

Ministry in modern society presents a perpetual assault on the pastor's soul. Yet far from a mournful manifesto of the burdens of pastoral life, this book is a celebration of the wonderful opportunity to shepherd God's people. In this three-part book, Schmidt unfolds an approach to sustained, joyful pastoral health.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WRONG ONE FOR THE JOB

EMBRACE INSUFFICIENCY

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses. . . .

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10

It was pitch black. I was wide awake in bed at 2 a.m., staring at the ceiling. My wife, Dana, slept peacefully beside me, but there was no peace for me. Just turmoil. Nearly twelve years later, I’m still unsure if that scene was wrestling, negotiating, or rebelling. God and I were having an ongoing conversation, but I was not being cooperative.

Fear dominated my mind, and relevant excuses were abundant. I was trying to convince God that He was in error (absurd—yes, I know), that He shouldn’t call me to a senior pastorate, and that I was the wrong guy for the job. I was looking for any excuse to give me an out.

Admittedly, there is nothing wrong with aspiring to be a senior pastor (1 Tim. 3:1), but it wasn't something *I* desired. First, I didn't believe I had the senior leader gift mix. Second, I had never sensed that particular call. Third, I was sure of my fit as a "support man" (sort of like Joshua to Moses . . . gulp!). Fourth, I was comfortable with my present assignment, although God was making it increasingly *un*comfortable. And finally, seeing the unhappiness, grumpiness, and misery of some pastors, I didn't want the burden.

I feared losing the joy of ministry.

This negotiation between me and God had lasted several months. He was pursuing my heart, and His Word was specifically convicting. Circumstances were relentlessly validating. His Spirit was ceaselessly confirming. But my fear, self-cynicism, and risk aversion were ultimately winning.

That night was the final round of wrestling. For weeks I hadn't slept much and didn't have an appetite. My wife patiently and silently watched me struggle, giving God space to do His work within me.

As I lay there, I realized He was changing the conversation. Scripture had moved from calling to correcting to warning. It's important to say I never had the overt intention of disobeying God. But I was hoping I could wear Him down, change His mind, or talk Him out of it—like a teen-parent argument.

But that night He seemed to draw a line in the sand, as if to say, *Stop. It's now or never. I'm not negotiating. I've been patient, but now it's time to obey or disobey. I will either deal with you as an obedient child or a disobedient one. Which will it be?*

In the silence, facing that gauntlet of a question, I held my breath, then answered. "Lord, I will obey. I repent of fear and argumentativeness. I surrender. I'll go wherever. I'll do whatever. Would You consider three requests? Would You help me sensitively navigate my resignation and communication? Second, could You spare me from looking for a church? Point me expressly to the church where You are

leading. And third, this will be unimaginably complex and painful. Would You assure me that You are going with us?” (See Ex. 33:14–15; Josh. 1:9; Matt. 28:20; Acts 18:10; and 1 Thess. 5:24 for similar prayers or promises.)

My last, fleeting request was, “Lord—if You would provide a building, I will preach the gospel and pray that You will fill it with new believers.” As a peaceful night’s sleep finally began, I remember drifting off, thinking: *What did I get myself into?*

It was the first night I had fallen deeply asleep in months. My next memory was waking refreshed. For the first time in many days, I was energized by God’s pervasive peace. Crazy how surrendering to God’s vast unknown can be so comforting.

My wife noticed the change with intrigue. I explained that the fight was over, and I had lost. In truth, it was a *win*, for true surrender is always a spiritual victory. It’s a good thing when God vanquishes our hearts. My struggle with God was over, and we would follow Him—though we didn’t know where, when, or how.

Having observed my prolonged ordeal and having already surrendered personally, Dana responded with remarkable optimism and faith. While she didn’t desire to be anywhere else in ministry and wasn’t looking forward to the significant losses we would experience, she had sensed God’s unfolding work and yielded to Him much sooner than I did.

She assured me of her heart. This would be a *together* adventure, and I was thankful to have a faith-filled wife. We had a deeply shared sense of call and were simultaneously nervous and excited. Something supernatural and wonderful was unfolding in our lives, but it was leading us into deep waters in unfamiliar territory. While choosing to obey God brought peace, it also opened a new world of possibilities for fear and worry.

Suddenly, our future was a terrifyingly blank slate.

But God writes amazing stories when we give Him blank slates.

A Call to Insufficiency

How often have you thought, *I'm the wrong guy for this?*

Right. And wrong. At the same time.

Deep pastoral wellness begins with *reckoning*—a reality check of sorts. Please don't let these following few chapters seem negative in tone. Instead, see them as diagnostic. Without complaining, we need an objective view of ministry realities. Gospel service consumes our souls in ways that God counters with offsetting graces.

Let's ask God to open our eyes to things we would rather deny, ignore, or escape. Let's own the truth of this deep end of the ocean in which we swim. Yes, we are in over our heads and treading water. Yes, we are the right "wrong guys" for the job. Yes, we are inadequate.

A call to pastor is a call to *insufficiency*.

Ironic. God calls us to things we are not "up for." He sends us into impossibility. He delights in exploiting our weaknesses. Sometimes He even tells us, *It's not going to work!*

He told Moses to go to Pharaoh but predicted that Pharaoh wouldn't listen. He sent Ezekiel to Hebrew exiles but preemptively said they would not hear. He commanded Jeremiah not to be afraid of people's faces. He prepared Paul to be arrested in Jerusalem. He exhorted John the Baptist not to be offended in Him. In each of these cases and others, God called insufficient people to substantial tasks and prepared them to be let down in the process. Step one—"Follow Me." Step two—"Be let down."

Death always precedes resurrection.

This is interesting when juxtaposed against the modern ministry narrative, which is something like: Step one—"Follow Me," and step two—"Everything turns out great!"

Christian motivational speech teaches us to aim high, be winners, and get the job done. But in spiritual leadership, the first criterion is "Be weak." Perhaps you knew from the start that you were insufficient.

Or maybe you knew it theologically but secretly believed you would crush it. After all, some aim at immediate celebrity, confident they will quickly rise to it.

On the other hand, perhaps insufficiency is self-evident, having knocked you flat to the ground in stunned dismay. The *experience* of insufficiency is unnerving and overwhelming. The moment our inadequacy hits us like a wall (and it will), it's enough to make us want to walk away or render us unhealthy until we do.

We all want to be good at what we do. Who doesn't desire to succeed? We dream of being useful to God. This is healthy from a biblical perspective, but it is also counter to the breaking, humiliating realization that God's work is drastically bigger than we are.

Insufficiency is built into gospel ministry, and our weakness is not a surprise to God; it's one of His unique qualifiers. But the *experience* of it is dismaying. Our daily acquaintance with insufficiency can grow wearisome.

Insufficiency is permanent. Remaining in ministry means we never rid ourselves of this unwelcome companion. No amount of experience, education, time, or supposed success can quash this ever-present pest. We will know weakness like nothing we've ever known.

The *normal* pastoral call is perpetually reacquainted with the constant, often condemning voice of insufficiency. Sounds like everyone's career dreams, right?

In my imagination, that voice is the annoying kid in the movie *The Polar Express*.¹ I can hear him daily: *You will never be a good pastor. Give up while you still can. You're such a disappointment!*

The Paradoxical First Step to Wellness

In ministry, you're going to wake up every day facing needs, expectations, and spiritual challenges that are far beyond your reach and ability. These things laugh at talent, spit on education, trample experience,

and trump every imaginable preparatory strategy. We swim in stormy, deep waters, and they are constantly changing.

You will never *feel* like the right guy for the job. You will never *feel* like you've got this in hand. You will never *feel* up to it or sufficient for the needs of God's people.

Every day you will coexist with insufficiency. You will live with a limp, yet you are called to run your race with patience (Heb. 12:1–2). You will be confronted with strong feelings of finiteness and walk through life with a general low-grade sense of inadequacy.

This is God's intention and design.

Why?

*Insufficiency requires us to depend upon
and point others to a sufficient Savior.*

Think about it. If we believed we were sufficient, what a disaster it would create! Our ego would project a contrived image, and we would find it impossible to be the saviors we pretend to be. We would exhaust ourselves attempting to live up to our phony images, and eventually, we would become the object of scorn from the people we let down.

Trying to come off as sufficient is nothing but fakery looking for a way to fall apart.

We aren't sufficient. Jesus is sufficient. God's people need *Him*, not *us*. They need us like the Israelites needed John the Baptist—we *point* to Him.

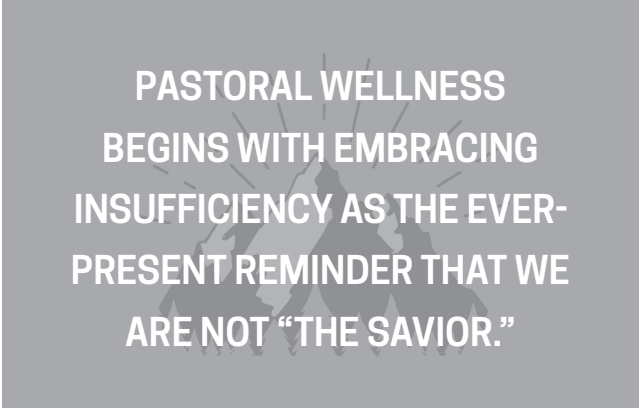
Insufficiency is built into the faith-life.

How does this relate to a "wellness plan"? It's a paradox, like many things in Scripture. Most wellness talk attempts to teach us to deny or defeat negative ideas. Most formulas prescribe self-help and self-esteem books and coach us to overcome with positivity. Psychobabble

says, *Look in the mirror and say, "You've got this," and then go out and build a great church and change the world!*

God's Word essentially says, *Repeat after me—"I don't got this. But Jesus has got me, and He's got this!"* (Grammar intentionally butchered for emphasis.)

Pastoral wellness begins with embracing insufficiency as the ever-present reminder that we are not "the Savior." Acknowledging insufficiency delivers us from the burden of being the hero of the story.



PASTORAL WELLNESS
BEGINS WITH EMBRACING
INSUFFICIENCY AS THE EVER-
PRESENT REMINDER THAT WE
ARE NOT "THE SAVIOR."

Now, *embracing it* does not mean giving in or giving up. It does not mean that despair owns the narrative in your head. It certainly does not mean walking away. *Embrace it* means reckoning with reality, accepting this new, pesky forever friend, and expecting God to leverage it into His strength.

The truth is that Jesus does not expect us to be sufficient. Teaching this to ourselves and others helps everyone remember that *you* are not the Savior, Jesus is. He must increase; we must decrease (John 3:30). Decreasing is healthy. It is safe and true. It is a Christlike descent into wellness. We lower ourselves into spiritual and emotional health. We downsize our view of self. It is the only way to sustain a healthy

servant-hearted trajectory, and I believe it is the first step in developing a strong core for a steady journey in spiritual leadership.

The Good News of Insufficiency

Embracing insufficiency is not self-deprecation or denial of ability, talent, giftedness, education, preparation, or all other good resources for ministry. It is an objective reckoning with the reality of a gap.

There is a great gulf between the totality of *me* and the totality of the spiritual needs of those I love and serve. The corrective realization is that there is *no gulf* between the fullness of Jesus and the magnitude of those needs. Jesus fills the gap.

The infinitude of our assignment—meeting the spiritual needs of people—viewed against the severity of our insufficiency and weakness will create one of two responses: self-centered despondency or Jesus-centered dependence. Self-cynicism simply thinks *I can't do this*. But reliant faith experiences a resolved sort of liberation, believing *God will do this*.

The faith view of weakness is optimistic. Our awareness of insufficiency can either level us or liberate us. If we take it to the wrong place emotionally and psychologically, we will walk away and find a vocation we can handle. Therefore, insufficiency must be processed biblically.

Insufficiency isn't something we overcome or defeat. It's something that compels us to release ourselves into Jesus' sufficiency. His strength makes us free from the soul-crushing burden of trying to do what only He can. This is the first step to being an authentic, visible example of the gospel life—one in which we stop depending on what we can do and begin depending on what Jesus has done.

God's people do not need to see a sufficient leader. They need to see an insufficient leader joyfully trusting and obeying a sufficient Savior.

This is what it means to *live out* the gospel so that God's people hear it in our teaching *and* see it in our living. We declare it and

display it. And they see it not only in a moral lifestyle but more abundantly and clearly in a weak but trusting faith walk. They see us growing up in the gospel—as they are. They know that we run and limp simultaneously, which is okay because Jesus has already run and won our race.

A Funeral for Sufficiency

I imagine we should schedule a funeral for sufficiency. Mourn its nonexistence. Grieve its absence. But only for a moment. Play a short dirge. Shed a tear or two. Bid it farewell with finality. But then see it for the iron taskmaster that it was.

Pretending to be sufficient would have imprisoned you to a life behind a curtain, like the Wizard of Oz. You would be a flaming, oversized bluster in image only—fearsome and apparently powerful, but actually a desperate little man, hiding in fear of exposure.

Contrived sufficiency is the prelude to catastrophic collapse.

The gospel says, “Who you truly are is enough in Jesus.” Open the curtain. Let down the smokescreen. Unveil the insecurities and release the pretense. Jesus likes the little guy behind the curtain, or in a tree (Luke 19), or on a night-shrouded lake (John 21), or crouching by a winepress (Judg. 6). He loves to release us from our exhausting masquerades. He sets us free to be weak followers of a strong Savior.

Doesn't the gospel begin with insufficiency? Doesn't our relationship with God begin with, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13)? As with salvation, the only way we can be useful for His purposes is to be insufficient. We aren't just “weak.” We feel it, live with it, and fight with it every day as it presses uninvited back into our psyches.

Embracing it means we appropriate it to its rightful place—a *reality* but not a *limitation*. In God's economy, weakness is the first qualification of the call.

Do you know what's kind of sad about the Wizard of Oz? The man behind the curtain was so likable. How long he hid in fear, grasping for power, when he could have joyfully, restfully played himself, a wise, gentle benefactor to Oz. I'm certain the lollipop kids would have preferred his gentle self to the fiery, oversized image he had constructed.

Guess what? Your church family would too. No one really expects you to be sufficient unless you convince them otherwise. If you try to, some will believe you, exponentially increasing your performance troubles. A better path is to regularly admit to yourself and others your insufficiency—not in self-deprecation, but in honest, Christ-dependence. This will keep all eyes on Jesus as Savior, not you.

Let Jesus release you from the crushing burden of sufficiency. Equally, refuse to allow insufficiency to dominate your heart's narrative. A healthy pastor shakes hands with insufficiency daily but then tells it to take a seat before the sufficient Savior—Jesus.

Embrace insufficiency. It's a pain, but in its annoying way, it also makes you free.

You don't have to be a savior. Jesus already is.

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