

## **Make Your Mess Your Message**

by Rankin Wilbourne

Until a few years ago, and for almost 14 years, I was senior pastor of a church in Los Angeles. Almost overnight, we became a large, gospel-centered, mission-minded church in our city. Our staff grew from two people when I arrived to more than 45, ministering to people around the city and beyond. Also, during the years I pastored there, I got married, we had three kids, and I wrote two books.

Though we lived in the middle of the city, I grew up in a small town in the other LA. In Louisiana, on some of the back country roads, it wasn't uncommon to see old wooden bridges posted with signs: "WARNING: Over 5000 Pounds Cracks May Appear."

Under the weight and stress of leading a church and a large staff, some of my own cracks began to appear. There were some unhealthy and ultimately sinful patterns in my leadership that I didn't see at the time, and though it was painful, I'm glad God brought them to light.

### **Tensions in a Leader's Life**

I came into pastoral ministry after several years in corporate banking and carried some traits from my first career into my new calling as a church planter: a commitment to excellence, alongside incredibly high standards for myself and others. A recovering Type-A personality, I sincerely believed that my ambition was (mostly) for the glory of God and I wanted to play my role as well as I could.

But beneath that persona, I was filled with anxiety (beneath which ran sadness and shame) along with a deep depression that I was not aware of at all. I can see now that I was terrified of real vulnerability. And I used my words (and my theology) like armor, to protect and hide myself.

I could preach on the dangers of idolatry and the importance of rooting our identity in Christ, but my own sense of self-worth was still closely tied to my work and other people's judgements. I spoke to others weekly about the grace of God, but I was still driven to perform and achieve, as if the church's "success" depended on me.

As you might imagine, this left me exhausted, desperate to keep up appearances. These contradictions were not lost on me. But I had no idea how to break free. My strategies of working hard and hustling for my worth – doing more, better – had always worked. Until they didn't.

### **What Got You Here Won't Get You There**

The problem with burying emotions is that they don't go away. They're just buried alive. And when stress piles onto that old wooden bridge, the cracks appear and our emotions leak out onto the people around us, often to their harm.

I dealt with my distressing emotions by reaching for my drugs of choice: performance and control. That looked like making an idol of excellence, evaluating others with the same high standards I held myself to, and insisting overmuch on clarity – *maybe the expectations just weren't clear enough*. But nothing ever felt *enough*. The perfectionism that kept me striving and hustling was projected onto those around me, and it was suffocating them.

I believe that Maya Angelou was right, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Eventually, some of the people who worked alongside me began to feel run over by me – because they were. My leadership caused some on our staff team to feel uncared for, disrespected, and hurt.

Before I got serious professional help, I was blind, convinced that I was not the core problem. I was wrong. I was in so far over my head that I didn’t even know it. I couldn’t see how I was coming across.

Getting help was the most difficult work I’ve ever done, but I needed a counselor who could cut through my posturing and get to the pain I had been protecting for so many years and the anxiety I was (unsuccessfully) trying to manage. A few months into therapy, I felt like I was breaking, descending down into those dark places that I’d avoided my whole life.

I slowly began to see why and how some of those around me experienced me as controlling, intimidating, authoritative, and domineering. I came to recognize how I used my words to cast myself in a better light, which the Bible more plainly calls lying. I started to understand that while I cared about our team, I cared more about achieving the “success” I needed to feel worthy, so I ended up using people to get what I thought I really needed. I’m ashamed to write that out. But it’s true. And sadly, those patterns are still struggles in my life today – though I’m more aware to resist them.

Although my sins were not intentional, my lack of awareness in no way exonerates me (Lev. 4.1). I wanted so much to be a great dad and a good husband and a faithful pastor. But I lost sight of the fact that, as a leader, you can’t be present for others in a non-anxious way unless you are in touch with your own pain. For years, I was not, and I passed my pain and anxiety down into the team that I was charged with leading. I did not embody the gospel of grace of grace that I preached.

Today what grieves me most is that my leadership hurt people on our team and the church God had called me to serve. As the leader, I bear the responsibility.

## **Conflict in the Church**

Understandably, our staff and then our leadership became divided over my fitness to continue as pastor. In 2019, after several years of internal debate and several rounds of consultants, some parties brought their concerns to a group of denominational officials above our local church (called a presbytery in our context).

I worked with some skilled mentors and then with the presbytery to confess all that I could, as ruthlessly as I could. In February 2020, the presbytery heard my confession, and voted to revoke my ordination and remove me as pastor. I had spent my whole life hiding in fear, trying to avoid the very thing that ended up happening to me – being cast out.

Without negating my confession, I decided to appeal the presbytery’s decision to our denomination’s highest court. The elders of our church also appealed, as did a few other pastors who had served on our staff team and had their own perspective on the dynamics in question.

We all appealed to the higher court that the censure was too severe for the sins confessed and that the process by which they had arrived at their decision had been unjust. The appeal took over a year

with COVID but the higher court eventually found unanimously in our favor. They removed the censure from me and recommended that my time away essentially be considered time served. They restored me to a minister in good standing.

Meanwhile, my family and I had left L.A. and moved to a farm in the Midwest, where I continued getting professional help and eventually was hired by a local church whose leadership was thoroughly aware of my story. That's where I've been gratefully serving until this new opportunity arose with Relational Wisdom 360.

## **Two Things Can Be True**

Mine is a story of an emotionally unhealthy leader. I'm grateful for the growing awareness of the need for emotional health among church leaders. The culture that ultimately undid our staff team – of avoiding conflict, not being vulnerable, whispering and triangling – is the culture that I modeled and built. Because I wasn't self-aware, I couldn't see how I sowed my own emotional dysfunction into the foundation of the church I loved. One reason I'm joining the team of RW360 is I am convinced most church leaders need so much more help than we realize.

At the same time, mine is also a story of a frail sinful man in way over his head, filled with anxiety, who hurt the very people that he cared about. That's a story that needs to be told too, because there are more than a few leaders out there who are aware of their own sin, but who are terrified of asking for help or letting ourselves be seen, fearing what it will mean for our reputations or livelihoods.

The church does need a culture of justice, accountability, and transparency. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Pastors like me may need to step aside for a season. But we also need a culture that models working through conflict in a way that serves everyone involved. If people don't witness forgiveness and reconciliation in the church of Jesus, where else can we hope to find it in our contentious, polarized world?

The way forward is to remember what the gospel tells each of us: two things can be true. John Newton's final recorded words were, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

In the midst of the turmoil at our church, a mentor said to me, "You are so upset about things others are saying that you believe are untrue. Try to remember the things they don't know about you that are worse." Oddly, that helps. The truth is, I'm worse than whatever anyone could say about me – but it's also true that in Christ I'm far more deeply loved, and forgiven. I have many regrets, but Christ is sweeter to me today, when I'm not leading a church, than he was for those many years that I was.

In one of her novels, Louis Penny says there are four things we must learn to say that lead to wisdom. I hope one leader reading my story might be strengthened to raise his or her hand and say with Penny, "*I don't know. I need help. I'm sorry. And I was wrong.*"

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*(For more details on my story and my new role at RW360, email Ken Sande, president of RW360, at [ken@rw360.org](mailto:ken@rw360.org))*