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## Pastors: A Vanishing Species? A Paradigm Shift for Missional Churches

Did anyone see it coming? Did you ever think about the massive number of baby boomer pastors retiring? Has anyone asked the critical question: "Why are Bible colleges and seminaries scrambling to get young adults to consider God's call to ministry?"

What is the issue behind the issue — and the issues behind that? First, consider this: Retirement is foreign to Scripture. The Apostle Paul said it himself: Philippians 1:22, "As long as I am in this body, there is good work for me to do." (He was speaking as a prisoner in jail!)

To be fair, some pastors are not succumbing to the "retirement mindset" per se, but actually participating in "refirement." They are taking on a different type of ministry that better suits their aging bodies or other personal circumstances. Great!

But most pastors, if you privately interview them, as I have, are burned out, discouraged, tired of working so hard just to see their congregation continue to decline. And, they see a non-denominational church just down the road, flourishing! What is the issue behind that issue?

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## Mission Field Training

Actually, there are *several* issues. In the U.S. and Canada, following an earlier pattern in Western Europe, the landscape has dramatically changed. These areas of the world are now secularized mission fields. So, what is the real issue? Pastors, in most instances, have never been trained to be missionaries. Therefore, they are not equipped to train church members to be missionaries.

There's an issue behind that issue. In these same countries, there has been the false notion — subtle and unannounced — that the land was “Christian.” For the most part, the only pastors trained in missionary teaching have been those who felt called to the “mission field,” which was understood as somewhere “over there.” In truth, *most pastors have been trained to manage Christians*. The denominational systems, through their Bible colleges and seminaries, have set pastors up for failure. No wonder, at retirement age, pastors are bailing in huge numbers!

What about the failure to attract the large number of younger people training as pastors? This is a separate issue, but connected. Consider this: What younger person in their right mind would want to go through all that training to become “the captain of a sinking ship” — a declining church? Who would spend all that money to be trained in a system that doesn't equip you for the mission field of a secular society? Who would want to receive a salary that may not pay off your student debt until you're 60 years old? Any young person going through a seminary or Bible college system and facing the reality of the church today would have to be really committed — or ought to be committed, to an institution!

The whole system requires a major, adaptive, paradigm shift. Retirement and mounting vacancies won't win the world for Jesus! But it will help get our attention — and, perhaps, increase our willingness to reinvent the system.

## An Adaptive Strategy

It's time — way past time — to rethink the approach to training pastors. First and foremost is the need for church leaders trained in missiology. This concept is based on the reality that a nation has become secularized, as in the case of the U.S., where 50 percent of the American population says they have no affiliation with a “church” (of any kind) (Gallup, March 2019). This situation is similar to other areas—based on reports on both Western and Eastern Europe, Canada, and Australia.

Within the world of cyber realities, learning much of the classical disciplines is no longer required. Greek and Hebrew nuances to Scripture are easily available to pastors via the Internet. Church history is most valuable to the challenges that pastors face today when it is focused on *the history of missiology* (for example, books like Paul E. Pierson's *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History through a Missiological Perspective*, *Evangelism in the Early Church* by Michael Green, and George W. Peters' classic, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*). We should equip all church leaders in mission strategy, using tools like the video series *The Damascus Road: Where Christians Become Missionaries*.

From an *academic* perspective, pastoral training should be 50 percent biblical doctrine and 50 percent missiology, geared toward the present world. Bible doctrine should have increased emphasis on the two areas known to be resurrected prior to every revival in history: spiritual

gifts and the priesthood of all believers. In *practice*, learning should coincide with candidates being *discipled* on the job as they learn. It's what Jesus did!

## Two Tracks for Pastors

With an emphasis on recruiting young adults for ministry, the church should adopt John Wesley's model of a two-tiered entry approach: "ordained" pastors and "local" pastors. Ordained pastors are equipped through extended Bible college or seminary methods. Even so, the length of time should be reduced, according to the focus, mentioned above, primarily on doctrine and missiology. Two focused years is enough, as long as pastors have a "lifelong learning" worldview.

The local pastor concept includes a different training approach. It has several steps: (1) precertification by a pastor from a healthy, growing church; (2) 18 months of training while working a secular job or, better yet, in a paid church position; (3) supervision by a local, ordained pastor; (4) ongoing access to a specified local pastor with experience, while in training; (5) local pastors are then ordained. From the perspective of congregational members, there is no visible difference between seminary or Bible college graduate "ordained" pastors and "local" ordained pastors.

## Hands-On Apprenticing

Another important factor for pastoral training is hands-on discipling by an active pastor who knows and practices the six steps of discipling:

(1) follow me; (2) I do/you watch; (3) I do/you help; (4) you do/I help; (5) you do/I watch; (6) we both spend our lives repeating the process of multiplying disciples who multiply disciples. (This practice will replace secular *volunteer* efforts in congregations.) Volunteerism is not biblical. Spiritual gifts discovery plus discipling is the biblical pattern.

## 10 WAYS TO IMPROVE CHURCH LEADERSHIP

1. Give special love, attention, and prayer to your pastor during tough times.
2. If you are facing a pastoral transition in the next five years, get objective *outside* help to (1) assess the strengths and challenges of your church and (2) form a plan for a smooth transition for your pastor and your church.
3. Work on expanding your horizons for staffing options: Consider discipling (mentoring) members who may be called to ministry.
4. When filling positions that will become vacant, make sure you focus on a position description that includes spiritual gifts. Use a spiritual gift inventory discovery tool.
5. Get help to look at your "church governance" – the way you make decisions. Most churches are organized by a "corporate" model that does not work well, especially in staffing transitions.
6. Focus on mission field training for all staff — and any member willing to grow to meet your church's greatest challenge: reaching lost people.
7. Develop a philosophy of ministry document that describes your congregation's unique personality. Use it for every staff and leadership transition.
8. Do away with the secular notion of volunteers. Practice the simple steps of discipling, based on the work Jesus did with His disciples.
9. Communicate to your church members: The shortage of pastors trained in traditional approaches may be God's way to get us back to on-the-job equipping by discipling.
10. Study areas of the world where the Christian faith is exploding. Focus on the amazing ways God is raising up leaders.

From the perspective of mission urgency, “local” pastors who have been Christians for approximately 10 years and who have been active in their churches should be fast-track trained in 18 months.

Pastors-in-training should learn almost all of their academics online, at little cost. The demand for the Gospel in an increasingly secular society, along with the shortage of pastors and the lack of mission training, warrants greater trust in God from those who are called to serve, with practicing mentors/pastors as overseers.

## Multiplication

The training of pastors must return to a focus on Ephesians 4. The role is clear: Those who are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers have one primary role: “to equip God’s people for the work of ministry.” This basic approach restores the biblical function and reestablishes the priesthood of all believers. It requires the discovery, development, and use of spiritual gifts. Unless pastors self-identify as equippers, they will remain managers of Christians in anemic churches on the mission fields where they live.

## Females in Ministry

A biblical approach for training females to be in ministry should be conducted anywhere it is not already established. If a particular branch of Christianity can’t biblically justify this perspective, an alternative nomenclature should be revised to allow women who are called by God to serve in roles of ministry. Further, the Ephesians 4 model of *equipping* reorients the role of pastors (and others) to equipping all people for the work of ministry. Martin Luther said, “Your baptism is your ordination to ministry.” This paradigm shifts the issue of women as leaders because pastors are not “in charge” over people but are equippers of people.

## Getting Our Attention

Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better. Why? God gets our attention. In the present system of most denominations, there is no way that churches are going to have the luxury of the present approach to pastoral leadership. The Roman Catholic Church has suffered

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this dilemma for decades, and it gets worse every year.

In Protestant churches, this reality is just beginning. The American Association of Theological Schools reports a significant trend: fewer young adults entering training programs for ministries. As is seen in the underground house church in China, often, when the “official” ordained leaders are removed from the situation, the priesthood of all believers returns as a powerful practice. This one reason is why, in spite of all the resistance, the church in China is growing.

The same is true in places like Nigeria in West Africa and Ethiopia in North Africa. It is also observed in the indigenous Christian movements in Central and South America, even in the evangelical movement in Russia.

The one exception? Western missionaries in these areas who plant churches and follow methods exported from their home denominations! Where indigenous movements utilize home-grown lay pastors, the growth of Christianity is less hindered. Do challenges arise? Always! The same is true among Western-trained pastors. Mission is, by definition, messy. Look at the New Testament!

In the West, the growth of secularization has resulted in the scarcity of pastors. It’s amazing how God gets our attention and refocuses Christians through Scriptural principles. When they are followed, His Kingdom grows. We cannot improve on God’s plan. Mission is messy. Get over it. Trust God.

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