

The Long-term Pastorate

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By Paul Beasley-Murray

It has been said of pastoral ministry:

The first two years you can do nothing wrong. The second year 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. (Lynn Anderson: 'Why I've Stayed', Leadership VII.3 p 77)

George Barna, an American church researcher, conducted a survey of more than 1000 senior pastors. One of his concerns related to ministerial mobility:

During the past decade, the average tenure of senior pastors has dropped to about four years from seven. This is alarming for several reasons:

The practice of changing churches is not a characteristic of a leading or effective pastor.

Because viable churches are based upon relationships and because a strong community takes time to build, the possibility of a pastor creating a strong relational network within the congregation is minimised by a short tenure.

Many pastors experience their most productive years in ministry between their third and fifteenth years of service.

When churches experience a revolving door pastorate, they are less likely to be trusting, communal and outward oriented.

Barna went on to comment:

The smaller the church body the more likely the pastor is to spend a few years in that pulpit. Perhaps this is one of the ramifications of the numbers-crazed, upwardly mobile mentality that plagues the pastorate. Failing to accomplish the numerical growth with which the profession is enamored, pastors move to other congregations in hopes of finding a setting more responsive to their efforts.. The revolving door syndrome begs the question of whether God really calls most pastors to spend only a few years in each church before moving to new (and, presumably, greener) pastures (Barna, **Today's Pastors**: Regal Books, Ventura, California, 1993).

The American scene is actually worse than it would appear from Barna's description. For Barna was writing of senior pastors ie pastors of larger churches able to afford more

than one pastor. In smaller churches ministerial tenure is often much shorter. According to Jerry Scruggs, with forced terminations on the increase, the median tenure for Southern Baptist pastors is barely three years ('The Flexible Leader', **Search** Winter 1991, 30).

Unfortunately I have no figures for the English scene. From a cursory examination of the Baptist Union Directory it would appear that the average English Baptist pastorate has been a little longer at around six years. This may in part be due to the fact that in the UK we may be less obsessed with numbers than ministers in North America. On the other hand, if British ministers were truly honest with themselves, they would have to admit that many yearn to be pastors of bigger and better churches. Over the last 25 years in particular there has been a paradigm shift: whereas once the emphasis was on 'faithful' ministry, today the emphasis is on 'successful' ministry.

In **Turning the Tide** (Bible Society, London 1980) Alan Wilkinson and I published the results of our survey of Baptist Church Growth in England, in which we sought to test out some of the assumptions of C. Peter Wagner, the American church growth guru. With regard to pastoral longevity Wagner stated:

A substantial number of pastors of growing churches have considered their particular parish to be a life-time calling. They are not looking around for greener pastures. Such pastors are excited about what they are doing, and they are fulfilled in their ministry. They love the people as much as the people love them. They do not regularly ask themselves, 'Could it be that my ministry here is ending?' Pastors of growing churches are generally characterized by longevity in the ministry (**Your Church Can Grow**: Regal Books, Glendale, California 1976 p 61).

In our survey we specifically tested the fruitfulness of long-term ministry in one church and discovered that 'it is not until a minister has served for five to ten years in his church that a bias towards growth becomes evident. In other words, it takes time for fruit to emerge from someone's leadership' (**Turning the Tide** p 34). This finding substantially altered my own approach to the ministry at Altrincham. Initially I had seen myself as ministering for a relatively short period of time, particularly since it was my first pastorate. In the end I stayed for over thirteen years. In those thirteen years the church experienced substantial numerical growth - for in spite of high mobility the membership quadrupled in size. I would also like to believe that the church experienced qualitative growth, not least in terms of relationships within the church - although this is more difficult to measure.

Yet there are dangers in long pastorates - especially when the long term pastorate has come about by 'default'. For instance, some ministers would like to move on to another church, but fail to get an invitation. This is often the case for those in their mid-50s, who on the ground of their age alone are no longer perceived by many churches to be 'attractive' with a result that they become 'stuck'. In other walks of life they might be offered early retirement, but in the ministry they are left to work out their remaining years. For some these may be exceedingly fruitful. For others, however, they may be

desperately barren. The long term pastorate is not of itself necessarily advantageous to minister or to church. For example, on the basis of a detailed series of consultations with thirty-four ministers and twenty-six spouses, Roy M.Oswald, Gail D.Hinand, William Chris Hobgood and Barton M.Lloyd listed eight potential disadvantages to the Long Term Pastorate (New Visions For The Long Pastorate, Alban Washington DC, 1983 p 30) - the Long Term Pastorate (LTP) being defined as one lasting more than ten years:

A LTP may lead to over-identification between the clergy and congregation;

In a LTP, a gap may develop between clergy and a growing number of the congregation;

In a LTP, there is a danger that a stagnant ineffective climate can develop;

In a LTP, there is a greater danger of clergy burnout;

As negative influences of a LTP mount and begin to outweigh positive influences, a downward spiral may develop;

An unhealthy LTP can ultimately lead both clergy and congregation to feel they are helplessly stuck with each other;

A LTP may produce reduced personal benefits for the clergy and their families.

'All of us', they wrote, 'are aware... of the many long pastorates that are stale and lifeless at best, and downright disgraceful to the Christian Church at worst. Those who risk long tenure in a pastorate need to know the price of failure' (**New Visions** p 8).

On the other hand, they go on to say, that 'though the stakes are high, the advantages clearly indicate that for alert, competent clergy, the risks are worth taking' (New Visions p 8). For according to their research there were six very positive advantages to a Long Term Pastorate (**New Visions** pp 29,30):

A LTP makes possible greater in-depth knowledge of and relationships between the pastor and individual church members as well as between clergy and the congregation as a whole;

Experiencing a LTP makes possible cumulative developing knowledge and experience of each other for both clergy and congregation, as they observe and participate in each other's growth over time;

Greater continuity and stability of leadership and program in a LTP makes possible events not possible during a short tenure;

A LTP opens up possibilities of greater personal and spiritual growth for both clergy and congregation;

A LTP makes possible greater in-depth knowledge of and relationships between the pastor and individual church members as well as between clergy and the congregation as a whole;

A LTP makes possible deeper knowledge of and participation by the clergy in the community (local, professional, ecumenical, larger denominational); and

A LTP allows additional personal benefits for both the clergy and his/her family

The advantages of a long-term pastorate are very real Ð but not inevitable. In their summary Oswald, Hinand, Hobgood and Lloyd conclude:

In many ways, maintaining a healthy long pastorate is more difficult than changing pastorates every five to eight years. Clergy can dazzle and even fool a congregation over shorter periods of ministry. Many simply repeat their five year bag of tricks everywhere they go. In a long pastorate people get to know their clergy very well, both their assets and their liabilities. These clergy either need to be genuine, authentic persons who live by what they preach and advocate or, to the detriment of their ministry, they are soon found out. It is definitely easier to be the spiritual mentor of people over the short haul than over the long haul. In a long pastorate, clergy soon exhaust whatever wisdom or knowledge they brought to the scene and must continue to scramble to grow personally or end up repeating themselves and boring others. But those who do grow, who do monitor the other disadvantages of a long pastorate, will be likely to have a ministry that is very rewarding and fulfilling (**New Visions** p 87).

Certainly as I reflect on my own experience of ministry, I have found long-term ministry both rewarding and fulfilling. It is a wonderful privilege, for instance, to be involved with 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. From a personal point of view, there can be great gains in family stability: my own children benefitted greatly from spending their formative years in one happy church. 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 my own experience is anything to go by, there are constant temptations to move on. For instance, the moment we began to experience significant church growth at Altrincham, that moment the invitations to other churches poured in. Yet had we moved at an early stage, the probability is that the structures for growth I had sought to put in would have collapsed like a pack of cards with the result that growth would have been short-lived. As it is, although with a new pastor the church took a slightly different direction, the basic structures remained and the church continued to experience growth. One of the costs of growth is a willingness to stick at it - however tempting the offers from other churches might be. Here in Chelmsford the invitations to move to other churches have not come in the same way - in part because we have yet to experience

substantial growth, in part because of my age, and maybe in part because of other factors too. And yet clearly the possibilities for moving on exist. But what then would be the point of all the effort and all the pain as we have sought to bring about change to a church that was ripe for change. If a short-term pastorate only is in view, then far better to let sleeping dogs lie and maintain the status quo.

Clearly there are occasions when short-term ministry is right and proper. There is no point, for instance, in remaining 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. The received wisdom is also that short-term pastorates are best after long-term pastorates, because of the difficulty congregations often have in transferring their affection and allegiance to the incoming pastor.

Nonetheless I would maintain that there is much to be said for increasingly perceiving long-term pastorates as the norm. For this to happen there has to be a change of mind-set on the part of pastors. We have to free ourselves from viewing ministry as a 'career', which involves constantly seeking to move to a bigger and better church.

Eugene Peterson tells of how when at the age of thirty he came to Christ Our King Presbyterian Church, Bel Air, Maryland, he determined to stay there for his entire ministry. Influenced by the Benedictine rule of 'stability' he saw the church as a place for developing 'vocational holiness'. As he came to the end of his twenty-four year pastorate he wrote:

I found a way to detach myself from the careerism mind-set that has been so ruinous to pastoral vocations and began to understand my congregation as a location for a spiritually maturing life and ministry. I don't insist on the metaphor for others. I might be the only one for whom it works. I do insist, though, that the congregation is not a job site to be abandoned when a better offer comes along. (Under The Unpredictable Plant: an Exploration In Vocational Holiness: Eerdmanns/Gracewing, Grand Rapids/Leominster 1992 p 21)

I believe there is much wisdom in that statement.

Yet more than a mind-set is called for. For longer pastorates will be successful only to the degree that ministers themselves are growing and developing. For this to happen pastors need others to help them grow and develop. Hopefully the stimulus will in part come from within the local church - I have been fortunate in having leaders who have contributed to my own growth and development. Certainly there is something lacking if pastor and people cannot 'journey' together. However, outside resources are also vital. There is a limit to the extent to which ministers can make themselves vulnerable to their people. There are times when we need specialised help in our walk with God. Here 'soul friends' and 'spiritual directors' have a vital role to play. But we also need help to grow and develop in our understanding and practice of ministry: here such bodies as the RBIM have much to offer. For the church's sake - let alone for our own - we cannot

afford to stand still. If our churches are to be on the move, we too must be on the move. This is the secret of the effective long term pastorate.

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