

HOW LONG SHOULD A MINISTER STAY IN ONE CHURCH?

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Some years ago Alan Wilkinson and I discovered on the basis of a survey of some 350 English Baptist churches that “it is not until a minister has served for five to ten years in his church that a bias towards growth becomes evidence. In other words, it takes time for fruit to emerge from someone’s leadership”. More recently Lynn Green, an American pastor, said of pastoral ministry: “The first two years you can do nothing wrong. The second two years you can do nothing right. The fifth and sixth years of a ministry, either you leave or the people who think you can do nothing right, leave. Or you change, or they change, or you both change. Productive ministry emerges somewhere in the seventh year or beyond”. If this is so, then, most English Baptist ministers don’t stay long enough in one church, for the average length pastorate, according to the Baptist Union Directory, would appear to be around six years. Of course, there are dangers in long pastorates - not least when the when the long term pastorate has resulted by ‘default’: e.g.. when a minister would like to move on to another church, but fails to get a call. Long-term ministry is not necessarily always fruitful ministry. There is no point, for instance, for a minister to remain in a church where the members as a whole refuse to follow the leadership offered; nor is there any point in remaining in a church where it quickly becomes apparent that one is a square peg in a round hole. However, as I reflect on my own experience of ministry, first of thirteen years in one church, and currently eleven years in another, I have found long-term ministry extremely rewarding and fulfilling. Its a wonderful privilege, for instance, to be involved in families over a period of time and to see those children brought for a service of dedication later confess their own faith in baptism; and then at a later stage to be involved in their marriage and even in the dedication of their children. There can be great gains in family stability: my own children benefited no end from spending their formative years in one happy church. And of course, there are also great gains in the development of deep and meaningful friendships - constantly shifting from one place to another can lead to ministers and their spouses experiencing fairly shallow relationships. However, if long-term ministries are to become the norm, then the following two things are necessary. First of all, ministers need to free themselves from viewing ministry as a ‘career’, which involves constantly seeking to move to ever bigger and better churches – as Eugene Peterson rightly said “the congregation is not a job site to be abandoned when a better offer comes along”. Secondly, ministers need to commit themselves to growth and development in their own personal and professional lives – otherwise, they will become stale, and bore their churches rigid.

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