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Evangelical Free Church

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Healthy Church Growth Happens When Pastors Stay A Long Time

Russ Green

My superintendent met my gaze after I hinted at some troubling developments in my new pastorate. He chose his words carefully. "You're going to need to keep a steady hand at the helm." The comment dangled without any details. A Nostradamus-style utterance seemed appropriate advice but was a little too obscure to be of much help. I registered it mentally and moved on. But my mentor's admonition would prove perceptive enough to get me through many years of stormy church life and still be sane and in the pastorate today.

Early ministry circumstances forced me to work through issues that I never expected nor particularly welcomed. I became desperate to know how a pastor can develop cohesive leadership when those he leads have been fighting among themselves and with his predecessors for years. How does a pastor deal with expectations of the pastor-church relationship never voiced, deceptive statements and actions made by church leadership, and chronic financial shortfalls that erode morale and confidence? When the church is under repeated physical attack by a thief and arsonist involved in Wicca, does the pastor simply move on because the pressures are too intense? One of the simplest and sometimes most galling answers to these questions was "you must give a church *time*." Seminary professors, seasoned pastors, and church leadership literature had all pointed me to the irreplaceable role that time in one church played in the health and effectiveness of both church and senior pastor. But the turmoil I personally faced was a severe test of my commitment to follow

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the counsel of many people. At times I wanted to exit vocational ministry and forge a career in the corporate world.

At the same time, the experiences of leading a difficult church, along with my superintendent's counsel, became the inspiration for a more formal exploration of the impact that pastoral tenure has on church effectiveness. I needed to know personally why I should stay with a congregation in a place that was just plain tough. Was it worth it?

For those in troubled ministries, the answers I have found will help by showing the positive results of long tenure. I also will present the results of a study of other church leaders in full-time vocational ministry or in roles that impact the durability of the pastoral relationship. The ideas and research data presented here will assist people that have an impact on pastoral longevity: pastors, denominational leaders that influence pastoral placement, and pastoral search teams of churches looking for pastors. They will discover answers to the question, "Why should a pastor stay at one church for a long time?"

Shrinking Senior Leadership Tenure

Church growth leaders have observed that churches where the senior pastor stays more than five years tend to grow the most numerically and display other signs of health. Churches with high pastoral turnover usually hit attendance plateaus or decline in numbers. The correlation sometimes has been noted only in a negative sense, such as Rick Warren's observation that "A long pastorate does not *guarantee* a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years guarantees a church *won't* grow."¹ But little if any data has been available to confirm the validity of these observations.

Long-term pastoral leadership is missing from many churches in the United States. A cross-denominational survey of U.S. pastors revealed that a third of all churches have forced pastors to leave the parish.² A quarter of all active American clergy have experienced involuntary termination from their place of ministry at some time in their ministry life.³ Every day of the year, two hundred clergy families find themselves relocating to a new ministry.⁴ Every disruption in pastoral service drains off energies from a church's task of being a witness to Christ in its community.

There are significant parallels between the tenure of senior leadership in secular enterprises and pastors. *Business Week*

magazine recently published a comparison of average CEO tenure in different sectors of the economy.⁵ The range across industry sectors was 8.4 years as the longest average (in manufacturing), with 2.7 years in the telecommunications industry the shortest. The turnover rate of just over 4% per year in every sector indicates that CEO ranks are fairly stable across the board. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, pastors enjoy one of the longest average tenures of any profession.⁶ John C. LaRue found that the average longest stay at one church for pastors is eight years and the shortest is 2.2 years.⁷ The average tenure in pastoral ranks is 4.9 years; for senior executives, average tenure is just over four years.⁸

Short Tenure Is Self-Defeating

Pastors must earn the trust of those they lead, particularly at the leadership level. A pastor has to acquaint himself with the particular spiritual challenges his community has and discover ways of meeting them. Senior pastors must have sufficient latitude and support from a team to develop a long-term, comprehensive, and effective strategy to fulfill the Great Commission in their communities. Implementing and sustaining the vision and plans of leadership requires years. The efforts will include missteps and errors in judgment.⁹ But turbulence at the top position in leadership forces the church organization to redirect its energies to less-productive needs. Accommodating to new leaders requires great investments of trust and understanding. These do not develop in a short time.

Short senior leadership tenure imposes enormous costs on any organization. "As tenure gets shorter, the likelihood increases that the leader will depart without completing any changes. Followers will also suffer . . . One of the most damaging results is the cynical belief that leaders can no longer make a difference."¹⁰

Short tenure inhibits church growth. Attendance stagnates or declines. Conversions to Christ in troubled churches are virtually non-existent. Church income does not grow to meet staff and program needs. People do not want to be part of a congregation that has turmoil at the top. The energies of a congregation that should be devoted to fulfilling the Great Commission are instead diverted to lesser and ultimately self-defeating pursuits.

Some Perspective

An Anglican priest surprised a friend of mine by relating how difficult it had been for movers to get his piano to its room on the third floor of the manse. A crew had to tear the wall open, hoist the piano up with a crane to its room, then reinstall the wall that had been removed. My friend asked incredulously, "What are you going to do about the piano when you move?" "Why would I ever do that?" was his reply.

Modern American pastors may find it difficult even to imagine a time that a call to a church was a lifetime commitment. The experiences of pastors have been indelibly shaped by the American culture of constant change. American pastors are shocked by the thought that one congregation might be the only group of people they will ever serve. Yet that was the experience of the Church's pastors and congregations and their antecedents in biblical history until the advent of American Protestantism.

The American pattern of declining pastoral tenure and multiple churches served over a ministry lifetime earns it a unique place in the annals of pastoral ministry. The American church has put a heavy strain on the long-established connection between lifetime pastoral service with one congregation and spiritual fruitfulness. Eugene Peterson laments, "We American pastors, without really noticing what was happening, got our vocations redefined in the terms of American careerism. We quit thinking of the parish as a location for pastoral spirituality and started thinking of it as an opportunity for advancement."¹¹ American churches have also been caught up in a constant and bold redefinition of what was expected of pastors, making them far more willing to part with a pastor that did not measure up to new standards for clergy performance. How did this happen?

The changes in pastoral tenure in America derive in large part from the experiences of the colonies and their frequent revivals. Parish boundaries in the colonies, established in reflection of the British and Continental experiences of the colonials, could not contain enthusiastic preachers let loose in open-air venues. Constant out-migration to the frontiers meant less loyalty to any particular locale. Laws that were established to enforce strict penalties for anyone found to violate parish boundaries in their evangelistic work crumbled in the face of steady immigration from Europe. Anyone without a personal, saving knowledge and experience of Christ, regardless of their denominational affilia-

tion or ethnic background, became fair game for what New York Governor Lord Cornbury derisively called “strowling preachers” in 1707.¹² What was an annoyance in the early years of the colonies became a flood during the Great Awakening that washed away many traditional boundaries separating denominations and churches.

From the earliest days of American church life, how well a pastor did at winning souls, growing his church, and enabling the church to make a significant impact on its community became the basis for evaluating pastoral effectiveness. Pastoral tenure became a function of performance, not of a pastor’s calling and office as it had been for so long.

Many lament the change to marketplace values such as effectiveness, performance, growth, and “marketshare” in the American church. Authors such as Peterson approach pastoral ministry with an urgent call for pastors to shun the careerism of other American professions. London argues, “Bloom where you’re planted.”¹³ On the other hand are the advocates of church growth and health that make the valid point that there have always been quantifiable measures of effectiveness for pastors who govern a church’s affairs (1 Tim 5:17). When those standards are met, a church lives and grows healthily. If the biblical requirements are not kept the pastor should change personally or move on. These positions do not necessarily have to collide.

This article assumes the validity of the church growth advocates’ position on the role that pastoral tenure plays in church effectiveness. Pastors need to stay on at their ministries for a long time. But they need to do the things that bring the greatest impact for Great Commission ministry in their communities. The biblical and historical pattern of long pastoral tenure was intended to bring maximum fruitfulness forth from the local church. At the same time, the pastorate has always been a calling where work performance is to be judged by objective means, even if those objectives might change over generations and cultures.

Protestant groups in the United States generally measure church and pastoral effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission by a few simple criteria: trends in attendance, conversions, baptisms, income, programming, staffing, building programs, and stability. My denomination, the Evangelical Free Church of America, is a good test case for assessing the role of pastoral tenure in church effectiveness. The EFCA is typical of revivalist-

tradition churches that emphasize conversions and numerical attendance growth, church planting in world missions, and strong teaching ministries that are oriented to disciple making. The Free Church assumes that when a church and its senior pastor are effective, the church will show it by increases in the numerical indicators of effectiveness. Data for such criteria are readily available in the EFCA. The key is to test those indicators for correlation between the length of a senior pastor's service and overall church effectiveness.

I drew up a survey targeted to senior pastors and sent it to three hundred seventy two Evangelical Free churches. Every Evangelical Free church with weekend worship attendance over two hundred was surveyed, with a portion of the sample selected at random from the churches with less than two hundred in weekend worship attendance. The sample represented 27.66% of the churches listed in the 2001 EFCA directory.

I assumed that most churches currently over two hundred in worship attendance were, at some time in their history, less than two hundred in weekend worship attendance. Understood in that context, the sample, though weighted toward the larger Evangelical Free churches, is representative of the experience of the churches throughout the Evangelical Free Church in the United States. Significant numbers of Evangelical Free churches have grown beyond the life of the small church they once had. I expected the data to show that an essential component to the growth of the churches now over two hundred in attendance was the tenure of their senior pastor. That assumption proved reasonable, as I will demonstrate later in the article.

*The Survey*¹⁴

Respondents were asked a series of questions that focused on the changes in their church's ministry in the time that they had served as senior pastor. They were asked to record data from the year they began ministry at their church and at the end of 2000. Information was solicited on weekend worship attendance, conversions and baptisms per year, worship services added, staffing additions, income, facilities growth, program expansion, with space for personal observations on the issue of pastoral tenure from their experience. The incentive of having an entry in a drawing for a good digital camera was offered to those who completed the survey and returned it in the provided self-addressed, stamped envelope.

The Response

One hundred seventy one completed surveys were returned, which was 46% of the original sample. The responding churches reflect the experiences with pastoral tenure of 12.8% of the entire denomination. The data is grouped into three categories: 0-6 years tenure, 7-15 years tenure, and 16+ years of tenure. The following table provides the breakdown by tenure group.

Table 1. Sample Distribution

Tenure Category	1-6 years	7-15 years	16+ years
Sample Size	47	86	38
Percentage of total responses (171)	27.5%	50.3%	22.2%

Average tenure in the survey group was surprisingly high, more than double the average tenure of 4.9 years for pastors in general. Even the smaller churches show this fact. Nearly 90% of the surveyed churches had not experienced a split during the current pastor's tenure. Median tenure did increase with church size, although not greatly. Table 2 shows the mean and median tenure by church weekend worship attendance.

Table 2. Tenure Compared to Worship Attendance

Worship Attendance	0-200	201-500	501-1000	1001+
Mean/ Median tenure	10.5/9	9.7/7	11/11	13.8/11
Sample size	17	82	45	27

The data was further analyzed by ascertaining the mean and median changes in the numerical indicators solicited in the survey. The following table is a summary of the responses by tenure category.

Table 3. Summary of Numerical Indicators Compared to Pastoral Tenure

Tenure	1-6 years	7-15 years	16+ years
% Gain Attendance Mean/Median	+156% / +27%	+553% / +221%	+2,330% / +380%
% Gain Income Mean/Median	+62% / +27%	+648% / +219%	+2,990% / +1,440%
Staff Additions Mean/Median	1.4 / 1	5 / 4	8.4 / 5
% Gain Decisions Mean/Median	+340% / +156%	+438% / +900%	+924% / +600%
% Gain Baptisms Mean/Median	+255% / +60%	+630% / +300%	+802% / +400%
Program Additions Mean/Median	3.4 / 4	5.2 / 5	5.5 / 5
Mean # Building Programs	0.5	1.7	2.6

One can readily see the positive role that long pastoral tenure has on a church's ministry. The impact is felt in every numerical indicator. As stated earlier, it was assumed before the survey was sent out that most of the churches with worship attendance greater than 200 had at one time been smaller in size at some point in their history. These data demonstrate that long pastoral tenure certainly is key to a small church's ability to grow beyond the level of 200 in worship. Fully 60% of the respondents had had less than 200 in worship attendance when they began their current ministry. Most had seen their churches grow well beyond that figure by the year 2000. Long pastoral tenure is apparently essential to a church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission in its community.

Some Recommendations

Commitment from Pastors To The Long Term

I urge pastors to prepare themselves spiritually, professionally, and emotionally for the "long-haul" with the churches they

serve. If a pastor wants to ensure that the church he serves has the maximum impact for Christ in its community, his service over a long period of time is a prerequisite for that effectiveness. The long-term pastor must continually enhance his skills as a communicator and leader, adapting his style, methods, and aspirations to fit what is best for the body of Christ he serves as it grows into what the Lord desires it to be. This is sacrificial service. The committed pastor will require oftentimes difficult coaching and training for each life stage of an effective church. He must change as his church changes.

The life of a pastor is inherently difficult no matter the setting. Pastors face challenges in their work life and environment that no other professionals encounter. Pastoral “church hopping” is not healthy for either a pastor or the churches he serves. The well-worn axiom, “bloom where you’re planted” remains appropriate for pastors seeking maximum effectiveness in their service to their Lord and Savior.

Do The Work of Ministry That Brings Maximum Effectiveness

The survey group of Evangelical Free churches indicates that most are doing ministry that brings good results. While the survey was limited to this one small denomination, the findings may well be similar in other evangelical churches. Only an extension of this or a similar survey methodology to other evangelical denominations or independent churches would validate the findings on a larger scale. But these Evangelical Free churches demonstrate that lengthy pastoral tenure has been essential for their effectiveness. At the same time, the pastors of these churches seem to have taken advantage of their long service to help their churches do the right things.

The churches in the survey have made a habit of welcoming and seeking newcomers or they would not have shown the dramatic gains in attendance and other indicators of effectiveness that they have had. They make room in their hearts, their budgets, their programming, their buildings, and their staffing to meet the needs of an expanding church population. Many have developed an intentional disciple making strategy. People are taught about godly use of money. Felt needs are met in areas of Christian education. A passion for unbelievers to come to faith in Christ motivates them not to be content with their past successes or present condition in reaching the lost. The majority of the churches are pursuing the unchurched with the message of

Good News in Christ. Pastors and churches should take the experiences and principles learned from this survey group and seek to follow its blueprint in light of Philippians 4:9, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

Church Commitment

If it is incumbent on pastors to commit themselves to long-term service to one church, it also is imperative that churches be diligent and careful about providing an environment where their pastor can bloom. Churches must commit themselves to having long-term pastorates. Church leadership will need to be well informed about the needs of its congregation and the ministry God has called the church to undertake in its community. This may take a great deal of prayer, time, substantial funding, research, consultation with outside advisors, and communication with the congregation. The congregation and its leadership should commit to the Lord to provide the spiritual, financial, professional, and emotional benefits of an environment that insure the joyful service of their senior pastor and incline him to stay on in service to the church (Heb 13:17).

Pastoral Search Teams

The pastoral search team plays a crucial role in bringing the best match between pastor and congregation for an established church. Pastoral search teams must understand what they are looking for in a pastor. They need to take the time to discover for themselves what their ministry in the community is and then find the man best suited to reach their ministry target. This can be a time-consuming, difficult, and even expensive process. Many consultations may be needed to find the right match of pastor to congregation. However, the benefits of a thorough search far outweigh the costs, especially the price of a poor match. The latter can increase the likelihood of lesser effectiveness for the entire church ministry.

The ministry match process appears to be even more crucial in church planting situations. The survey results indicate that many churches with the greatest percentage gains in attendance and income are often those that have had one pastor since their inception. Finding the match of the right pastor to an eager church planting group seems to pay great dividends in church effectiveness.

Conclusions

Long senior pastoral tenure should be the norm for all churches intent on fulfilling the Great Commission in their communities. The biblical record clearly favors lengthy tenure for the leaders of God's people. Church history confirms that the role pastors have in the life of the church demands that they serve their churches for a length of time sufficient to the goal of insuring church effectiveness. Even in the American Evangelical milieu, where change is frequent and unrelenting, stable long-term leadership in churches is crucial to their ability to reach people for Christ. The case study of Evangelical Free churches across the United States demonstrates conclusively that those churches with long pastoral tenure are generally more effective in carrying out the mandates of the Great Commission. The findings of this study can be used as a guide for pastors and churches wanting to maximize the effectiveness of their relationship in the advance of God's Kingdom.

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NOTES

¹. Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 86.

². John C LaRue, Jr. "Today's Pastors: Forced Exits: Preparation and Survival," *Your Church* 42, no. 4 July / August 1996, 64.

³. John C LaRue, Jr., "Forced Exits: A Too-Common Ministry Hazard," *Your Church* 42, no. 2 March / April 1996, 72.

⁴. Michael Lane Morris and Priscilla White Blanton, "The Influence of Work-Related Stressors on Clergy Husbands and Their Wives," *Family Relations*, Vol. 43 No. 2 (April 1994): 189-195.

⁵. "The Big Picture: Revolving-Door CEO's." *Business Week*. July 22, 2002, 10.

⁶. Max Carey. "Occupational Tenure, Employer Tenure, and Occupational Mobility," *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* 34, no. 2 Summer 1990, 57.

⁷. "Profile of Today's Pastors: Transitions." *Your Church* 41, no. 3 May/June 1995, 56.

⁸. Thomas North Gilmore. *Making A Leadership Change: How Organizations Can Handle Leadership Transitions Successfully*. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1988), xi.

⁹. Warren, 28-29, or James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras. *Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. (New York: Harper Business, 1994), 146-150.

¹⁰. *Ibid*, xi.

¹¹. Eugene Peterson. *Under The Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration of Vocational Holiness*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 20.

¹². Timothy P. Hall. *Contested Boundaries*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 27.

¹³. H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman. *The Heart of A Great Pastor: How To Grow Strong and Thrive Wherever God Has Planted You*. (Ventura: Regal Books, 1994), 27.

¹⁴. To view the survey, a spreadsheet of the collected data, and a more detailed analysis of the data, please refer to my dissertation, which is available through interlibrary loan from Biola University. Russell Green. *Stay The Course: The Necessity of Long Pastoral Tenure For Maximum Church Effectiveness*. Unpublished D Min. diss., Biola University, 2002.