

# Faculty Mid-Career Crisis and Remedies

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**ABSTRACT: Most Christian faculty members start their careers full of excitement and thanks since they know God called them to participate in God's work through research and teaching to restore the world. However, as time passes, many of them experience their callings get dimmer. If faculty suffer a midlife career crisis, their ability to help their students to be future Christian leaders for God's Kingdom may be negatively impacted. This paper introduces a faculty crisis self-checklist that contains 10 symptoms and provides remedies to overcome the crisis.**

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## INTRODUCTION

As part of student development efforts, our business school invites Christian business leaders to speak to students. Last spring, we invited a former student who graduated several years ago and was a senior consultant at an investment banking services company. I did not have any plans to attend the event, but the staff who arranges it told me I should be there because the speaker mentioned that it was me who led him to go into the finance area. After returning to my office, I searched through my old emails to find the name of the speaker. Then, I found his message sent a few years ago saying, "I don't know if you remember me, but it was your class that made me switch my major to finance. It has turned out to be a great decision." Over the years, I have received similar emails from former students; however, this time, the message evoked deeper serious self-reflection. Why? Recently I have found myself feeling less happy. I thanked God and surrounding people at my workplace less often than before. I started to examine the reason as to why I did not find the same happiness as before.

Frances Hesselbein said, "When we're called, we're given the energy" to do the calling, but "when we're no longer called, we will not have the energy" (as cited in Buford, 2004, p. 237). I do believe that God called me to be one of His servants at the place where I am working. The reason why I had been losing "energy" was not because I was "no longer called" but I gradually became one of those who "have forsaken the love you had at first" (Revelations 2:4, New International Version). I slowly forgot the fact that

"God uses your work to meet the needs of people," which fulfills one of "the greatest of Christ's commands," loving others (Sherman & Hendricks, 1987, pp. 88-89).

Grappling with these self-reflections has motivated me to share my idea, which I call "a Christian faculty mid-career crisis," with others to think about how to keep our calling new and exciting and to continue to live a life as a Christian faculty member. After submitting it at the CBFA conference, I received positive reviews from all of the reviewers saying things such as it is a "timely topic," "much needed self-analysis," and "something needed within the area of Christian higher education." Then, after the presentation, the attendants provided me many positive comments, including a personal thank you email for sharing the topic. In addition, the paper was selected as one of the best paper awards, which I never expected. Through the experiences, I found it is not just me but many other colleagues who have experienced similar issues, too. Then, I thought it is better to share the paper with more Christian faculty because if faculty suffer their midlife career crisis, their ability to help their students to be future Christian leaders for God's Kingdom may be negatively impacted.

## CHRISTIAN FACULTY MID-CAREER CRISIS SYMPTOMS

Personally, I believe that many Christian business faculty members have chosen employment at Christian institutions, sacrificing the market salary at secular institutions.

I, too, contemplated the more attractive salary at secular institutions, and I can attest to the challenge. I had to decide between accepting almost twice the teaching load but half the salary as compared to those offered at non-Christian schools. While the decision reduced my potential personal financial resources, God has provided me with the great joy in teaching future Christian leaders and researching faith-related financial issues. As a servant leader to my students, I received “personal satisfaction from watching [their] growth and development” (Blanchard, Hybels, & Hodges, 1999, p. 66). At that time, “[My] paramount aim [was] the best interests of [my students]” (Blanchard et al., 1999, p. 66). In my work, I tried to “make the greatest contribution [I could] to [my students] in light of the resources and responsibilities God [had] given [me]” (Sherman & Hendricks, 1987, p. 137). That does not mean that it has been sunny days all the time because the school is a Christian institution. Covey (2004) said that “all organizations, even the best of them, are absolutely filled with problems” (p. 102). I have seen similar issues and conflicts that faculty could face at a non-Christian school. However, these issues and conflicts did not reduce my joy at work since “God [was] in [my] box” and because of that, I had “more grace and freedom to live with those problems” (Buford, 1994, p. 196).

After enjoying my vocational calling as a professor for the first several years, the slow onset of experiencing my personal calling faded, causing me to go to work without having the mind of fulfilling God’s calling and without as much job contentment. I was gradually stepping into the territory of Christian faculty mid-career crisis. In a way, as Sherman and Hendricks (1987) warned, I did not notice that my “own sinfulness” tempted me “to work against God and to pursue wrong ends with wrong motives” and my own interests (p. 105). While “*everything* about our jobs should be directed toward Him—our purposes and motives, our profits and their use, our decisions, our plans, our goals, our equipment, our financing—*everything*” (p. 115), I slowly forgot it was not my work but God’s work, and I am one of His servants. It was high time that “I humbly [asked] God to remove my shortcomings and to strengthen me against the temptations of recognition, power, and greed” (Blanchard et al., 1999, p. 180). Before it was too late, I needed to check “not only what we do, but how and why [I] do it” since “loving God in our work involves [all of them]” (Sherman & Hendricks, 1987, p. 94).

An article from *Huffington Post* listed seven signs of midlife crisis including “panicking about health issues, having more questions than answers, comparing yourself more and more to your more successful friends....”<sup>1</sup> Although, I do relate to some of these signs, another article

from Forbes gave better insight about people’s midlife crises. It listed fifteen signs of crisis and some of them are about pervasive boredom, “dread[ing] getting out of bed,” debating without action, losing life purpose, “life plan isn’t working anymore....”<sup>2</sup>

For the Christian faculty mid-career crisis, I listed ten self-diagnostic questions to check one’s level of the crisis. Those lists or symptoms are things we can find easily from our workplace. Of course, the deeper issue is the relationship between one and God. However, I intentionally tried to focus those that one can easily observe and analyze. In the Bible, some of Jesus’s sermons are somewhat complicated and difficult to understand, but many others are very simple, such as “look at the bird, ...do not worry about...” (Matthew 6:26-34, New International Version).

### ***Faculty Crisis Self Checklist***

Compared to the first few years of my faculty career:

1. I pray less for God’s grace and guidance before a class teaching (Yes/No)
2. I feel less happy to go to school (Yes/No)
3. It takes longer to respond to emails from my students, my school, or department (Yes/No)
4. I am excited less for school or department meetings (Yes/No)
5. I try to meet just the basic contract requirements to keep my job (Yes/No)
6. I focus more on negative sides than positive sides of school/department (Yes/No)
7. I think more about my salary or benefits than my teaching or research (Yes/No)
8. I long for more of the semester ending (Yes/No)
9. I try to minimize my office hours (Yes/No)
10. I spend more and more time on workplace politics (Yes/No)

Buford (1994) said, “To make the second half better than the first, you need to discover the real you” (p. 87), and Clinton (1988) mentioned, “What we truly are is revealed in a crisis” (p. 107). While it is subjective, I would say if your answers are “yes” for at least two or more questions above, you are already one of those who are undergoing a mid-career crisis. Let us briefly discuss those on the lists.

### ***Symptom 1: Less Time to Pray for God’s Grace and Guidance Before a Class or a Semester***

Recalling back two decades to my first teaching day, I remember entering my classroom with mixed feelings of excitement, worry, hesitation, and a little pride. Of course, I prayed a lot before the class and asked my wife to pray for me. How about you? Can you recall how you felt on your first teaching day?

Now as an experienced faculty member, I do not have that same amalgamation of feelings. I now enter my classroom with a more confident mind. With decades of teaching and research experience, a faculty member like myself develops and hones teaching and research skills. However, as time passes, I find that there have been things I have been losing. I no longer have the same excitement I had when I was a new faculty member at the beginning of a new semester. I do not pray much about my classes anymore. Through biblical stories, we know King Saul was very humble and kept asking for God's guidance in his early kingship. However, after several war victories over other countries, Saul started making his own decisions (1 Samuel 13, 15). Clinton (1988) emphasized the importance of seeking God's guidance through prayer by saying that "If God calls you to a ministry, then He calls you to pray for that ministry" (p. 116). I can attest that relying less and less on God is a definite signal of a Christian faculty mid-career crisis.

### ***Symptom 2: Feel Less Happy to Go to School***

Upon finishing my PhD, I interviewed with dozens of schools at a national conference and received invitations to campuses. During the process, I was contacted unexpectedly and chose to visit the institution where I currently reside. It was the first and only Christian school. I was deeply touched when the dean and other faculty members opened our first meeting in prayer! I had never experienced this at the secular schools I visited and interviewed. Being invited to the students' morning chapel filled me with an overwhelming amount of joy. Without thinking much about other conditions such as teaching load, salary, research requirements, and benefits, I felt this was the place God wanted me to serve Him. While the offered salary was much less and teaching load was much more than other schools, I was happy every day.

Maybe not all, but many of us came to Christian colleges believing God called us to be there. When we made the decision to join the colleges, the calling was the main reason for the decision. Other factors such as teaching loads, salary, and research requirements were not as important in comparison to God's calling. Then, as time passes, if any of those other factors become more important than the calling or the calling does not drive your career and you lose the happiness of working at the place God called you to, it begins to signal career crisis.

### ***Symptom 3: Longer Time to Respond to Emails from Your Students or Department***

I remember the time when my students needed help and I was happy to assist them. On some occasions, I have

arranged meeting my MBA students on Saturdays to accommodate their full-time work schedules.

As faculty, we can all relate to being bombarded with several emails from our students all hours of the day on any given day of the week. Generally, these emails are regarding the request for assistance on course materials; however, some email requests are asking for recommendation letters for their part-time or full-time jobs, graduate program applications, etc. As you may relate, these emails are not only during a semester while they are taking your courses but also after graduation. We may check our response time to those emails. If the time gets longer, it may tell that we do not treat them as we are treated by them (Luke 6:31) and are not loving others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31).

### ***Symptom 4: Less Excited for School or Department Meetings***

As faculty, our service is not limited to students. We have many meetings inside our departments and within the university. Faculty members who keep reminding themselves of God's calling will love to go to school or department meetings and try to contribute during the meetings. However, as time passes or the calling gets dimmer, we lose the excitement of those meetings.

### ***Symptom 5: Try to Meet Only the Minimum Requirement***

After becoming a new faculty at a Christian college, I found I had to teach more courses per semester than my friends who studied together and went to secular schools. While my school did not require me to publish papers to keep my job at that time, I decided to do research, present, and publish papers. While I can show a certain level of teaching quality to keep my job, I did my best to help my students. In fact, I did not care about the requirement listed in the faculty handbook. I just focused on continuing research for my development as a faculty member and improving my teaching skills to serve my students better. I believe if a faculty member focuses on the minimum requirement his/her school is asking to maintain employment status or for a promotion, the individual may be in the territory of a career crisis. Sherman and Hendricks (1987) say that there are "ways in which sin has permeated each one of us" at our workplace, and such actions like that of "sign[ing] in at work with the attitude that you'll do only the bare necessities of what it takes to keep the job and collect your paycheck" is one of the examples (p. 105).

### ***Symptom 6: Focus More on Negative Sides Than Positive Sides of School/Department***

With more life experiences, we grow to find that there are no perfect organizations in the world including your

home, church, or workplace. There are both negative things and positive things in any organization. Your school also has several good things and undesirable things. Faculty with a calling mindset see the negative sides of an organization as opportunities for improvement. Therefore, the negative impact of those factors will be minimized. You may find more and more negative sides of your organization as time passes. However, if those affect you in progressively negative ways, it is time to check your calling seriously.

### ***Symptom 7: Focus More on Salary or Benefits***

It is related to other checklists mentioned earlier but specifically, as faculty approach the crisis territory, they focus more on compensation and benefits than on the calling. The interest of the faculty moves from students and school to one's own interest. The motivation of teaching, research, or services is not on the calling but for other things such as salary increases or promotions.

### ***Symptom 8: Long for the Semester Ending***

Called as a teacher, we are happy with spending time with our students. Lecturing in the classroom makes us excited and gives us a feeling of fulfillment. During summer or winter break, we long for a new semester and meeting new students, future Christian leaders. However, if we long for a semester ending more and more as time passes, it is time to check whether you stand on your calling firmly.

### ***Symptom 9: Minimize Office Hours***

As faculty, we are at work with a mission mindset and are faithful to our calling. We enjoy spending time with our students to discuss class materials, advise their future career, and to help them to grow as Christian leaders. When Bob Buford asked how to deal with his anxiety regarding spending his time, Dollars Willard said the answer is very simple: "You should devote yourself to advancing their wellbeing" who "live around you" (as cited in Buford, 2004, p. 13). As faculty, we should devote ourselves with our time to advancing our students' wellbeing.

While many schools have a policy specifying mandatory minimum office hours and days, many of us are willing to extend our office hours past the minimum requirements to accommodate our students' needs. We have experienced that God uses us to influence their lives a lot through the meetings we have with them, one on one, in our office. Thus, our office can be a good mission field, and if we try to minimize our office hours, it can be a way of being "off the mission field." We know that the great King David committed adultery and murder when the whole Israelite army went to war but he did not go (2 Samuel 11).

### ***Symptom 10: Spend More and More Time on Workplace Politics***

Personally, politics is not an area of interest of mine. Through my faculty life, I have seen people who are well versed in academic politics. At times, I have observed individuals who received more recognition than they deserved at schools. While some faculty are awarded titles such as the best teacher, the best researcher, or the exemplary Christian faculty at meetings, we know that there are other faculty members who are more deserving of those awards. Sometimes we see faculty members are offered promotions or positions not because they are qualified but because they are good at playing the politics. Not only in secular schools but also at Christian schools, workplace politics always exists and sometimes it speaks louder.

However, those faculty who live on their calling do not seek for people's recognition. "For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends" (2 Corinthians 10:18, New International Version). Blanchard et al. (1999) mentioned that servant leaders are "more concerned about service than recognition" and "developing loving relationships than power and status" (p. 178). If we partake in workplace politics more and more, we are straying away from our calling from God.

## **REMEDIES TO OVERCOME FACULTY MID-CAREER CRISIS**

I am not sure whether all other Christian business faculty members undergo similar mid-career crises; however, I am assuming at least some of them have similar issues. Being called as Christian faculty, we want to serve our God by fulfilling the duty to train future Christian leaders who will restore God's Kingdom in the marketplace. In fact, God does not need our help. God can use other people rather than us. Sherman and Hendricks (1987) argue that while God does not have any need, "God chooses to have us participate in His plans" (p. 83). They emphasize the fact that our work in Him is "the highest and noblest thing any man or woman could ever do—God's work" (p. 129). To avoid the career midlife crisis or overcome it if we are already in the middle of the crisis, I propose three remedies plus one.

### ***Remedy 1: Remember***

To avoid or recover from the mid-career crisis, one remedy is to keep remembering God's grace and guidance in our life. I reflect on the many ways God continues to bless me through my life journey. Moses emphasized it to Israel stating, "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the

way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (Deuteronomy 8:1-2, New International Version).

As Christian faculty members, if we can keep remembering God’s grace and blessings in our life journey, we can make our calling “new” continuously and can be humble in the eyes of God, who “tests [us] in order to know what [is] in [our] heart” without experiencing the mid-career crisis or recover faster from it. Remembering what God has done for us will restore our happiness in the workplace, rejuvenate us to care for our students more, and aid us in giving glory to God in our workplace and mission field.

### ***Remedy 2: Thinking of the Ultimate Evaluator, God***

Another remedy is focusing on the ultimate evaluator, our God. Blanchard et al. (1999) mentioned what Jesus’ focus was for his ministry. They said, “Jesus certainly did not try to please everyone. His simple concern was to please God” (p. 178). When we were new faculty members, we did not experience such crises. We were motivated, driven, and focused on our calling. In addition, in part, there were many forces that made us stay focused on our calling and do our best. For example, for many faculty members, the tenure system pressure pushed faculty to do their best in and out of the classroom. They needed students’ evaluation scores to be as high as possible and to have as many as possible presentations and publications. However, after achieving tenure, those outside pressures dissolve or at least reduce significantly.

However, we need to focus on the fact that our ultimate evaluator is not our school, dean, nor chairs, but God himself. If so, we will keep doing our best at using our God-given talents in our teaching and research. We will not solely focus on how to make our students happy for the purpose of better course evaluation scores or how to navigate workplace politics for advancement.

### ***Remedy 3: Meeting Three Conditions to Be a Faithful Servant***

The third remedy is to keep checking our faithfulness to God as one of His servants to mitigate the onset of the crisis. One Sunday, my church invited a guest speaker, and during his sermon, he suggested three rulers to test one’s faithfulness. Although I do not know if the three rulers were his own ideas or if he heard them from others since since he did not mention that part clearly, I found there to be a connection to the faculty midlife crisis and the three rules mentioned to improve one’s state of crisis.

The first one is the time ruler. This is consistency over a period. Many people change their services as time passes.

When we keep checking or evaluating whether our services to God and our students are consistent, even as time passes, this will alleviate the crisis.

The second one is the interest ruler. As faculty members, we face many decisions bring conflicts of interest. For example, we can make a class harder to push our students to maximize their God-given talents, or we can make the class easier (i.e., easier grading or extra credits) hoping for better course evaluations for our own job safety or promotion. Which interest comes first will guide your decision in how you manage your class.

The last ruler is the rainy-days ruler. It checks how you react during rainy days. For example, your faithfulness can be measured through how you react during your institutional crisis (financial or non-financial) or during your personal challenging periods (such as denied promotion application or sabbatical application). By evaluating ourselves using the three rulers and trying to pass the measurements, we will not face the crisis, and even if we do face a crisis, we will overcome it quickly.

### ***Plus One***

Finally, the plus one remedy is one that God provides unexpectedly. For me, one example of this remedy is when God sometimes reaches out and touches my shoulder using my former students’ emails, which do not affect my promotion or annual evaluations but internally renew me and make me focus on being one of God’s good servants. Below are examples of (unexpected) emails from former undergraduate and MBA students.

I and my brother .... think about you quite often. I am doing garments manufacturing [business] with a capacity of .... with 750 people continuously working ..... I have been blessed and use lots of things you taught us.... If you come in Asia, please stop by .... You are always invited :).

I have a wonderful news for you. I just received the notice that I PASSED CFA LEVEL 1!!!!!!Finally.... I just got the result today! Thank you so much for all your help throughout this process. God is good in good times and in bad times.

I am already utilizing the fundamentals we learned in class in my job search.... the 1st phase of the application process was to complete a mini Finance Quiz ... I passed the quiz and (2) initial screenings and .... Appreciate .... real world learnings in class!

This class has opened my eyes to a whole new world of finance.... I have always struggled with where I am supposed to be in the world and frequently asked where does God want me? .... It wasn't until your class that I have realized where God is leading me. ... In the past, I have neglected my talents .... now God's vision for my career is clearer.... I wanted to share this information .... express what an impact you have had on my life in such a short amount of time.

### CONCLUSION

We are called to be Christian faculty. Our calling is very important since God wants to expand His Kingdom via our research and help our students to be future Christian leaders. When we remember our early faculty career, the calling was the main reason that drove our career. As time passes, we get used to our teachings and work. Nouwen (1989) questioned himself whether more experiences brought him close to Jesus after "twenty-five years of priesthood" and confessed that his "own soul [was] in danger" while all others said he was "doing really well" (p. 10). From my own experiences as faculty, I, too, find that being a more experienced faculty does not mean I become a better professor to my students or a more faithful servant to God. On the contrary, I have found myself losing the excitement of my calling as time passes, experiencing mid-career crisis.

To check one's level of crisis, I discussed ten self-diagnostic questions. To recover from it, I suggested three plus one remedies. Clinton (1988) says, "Crisis processing either drives them deeper into the presence of God or drives them away from God" (p. 165). I hope and pray that this paper provides a deep reflection time for those who are experiencing their career crisis on their calling and any help to think about how to keep their calling new and exciting as they continue to live a life as a Christian faculty member. Bill Pollard said [to those who finished well], "Their work hasn't been an arduous task for them; it has always been their joy. It's serving God and serving others, and they've loved every minute of it" (as cited in Buford, 2004. p. 233). I hope this paper helps those who are in their mid-career crisis to recover their "first love" (Revelations 2:4) in God and that we can all finish our race well (2 Timothy 4:7). I pray that someday after we finish our race, all we hear from God is, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:23, New International Version).

### ENDNOTES

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