



DRIVING THE FAMILY TO SUCCESS STRESS

It pays to notice the emotional traffic signals.

With a baby in tow and the seminary in our rear-view mirror, my wife and I headed for a "successful" ministry. Four and a half years later, and with another addition to our family, we left that church family for an adventure in church planting.

While giving birth to that church, my wife and I celebrated the arrival of yet another baby. We joked to friends that our kids were "Eenie, Meenie, and Minie . . . and there ain't gonna be no Moe."

Next came the call to a position helping other pastors. My friends called it, "The rewards of successful ministry." To my family, though, this road to success was no joy ride.

While gaining momentum in ministry, my family struggled with the losses success brought. Identifying them, though, was like having pepper stuck between our teeth; we were the last to notice it.

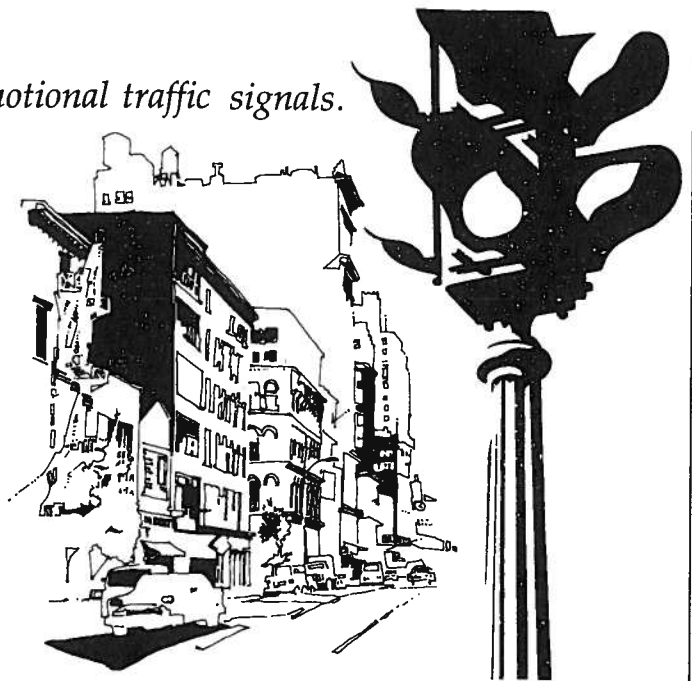
"The hugging and good-byeing included a little dying," I had written in my journal, "because with the new promotion comes a wave of sad emotion." I penned these words in an effort to identify the dynamic in our painful "upward" journey.

Outwardly, my family appeared to be healthy. We were good at concealing emotions — especially negative ones. We avoided acting angry or sad around our church family.

We've got to be strong as a testimony to our faith in Christ, we thought.

But when we returned home to the safety zone, away from those who looked to us as a model of control, we let it rip. WHAM! We would unleash torrents of simmering emotions — on each other.

The game of "now you see it, now you don't" had injured the family. I observed behavior in myself



that I loathed in other people. And I only behaved that way with those I loved the most — my family.

The signals that warned me of impending danger, causing me to find a safer route, are posted here. Red lights indicate dangerous or unacceptable conditions. Yellow lights represent cautions — the warning signs that flashed, "Slow down to avoid injury." Green lights are the healing times — events that aided our travel through the stressful drive for success.

Red lights: misplaced anger

I had no problem controlling my emotions at church. Even the most irascible people received reassurances as I resisted saying what I *really* thought.

But at home, with our first child, I lost my cool over insignificant things. I could come across as calm as a corpse in a tense meeting, but put me in the kitchen with a crying baby when I couldn't find the nipple to the stupid bottle and AAARGH! I acted worse than the child I was trying to feed.

Fortunately for me and my family, our pastor and supportive friends encouraged us to talk about such incidents and didn't reject us afterward. Laughing about the way I stomped around the room with a confused child on my hip provided humorous perspective. I was still concerned, however: blowing up over spilled milk wasn't healthy.

After our move into church planting, stress mounted again. This time I was in charge, however. As a church planter, things happened only when I made them happen. What a contrast to the previous four-and-a-half years.

I had a wonderful relationship with the pastor of our church in Michigan. As associate minister of education and music, I relied heavily on his experience and guidance — much more than I had realized. Now, the buck stopped when I sat. So I didn't sit much. I was on the run most of the time, taking only a couple of days off to be with my wife when our third child was born.

My poor wife endured traffic in and out of the house, which doubled as our church office, when what she needed most was peace and quiet.

The explosion that caught my attention involved my throwing a plastic child's toy across the back yard. *Oops. You're over the edge, something inside said. Better figure out why and do something about it.*

Then, during a Christmas vacation at my wife's relatives, my anger and frustration over an unavoidable accident warned me of my dangerous overload. I can laugh now, but at the time, the strange scene frightened my family.

All of us were battling the flu, and our kids, all three of them, were on medication. Our then three-year-old son suffered the sort of syndrome children often get when they take large doses of antibiotics — diarrhea.

Standing in the middle of his cousin's room on Christmas day, his tiny face suddenly twisted into a surprised look. In disbelief, my eyes shot to the white carpet below — too late.

Instead of reacting quietly and quickly, though, I flew into a rage.

While screaming at him for not running to the bathroom, I grabbed the scared little tyke, dashing across the hall into the tiled room, leaving a tell-tale trail behind. My tirade resulted in a smelly carpet and a trail of tears.

When my wife arrived on the scene, she asked, "Are you all right?"

Still not composed, I hollered, "No, I'm not all right! What else can go wrong?"

I took two aspirin and crawled into bed with my flu. After that episode, which I wasn't proud of, I knew things had to change.

Yellow lights: pent-up tears

A caution sign flashed at a restaurant a year after we left seminary. We had been in our first church long enough to nurture many friendships; we rarely had time to feel homesick.

I had whisked my wife away for breakfast — away from the baby, from church talk, and from the "ministry mask" I wore most of the time. Somewhere between the coffee and pancakes, we chewed on the subject of an uncle of mine who had died after we left seminary. Since my uncle lived near where I had attended seminary, my wife and I had become close to him and that side of my family.

Obviously, we hadn't yet processed our grief over his loss, because without warning, both my wife and I burst into tears, sobbing our way through breakfast. (Our waitress seemed empathetic after we explained our strange behavior.)

That yellow light was a breakthrough. After we faced our pain, allowing ourselves to feel the negative emotions associated with grief, we felt an emotional release.

Later, in a different church, our daughter also flashed a yellow light. She began behaving differently at school. Her usual brightness dimmed. She increasingly resisted performing simple chores, whining about everything.

One evening, about three weeks after Christmas, I sat on the couch, holding a sobbing 6-year-old. She poured out her bottled-up feelings about the friends and family she had left behind.

What startled me was not her outburst. The fact that she was mourning friends she had left *a year earlier*, though, did bother me. In my impatient quest for success, we hadn't slowed down long enough to grieve over the last move, much less the one before it.

Our daughter continued to grieve her losses. She kept bringing up a kitten named Cuddles that ran away the week my wife and I left for a conference. I felt that she was holding on to that kitten's memory too long to be healthy.

We sought professional help for our daughter, taking her to a psychologist. I wanted to know how to help my entire family; the consultation was as much for my benefit as it was for my daughter's.

For our daughter, Cuddles represented all the other losses she had experienced. The kitten was her baby, and she was upset that a warm, lovable crea-

ture would leave — because we had abandoned it. Because my wife and I were gone an entire week, the runaway kitten was our fault, our daughter believed. We had left the children at my parents' house, away from the kitten who needed us.

Our daughter needed to grieve over that kitten, but more importantly, she needed to express her anger toward us, knowing her feelings were validated. She needed to blow off steam without being told to put a lid on it.

We were the ones who initiated the move, causing her to lose her friends. She had a right to be angry at us. I hadn't been listening; I had been evaluating.

Our daughter, thankfully, is making progress. Recently I took her on a "Daddy date" for ice cream. She gobbled up my attention as much as the ice cream. Spying some of her former "spark" back in her eyes felt rewarding.

She needed someone who cared about her enough to let her express herself without fear of rejection.

The time spent processing her sorrow made me realize that I, too, had ignored much of my own pain of our transitions. My daughter wasn't the only one missing her friends in Michigan and Arizona. I had been so afraid to bore our new friends with old news that I rarely mentioned the close friends we had back at our former churches.

Green lights: moving on

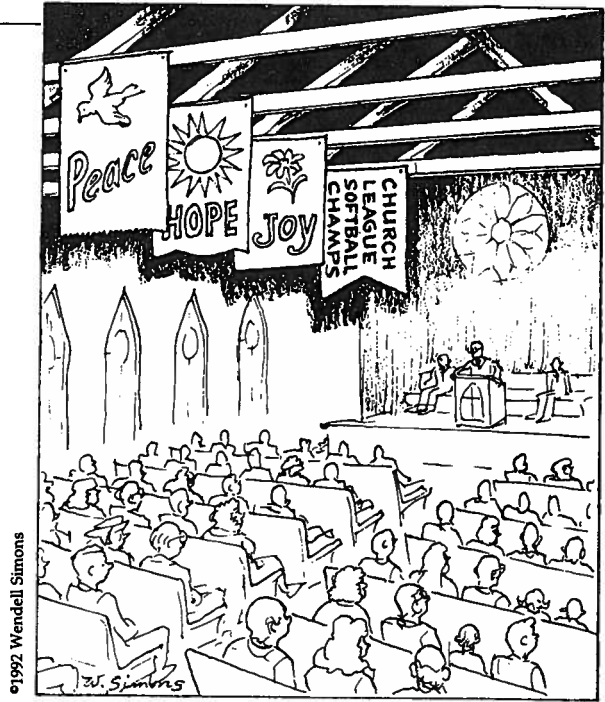
Not long after the blubbing breakfast, a church member remarked to me that he enjoyed my weekly newsletter articles. He surprised me by saying, "Writing must be therapeutic for you."

I had never thought about my writing that way before. He was right. My articles allowed me to express on paper those emotions that were not easily verbalized. I hoped my writing helped others. But I was the most helped.

And then another green light flashed: a worship service in our church turned into a time of healing. Unknown to me at the time, a home prayer group had been praying for my family's healing, and that Sunday, their prayers were specifically answered.

A time of singing followed by prayer for one another quickly became moments of tears, laughter, affirmation, forgiveness, and cleansing. I had never experienced anything quite like it. I can only attribute the event to the power of the Holy Spirit, answers to prayer, and the effect of joining with our small group in Bible study, prayer, and praise.

Another green light was a study by Richard Black-



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mon, which signaled the beginning of my journey to health after our last move.

Blackmon, while working on his doctoral dissertation, discovered that 80 percent of those surveyed believed that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively, and 75 percent of those surveyed reported a significant crisis due to stress at least once in their ministry.

Then the clincher: 70 percent did not have a close friend with whom they could confide. I did a double take at the statistics staring back at me. *I'm one of these people*, I thought.

I decided to make some new friends, beginning with my wife. We began having a regular "date" night each week. We hired a baby sitter and spent the evening talking — not watching a movie or engaging in distracting activities but actually *communicating* — about our family, my job, and her job as mom to three active kids.

One great stride I'm making involves recognizing danger signals. When I start to feel irritable, I say, "I'm feeling irritable." Then, I can start talking about the why.

Our family struggles haven't disappeared; however, we're making progress. Perhaps my 6-year-old's advice is the best I've received: "Do you want to talk about your feelings, Dad? Maybe that would help you feel better."

It does. It also helps us obey the signals of family stress.

— Clark Cothorn



God uses lust to impel man to marriage, ambition to office, avarice to earning, and fear to faith.

— Martin Luther