

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

March 2014 - Volume 22, Number 3

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When Less Is More: The Consequences of Clergy Turnover

James served on the staff of two large churches before accepting a call as a solo pastor for a small rural congregation. After three years, he wonders if his leadership has made a difference. Gloria accepted a call to lead an urban congregation immediately after seminary. After a decade in ministry there, she wonders if she is still the best leader for the church. Jeremy heard from his seminary mentor that a wonderful church, served for twenty-five years by an esteemed pastor who has announced his retirement, is seeking a new pastor. Should he apply?

Pastoral change is a part of every congregation's life. Pastors serve a congregation about five years before leaving for another call. Protestant pastors currently in ministry have served, on average, in three or four church positions. Pastors tend to stay longer in any particular ministry position the longer they are in ministry because frequent job changes tend to occur in the earlier years of ministry service.

In addition to the individual circumstances of each church, the amount of time a pastor remains in any single position varies greatly by their denominational affiliation, theological training, and career stage. However, research conducted over an eight-year period tracked a sample of congregations to explore how a change in pastoral leadership affected those churches.¹ What did the study reveal?

About half of the congregations experienced a pastoral transition. Conservative Protestant churches were the least likely to experience a pastor turnover; only 29 percent of these churches welcomed a new senior or solo pastor between 2001 and 2008. Similarly, relatively few Catholic parishes experienced priest turnover, with only 36 percent of these parishes welcoming a different senior pastor. The biggest clergy turnover occurred among mainline Protestant churches. Two-thirds of these churches received a new senior or solo pastor during those eight years.

Church Conflict Makes a Difference

Clergy often leave congregations when conflict, resistance to change, and diminished ministry oppor-

tunities discourage them. One in four churches with different pastors in 2008 than in 2001 said that the church had experienced major conflict, leading a pastor or minister to leave.

What is the conflict about? One out of three pastors reported leadership style as a source of the church conflict. But other disagreements erupted into conflict around church finances, changes in worship services, or renovating or building new facilities.

Even more serious is major conflict that leads to a church split. One in ten pastoral leaders serving their congregation since 2001 reported that one outcome had been the departure of members to form a new church.

Negative Consequences of Clergy Turnover?

Many mainline Protestant churches that went through a pastoral transition also declined in size. Mainline Protestant churches that lost their 2001 pastor also experienced a loss in worship attendance between 2001 and 2008. And the majority of churches (seven out of ten) with different pastors in 2008 reported some decline in worship attendance. Those mainline Protestant churches that retained



"REMEMBER US?...THE MITCHELLS?...
YOU PASTORED OUR CHURCH FOR SIX WEEKS IN 1996?..."

their pastor reported almost no change in worship attendance. Only half of churches with the same pastor reported any decline in worship attendance.

The relationship between clergy turnover and growth is less clear in conservative Protestant churches. Conservative Protestant churches that lost their 2001 pastor actually increased their worship attendance by an average of almost 18 attendees. Those conservative Protestant congregations that retained their pastor declined slightly in size.

Do pastoral turnovers create numerical decline? It's complicated. Many factors play a role in decreasing or increasing worship attendance and growing church vitality. Sometimes numerical decline even precedes the pastor's departure. Any picture of clergy turnover does not capture the *quality* of pastoral leadership. The consequences for the congregation are quite different when an effective leader departs versus when an ineffective pastor leaves for a new call.

Positive Consequences of Clergy Turnover?

Research indicates that longer tenures give pastors more time to build relationships, lead through a period of change, and resolve long-standing conflict. Further, a new pastor can take several years to reinvigorate members' energy and investment in congregational life after such a transition.

New pastors are more likely to lead effectively if they listen to members' responses to the following:

- What issues and questions dominate the discussions at governing board meetings?
- What are the most important things that happened in the congregation in the past several years?
- What are some of the best things happening in the congregation right now?
- What are some of your hopes and dreams for the congregation over the next five years?

The first few years of a new pastorate set the stage for long-term effectiveness. In smaller churches especially, new pastors must first earn the trust of members. Visiting and building relationships helps the new pastor identify and affirm the gifts and talents in the congregation. In larger congregations, lay leaders want to see if the new pastor is a proactive leader who is willing to take the initiative or a more reactive leader who responds to others' initiative.

New ministers invariably inherit staff currently employed by the congregation. Lay leadership smooths the way when they quietly inform existing staff members that the new pastor will be given the

authority to build a new staff team and those terminations may be made by the new pastor. In this way, lay leadership and not the new pastor introduce the idea that staff changes may be necessary.

Advice to new pastors: Proceed with caution—only so much can be accomplished in the first year. It is enough to start a process where members begin to grasp a new vision for the future and become increasingly aware of new possibilities.²

Long Pastorates as More Chapters

If a new pastor negotiates the first year or chapter with an interim understanding—as a transitional leader between the past and the future, the stage is set for the next successful chapter. Long pastorates are actually a series of terms or chapters. Change necessitates that the current contract between the pastor and the congregation must be renegotiated. A new contract calls for retraining lay leaders, recruiting leaders with different skills, employing a new leadership team, and perhaps even revising existing rules. Likewise, pastors must reassess their role, leadership style, and ability to recreate themselves for the new congregation forming before them. Pastors who grasp the concept of chapters are better equipped to serve beyond the first or second term, which lasts between five and ten years.

In year three, James is still in his first term as pastor of the small rural church. Absent any major conflict, after another two or three years, he can discern whether his gifts and skills are right for the congregation's next chapter. Gloria, in year ten, has clearly finished a first term. Her discernment will center on whether her call to the congregation is going to be a long-term pastorate. If Jeremy is going to seriously consider a new call, his job is to ask questions to learn about the congregation's focus and commitments. Together he and the lay leadership can discern if his gifts are likely to bear fruit for the church's next chapter.

In every chapter of ministry, the goal is to flourish. Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ pastor captures the joy of ministry: "I do love being a minister. I love the agility it calls forth in me and the chaos that only Jesus could organize into a calling."³

1. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001–2008

(www.USCongregations.org).

2. Material drawn from *Wisdom from Lyle E. Schaller*, edited by Warren Bird (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

3. "Minute Fifty Four," *What is Good Ministry?*

(www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu).