and how it would create a perfect technological storm heightening the pressure, the demands, the conflict, the expectations, and the isolation for pastors in the ministry.

We believe we find ourselves in this current crisis because we have ignored for far too long what Eugene Peterson saw long ago. Now, more than ever, the prophetic voice of Eugene Peterson in this regard needs to be heard. In light of his recent death, we want to take up his call and continue to sound the note that he did in his generation—*that is, a redefining of how the work of a pastor is done so that it will lead to joy and longevity for the pastor.*

#### **The Purpose of This Book**

This is what we hope to accomplish with this book. *The Unhurried Pastor* is not a call to redefine the work of a pastor. The biblical understanding of the call of a pastor is, if anything, growing clearer and clearer with this younger generation of pastors: that is, “to shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Peter 5:2). *The Unhurried Pastor* is, however, a call—a plea, really—to redefine how this work is accomplished. This will be an uphill battle for sure. It is a push against the accepted busy and frantic practice of pastors today, as well as a push against our broader Western mindset, which assumes that to be productive we must always be busy, moving, and hurried.

Our aim is to convince you that the secret to true, spiritual fruitfulness is in fact the opposite. Genuine pastoral productivity—of a kind that brings joy and longevity—is unlocked through the practices reflected in some of the titles of chapters that follow: humanity, humility, self-awareness, prayer, contemplation, silence, rest, friendship. We will

challenge you about these things. We will address many of the practicalities. But in this book you will not find a blueprint to be more productive by being busier. The secret to true productivity in the work of the kingdom, as we walk with Christ and shepherd his people, lies in *being* more than *doing*. If we convince you to reconsider your own approach to the work of the ministry, we will be pleased.

So where do we start? Let's have Eugene Peterson set the tone for what you should expect as you begin this book. You might be wondering, "If I shouldn't do things the way I have always done them, or the way I have been trained to do them, then what *should* I do?" Peterson addresses that question as follows:

If I'm not busy making my mark in the world or doing what everyone expects me to do, what do I do? What is my proper work? What does it mean to be a pastor? If no one asked me to do anything, what would I do? Three things. I can be a pastor who prays. I can be a pastor who preaches. I can be a pastor who listens ... I mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for the silence and solitude out of which creative work—prayer, preaching, and listening—can issue.<sup>7</sup>

Pastors, if these words resonate with your weary soul—if you're longing for a more joyful and sustainable rhythm of ministry—keep reading. And if these words make your hurried, frantic soul feel slightly nervous—you should keep reading too. Imagine a different pace when you arrive at your church premises or sit at your desk on Monday morning. Imagine being able to pray, or study, or be present with a church member without that frantic awareness of what is coming next. If this appeals to you—keep reading. Trust that Jesus will meet you where you are and minister his grace to you as you wrestle with this alongside us. Be assured, we are learning with you.

**A Final Word of Irony**

Ronnie and I are painfully aware of two specific ironies that almost sabotaged the writing and completion of this book. First, we were both “too busy” to work on this to get it done. (We know. Don’t stare.) Second, we wrestled on many occasions with the belief that we are not equipped or qualified to write such a book. We are not experts in doing ministry in a present, still, unhurried, thoughtful manner. Not many are. But in our combined 45 years of pastoral ministry, we have run long and hard, flamed out, got back up, made changes, and tasted the benefits. We hope you too might taste the benefits as you read, and we hope to grow in our own lives as we write. So, let’s step out on this journey together with the hope that joy and longevity await us all.