

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Long Tenure Can Hurt Your Church

One of the most well known findings of church growth relates to the tenure of lead pastors. Generally, the principle states that longer pastoral tenures are healthier than shorter tenures.

Lyle Schaller was the first person to point out that, while long tenures do not guarantee a church will grow, short tenures almost always guarantee a church will not grow. Thus, if a pastor leaves too soon, the church is not likely to grow.

“The first ten years were great; the second ten years were good; I should have left in year twenty!”

However, a pastor can stay too long. Generally, the first twenty years of a pastor's tenure is quite healthy, but it is very rare for a pastor to lead a church through a third decade and beyond with vitality and growth.

I have had the opportunity to interview numerous pastors with long tenures of twenty-five years or more in the same church. A short summary of those interviews can be stated as “The first ten years were great; the second ten years were good; I should have left in year twenty!”

Pastoral leadership goes through a natural cycle. When a pastor first arrives at a church, he goes through a learning curve gaining knowledge and experience. Soon a new vision emerges into fresh ministry initiatives that propel the church forward for one or two decades. Then a pastor gradually loses a sense of vision, while becoming adverse to risk and change. As the pastor loses vision and a willingness to adapt to change, the church slowly loses ground.

The causes of this normal cycle are many, but research shows that some of the following factors are in play.

First, pastors come to a church with vision for a better future. No pastor accepts a call or appointment without some ray of hope for improving the ministry.

This usually translates into an exciting beginning, which can propel a church forward in effective ministry for a decade or more, depending on the size of the vision. However, most pastors see their original vision fulfilled in ten to twenty years, at which point they begin to coast in ministry rather than taking the risk of establishing a new vision for the future.

Check out Dr. McIntosh's new website for additional articles.

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Pastors must reinvent themselves.

Bolster your efforts in the third decade.

Second, pastors learn from people inside and outside of the church in the early years of their tenure. Basically, pastors are more attuned to the needs of people outside the church in the early years of ministry, which leads to new programs being designed with the non-churched person in view. However, in the latter stages of their tenure, pastors become entrenched, they listen to their internal members more and become less connected to voices outside the church. Over time less and less ministry is directed to the non-churched and the church turns ever more inward.

Third, pastors are less attached to the status quo in the early years of their tenure. They favor focusing on practices that cause growth in the church over maintaining the existing condition of ministry. However, as pastors become more invested in the church ministry, the less willing they are to rock the ministry boat. Their attachment to the current state of affairs makes them less responsive to new innovations.

Fourth, pastors focus on strategic thinking in their early tenures. They develop plans and goals to move the church to a healthier place. However, as tenure increases, pastors think less about change strategies and try to motivate worshipers to support a failing course of action.

The ministry cycles of a long tenure leads to several implications.

First, pastors must reinvent themselves every ten years. Observation reveals that most pastors have a vision that is good for ten years, after which the ministry gradually loses energy. Continuing education, regular reading, and attending conferences are all ways that pastors

can help to reenergize their ministries.

Second, church boards should be watchful for signs the pastor and ministry are running down. Most pastors and church ministries gradually move into inactivity and stagnation. Church leaders can help by offering sabbatical leaves, expecting pastors to participate in continuing educational opportunities, and requiring pastors to submit annual plans of action.

Third, both pastors and church boards ought to bolster their efforts as they enter the third decade of a pastor's tenure. Recognizing that the third decade of a pastor's ministry is often a difficult one, it is fitting that church leaders become assertive in designing a deliberate strategy for church growth for that decade of ministry. To do less is to allow the church, and pastor, to relax into a state of comfortable fruitlessness.

Have you stayed too long in your church? If so, how can you begin to reinvent yourself and your ministry in the coming years?



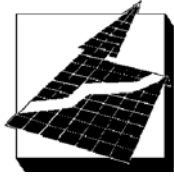
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See the full article on Dr.

McIntosh's blog at

<http://churchgrowthnetwork.com/site/blog>

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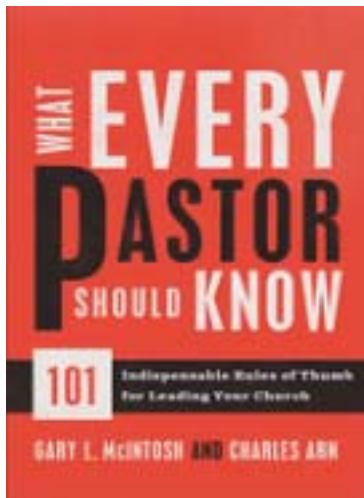
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