

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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Earlier in the Summer I received an unexpected e-mail from a young man who grew up in one of my former churches. I had been privileged to serve as his Pastor while he matured from about the 5<sup>th</sup> grade into college. The unexpected aspect of the e-mail was his announcement that he was leaving his teaching job to become a full-time minister.

While I don't remember ever having a serious conversation with him about considering God's call to ministry, I received his announcement as some little affirmation that the years I served as his pastor and the many interactions we had (youth group, camping, etc.) did have some impact on his willingness to listen to God's call and his decision to respond to that call. He did know my story, and we had talked about my decision to leave the university in response to God's call. Those conversations just never progressed into his reflecting on the possibility of a call (at least as far as I could tell). And, of course, I was not the only pastor he had ever known.

The Church is the means by which "the wisdom of God is made known."<sup>(Ephesians 3:10)</sup> and God has always called leaders for the Church. But for several years now there has been discussion of a "clergy shortage" in general. The discussion began with Roman Catholics and their looming shortage of priests. But it was not long before those in other denominations raised a similar concern. At the same time, others have denied that there is any shortage—usually on the basis of statistics (x number of churches compared to y number of pastors) and the presumption that pastors were just equally interchangeable parts.

For most of us who are involved in helping churches find pastors, it is very clear that the shortage is real and that it is growing. While the booming suburban church near a major metropolitan area may never experience the frustration of clergy shortage when looking for a pastor, modest sized churches (less than 175 in worship), in more out of the way places are in for a tough time whenever they begin the search for a pastor. Those modest sized churches account for 65-70% of the churches in America.

As part of our constant evaluation and improvement, we keep good statistics. In the Great Rivers Region the median search for a pastor is about 14 months. That's right—over a year! Search length has been relatively stable at that point for several years. We also know from over 10 years of experience that 55% of churches who call a new pastor find them in another GRR church. 16% of pastors come from other ABC regions. 10% come from non-ABC churches. And less than 7% come directly from seminary.

That last figure is the most startling. When you compare it with the fact that over 13% of GRR pastors are already over 65, and that another 31% are between 55 and 64, there is reason for alarm. Nearly half of the pastors serving in GRR right now could retire within the next 10 years! As exciting and encouraging as it was to hear three young (under 35) GRR preachers at the

Annual Meeting in Moline, we must acknowledge that they represent less than 7% of the active pastors in the Great Rivers Region.

I don't believe God has stopped calling leaders for the Church, and I don't believe ministry is just another career decision. While we can't manufacture God's call, we can reduce the background noise so persons are more likely to hear God's call and we can remove impediments.

While there are many things that can be done, and are being done, I would like to focus by closing with some thoughts about the Church—YOUR church—functioning as a “greenhouse for ministry.”

You are familiar with the function of a greenhouse. It is the place to safely nurture seedlings until they become strong enough to transplant outside where the environment is uncontrolled. It may be several months between the time a seed is pushed into rich soil held by a small cup in the encouraging environment of a greenhouse, and the harvest of ripened fruit and vegetables from the garden outside.

How can your church be a safe, encouraging environment for ministerial “seedlings” to germinate and grow?

The first thing you notice about a greenhouse is that the environment is different from the great outdoors. It has been intentionally engineered so seeds will have the best possible chance to germinate and grow into healthy plants. “Ministerial greenhouse churches” will be places where ministry is honored and respected. Conflict will neither be covered up, nor permitted to explode with unbridled destructive force.

“Ministerial greenhouse churches” will plant good seeds. Persons will be encouraged to listen for God's call on their lives. The invitation to respond publicly to God's call will be frequent and authentic.

“Ministerial greenhouse churches” will maximize conditions for germination. Good Bible study, care and thoughtful attention to those who give signs of God's call on their lives will be intentional. The practice of spiritual disciplines will be the visible norm.

“Ministerial greenhouse churches” create opportunities for growth. As roots develop “seedlings” will be progressively moved to larger “pots.” Persons will be given opportunities to practice ministry and explore the call in ways that are appropriate to their level of development.

“Ministerial greenhouse churches” will send out their “seedlings” with blessing. Further training and education will be encouraged and supported financially. The church will celebrate the “gift” it has been privileged to send into the larger world.

If these sound like just good discipleship practices, it's because they are.

