

The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry

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Weakness as a Resource?

In *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Can Empower Our Ministry*, veteran pastor Mandy Smith uncovers what it might look like if the church didn't emphasize our leaders' strengths but instead human weakness. "My own collision with Christian leadership ideals motivated me to write this book," writes Mandy. "If we expect that we must be strong to lead, we will never see our leadership potential (or we will put up a façade to pretend we're always strong). While this began with leadership, it also became a question about Christianity in general – if being a Christian also means being strong, how can we ever be Christians? The church is in a state of upheaval, which naturally raises questions about what leadership could and should be for the future of the church." Mandy tackles some of the following difficulties:

- How has the emphasis on strength contributed to the burnout of so many of our leaders?
- Why do we put so much pressure on our leaders, pastor or otherwise, to always have easy answers, feel God's presence and have political power?
- Is the CEO model for leadership ideal for organizations or churches?
- Who should our Christian role models be? What are their characteristics?
- What does a leader look like if they aren't the typical powerful, has-everything-together leader?
- What should faith, leadership and Christianity look like right now, at a time when organized religion is changing so rapidly?
- How does transparency in leadership relate to vulnerability?
- Are leaders really meant to be strong, seemingly unshakable individuals? Or should they have the ability to call on God in times of weakness?
- What opportunities do an emphasis on vulnerability in leadership provide for the church and other parachurch organizations?
- How has Mandy's experience as a missionary and pastor influenced the conclusions in her book?

"'A vulnerable pastor' is often an oxymoron. Mandy Smith is not; she is an example of her own book," writes Ruth Graham, author of *In Every Pew Sits a Broken Heart*. "She asks the right questions and wrestles with the answers – her honesty is honest. Her voice is like a breath of fresh air in an airtight, stuffy room. This isn't a book just for pastors but for all of us who want to be 'real' with ourselves, others and God."

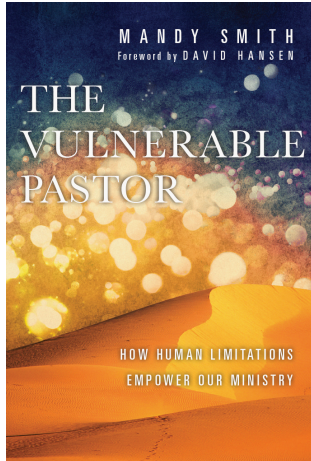
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FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
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"It's hard to be both painfully honest and faith filled at the same time, but Mandy Smith does it. And she shows us how shepherding souls requires honest faith and hope and love, even when some pain is involved."

— Marshall Shelley, editor,
Leadership Journal

“Do you ever feel like you’re making it up as you go along?”

The week I stepped into my new role as co-lead pastor I attended a major convention for Christian leaders. For four years I had served as associate pastor alongside my good friend and lead pastor Troy Jackson, then his growing passion for justice work led us to reduce his workload at UCC to allow him to pursue those opportunities. As we were entering this new partnership, I attended the conference with an open heart, hoping it would equip me for what was ahead. It certainly did, but not in the way I expected.

The more workshops I attended and bookstands I perused, the more strange I felt. Something didn't feel right. I sat in the sessions and earnestly took notes, waiting for something to connect, but the harder I tried, the more I felt myself sinking. After a day of this discomfort, I found myself at dinner with some of the key speakers. I was surprised to hear myself ask them, “Do you ever feel like you’re making it up as you go along?”

I know they responded to me, but I have no recollection of what they said because none of it gave me what I was really asking for—a glimpse behind the scenes into their human hearts. I'm sure they left wondering, “Who was that awkward person with her odd questions?”

I went to bed that night feeling defeated, but in the morning I psyched myself up for another day.

It was more of the same: programs to plug in that would fix my problems. Systems to integrate that would manage my congregants. Books to buy that would prop up my insecurities. Everything was intended for good but it was not for me. The programs and measurements of success did not represent me. The assumptions didn't include me (statements like “All leaders will be motivated by . . .” and “Your church doesn't want a leader like this; they want a man who . . .”). As far as I could tell, no one in this huge gathering of church leaders looked or sounded or thought like me. I hadn't gone with a chip on my shoulder, expecting to be marginalized. In fact, I had expected to be welcomed and included. But by midday, the sinking feeling returned with greater intensity and I faked a coughing fit to mask my teary departure. Feeling shame at my emotional state, I headed for my hotel room where I told God, *This job isn't for me. I have nothing to give. You've made a mistake.*

The realization was so disturbing to me—at forty years of age, after years of prayer and preparation for this role—that for the next twenty four hours I couldn't leave my little hotel room. It's a blur to me now but I remember bouts of tears, dry retching, restless sleep and the kind of prayer that scrapes your insides on its way out. The place inside of me where I go to draw on strength or faith or feeling was a wasteland. If a fire could scorch a desert and

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BOOK EXCERPT



Originally from Australia, **Mandy Smith** is lead pastor of University Christian Church, a campus and neighborhood congregation with its own fair-trade café in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is a regular contributor to *Leadership Journal* and *PARSE* and the author of *Making a Mess and Meeting God*. She is also the creator of The Collect, a citywide trash-to-art project. Mandy and her husband Jamie, a New Testament professor at Cincinnati Christian University, live with their two kids in a little house where the teapot is always warm.

leave it drier and deader than it already had been, that was the state of my soul. I longed for God to comfort me with words like, “You’re stronger than you think” and “You’ve got this—look at all the gifts I’ve given you!” But instead, in my despair, God’s voice was assuring but vague.

*A broken and contrite spirit I will not despise.
In your weakness I am strong.*

Deep truths that felt flat compared to the empty expanse in my soul.

Yeah, yeah, God, I know. Keep trusting in your strength . . . still . . . again.

Although I awoke the next day with eyes swollen closed from crying and my stomach still churning, I knew I had to return to the world. I grabbed something for my headache and invented an explanation for my red eyes. I got through the conference and returned to my home and work, still raw from the experience. We often joke that going to a conference is like drinking from a fire hose. What do you do when it’s more like gulping for air as the torrents threaten to drown you?

– Taken from chapter one, “Filled with Emptiness”