

CONFESSIONS OF AN AMATEUR SAINT

THE CHRISTIAN LEADER'S JOURNEY FROM
SELF-SUFFICIENCY TO RELIANCE ON GOD



FOREWORD BY ANDREW ROOT

MANDY SMITH

If you're a leader who's weary of bluster and preening and you long for an honest, faithful voice to name the ache in your soul, you've found a friend in Mandy Smith. These pages take us deep into our story, into our fear and hope, into the places where God waits for us with open arms.

WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination and author of *Love Big, Be Well* and *A Burning in My Bones*

Like Mandy Smith's previous books, this is a searingly honest confession by a truly vulnerable pastor. Dr. Smith acknowledges her impulse to desire success, certainty, and comfort but shares how she has come to yearn for a different perspective—one that sees what God sees, glimpses what God is doing, and tries to follow the prompts of the Spirit. If you're like me, you'll be deeply disquieted by *Confessions of an Amateur Saint*. It's scary. Scary good.

MICHAEL FROST, Morling College, Sydney

What Mandy offers here ought to be self-evident among those who work in churches or in positions of spiritual influence, but sadly it is not. We have lost the art of true spiritual leadership, of what it means to be an elder in the church. We lean too heavily on secular skills and perspectives in our work of ministry and not enough on the sheer act of faith. Mandy challenges us to return to the vulnerable, messy, courageous work of real leadership after the pattern of Jesus. It is a call worth hearing and leaning into because the world starves for more truly spiritual leaders.

CAROLYN MOORE, pastor and church planter

Mandy Smith has done it again. She has honestly, creatively, and faithfully drawn us into things that matter most. Her searching self-examination as a pastor and as a woman leader during these turbulent days is itself richly reflective as she names and explores the familiar and the mysterious about the church and beyond. All this occurs as her undergirding sense of hope grounds her wisdom and faith. Mandy Smith is such a gift, and I consider myself her student. I commend you to do the same.

MARK LABBERTON, professor and president emeritus of Fuller Theological Seminary

This book is for those of us who love doing God's work but who also struggle with the tension of living in our own messy stories. In a natural, relational style, Smith invites us to be real and to own and name the difficulties of leadership, whether we're struggling with unbelief, the desire

to succeed, or other challenges. But she doesn't leave us there. She reminds us to return to our faith by confessing and choosing God rather than relying on ourselves. A wonderful, helpful book for strengthening and discipling Christian leaders.

MARYKATE MORSE, professor and author of *Lifelong Leadership* and *A Guidebook to Prayer*

We live in a world that teaches, "Blessed are the self-confident, for they will bring about the Kingdom of Heaven." But what if as we grow in ministry competencies, we become less self-reliant? Mandy shares her struggle to trust God in the daily grind of ministry and invites us on a journey to discover the countercultural truth that Jesus pronounced: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."

JR WOODWARD, PHD, national director of the V3 Movement and author of *The Scandal of Leadership*

This beautiful book is a gift to us all! Mandy Smith writes with a tender vulnerability as a fellow believer who doesn't always fully believe but who chooses to keep trusting in God over and over through the practice of confession. She models this honest confession through personal stories, reflective exercises, and prayers that open us up to the transformative power of God in our lives and ministry. I believe this way of confession is the way of God-reliance and the way to abundant life!

JOYCE KOO DALRYMPLE, founder and director of Refuge for Strength; author

Thousands of pastors are discouraged and burned out. Many are looking for a way out. But what if there is a way *in*, a way to do ministry as a divine partnership marked by faith, confidence, and soul rest? In *Confessions of an Amateur Saint*, Mandy Smith shows us how. She reveals the practical benefit and joy of doing ministry through renewing our faith and refreshing our relational reliance on the presence and power of God.

BISHOP TODD HUNTER, author of *What Jesus Intended*

Mandy Smith is right; our world has shifted, and pastors are left in an "empty space, holding tools that no longer work, speaking words that have lost all meaning." If you're in this place and want out, follow her honest and creative lead as she models a way back to a faith that is authentic, empowered, and free.

JOHN VAN SLOTEN, community theologian and author of *God Speaks Science*

A courageous journey into the depths of the human soul. With profound vulnerability, Mandy Smith reveals the struggles and doubts that often accompany Christian leadership. Through her own confessions, she dismantles the barriers that separate us from God and invites us to join her in embracing our own vulnerability before the One who brings light in the darkness. If your soul feels burdened by the weight of trying to be more than an amateur saint, delve into this book and join the chorus of confession to discover the freedom that comes from embracing reliance on God.

LISA RODRIGUEZ-WATSON, national director of Missio Alliance

How can our sincere efforts as Christian leaders to be good at ministry make us very bad at ministry? Mandy Smith gently asks us to consider how we became so good at our jobs that we can do them without the enlivening work of God. *Confessions of an Amateur Saint* invites us to exchange professional competence for the practices of a robust, personal, and messy faith that reveals the work of God in the world. Even better, Mandy lives the life she describes and is an authentic guide.

TRISHA TAYLOR and JIM HERRINGTON, coauthors of *The Leader's Journey*

Mandy Smith is a necessary gift to us all because she generously invites us into her inner world and helps us feel seen and understood by making her own confessions. I find following an invisible God difficult, but Mandy has become a trusted guide for my own faith, and *Confessions of an Amateur Saint* is vintage Mandy Smith, one of the rare pastor-artists writing today.

STEVE CUSS, author and pastor

Mandy Smith is one of the wisest writers on church leadership today. Building on her previous books, *Confessions of an Amateur Saint* overflows with a keen sense of what it means to be human and to lead a church in these tumultuous times. Every pastor should read this book!

C. CHRISTOPHER SMITH, author of *How the Body of Christ Talks*

In this somewhat autobiographical book, our friend Mandy manages to communicate not just ideas that are helpful but something of her very precious self. Her *Confessions* are painfully honest, spiritually insightful, and pastorally authentic—the (in)credible witness of the quintessential amateur saint that is Mandy Smith.

DEBRA and ALAN HIRSCH, missional leaders, founders of Forge Mission Training Network and Movement Leaders Collective, and authors of various books

Good night. Mandy Smith has done it again. Few have the power to read my mail the way that Mandy does. This book invites the reader into a form of vulnerability and frailty that is almost uncomfortable. Through that vulnerability is the power of Christ. But we don't get to Christ by puffing ourselves up. We can only come broken. Mandy has shown us the way.

A.J. SWOBODA, PHD, professor of Bible and theology at Bushnell University and author of *The Gift of Thorns*

Almost every epistle in the New Testament is addressed to “the saints” and was penned as the early church was being established and formed. And yet the letters were clearly written to far-from-perfect people who were flawed in both theology and behavior, a reminder that to be a saint is to be a lifelong student in the way of Jesus: becoming the people God declares us to be.

In this book—which reads like a glimpse into a personal journal—Mandy Smith gently invites church leaders out of the perils and pressures of a professionalized ministry by reestablishing us as forever rookies in the life of faith. Through the honesty of confessing rather than covering up our incompetencies, Mandy points us toward the reality of God's power being perfected in human weakness.

With every turn of the page, with every confession of my own, I found myself being invited into the gift of identifying my own vulnerabilities, resulting in a deepening dependency on and intimacy with God—the goal of all saints.

ERIC E. PETERSON, pastor of Colbert Presbyterian Church

Years ago Mandy Smith wrote an exceptionally important book called *The Vulnerable Pastor* about ministers being real—honest about their fears and doubts and weakness. Here in *Confessions of an Amateur Saint* she shows us exactly what she means and how it is done, modeling a painful vulnerability that is rare, especially among professionally trained clergy. I came away stunned, amazed, a bit disturbed, and very, very grateful. I promise you have never read a book like this. Her creatively written meditations, laments, questions, and prayers reveal a deep longing for God and candor about the hard stuff of life and ministry. *Confessions* invites you to own up to your own struggles that, when named, will lead to healing and hope. Vital for pastors and truly useful for all.

BYRON BORGER, owner of Hearts & Minds, an independent bookstore in Dallastown, Pennsylvania

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MANDY SMITH

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For my friend Winn.

The way you follow helps me follow.

The way you lead helps me lead.



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FOREWORD

It's probably always been true at some level, but it's acute for us late-modern humans: We are prisoners of the moment. Perspective, particularly a historical one, is hard to come by. Our anxieties give us the assumption that our times are singularly troublesome. We come to believe that no one has dealt with the troubles we face. Particularly not the church.

I hear it often from pastors, bishops, and lay leaders. They say things like “The church has never faced such a challenge!” or “If we don't get our act together, the church is doomed” or “If we don't come up with new ways of being church there will be no church.” But this just can't be true. It particularly can't be true theologically. Of course, the church is stewarded by fallible and sinful human beings, but the church exists because of God's act—alone! Therefore, like it or not (and I think at most times it's *not*), the church is God's responsibility. Not yours. Whether a pastor, bishop, or lay leader, we'd all do well to remember this. Nothing we do will save the church, for the church exists to witness to the fact that God alone is saving the world.

But how can we trust this? These may be nice if not terrifying thoughts. “But . . . b-b-but . . . b-b-but,” we say to one another, “things are really bad. Never worse!” But that's not true either.

No one—never ever—would accuse me of being Mr. Brightside or Pollyanna Andy. Kierkegaard's biblical existentialism and Luther's *theologia crucis* run too freely in the veins of my imagination. I am not merely placating anxiety when I say that even

with the propensity to think things through the negative (the *via negativa*), I know there have been worse times for the church. The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries come to mind. These were very bad times. France and England were in the middle of the Hundred Years' War; climate change from the Medieval Warm Period to the Little Ice Age was causing famine (there were years that summer never came); politics was heated, with dukes killing each other in the name of God; the church was divided between two popes (one in Rome and one in Avignon); and then, to really bring the crisis to a scream, one-third of Europe's population was wiped out by the bubonic plague. *Those* were some hard years! And yet the church survived. Our times of apathy and declining resources have their challenges, but the crisis is a bit less—a lot less—severe than in the fourteenth century.

But what we can learn from the crisis of the fourteenth century is not only to have some perspective but also that it's inside such perceived crises that calls for pastoral renewal arrive. Inside these times of crisis, when the pastoral task is most needed, we begin moving toward the renewal. The renewal often is bound to a reimagining of the pastoral task. The reimagining starts with a lonely prophet or two speaking against the tide.

In the late fourteenth century, that person was the child of peasants, who made it all the way to the University of Paris, and not just as a student, but eventually as chancellor. That man was the mystic Jean Gerson. As chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson pushed the French king to end the schism of the two popes and sought to reform the university to educate pastors who could care for ordinary peoples' experiences of loss and fear. Gerson wanted the university not only to prepare priests for monasteries but more so to prepare pastors to wrestle with the presence and absence of God in people's lives. Gerson's efforts would be frustrated, eventually pushing him into exile. In exile he wrote his most important piece, *The Consolation of Theology*. In it Gerson

claimed that the pastor's primary vocation is to walk with people through the pilgrimage of their lives, helping the whole of their lives be directed toward a living God. The pastor's job, Gerson assured, isn't just to operate the apparatus of the church's sacraments but to give people a glimpse of God's real action in the world, which comes near them in their sorrowing, bringing life out of death.

Mandy Smith is just the kind of pastor that Gerson imagined. She is a prophet—speaking against the current—for truly theological pastor renewal. In this book you're holding, Mandy offers us a call to renew pastoral identity and practice in a way that Gerson would've loved. Mandy is calling us back to a living God, who meets us not in our clerical assurances or doctrinal purity but right at the place where the God of Israel ministers, in our places of fear and trembling, in our doubts and faith. Gerson believed that if we leaned into our sorrows we'd find the presence of the God of life, ministering to us. Mandy wants something similar. She wants us to attend to our own yearning for a living God, to see whether, in our doubts and anxiety about the difficulty of the pastoral vocation, we might find the living God at work. And just maybe this living God will release us from our weariness to give us new life in the Spirit.

Our contemporary temptations, however, are much different from those of Gerson's day. We feel burdened with finding new ways to fix our problems. We need innovation, new strategies, new educational modules, new funding mechanisms, something new to fix our problems. Where Mandy's book is so important is in challenging this very assumption. She gives us no new programs, no new methods, no new identities as tech-savvy innovators. Instead, she reminds us of our *call*. Like Augustine, she calls us back to right our loves, directing those loves to God and God's people. Ultimately, she calls us back to loving and wrestling with God, believing that in pastoring people—in that same fear and doubt,

hope and faith—God will truly and really move. *Confessions of an Amateur Saint* is an important book and one I believe will start a new genre we desperately need in Protestant pastoral reflections. This is a book by a practicing pastor discussing her wrestling with the living God. It's a gift to us all.

DR. ANDREW ROOT

author and professor at Luther Seminary

INTRODUCTION

A PROFESSIONAL PROBLEM (AND A NEW POSSIBILITY)

The structures of the modern world implicitly promise that we can operate as leaders, even as Christian leaders, without thought or need for God. Instead of our foundation being in Christ and His kingdom's way of influence, we rest on the cultural foundation set by the modern world of what it is to lead. We measure leadership with earthly definitions of success and power. A secular autopilot version of Christian leadership takes hold, where we lead like practical atheists, with God as an afterthought.

MARK SAYERS, *A NON-ANXIOUS PRESENCE*

I was dismayed at the growing disconnect between the spiritual and organizational lives of congregations. . . . It was rarely evident that I was working in a faith-based environment. . . . My clients were working in overdrive to reverse decline and improve organizational effectiveness. Few were engaging God as a partner in the striving.

SUSAN BEAUMONT, *HOW TO LEAD WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING*

Something's wrong. Really wrong.

Christian leaders are dropping like flies. Those who aren't stepping away from Christian faith or leaving the profession are worn out, depressed, overwhelmed. We hear statistics about their health,

their marriages, their addictions and vices, their abuses of power. We shake our fingers at them for letting us down. Of course they should be held accountable for their choices. At the same time, Christian leaders are canaries in a coal mine. Every time another one drops off their perch, we ask, “Why weren’t they holding on more tightly?” How could we also be asking, “What’s wrong with the coal mine?”

This is about the integrity of individuals. But it’s bigger than that. There’s something in our profession itself that is lacking in integrity—what it claims to be conflicts with what it actually is. The crisis of leaders burning out and having moral failings and losing faith and going on ego trips and abusing parishioners deserves attention. How can we also attend to the greater crisis? Little will change as long as we focus on the symptoms without also attending to the underlying sickness.

This inherent lack of integrity in Christian leadership has something to do with the fact that, like all professional people, we’re supposed to be experts at something. But in our efforts to be good at preaching, making decisions, casting vision, we, too, often become incompetent in the very thing we’re supposed to be good at—trusting that ultimately Someone Else is doing the work. And so, in a terrible irony, our efforts to be good at our job have often made us very bad at our actual job.

Professor Andrew Root knows how to name the crisis:

Ministry is too often seen as some function or professional action done by clergy; just as a clerk files papers or a programmer writes code, so a pastor ministers. It is the name of the core function of a profession. And as such, it is just a generic description of some *human* action. But . . . ministry is the very event that unveils *God’s* action in the world. . . .

. . . In our secular age, divine action often seems

unbelievable. . . . [Ministers can become] more concerned with institutional structures (and the anxiety of their failing) than with an experience with God. The pastor either becomes the guardian and custodian of declining religion or needs to reinvent himself or herself as a religious entrepreneur, connecting busy, disinterested people with the programs and products of a church.¹

Here, hidden in the crisis, is an opportunity. If it's the role of the minister to unveil God's action in the world, perhaps the best "skill" we can bring to this "profession" is to be really good at following God and at describing that following to others in a way that extends God's invitation. Perhaps the crisis itself will teach us our need for God more than ever so we will have what we actually need to do this work and what the world is actually longing to see from the church!

The Challenge of Leading from Faith

It seems patently obvious to say that Christian leaders should lead from faith. But I'm surprised to find how much it stretches me to (without apology) make decisions, lead meetings, cast vision, and preach sermons with regular reference to my own personal trust in God. It's remarkable to note how little of my development for Christian leadership trained me in the skills of leading from faith. Instead, I had many cautions to guard my congregation from my own subjective experiences of God. Of course, there are abusive ways to speak from faith as a leader, ways that manipulate others or that draw attention to ourselves. But have we overcorrected?

As we learn professional language and skills, there's an assumption that we also know how to lead from faith. Through decades of reading, studying, and attending leadership conferences, I've been trained in strategies, programs, and decision-making skills but never had training in how to bring my personal engagement

with God into my work in a healthy, meaningful way. Twenty-five years into ministry, I'm coming to see just how much my personal faith is the thing that keeps me going in this impossible work. And how often honest expressions of faith are the place where God brings life to me and my ministry.

In recent years there's been much helpful analysis of "McDonaldization," the theory that modern society emulates this ubiquitous fast-food chain in highly valuing efficiency, predictability, calculability (quantifiable results), and (the illusion of) control.² In the critique of how these values have damaged the church, the conversation has largely been related to strategies and programs and less about how McDonaldization has affected the role and expectations of Christian leaders. If the church has become a factory, leaders have become cogs in the machinery—human beings whose flesh is pinched in the workings of the subhuman values of industrialization. We feel pressure to be predictable and tidy, to be self-contained and complete, to become bland, neutral, void of personality. Secular professionalism requires a self-sufficient competence that polishes us into a self-contained product, a finely tuned component precision-engineered to function in a machine.

When we bring that kind of professionalism into ministry, we find our work and church drained of the messiness, quirkiness, complexity, and beauty of what it means to be human. In their efforts to provide a consistent product, orange juice manufacturers freeze and distill fresh juice to make concentrate, boiling out the unique flavor that once told where each orange grew and how the weather was that year. It guarantees predictably mediocre orange juice. How can we hope for our people to enjoy the vitality of this faith if, in the name of consistency, we offer them a distilled version of our own experience of God? As pastor and theologian Eugene Peterson put it: "The secularized mind is terrorized by

mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels people, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life.”³

It’s our professional calling to tell the story of a God who made it personal by personally stepping into our world, offered his Spirit to live in our very bodies. It’s our profession to embody our personal faith in that story and invite others to take it personally, to retain the amateur’s love for this, even as we gain professional skills. It will stretch us to figure out how to do that without abuse, but it’s worth the risk.

What if our call is to strengthen others in their faith by inviting them to step with us into the risk of unknowing? What if the best way they’ll see God at work is by having our company as we watch for him together?

Perhaps the best thing we can bring to a meeting is the skill of discerning when it’s time to stop talking, stop spiraling, stop strategizing.

Perhaps the best skill we can bring to a crisis is knowing when it’s time to reach beyond ourselves to pray.

Maybe the best communication skill we can have is the capacity to share living stories of actual dependence on God.

Perhaps the best strategy we can offer is the determination to keep listening to God and saying yes, every step of the way, knowing only too well how unprofessional that might sound.

We may find that the most professional skill we can bring is knowing how to stop being so good at our job that no one needs God. The ways we’re learning to follow God personally might also be essential to the ways we lead others, inviting them to trust with us.

As much as we can shape structures and programs, we cannot control the people—their choices to attend, to serve, to give, to grow. But we do know how someone becomes a disciple because we’ve been doing that all our Christian lives. We know it’s not our own work but work being done in us. We don’t have to understand

it. We're not expected to always feel it or even fully believe it. But we can control our will. We can choose once more to say yes, day after day. If this is what it means to follow God personally, why not also trust we can follow God in this way professionally?

For many of us the call to ministry began with a deep, personal longing for or encounter with God. We were amateurs doing this for the love of it.⁴

For me, the call to ministry felt at first like an invitation to hide, full-time, in the comfort of God's presence. But ministry is so far from comfortable that I've learned to wryly forewarn my doctor of ministry students: "Don't let my appearance of comfort fool you. I'm not comfortable. It's just that I'm getting used to the discomfort." (*Discomfort* is not nearly a strong enough word for what can feel like relational, social, and existential death. Day after day.)

Instead of leading to the comfort I expected, my ministry has been twenty-five years of pioneering, whether because I'm from a different country or a different denomination or because I'm the first woman to lead in a particular place. How did this desire for comfort lead me to the role of reluctant change agent? And at a time of great upheaval in our culture and church, I'm not alone—we're all pioneers now, whether we like it or not.

Pioneering looks very little like maintaining the status quo and requires a watchful adventurousness that doesn't look much like "profession." We may be disciplined in these risky, adaptive skills in our personal faith—have we been given permission to bring them into our profession? Now more than ever, our profession looks very little like certainty (unless you count certainty in God).

This reality seems cruel according to the world's way of having a career—we've been given an impossible task to lead something without really knowing what on earth it is or will become. But this work promises to teach us the very skills required for the work.

If we approach ministry through the lens of discipleship, the challenges of this work teach us this essential skill of following

God. (And we have much to learn from those who follow him even though it's not their job!) Viewed through the lens of secular professionalism, every question, every problem is a sign we need more consultants, conferences, and strategies. But in professional pioneering we recognize questions and problems and upheaval as a chance to rely more on God. So the work of leading others in their discipleship is a fundamental lesson we learn ourselves even in the act of leading them. Leading from faith no longer pulls us in warring directions but becomes a way of deep integrity.

Our call is to be strong in our ability to turn to God, not to be strong in ourselves.

To stretch out our roots and branches to take in life from God, not to be self-sufficient.

To share how it's messy, how it stretches our perseverance.

To be able to say, "I don't know what God will do, but I know what he can do."

Our profession is confessional—confessing to God the ways we're tempted toward self-reliance and confessing once more our reliance on him. In a secular, post-everything age, what the world most needs to see from the church is our own reliance on the power of a transcendent God. Do we, as products of this age, even know how to rely like that?

This leading from faith does not mean always feeling God's presence, always knowing God's direction, but rather making a faithful choice day after day. We can't control our understanding or emotions, but we can control our will, choosing God yet one more time. And another time after that. And we can choose to share what we find there. May we become proficient at the right things. And when we do, a world disillusioned by the failures of secularism will sit up to see one small, human face lit up with belief in the living God. A cynical, postmodern world devoid of grand narratives will be intrigued by one person's subjective, messy, wonderful story of a God at work in their days.



CHAPTER ONE

CONFESSING UNBELIEF, CONFESSING BELIEF

We act like pagans in a crisis.

OSWALD CHAMBERS, *MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST*

To whom am I telling this story? It isn't of course to you, my God, but in your presence I'm telling it to my race, the human race. . . . And what's the story's purpose? Obviously, it's so that I and whoever reads this can contemplate from what depths we must cry out to you. But what's closer to your ears, if the heart humbles itself in confession and the life is lived in faith?

AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS*

I confess.

I confess I don't believe in God.

Well, if belief is a cognitive assent, I guess I do believe. I assent to the idea of God. I'm willing to acknowledge God exists.

But I don't believe God is present.

And I don't believe God is powerful.

And I don't believe God is benevolent.

I don't believe God is acting right here and now in this place, in this body, in this Body.

If behavior attests to belief, I don't believe.

Oh, I'm a Christian. A pretty Christian Christian. You could say I have been all my life: born to Christian parents and Christian grandparents. We prayed before meals, talked about God, went to

church every week. When I was small enough to sit in my mother's lap in church and lay my head on her chest, I heard the sound of the singing resonating in her body and wondered if all the church was in her. My dad's faith brought tears to his eyes, making me wonder, *What is so powerful that it humbles the most powerful person I know?* This was not just learning ideas but the embodied experience of Jesus alive in my life and my home and community, modeling for me a way of life that turned the other cheek and welcomed strangers. It was so much a part of my development that my wedding was also an ordination, blessing us not only to a life submitted to one another but also to God. And for the past twenty-five years I've devoted myself to that life. I pray, I read the Bible, I talk a lot about God.

But I'm also secular. As much as I was steeped in bodily experiences that grew from the way of Jesus, I've been shaped by secular liturgies.¹ I've been molded by a culture that was influenced enough by Christianity to seem Christian enough, been educated by institutions with good, inclusive values, led by politicians who valued freedom and democracy, trained by media that seemed a harmless distraction. These have fed me as much as the bread and wine. I've been as immersed in them as in the waters of baptism. As positive as they may in some ways be, they're not founded on a fundamental belief in a transcendent being. And so, alongside my father's tears and my mother's songs and my Bible college classes, I've been shaped to be self-reliant. And to be ashamed when I'm not. My eyes have taken in countless ads whose main message is that something's wrong with me and I need to fix it. I've sat in countless classrooms that have taught me I can find an answer to every question if I study long enough. I've been influenced by leaders who think it's their job to be my savior (and intuited that when I lead, I'll need to become a savior too). As much as we bundle the kids off to Sunday school and listen to Christian radio and tattoo ourselves with Bible verses, we're secular saints.

If belief means writing sermons by looking up from my laptop

and toward the Writer of every sermon, on Wednesday mornings I often don't believe.

If belief means remembering that Someone Else birthed and nurtures this congregation, too many Sundays I don't believe.

If belief means leading every meeting knowing every breath around the table is breathed in his Spirit, I regularly don't believe.

If belief means obeying regardless of how it will affect others' opinions of me, too often I don't believe.

If belief means remembering that my daily desperation is an invitation to reach outside myself, most days I don't believe.

If belief means choosing not to do the quick, violent thing with my pain, right now I don't believe.

For every question I don't bring to him, every meeting I don't invite him into, every crisis I try to resolve in my own strength, I don't believe.

Me, a pastor, who's supposed to help people believe!

Oh, I have my moments. Moments when I remember the things I claim and choose them once again. But for someone who has not only been living this Christian life for a long time but also been guiding others in it, it's amazing how often I'm an atheist. Of course, I would never say, "I am called to be this church's savior." But with the next crisis, my savior habits surface again:

Problem? Be powerful!

Question? Be present!

Crisis? Be active!

While I say, "I believe God is powerful and present and active," my behavior too often proclaims this theology:

I am powerful, I am present, and I am active.

And when I finally remember to reach outside myself to get resources—to ask questions, to find books and best practices—it's still too often an anxious grasping for tools that allow me to clamber back to self-sufficiency. My goals have been shaped by my following of Jesus. But my methods are too often shaped by my

discipleship in the secular way of things. I'd never say it, but my life proclaims it loud and clear: I want to be a closed system. I'd like to be self-contained. Of course, I also want to flourish, to bear fruit. But it seems I must make a choice.

In Jeremiah 17 God offers a pretty stark choice to his people:

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.

They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.

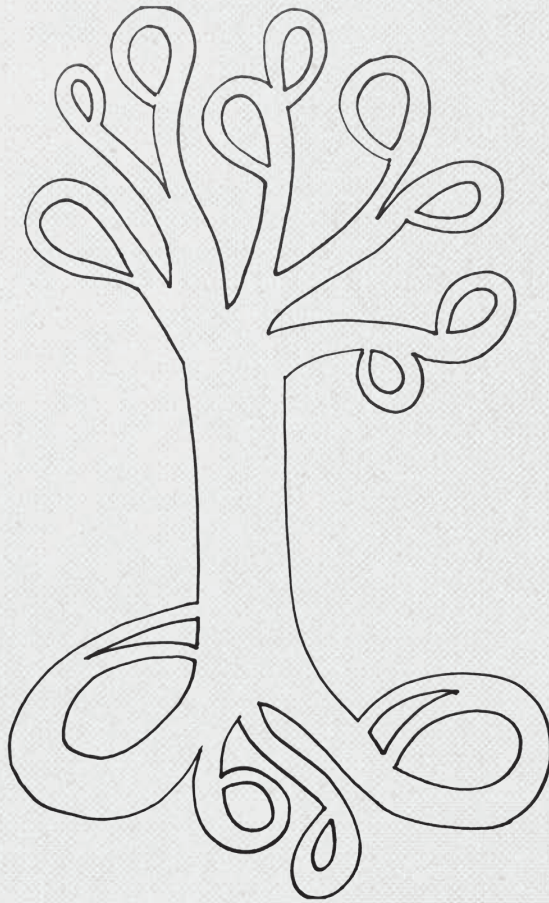
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;

in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

JEREMIAH 17:5-8, NRSV

This is not tit for tat. God's not saying, "If you reject me, I'll punish you." And it's also not prosperity gospel. He's not saying, "If you trust me, you'll never have problems (so if you have problems, you just don't have enough faith)." This is describing the natural outcome of our choices: Since God is the source of life, it's only natural that if we cut ourselves off from him, we'll begin to dry up.

Visualizing this image of two trees—one withered, one verdant—I know which kind of life I'd rather have. Of course



1. Contemplate this self-sufficient tree. It's a closed system, the opposite of the flourishing, reliant tree described in Jeremiah 17. How does it strike you? How long might this tree stay alive? Will it ever bear fruit? Will it ever birth new trees?
2. How are you like this tree? How do you rely on your own resources?
3. Where is God inviting you to stretch out to him for all you need? How does that feel?

I want to be unafraid in drought. I want leaves that are always green. I want to be ever fruitful. And so I set about doing whatever it takes to be sure I'm always flourishing, always fruitful. And without realizing it, I'm working hard to become the fruitful tree and inadvertently becoming the withered. The harder I work to be green, the more I "trust in mere mortals" and "make mere flesh [my] strength." So I shouldn't be surprised when I begin withering like the shrub in the desert. The *way* we go about finding life is what makes the difference. The choice is not whether we want to be dried up or flourishing—of course we'd all choose flourishing. The choice is where we place our trust, what is the source of our life.

It's a natural response—in anxiety, we shrink in. In desperation, it's a fundamental human self-preservation instinct to conserve energy, to tuck ourselves in tight. But this streamside tree keeps sending out roots, stretching, seeking, siphoning. And because of that stretching of roots deep, deep in the earth, it's able to also send out branches into the sky, drawing in rain and sun, burgeoning with leaves and life. The skyward yearning of its branches mirrors the subterranean yearning of its roots.

We say we believe in God. What does it mean to live as if he's literally, *actually* our source of life? How would we live if we really believed he's the answer to every question, the resolution of every crisis, the preacher of every sermon, the leader of every community? That kind of belief teaches us to watch for that old habit that sets our roots curling inward again and to choose to stretch out those roots once more. Oh, we'll need every capacity and gift we can muster. Each tree has the inherent capacity to grow, to bear fruit, to multiply. But none of these capacities are engaged without external nourishment. God does not ask us to be passive or to set aside our capacities. The question is whether God's capacity or our own is the source of our hope. When everything we've been taught by our culture, the media, our education (sometimes even our

ministry training), tells us to depend on ourselves, this outward reaching feels like death.

But it looks like life.

And how it looks will be important. Because that tree by the stream does not just flourish for its own sake. Its flourishing is a witness. It's an impossible tree, a tree that makes no sense. In a dry and weary land this tree not only survives but thrives, bearing fruit and green leaves all year round, defying seasons. Encountering this tree, with all its vibrant life and color, is a burning-bush kind of moment, drawing us closer to investigate. How does this tree do it? What's going on here that's not true for the withered tree? This flourishing tree, verdant in drought, points to something outside itself. And because it doggedly remains reliant on that stream, it can be a resource, a place of shelter and nourishment, an oasis. It's alive for its own sake and for the sake of others.

As Christian leaders, we know it's our job to be a resource for others. So we take this work very seriously. The seriousness of it all has led me to seminary, to countless conferences and workshops. Too few of my mentors have let me see behind the scenes of their own wrestling and prayer and hope and perseverance. Too few leadership books describe the daily confessions, the weekly conversions. Since it's often our faith that draws us into this vocation, our training often assumes faith. My training has encouraged me toward helpful self-care practices that nurture my relationship with God. And I've had training in how to teach others about their own faith. But in all that training, reading, and resourcing, I haven't heard much about the tricky skill, the vital necessity of engaging my own faith in the daily work of leading a congregation. In fact, I've been warned many times not to "make it about me," to somehow serve other people's faith by rarely mentioning my own. I'm a chef who's been warned to restrain my delight in food. I'm just here to cook for others.

But this work stretches my faith beyond my comfort level on a daily basis, inviting me to proclaim things I can't see, to press

toward goals we may never achieve, to claim hope when the world (and church) are crumbling, to speak challenge when I just want harmony. It stretches my fundamental sense of self-worth and identity, my desire to be known and liked, my need to be comfortable, my longing to know the future, my hunger to be part of something successful. It breaks and remakes me every day. And in it I get the feeling I'm slowly becoming more like Jesus.

What a possibility—that this work of helping others walk with Jesus might, if we pay attention, equip us in our own walk with Jesus! Those things that seem to overcome and disqualify us can, when approached with Jesus' willingness to be broken, make us new. The thing that threatens to undo us holds within it the very thing that might just remake us. The desperation of this impossible task of leading others into faith might just stretch our own faith so much that we'll have something to say. And it will light up our faces to say it. Not because it's easy but because there's Good News on the other side of despair. There's life hidden in what we feared might kill us.

We've found ourselves in a profession where we regularly feel unprofessional, stumbled into a career where we can't direct our own destiny. How can we grow in our capacity for the discomfort of this work? How can we get used to the fact that the best way to be good at this job is to know our need for something beyond ourselves? How can we rediscover faith in God (imperfect though our faith may be) as the foundational "skill" for this work? And how can we develop emerging leaders and resource existing leaders as if Jesus is still the actual head of his church and our best "best practice" is knowing how to listen to and partner with him?

My days are driven by the ache of not believing any of this as fully as I'd like. It drives me away from God and, in my better moments, also has the potential to drive me toward him. It's a constant struggle between my secular habits of independent competence and my Christian habits of dependence.

In the chapters that follow, I share these struggles, written on ordinary days. (*Written*. Such a tame word for what has felt more like throwing up. Or fighting for my life.) I share them not because I think my faith is remarkable. In fact, it's because it's so ordinary that I feel called to share. I share to invite others to name with me, and make public, this daily repentance, this regular rhythm of death and resurrection, to remember together this is what our call actually is, as leaders and as followers.

We may have signed up for a nice, stable, predictable job: The church has been around for centuries, the Bible is always the same, and God never changes. We may have expected to maintain an institution, to recite familiar passages, to cruise. And then the rug got pulled out from underneath us, and suddenly nothing that's "always worked" is working anymore. The words that have always been spoken suddenly sound like gibberish (or violence). The rooms that were once filled now echo; the practices we once knew are forgotten. And our profession is left in the empty space, holding tools that no longer work, speaking words that have lost all meaning. And this once-comfortable, predictable space now feels like an undiscovered planet, and we're gasping, hoping our lungs can learn to breathe new air. We're figuring out how to proclaim hope in a foreign tongue that's being formed as we speak it.

I'm a settler at heart. I found my husband and my calling before the age of twenty and thought I was set. Put me somewhere for a long time, let me set down roots, and I'll grow something. But look at my life and you'd never believe I have a settler's heart. Instead, I find myself a reluctant pioneer. Four international moves (three before the age of twenty-six) have stretched my settler's heart. The uprooting, the adapting, the making a home in a foreign place have given me no choice but to learn a pioneer kind of faith. Finding myself the first female lead pastor in a fellowship of six thousand congregations taught me pioneer perseverance.

Ministry to young adults in post-Christian contexts has taught me pioneer adaptivity. And doing the work of church planting and regeneration has required me to discover a pioneer's capacity for humility and failure. None of these were lessons I was asking for. All of them are lessons I'm still learning.

There are many kinds of pioneering. You may be a pioneer because you're new to your role, the first person your age or gender or race or from your background to lead here. The context may be (or seem) stable, but you're new or different (so you may feel the pioneering more than those around you). It may be that you're planting something new or reenvisioning something old. You may be casting a vision for something you have never even seen. You may be called to shape new definitions for what this faith, this church, this mission could be. And, likely, you'll feel the greater work that is going on in the global church, where the old best practices no longer work and the solid things we once relied on are no longer available or meaningful.

So regardless of the specifics of your place and your call, there are many dynamics that all pioneers must navigate. Here are a few of the many that you may be facing:

- Working within old denominational, theological, relational, or political systems that we must maintain even as we reimagine and reshape them. This can feel like the work of palliative care and midwifery at the same time!
- Shaping new language and new metaphors to pave new paths forward.
- Functioning in many roles, some of which you may not be gifted or experienced in, which means feeling constantly stretched, inadequate, and underprepared.

- Having to defend your decisions because they're unfamiliar to the people in this place (and maybe even having to teach people how to follow you).
- Taking risks to experiment with new ideas that have never been tried (at least not here or by you) and dealing with your own anxiety while reassuring others who are risk averse. Having many opportunities to fail, often publicly, while reassuring those around you (and yourself) that failure is not the worst thing that can happen.
- Feeling alone—and sometimes actually being alone—in the work, either because there are no others (yet) to help or because those who are there don't get the vision or don't (yet) have the capacity to participate. Feeling in desperate need of advocates and allies and assistants.
- Carrying a heavy load while also finding and developing others to help bear the load (which makes double work for you until others are ready to step up).
- Living in a place of incompleteness, rarely seeing outcomes or being fully assured of what the outcomes will be, daily investing in something that may or may not become what you expect (and inviting others into that thing that doesn't yet exist so that it can exist).
- Dealing with high levels of anxiety, which affects sleep, relationships, and health. (All this in the middle of an ordinary life that, like every life, has its own ups and downs, family conflicts, and health concerns.)
- Discerning your own false-self issues—your fears about performance, perfection, and/or pleasing everyone, which may trigger traumas and unhealthy appetites.
- Engaging with a high degree of spiritual warfare.

In all this upheaval we have a choice. We can continue our secular habits with their knee-jerk response of desperate scrambling for that elusive self-sufficiency. Or we can remember this faith we claim that calls us to reach beyond our own small selves one more time. It may require us to remember the ancient practice of confession—confessing our practical atheism and confessing once more our choice to trust in the power of God. We may find that this habit that feels like weakness will actually bring the very life we've been working so hard to attain.

If belief is an act of will, a choice to live as if God is good and active and present and powerful, then I choose to believe. I can't always force feelings of belief. I can't always alleviate my doubts. But I can choose to act. I can use my will to live the way I would live if belief were simple. I can trust that the feelings will come (and go again), the doubts will pass (and return), as I just try each day to make a few more choices toward actual reliance on God than I did the day before.

So I confess.

I confess I believe in God.

I confess belief in a God who is present and powerful and benevolent and at work here and now.

I confess belief that this God has not forsaken his church but has a hope and a future for her.

I confess I believe God's Spirit still transforms human hearts and communities.

I confess I believe God still speaks powerfully through Scripture.

I confess I believe God still works through ordinary, broken people.

I confess I believe that even in desert places, God is still making all things new.

Too often we have just two kinds of leadership models: the perfect ones who never seem to feel inadequate, never make mistakes, and the leaders who make abusive choices that take down whole

ministries. I don't see myself in either. I need to watch ordinary leaders who feel the fear and choose God once more. I need to see behind the scenes of their dealings with their own self-sufficiency. I want to hear their very real temptations to be their own little god. I want to witness the moment they choose to need something beyond their own small selves.

In the middle of Paul's reasonable explanation of law and sin in Romans 7, he could have kept it abstract. Instead he chooses to say "I," and suddenly we're watching closely the personal dynamics of a human will. We want Paul to make the right choice, but we also don't want it to seem too easy—or else what good is his story for our struggles? The very words themselves tumble over one another: "What I want to do I do not do. . . . I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (verses 15, 19, NIV).

I do. I do. I do.

I. I. I.

Do. Do. Do.

At last, the impossibility of "I do" has brought Paul to a new subject—from "I" to "who"—and a new action—from "do" to "rescue" (verse 24, NIV). The dryness of desperation has itself become an opportunity to reach beyond this closed system. When the despair of our insufficiency feels most like death, there's relief in simply remembering that there is life outside of us:

"Thanks be to God, who delivers me . . . !" (verse 25, NIV).

I do. But God delivers.

Every morning dawns with new temptations to dominate the day. So every morning I walk and wrestle. By the end of every walk, I drop my keys by the door and head straight for the keyboard to

bash out the confessions that can finally be expressed, a kind of convulsive purging of the daily desire to need nothing but my own self. And a choice once more to depend. It leaves me wrung out but free. I know that any flourishing in my life and ministry grows from those daily moments of repentance. So because I've found such companionship in Paul's confessions and such fruitfulness from following his example, I share these stories of thrashing and choosing and turning. The chapters that follow are collections of my morning confessions. In each confession you'll find both a confession of my temptation toward suffocating self-reliance and a confession of my choice to believe once more (sometimes little more than a choice to *want* to believe and a promise to live as if I do). And each chapter begins with an essay that explores how biblical characters wrestled with these temptations so we remember we're not alone.

"A life of faith" can sound like one solid lump of believing. But faith is not always fully believing. And "a life of faith" can sound like a choice we made once, a long time ago. But this life of faith is made up of minuscule choices to set aside our own small interpretations, to imagine light in darkness, to say yes when we'd rather say no (or no when we'd rather say yes), to choose to please an invisible God over the very visible faces surrounding us. This life asks us to risk when we want security, to give when we want to hoard, to believe Scripture over how the world seems to us. The stories I need to hear (and so choose to tell) are the stories of those small, significant moments to choose again.

Many of the stories are amalgams of various experiences in four different congregations in two different countries over twenty-five years. I've changed details to describe the kinds of situations a leader experiences. In places where the story is more specific to a particular person, I've asked their permission to share it. I often tell the specifics of the situation only so far because for me the circumstances are not the point. The real story is happening on

the level of will—am I choosing to turn toward or away from God in this moment? Is my desperation a door to disbelief or one more opportunity for reliance? After all, as much as we talk about belief versus doubt, in Scripture, the contrast is often belief versus obedience. Belief is not held only in our heads but also in our hands and feet. As theologian Brenda Colijn explains: “Truth is not just something to be believed but something to be practiced. Believers must ‘do the truth.’”²

Please don’t read the confessions as a complete description of ministry. I’m not writing a general primer on the experience of Christian leadership. There are many times in ministry when it’s easy to believe in God. I write confessions for all the other times. And in this pioneering season there are many of them. How we respond to those moments will shape the culture of our communities and decide the future of our movement. So it’s vital that we’re vigilant to detox from our secular habits, to remember our reliance on a power beyond our own. And at the same time, what a grace that although we get it wrong day after day, God is working—whether we remember him or not.

The confessions can be read through from beginning to end in the usual way of reading a book. I hope that together they describe one leader’s life of wrestling every day for God-reliance. At the same time, I’ve given each confession a title based on the experience that tempted me to turn from God so that you can return to read them separately when you have similar circumstances.

Maybe one day we’ll be less surprised that we can’t be all we need.

Until then let’s keep confessing.

Reflect

1. What was it that initially led you to Christian leadership? Was there an experience of God, a longing for something for his church? A hunger or a hope? Is that still in you? What shape does it take today? How can that primitive prompt (from before this was your profession) still be expressed in your work?
 2. What are your concerns about leading from your own faith? What part of those concerns are healthy hesitations that keep you from crossing boundaries? What part of those concerns are an overreaction to abuses? For example: What might it look like to press into authority without domination? Or to share your own lessons in following God without making it about yourself? Or to invite the intimacy required in sharing behind the scenes of our faith without creating an unhealthy intimacy? And how can we discern healthy ways to protect ourselves from abuse as well, to avoid casting “pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6, NRSV)?
 3. What leadership models are you following? What models are you reacting to?
 4. How are you seeing God shape you as a disciple in the crucible of Christian leadership? How does (or can) that experience, messy and painful though it may be, help you follow and lead?
 5. In Philippians 4:9, Paul writes, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice” (NIV). And in 1 Corinthians 11:1: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (NIV). Is this self-centeredness and pride? What is it that Paul’s asking the believers in Philippi or Corinth to learn from him? How does it look to lead like this in your context?
 6. What is the difference between a secular way of being good at a job and a Christian way?
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