

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

A Case Study on the Key Habits of Long-Tenured Pastors  
in the Southern Baptist Convention

A Thesis Project Submitted to  
the Faculty of Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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## THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Pastors face a unique set of challenges as well as fierce spiritual warfare. Statistics reveal many pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention change churches every few years. In contrast, a minority of pastors withstand the difficulties and challenges, enjoying a long tenure in their churches. Studies also show a positive correlation between the long tenure of pastors and church health, which should necessarily encourage pastors to weather the storms and remain in their churches for the long haul.

This project will focus on senior or lead pastors of Southern Baptist churches who have served at the same church for more than ten years or retired from a church in which they served for more than ten years. Besides, the pastors in focus will be currently serving or retired from a church considered "healthy" based on industry standards. Through interviews and surveys, this project will identify the key habits and attitudes of the long-tenured pastors. Of particular interest are the spiritual discipline and holy habits of these pastors and their typical pattern of response to challenges and difficulties common in ministry.

Many pastors need encouragement and guidance, and this project is intended to offer insight into the lives of the men who have remained at their post faithfully for many years, not giving in to the temptation to pursue "greener pastures," and allowing their example to serve as instructive for others.

Abstract Length: 230

Key Words: Long-tenured pastors, spiritual disciplines, encouraging pastors

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## Introduction

The pastor sat quietly in his office, his head atop his hands on his desk. He had already texted his wife; he would be late once again. His minimal staff had gone nearly an hour ago, and once more, he remained alone. He wondered as he had so many times before, why was he doing this? Why should he carry on when the task was so complicated? Ministering to a congregation of several hundred was challenging. No, it was downright demanding and entirely problematic. It took its toll, exacting payment every day.

And, the fact was, nearly every day, the pastor felt the need to escape the ministry, but to where? He had only been there for three years, a short term in ‘ministry years,’ and there he sat once again pondering a way out. Was another church the solution, maybe one with less baggage? Fewer members? More joy? And, if so, where did one find such a church? Was the answer to escape career ministry and return to a secular position? Indeed, the salary would be better, and the rules more defined by the industry and the law.

He suddenly stopped his thoughts’ rapid descent. No, he realized this train of thought was wrong. He knew God had called him to ministry, of that he was certain. He loved the adrenaline and excitement that arose from within when God delivered a powerful message touching the congregation and urging them to action. He cherished the times when God allowed him to reach out to a lost soul and tell them about God’s redemption and His kingdom. The pastor rejoiced with heaven when a sinner came to sainthood by the grace of Jesus. He respected the opportunity he was given to provide Biblical counseling and guidance to troubled individuals.

And yet, it was the day to day drudgery of it all that got him every time. The seemingly endless barrage of members who didn’t like the music, or the flowers, or the way his kids dressed, or the way the shrubs were trimmed, or the posters on the wall in the children’s wing.

The minuscule complaints, ceaseless and unending, having nothing to do with the growth and health of the church – but rather seemed an ongoing irritation – like brush fires to be continually snuffed out to keep his congregation happy and harmonious.

It was an impossible task that led him on a daily basis to this out of control train of thought – a burning desire to escape. And yet, it always led him to another question – how do pastors, ministering in a single church, successfully keep it healthy and thriving, for ten or twenty years?

This scenario is not conjectural, but rather the experience of this author in his most recent ministry within a Southern Baptist Church. This pastor is not alone, and it is also the experience of a growing number of Southern Baptist pastors in the early years of their tenures at churches of varying sizes. Standing in stark contrast, are long-tenured Southern Baptist pastors who successfully lead their churches to participate and practice the Christian faith as they grow healthily and happily for many, many years.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is this author's assertion there exists a direct and positive correlation between the length of tenure of a Southern Baptist pastor, his spiritual discipline and holy habits, and the health of the church he is shepherding. Recent research relates:

A study of the largest Protestant denomination in the country found a startling relationship between the length of time pastors had been in their churches, and the growth or decline of those churches. Their findings? Approximately three-fourths of their growing churches were being led by pastors who had been in their church more than four years, while two-thirds of their declining churches were being led by pastors who had been in their church less than four years.<sup>1</sup>

At issue is the fact many pastors lack the reassurance, guidance, and direction needed to remain dependably in their position, and instead surrender to temptation, leaving their ministry in

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Arn, *Pastoral Longevity and Church Growth*, ([Pastors.com](http://Pastors.com), 2012).



pursuit of what they believe will mean improvement in their lives, their circumstances, and their families. This project will serve as a case study of the key habits of long-tenured pastors serving in churches in the Southern Baptist Convention who weather the challenges and experience health and growth in their churches. The research will focus on senior or lead pastors who have served for a period greater than ten years at a single church. In addition, the focus will be limited to those whose churches are considered ‘healthy and growing’ based on current professional standards. Using interviews and surveys, the project will identify key behaviors and practices of these long-tenured pastors as well as their spiritual disciplines and holy habits in response to challenges and trials common in ministry with the goal of providing guidance and instruction to encourage shorter-tenured pastors. It will serve as a leading guide from those who have persevered to those “young’ in their ministry to remain faithful and press on for the health and growth of their churches. Additionally, the project will support the current body of work, which states that longevity breeds healthier churches:

Doubtless, both clergy and congregations can benefit from the stability a long pastorate provides. Some significant developments in congregational life only occur within the arc of a long pastorate. Longer tenures allow for deep and significant ministry across the multi-generational context of families and the congregation. They may also set the stage for more deliberate, visionary change in the context of deeper trust in relationships that comes with time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Israel Galindo and Betty Pugh Mills, “Long-Tenured Ministry and Systems Theory: Bowen Systems Theory as a Resource for the Long Haul,” *Review and Expositor* 113, no. 3, (September 2016): 341.

## **Statement of Limitations**

Given that this author serves a Southern Baptist Church in Virginia, this project will focus on pastors of Southern Baptist Churches who have served for ten or more years in their respective churches, as well as retired pastors who served for ten or more years. The project will not address churches of other denominations or those with pastors serving less than ten years in their respective churches.

The scope of this thesis project will be confined to a limited number of pastors whose churches are considered “healthy;” not all the Southern Baptist Pastors who are serving or have served in their churches for ten years or more. The project will identify and interview a minimum of twelve Southern Baptist Pastors with a tenure of ten or more years in their churches and whose churches are considered healthy based on ministry and biblical standards. This project will not consider personality profiles or ministerial styles of the pastors interviewed, which cannot be addressed adequately in the scope of this project. This project will not address social-economic elements of churches studied.

In order to establish the correlation between length of tenure and church health, the interview findings will be examined to explore variables affecting the potential relationship. Thus, the interviews will contain questions that will require the biblical and industry definitions of a healthy church and will not exclude the perceptions of the pastors regarding their opinions of the health of their respective churches.

The project will neither avoid subjectivity concerning the interview questions on the part of the interview participants nor the part of this writer, who will evaluate the interviews. Though church health is often considered in terms of church membership, attendance, baptisms, outreach activities, and ministry, this project will seek to attain objectivity by working under the premise of the biblical characteristics of a healthy church and not focusing on the size of the respective

churches, their polity, the personalities of those interviewed, and uncontrollable issues in ministry, such as growth rate of an area, population changes, economic climate, cultural influences, etc.

The scope of this project will be based on biblical definitions with a focus on the New Testament Scriptures, in particular, the *ecclesia* of the New Testament as claimed by Jesus Christ as His own, ordained in Acts 13, and manifested today by the believers of the local assemblies known as churches. The reason being, the goal of this thesis is not only to establish the correlation between the long tenure of pastors and healthy churches but also to discover the spiritual disciplines and holy habits of these pastors, in order to offer guidance and encouragement to shorter tenured pastors who may be on the verge of giving in to temptation and pursuing “greener pastures” at a great cost to their personal ministry and their churches.

There is substantial biblical evidence for spiritual leadership in the Old Testament, as well. The New Testament with Jesus’ teachings and that of the Apostles provides the wealth of information on the definition and instruction regarding Christ’s church, local assemblies of believers, and the pastor’s role in these churches.

This author seeks to biblically define healthy churches and the correlation of said churches by the length of tenure of their pastors by offering insight into the lives of the men who have remained at their post faithfully for many years, despite the challenges and difficulties common to ministry. Finally, this writer believes the thesis project will produce a positive correlation between healthy churches and long-tenured pastors, while presenting applicable standards and strategies for short-tenured pastors to overcome their ministry challenges. The project nor the writer does not guarantee any qualitative or quantitative result for any pastor or church who participates in this method. This writer is confident that the key disciplines, attitudes,

and righteous habits of long-tenured pastors revealed in this study will serve instructive and encourage pastors to weather the storms in their ministry and remain for the long haul, faithfully serving for the health of the church.

### **Theoretical Basis**

This project has a sound theoretical basis, both biblically and historically. The evidence for spiritual leadership at the local level begins in the Old Testament and continues into the New Testament teachings of Jesus and the Apostles regarding the local church. Today, the relationship key is the fact many local churches are closing their doors annually. Among those in the Southern Baptist Convention, traditional gauges that measure healthy churches, including baptisms and membership numbers, are down and have been for years. There are fewer missionaries on the field with the International Mission Board than in years past. All these statistics speak to the Church (the local body of believers) and its earthly leadership in crisis.

From the beginning of the modern era, believers of Christ in the New Testament Church held themselves accountable to the Church body and its leadership, who were, in turn, accountable to God himself. Societal and cultural changes have eroded this precedent and replaced them with 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern individualism. Thus, it seems the Church has lost its influence and even its foundation amid a post-Christian culture. And yet, in reality, God and His Word remain unchanged and so the importance of the Church and its leadership remain unchanged as well.

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of the believer, with both leaders and followers having direct access to God (I Peter 2:9). The New Testament also clearly teaches the role of those in leadership. Pastors are called by various titles, each with a direct correlation to their character and function within the Church. In Acts, as elders, they are to be mature in their

faith, leading by example. In I Timothy and Titus, leaders are called overseers in reference to their function in the Church and their diligent teaching of the Word. In Ephesians, pastors are shepherds tasked with caring for God’s flock. The qualifications of these leaders are found in I Timothy and Titus and feature the ability to teach and a number of godly character traits.

A pastor’s role is clear, caring for and teaching God’s flock, even administering discipline on God’s behalf, and in doing so, pastors are integral to the life of the Church. Biblically and historically in the Old Testament and throughout history, the issue of tenure transcends leadership in most instances; for example, longer-tenured Kings provided Israel better leadership and guidance coupled with prosperity and blessing. Throughout history, churches with long-tenured pastors “experience some of the best years, by almost any metrics” when “both parties have worked through the tough times and now trust each other and love each other more deeply.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, pastors are leaving after short terms in their positions, even when history shows longer tenure often means healthier churches and growth of the body of believers. Some pastors abandon both church and calling, while others seek out greener pastures with the promise of greater benefits and support. And yet, pastors who serve long tenures find themselves in healthier churches with members who truly grow in the Lord becoming mature believers and creating a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

### **Statement of Methodology**

Since this project seeks to demonstrate the direct and positive correlation between the length of tenure of a Southern Baptist pastor, his spiritual discipline and holy habits, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Thom Rainer, “Five Stages of a Pastor’s Ministry,” Lifeway.com, May 31, 2016, <https://www.lifeway.com/pastors/2016/05/31/five-stages-of-a-pastors-ministry/>.

health of the church he is shepherding, the writer will begin in Chapter One by defining these terms: church, length of tenure, spiritual discipline, holy habits, and church health. Using the Bible, scholarly books, journals, and theses, the author will explain how the terms are understood separately and in relationship to each other. Chapter One will also explore the undermining of spiritual discipline, holy habits, and even tenure by the current world culture, church culture, and pastors' personal ambitions. In principle, this chapter will provide specific definitions of the key terms listed as well as increase the readers' understanding of the issues.

In Chapter Two, the writer will utilize his increased knowledge of the subject matter. However, the extensive study of the Bible and scholarly material, will establish how pastoral, spiritual disciplines, holy habits, and tenure contribute to the health of the local church. At this time, the writer will interview a minimum of twelve Southern Baptist pastors who are currently serving or retired, having served a tenure of at least ten years at a single church. The pastors will be questioned regarding their personally established spiritual disciplines, holy habits, and tenure. In addition, these pastors will be questioned regarding the health of their church. The writer will utilize prepared, yet open-ended questions in an interview format to enhance the depth of information gleaned as well as a greater quality of understanding and information while limiting the possibilities of leading or guiding the interviewees in a particular direction. The interviews will provide the author with the data needed to present solid conclusions regarding effective strategies of long-tenured pastors in moving through the early years of conflict to years of mutual trust and effective leadership.

Chapter Three will follow with a presentation of the findings from the pastors' interviews. The author will endeavor to confirm that longer-tenured pastors have healthier churches. The writer will compare the personal pastoral, spiritual disciplines, and holy habits

described by the interviewees regarding themselves to identify specific characteristics of long-tenured pastors. If successful, this data can then be used to help newer, struggling shorter tenured pastors learn how to navigate conflicts in home life and church life and make positive biblical personal changes to breakthrough and lead their churches to greater health. In Chapter Three, the author will endeavor to prove pastors can implement the effective personal strategies and characteristics of long-tenured pastors to get through the early years of conflict to years of mutual trust and understanding and lead their churches effectively to greater health and growth.

In Chapter Four, the author will deliver an effective strategy based on biblical principles for pastors to make positive personal changes in order to lead effectively and enhance the health of their churches. The strategy will be presented considering the definitions, interview findings, and the appropriate methods for successful implementation.

In Chapter Five, the author concludes the study with personal, practical, and anecdotal observations. In pursuit of positive personal changes and effective leadership, these personal observations point to practical applications for the author as well as his colleagues and contemporaries.

### **Review of Literature**

A project of this magnitude can only be successful through the examination of the current body of work composed by denominational experts and experienced church leaders regarding the length of pastoral tenure and church health. To follow is a review of the most useful sources of literature on these topics. These sources, as well as those listed in the bibliography, will be consulted throughout the project as part of the examination and research and in the formation of sound findings and conclusions based on scriptural wisdom.

*Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* by Henry and Richard Blackaby includes a number of key points in the exploration of this author's thesis including the challenges faced by Christian leaders and the character of spiritual leaders, as well as their decision-making techniques and the influence they have to encourage people within the church body toward God. The Blackaby's goal, as is the premise of this thesis project, is to help discouraged Christian leaders who are contemplating resignation, though they still feel God's calling on their hearts, and a burning desire to understand leadership God's way and be equipped to effectively lead.<sup>4</sup>

Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie in *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* offer up the details of what it takes to have a successful and lengthy ministry. The authors explore the stresses faced by pastors – never-ending tasks, long hours, conflict, challenging individuals, and unbridled responsibility – which often leads to burning out and giving up. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie are ministry veterans whose research revealed five themes for successful leadership resilience – spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and leadership and management - which will support the additional findings of this thesis project and provide guidance and encouragement to discouraged short-tenured pastors.<sup>5</sup>

*Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger, explore the reasons, from conflicts amid the congregation to passion for another ministry and all that lies between, why pastors leave church ministry. Serving as a

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011), x-xi.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 16.



reference point for this author's thesis project, *Pastors in Transition* provides an exemplary examination while distinguishing the reasons pastors leave, including underlying motivations, settings, conditions, and challenges.<sup>6</sup>

Jeff Iorg, in *The Painful Side of Leadership: Moving Forward Even When It Hurts* contributes to this thesis in demonstrating the difficulties and challenges faced by pastors and offering answers through responding with grace. From disappointments and loneliness to handling criticism and managing conflict, *The Painful Side of Leadership* presents solutions to staying committed despite the struggles for the health of Christ's church.

John Maxwell, provides principles of leadership, including integrity, self-discipline, and other biblically founded leadership qualities in *Developing the Leader within You*. Maxwell asserts, "Leadership is not an exclusive club for those who were 'born with it.' The traits that are the raw materials of leadership can be acquired. Link them up with desire, and nothing can keep you from becoming a leader," which for pastors, means these biblical qualities can be learned and make a difference.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the implication for this thesis is longer-tenured pastors have developed an understanding of these biblical leadership qualities and applied them continually, resulting in the health of their churches.

In *The Peacemaking Pastor*, author Alfred Poirier affirms that pastors, particularly those newly out of seminary, are not equipped for handling conflict or providing resolution and reconciliation. Since conflict is often at the heart of a pastor's challenges and subsequent frustrations, this book will support the thesis project in providing practical examples of conflict

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<sup>6</sup> Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 3.

<sup>7</sup> John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1993), ii.

resolution and peacemaking, which are among the holy habits of long-tenured pastors and their healthy churches.

Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, in their book *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, contribute to the author's thesis by providing a basis for defining a healthy church as well as the strategies needed to achieve the designation healthy church. Scazzero emphasizes "the overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership. In fact, the key to successful spiritual leadership has much more to do with the leader's internal life than the leader's expertise, gifts, or experience."<sup>8</sup> And so, long-tenured pastors' internal qualities of spiritual disciplines and holy habits hold the promise of wisdom and guidance for the pastors struggling in their ministry.

In *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, a book by Richard Swenson, the author explores the overload faced not only by pastors but by all individuals who live in today's evolving world.<sup>9</sup> The implication for this author's thesis is that the needed solutions for pastors affected by overload and discouragement are available and implementable, mainly when presented by those with a greater understanding and experience obtained via years in church evangelistic ministry.

Donald Whitney, in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, supplies definitions for spiritual disciplines alongside realistic counsel for implementing the disciplines into each individual's life. The author declares the godly are spiritually disciplined, offering

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 63.

compelling examples including Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, Lottie Moon, Elisabeth Elliot, many more modern heroes of the faith as examples.<sup>10</sup> The spiritual disciplines will support the thesis project by way of definition and example.

The International Mission Board (IMB) article entitled “*12 Characteristics of a Healthy Church*” explores the characteristics of healthy churches around the world. In the context of this thesis, the article will define and support the biblical characteristics of a healthy church for biblical definitions regarding this study. Healthy churches share these characteristics: Biblical evangelism, discipleship, membership, leadership, teaching and preaching, ordinances, worship, prayer, accountability, discipline, giving, and mission.<sup>11</sup>

Pewforum.com in “*America’s Changing Religious Landscape*” provides the data from a new Pew Research Center survey of more than 35,000 Americans and explores the decline (8 percent) in those who identify as Christians and the increase (5.9 percent) among those who identify with non-Christian faiths.<sup>12</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, the study will provide valuable insight into the potential correlation between the decline in those who describe themselves as Christians and the health or lack thereof of American Christian churches.

Providing additional information regarding church attendance trends in the United States is the latest survey called “*Church Attendance Trends Around the Country*” by Barna.com.

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 10.

<sup>11</sup> David Platt, “12 Characteristics of a Healthy Church,” *IMB*, (August 2016) <https://www.imb.org/2016/08/31/2016083112-characteristics-healthy-church/>.

<sup>12</sup> “*America’s Changing Religious Landscape*,” Pewforum.org, 12 May 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

According to the report, church attendance is declining.<sup>13</sup> The implication for this author's thesis is the query as to the correlation between declining attendance, pastor tenure, and church health.

Charles Arn explores multiple studies in "*Pastoral Longevity and Church Growth*," demonstrating the correlation between pastors' lengths of tenures and the growth or decline of their respective churches. Measurable growth has long been a marker in gauging the health of a church, and these studies confirm nearly three-fourths of growing churches have pastors who have served for more than four years and thus will corroborate one of the premises of this thesis – longer-term pastorates tend to lend themselves to the health of a church.<sup>14</sup>

"*The Impact of Leader Tenure on Proactiveness in Religious Organizations*" is an empirical study of the bearing of pastoral tenure on proactive strategy – relationship building, coupled with greater influence and trust.<sup>15</sup> Given that these strategies play a role in pastoral leadership as well as in the health of their churches, the implication for this study is that these qualities would align with the holy habits of long tenured pastors.

The work of Israel Galindo and Betty Pugh Mills on behalf of the Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) is highlighted in "*Long-Tenured Ministry and Systems Theory: Bowen Systems Theory as a Resource for the Long Haul*." For this author's thesis, this "theory of practice" explores the benefits of the long-tenured pastors while providing support and resources for these

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<sup>13</sup> "Church Attendance Trends Around the Country," Barna.com, May 26, 2017. <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Arn, "*Pastoral Longevity And Church Growth*," [Pastors.com](http://pastors.com), Retrieved on 27 May 2014, from <http://pastors.com/pastoral-longevity/>.

<sup>15</sup> David Fritz and Nabil Ibrahim, "The Impact of Leader Tenure on Proactiveness in Religious Organizations," *Review of Business* 31, no. 1 (2010): 45. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/923419336?accountid=12085>.

members of the clergy who are in it for the long haul.<sup>16</sup>

Kelly Shattuck explores “7 Startling Facts: An Up-Close Look at Church Attendance in America” on ChurchLeaders.com, presenting insights applicable in support of the premises of this thesis – the connection between pastoral tenure and a church’s health. Shattuck’s research reveals a decline in church growth and attendance, particularly in mid-size churches where tenure is often shorter, while smaller churches continue to grow healthily as do large churches with small group forward approaches.<sup>17</sup>

### **Scriptural Basis**

This project is based soundly in the Scriptures. The Bible does, as it should inform the beliefs and practices of the church. In support of this project, the author has examined the Scriptures to determine the importance of the church and why it matters, the significance of pastors in relation to the health of the church, and the marks of a healthy church as defined in the Bible. Included here is a presentation of the key Scriptures in support of this project.

#### **Matthew 16:18**

This passage establishes the fact that the church belongs to Christ; it is His alone, built by Him. He states it clearly, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”<sup>18</sup> Christ makes his statement “I will build” using the Greek verb tense of progressive future meaning “I shall continue to build” the church (ἐκκλησία) which is literally defined as “a chosen or called out assembly,” a reference

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<sup>16</sup> Galindo and Mills, *Long-Tenured Ministry*, 341-358.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” ChurchLeaders.com. 29 December 2015 <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html/>.

<sup>18</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages are from the New International Version (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017).

to the body of believers.<sup>19</sup> As the church of Christ, proclaimed as such by Him, and continually being built on and by Him, the church is of great importance.

Acts 2:42-47

In this passage in Acts, Luke records with great detail the establishment of the body of believers who gathered together as the church of Christ. Luke, a physician, historian, and companion of Paul, describes how the first converts to Christianity gathered together, devoting themselves to the teachings of those in leadership as they fellowshiped and prayed together. The body of believers met together in the temple courts or in homes - always praising God, who “added to their numbers daily those who were being saved.” God’s divine interest and obvious involvement further denote the importance of His church (the body of believers).

Acts 13:1-3

In this passage, the church’s magnitude is fostered as the believers sat among the teaching of their leadership. As they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit called the first missionaries, Barnabas and Saul. The church acted quickly, after fasting and praying, immediately obeying God’s command. God makes it clear it is by His Spirit that His church’s leaders are called. In addition, this further confirms God’s explicit involvement in His church and the leadership He sets over it and thus the church’s importance in God’s plan.

Acts 20:28

Acts 20:28 further establishes the church as belonging to God as well as its importance. As stated in the passage, the Holy Spirit Himself commissions the “overseers” to shepherd the flock, which is the church bought with Christ’s sacrifice. Though this analogy is often more difficult for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to fully appreciate, shepherds have a multitude of responsibilities which include feeding and caring for the sheep and lambs, leading and guiding

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<sup>19</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Liberty Commentary on the New Testament*, (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty Press, 1978), 59.

them, teaching them, keeping them together, seeking after those sheep who go astray, and protecting them from the dangers of the world around them. Acts 20:28 established church leaders with these immense responsibilities over their flock (the church). The Greek word used here ἐπισκόπους (episkopos) which is translated as a superintendent or an overseer, implies pastors are called by God to serve by watching over not only God's flock but also themselves.<sup>20</sup>

#### “Church Leader” Passages

The church, Christ's body of believers, are to be taught, guided, and protected by the overseers whose sound-minded and holy habits help keep the church healthy by doing God's will. Biblically, other passages add even higher weight to the crucial role given to church leaders by God Himself.

Consider I Timothy 4:1 in which Paul explains to Timothy the dangers facing the church “in later times” should the church overseers fall short in their God-given commission. The passage paints a grim picture of believers falling away and following the teachings of deceivers and demons rather than remaining under the watchful care of the church leaders who are to shepherd them.

In 2 Timothy, chapter 2, verses 3 through 13, Paul warns Timothy of the difficulties he will face as a “workman” for Christ. Paul then goes on to encourage Timothy not to allow fear of difficulties to discourage him from abandoning God's calling on his life. Rather, Paul urges Timothy to never lose heart, but be “strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” as “a good soldier of Christ Jesus” who seeks to “please his commanding officer.” As a final word of encouragement, in verse 10, Paul reminds Timothy, as overseers of Christ's church, their goal is the salvation in Christ of the “elect” for God's eternal glory.

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<sup>20</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1995), 35.

In Acts 20, verses 29 through 31, Paul is speaking to the elders of the church. He warns them of the coming attacks on their “flocks,” admonishing the elders to be ever watchful and on their guard. The inference in these verses is the immense value of Christ’s church as well as the elders’ accountability as the church’s “shepherds” appointed by God Himself.

Given these passages and the multitude like them, it is evident the local church is important and is Jesus’ idea; it is His church for which He sacrificed Himself. And thus, the pastors (leaders) of the church are significant in God’s ultimate plan as those positioned by the Holy Spirit to protect, teach, and guide Christ’s flock. Therefore, their holy habits, along with the trust built during longer tenures, guide the church and keep it healthy. In the study, entitled, *The Impact of Leader Tenure on Proactiveness in Religious Organizations*, David Fritz and Nabil Ibrahim explored the connection between relationship building, coupled with the greater influence of trust which comes during longer tenures and as a result of pastors’ holy habits.<sup>21</sup>

This leads to the role of elders as the shepherd is to the sheep, so should the pastor be to his flock. In 1 Peter 5:1-3, Peter exhorts his fellow elders to “shepherds of God’s flock,” and though the first-century elders knew exactly what that meant, Peter enriched their understanding. He explained they were to watch over the “flock,” not because of a desire for material gain, nor because they were compelled to do so, but simply because of their willingness to serve God.

Paul adds to the definition of the role of church elders in Titus 1:5-9, where he explains to Titus, he was left to put the church on Crete in order to appoint other elders as needed who would be above reproach and faithful. This passage is in agreement with what Paul also wrote to Timothy. As overseers, the elders were to be trustworthy examples of the gospel to the “flock” while they also tended to the “business” of the church.

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<sup>21</sup> David Fritz and Nabil Ibrahim, "The Impact of Leader Tenure," 45.



## “Healthy Church” Passages

Given the goal of this project to show a positive correlation between long-tenured pastors and church health, this author will now proceed to Scripture passages describing a healthy church. A healthy church, biblically defined as support by Scripture, includes evangelism, membership, discipleship, fellowship, giving, teaching, preaching, prayer, and worship, as well as participation in the ordinances instituted by Christ.

Evangelism, discipleship, and the ordinance of baptism are established in Matthew 28:18-20, the Great Commission passage of Jesus Christ Himself. Here Jesus admonished His followers, i.e., the believers who would soon establish His church, to go (evangelism), make disciples (discipleship), baptize these disciples (the ordinance), and teach them (teaching) all they had been taught by Christ. Romans 10:14-15 further supports evangelism and teaching, explaining no one can know the gospel (good news) unless they are told. Paul, in his second letter to the church at Corinth, extolls all believers are “Christ’s ambassadors” and therefore called to evangelize.

Membership, while not specifically defined in Scripture, is implied throughout the New Testament. In Acts 2:41, the passage explains the people were hearing and receiving the message, being baptized, and nearly 3,000 were added to their number. Given the fact someone in authority was keeping a record of baptisms and those being saved indicates membership on some level. This action, the recording of new believers is seen multiple times in Acts, suggesting membership is a part of the church; it cannot be disputed someone was counting. In 1 Corinthians 6:1-6, Paul cautions the church regarding the settlement of disputes among the believers. He asks plainly, “Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?” inferring some formal membership and accountability among

believers. Also, Paul instructs the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 to “remove” the man engaged in gross immorality from the church, from the fellowship. Again, the implication is clear; you must belong to something or be part of something to be removed. It makes no sense to instruct the removal of the immoral man in question if he is not a “member” or part of the church.

Discipleship, as previously indicated, is spoken of in Matthew 28:18-20 but is also evident in Ephesians 4:11-13. Here the Apostle Paul illuminates the fact Christ Himself appointed those in church leadership positions of authority to “equip His people for works of service” with the goal being believers growing in faith and gaining greater knowledge of God. In these verses, membership is also suggested as he states discipleship is performed in order “that the body of Christ may be built up.”

Fellowship, giving, prayer, and worship are additional attributes of a healthy church that follow from a reading of the complementary passages of Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:42. The first passage relates the believers’ devotion to fellowship, prayer, and breaking bread while they enjoyed one another’s company. As they followed through with these acts of praise and devotion, they continued to see God’s blessings in the number of believers (often in the thousands) who came to salvation daily, a result of the Holy Spirit’s prompting. The believers shared all things in common, having all they needed, a fact attested to in Acts 4:42 as well. Also, Acts 2 verses offer added insight. Worship was always a part of their gatherings demonstrated in their constant awe of God and His actions. Worship and prayer given in response to God’s direction are also shown in Acts 13:2.

Giving, demonstrated in the Acts 2 passage above, continued to be evident as the church grew and spread. In 2 Corinthians 8:3-7, Paul writes to the church at Corinth, testifying to the

generosity of the church at Macedonia and holding the Macedonian believers up as an example to other believers. The Macedonians gave beyond what they were able, willingly, without any outside pressure or coercion. Paul then exhorts the Corinthians to follow the example of their sister church in giving freely.

As parts of the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20, teaching and preaching of the true gospel are features of a healthy church. In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul expounds on Christ's gift of pastors and teachers, i.e., teaching pastors, whose gifts are used to prepare believers to do the work of the church and bring others into the body of believers.<sup>22</sup> And thus, in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:2, Paul elucidates the fact that pastors should have the ability to teach. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:2, Paul delivers this charge to Timothy directly and to all overseers (pastors) who will come after him - to preach the Word of God, at all times, using the Scriptures alone as the basis for correction, reproof, and edification of the believers. In addition to the role of pastors as teachers, the growing thriving church should be devoted to their sound teaching.

Finally, healthy churches regularly observe the ordinances given by Jesus to the church – believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper. The ordinances are to be part of the church's worship services allowing believers to confirm their dedication to the Lord. Baptism was set apart as an ordinance by Jesus Christ in the passage above, Matthew 28:18-20. Similarly, Christ provided the example for the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper on the night He was betrayed. Designating the bread as a representation of His body and the wine as representative of His blood, commanding believers to "do this in remembrance" of Him. In the days that followed, the apostles came to fully understand the depth of what Jesus told them at the Last Supper.

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<sup>22</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Liberty Commentary*, 517.

## **Chapter One**

### **The State of the Pastor and a Healthy Church**

#### **Introduction**

The foundation of this project rests on the correlation between the state of a pastor, including his length of tenure, spiritual disciplines, and holy habits, and the health of the church he is shepherding. Recognizing recent studies have found a connection between healthy, growing churches and pastors who have met the challenges and remained with their congregations for longer tenures, the goal of this project is to uncover the key habits of these pastors and how those habits contribute to a healthy church. The hope is the holy habits and spiritual disciplines of long-tenured pastors with healthy churches will encourage shorter-tenured pastors through both guidance, reassurance, instruction, and direction, so they can remain faithful and press forward for the growth and health of the churches they are shepherding. This project will support the current body of work, which affirms “clergy and congregations...benefit from the stability a long pastorate provides.”<sup>23</sup>

As a pastor who has served for 20 years at multiple churches, the writer has seen firsthand the effects of short pastoral tenure on the health and growth of the church. In order to examine the correlation between long-tenured pastors and healthy churches, this project cannot meet its goals in providing guidance to short-tenured pastors without first defining a healthy, thriving church. Chapter One will define a healthy church according to biblical standards, and thus provide clarity as well as opening the door to deliver guidance to encourage short-tenured pastors to continue through their current challenges for the health of the church they are shepherding.

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<sup>23</sup> Israel Galindo and Betty Pugh Mills, Long-tenured ministry and systems theory: Bowen systems theory as a resource for the long haul, Review and Expositor, 15 September 2016.

### *What is a Healthy Church?*

According to *The Baptist Faith and Message*, the document to which the majority of Southern Baptist churches adhere, a church is defined this way, “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> This definition is based on scriptural authority derived from multiple Bible passages, including the gospels and the epistles of the New Testament.

The English word “church” derived from the Greek word *ekklēsia* (*ek* and *kalēō*) means “an assembly of called out ones” and was first used to describe the believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>25</sup> The event, recorded in Acts 2, marks the dawn of the New Testament Church, the origin of Holy Spirit’s ministry within the church and a number of the attributes ascribed to what today would be recognized as characteristics of a healthy church – evangelism, worship, fellowship, prayers, and discipleship.

And while there are any number of characteristics that could be linked to a healthy Biblical church, the author believes there are five non-negotiable attributes, while some others could be considered matters of less importance. The invariable characteristics of a healthy church were the items of focus in the early church as described in Acts 2:42-47 (NIV):

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every

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<sup>24</sup> H.H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, (Nashville: Convention Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God, and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

There is no argument that Biblical membership, leadership, teaching, preaching, prayer, accountability, discipline, giving, and mission are all significant aspects of a healthy church.

Still, the focus here will include the elements presented in Acts. These inherent healthy church characteristics include:

- Biblical Evangelism
- Biblical Discipleship
- Biblical Worship
- Biblical Fellowship
- Biblical Ordinances.

The church, while referencing the universal body of believers, is manifest in local congregations of believers in healthy churches that exhibit these characteristics and function as Christ commanded. These attributes will then be defined, as follows, according to scripture.

### ***Biblical Evangelism***

Acknowledging the English word “church” derives from the Greek term *ekklēsia*, meaning an “assembly of called out ones,” it is evident that prior to a gathering of the church, individuals must be “called out.” *Strong’s Concordance* elucidates on the term *ekklēsia*, from the roots *ek* meaning “out from and to” and *kalēō* meaning to call, rendering this definition, “people called out from the world and to God, the outcome being the Church.”<sup>26</sup>

And thus, is derived the basis for a healthy church and biblical evangelism. There is no church, i.e., the body of believers, without evangelism. A healthy church is built on a foundation

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<sup>26</sup> James Strong, *Strong’s Concordance*, (1995), 28.

of evangelism, the authentic, passionate proclamation of Jesus Christ and His work. Evangelism is a call to repentance and salvation in Christ to all people. Mark Dever, in his book *What is a Healthy Church?* expands further, “Evangelism is speaking words. It’s sharing news. It’s being faithful to God by presenting the good news that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has secured a way for a holy God and sinful people to be reconciled... In short, evangelism is presenting the good news freely and trusting God to convert people.”<sup>27</sup>

The scriptures testify to Jesus’ perfect example of evangelism in Matthew 4, “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” For believers, the starting position in evangelism is sharing Christ with others. The message of evangelism is simple, “Repent.” A spirit of repentance – sorrow at and understanding of evil committed against a holy God and a conscious turn away from evil – is at the foundation of a healthy church.

Regarding the sharing of the gospel of Christ, theologian Elmer Towns rationalizes that 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians in a healthy church should assume the fervent approach of first-century New Testament church Christians, “Since everyone is lost, the church believed that everyone must be presented with the gospel.”<sup>28</sup> The early Christians were cognizant not only of the good news of God’s love, but also the reality of man’s separation from a wholly holy God by sin, the inevitability of death followed by God’s holy judgment, and the inability of man to right the situation in which he found himself. In healthy churches today, God’s holiness is evident and extolled so that those who come to Him can grasp the depth and breadth of the gospel message –

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishing, 2007), 91.

<sup>28</sup> Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2001), 650.

God abhors sin, and mankind will suffer the consequences of sin, outside of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Without biblical evangelism, humanity is destined to eternal separation from God, with no hope of redemption. Human beings cannot save themselves, regardless of their moral intentions or marvelous works. Strong, vigorous churches acknowledge and fathom the goal of evangelism, where mankind falls short, Jesus Christ does not. Jesus is God's supreme plan for mankind, a plan based on His love and mercy, which provides the sacrifice required for humanity's evil nature to be transformed, to gain new life in Christ, and the hope of Heaven – a glorious eternity with God.

For a healthy church, Millar Erickson explicates, “The one topic emphasized in both accounts of Jesus’ last words to his disciples is evangelism. The call to evangelize is a command...and therefore, if the church is to be faithful to its Lord and bring joy to His heart, it must be engaged in bringing the gospel to all people.”<sup>29</sup> Biblical evangelism is the substance of a healthy church, guided by the Holy Spirit in opening hearts to a relationship with Christ and the continuing fostering of the Kingdom.

### ***Biblical Discipleship***

Understanding the foundation of biblical evangelism leads, without question, into the second characteristic of the healthy local church – biblical discipleship. Former International Mission Board President David Platt, in an article entitled “12 Characteristics of a Healthy Church,” elaborates, explaining the responsibility of the church is as “a mouthpiece of Christ” which calls individuals to repentance and new life in Christ, but the responsibility does not end

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<sup>29</sup> Millar Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 1,061.



there.<sup>30</sup> The charge continues in discipleship, a part of Jesus' command in the Great Commission of Matthew 28, "make disciples of all nations."

On becoming a believer and a profession of faith, the local church is obligated as the teacher of a new disciple of Christ. "Disciple," the English word, is from the Greek *mathétēs* means a learner, a pupil, specifically one who learns intentionally through investigation and inquiry from another.<sup>31</sup> The meaning is still deeper, more than simply a pupil, but a devotee of the teacher.

A new believer, as a disciple, is looking to the local church for guidance as well as knowledge of the truths of the gospel. The church must then rise and live life purposefully, setting an example in both word and deed for the new believers in their midst. Discipleship is based soundly in scripture from the gospels to the epistles. In *Systematic Theology*, author Wayne Grudem explains, "According to Scripture, the church has an obligation to nurture those who are already believers and build them up to maturity in the faith."<sup>32</sup> The biblical admonition to the church is manifest by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:28, "He [Christ in you, the hope of glory] is the one we proclaim, admonishing, and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ."

What, then, is discipleship in practice for the healthy church? Biblically, disciples were those who repented, trusted Christ for salvation, surrendered their lives to Him, grew in obedience to Him to further His mission. Jesus' discipleship model is the groundwork on which future disciples would lay the foundation of His ministry. Jesus poured his life and words into

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<sup>30</sup> David Platt, "12 Characteristics of a Healthy Church," IMB.org, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, (1995), 54.

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, 867.

the twelve He had chosen for an exclusive purpose. They would need all He could provide to face what was to come, fulfill the Great Commission, and lead the multitudes who would follow.

The original twelve disciples, Jesus' chosen, were the leaders of a growing community of believers who grew in their relationships with Christ as a direct result of the spirituality being taught and modeled. The believers' lifestyle and worldview are detailed in Acts 2, portrayed as a community of sharing, encouragement, teaching, and fellowship in which they garnered support, instruction, accountability, and growth – discipleship defined.

Twenty-first Century churches are called to duplicate the models, both evangelism and discipleship, sharing the gospel message and teaching those who follow. Examples are plentiful, from Jesus to His disciples, to His believers who have taken up the call for more than 2,000 years. Discipleship is a command to the church, one which is essential to the ministry to which the church, the body of Christ, has been called. T.S. Rainer, former President and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, in his book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, attests to the merit of discipleship for the modern church, “Thriving churches have the Great Commission as the centerpiece of their vision while dying churches have forgotten the clear command of Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Healthy, thriving churches recognize not only the mandate to obey the command “to make disciples” but also its significance in carrying on the mission of Christ.

### ***Biblical Worship***

Often debated in 21<sup>st</sup> Century churches, Christian worship is an important aspect of a healthy church. In the New Testament, the Greek word, which is translated most often as “worship” is *proskuneó*. *Proskuneó* is defined “to kiss the hand in reverence, to bow down

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<sup>33</sup> T.S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 57.

before, to fall before.”<sup>34</sup> Worship is internal, a state of the spirit in which believers should abide continually, not only in times of corporate worship.

In John 4:23-24, believers are instructed to worship “in spirit and truth.” Beginning within, worship is unique to each individual, performed by those who are saved by grace. Worship requires a heart that belongs to God, repentant and pure, as well as a mind focused fully on Him. Where there is unconfessed sin, true worship cannot occur. Worship, then, is not an external or physical act, silencing the debate of worship styles (sitting, standing, quiet, loud, organ, guitar, etc.), but an individual, internal state of the heart and mind.

True Biblical worship is described in Romans 12, by the Apostle Paul, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Believers worship in light of God’s mercy – love, grace, peace, wisdom, hope, forgiveness, freedom, and so much more – so undeserved, yet rousing and inspiring obedience, thanksgiving, adoration, and praise. Additionally, Paul exhorts believers to offer their bodies as a “holy and pleasing living sacrifices,” thus giving their all to God every hour of every day. This feat can only be accomplished by the continual renewing of their minds. The renewed mind is one that is cleaned daily, purified by the truths of God’s Word.

It follows, then, authentic Biblical worship is not a product of an environment (a building), an impetus (music), or a posture (kneeling) but rather a product of a heart which discerns the Truth, believes the Truth, and loves the Truth (God). Worship is a way of life, unceasing, and designed to bring glory to God, aptly described in I Corinthians, “So, whether

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<sup>34</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, (1995), 76.

you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Genuine Biblical worship is continual praise and adoration of God, which takes place everywhere, including the church. It can take any form – prayer, praise, song, service to others, giving, reading His Word, and everyday living.

Biblical worship can also take the form of corporate worship but is certainly not confined to it. The body of Christ comes together in local churches to worship, learn, and encourage one another as admonished by God, but that is not the primary purpose. Author Wayne Grudem, elaborates, “Worship in the church is not merely a preparation for something else: it is in itself fulfilling the major purpose of the church with reference to its Lord.”<sup>35</sup> Sincere worship is obedience to God, recognition of His power, and glorification of His Name, and when corporate worship is attentive to these guidelines, diversity, creativeness, and inspiration are welcome in worship. Given that, Millar Erickson, affirms, “In this aspect of its activity, the church centers its attention on who and what God is, not on itself. It aims at appropriately expressing God’s nature, not at satisfying its feelings.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***Biblical Fellowship***

Biblical fellowship seems a natural and organic result of evangelism, discipleship, and worship. Among believers, as described in Acts 2, “all the believers were together and had everything in common,” one in heart, one in mind, sharing everything. The word, fellowship, is translated from the Greek word, *koinonia*, defined as “communion, fellowship, partnership, sharing in common.”<sup>37</sup> In the original language, the term indicates a relationship that is mutually beneficial for all involved. An authentic fellowship among believers cannot be accomplished

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<sup>35</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, 867.

<sup>36</sup> Millar Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd ed. Baker, 2002, 1,066.

<sup>37</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, (1995), 50.

without Christ. It requires individual repentance and salvation through Christ's sacrifice and God's grace and mercy.

Genuine Christian fellowship is possible among believers anywhere and is a gift, a right granted to meet the needs of believers through the community with one another and with Christ. Jesus promises, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." And thus, as Christians love one another, care for one another, serve one another, bear with one another while they admonish each other, and build each other up, fellowship ensues among them with and through Jesus Christ. Biblical fellowship is openly and honestly sharing life with other believers. Bible scholar Millar Erickson, expounds, "The body is to be characterized by genuine fellowship. This does not mean merely social interrelatedness but an intimate feeling for and understanding of one another. While hurt is reduced, joy is increased by being shared."<sup>38</sup>

True fellowship is a unique unity among Christians joining them together as one in an exclusive relationship, as described in John 17, by Jesus, "I will be in them, just as you are in me. I want them to be brought together perfectly as one. This will let the world know that you sent me. It will also show the world that you have loved those you gave me, just as you have loved me." And while friendships and community can exist with non-believers, authentic Christian fellowship only exists among believers who are united by Christ, following Him in obedience and sharing beliefs and goals to glorify God.

### ***Biblical Ordinances***

The Bible communicates the establishment of two ordinances observed in New Testament churches – baptism and the Lord's Supper (also commonly referred to as communion). Neither ordinance has the power to save but serve as acts of obedience according

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<sup>38</sup> Millar Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd ed. Baker, 2002, 1,048.

to God's ongoing grace in the lives of believers. Baptism is symbolic of the new birth in Christ following an individual's repentance and salvation through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. It is an external representation of a born again believer's internal transformation. Theologian, Elmer Towns, illuminates the symbolism as well as the command regarding the ordinance, "Baptism symbolizes the believer's identification into the communion of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection . . . It symbolizes regeneration through union with Christ... "Every Christian should be baptized immediately after he is saved because baptism is not optional; it is commanded."<sup>39</sup>

In the early church, as recorded in the Scriptures, baptism followed salvation, often directly after a person's profession of faith in Christ. For early Christians, this was a public declaration of their faith, which often set them up for persecution from Jews, Romans, and even maltreatment by family and friends. For many 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, persecution, oppression, and intimidation often follow the profession of faith and baptism.

In the Bible, baptism by immersion is the only form recorded. The symbolism regarding the act is chronicled in Romans 6:4, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Sinful man is buried with Christ, sin is washed away through Jesus's sacrifice, and the new believer is raised to a new life in Christ.

The Baptist Faith and Message describes it thusly as one of the two ordinances observed by Southern Baptist Churches,

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his

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<sup>39</sup> Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today*, 650.

faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and the Lord's Supper.<sup>40</sup>

Salvation, followed by baptism, are essential to participation in the second ordinance, the Lord's Supper. Like baptism, communion or the Lord's Supper is symbolic of an individual's life in Christ. The wine (fruit of the vine) and the bread represent Christ's body and His spilled blood symbolically, recalling His sacrifice for believers' salvation. Its observance is recorded in I Corinthians 11:23-25, "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." The representative practice was established by Christ Himself at the last supper (Luke 22). Not only is it to call believers to the remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and their salvation, but also an act of discipleship for unbelievers in their midst. Wayne Grudem explains, "When we do this (partake of the bread and cup), we give a symbol of the fact that we participate in or share in the benefits earned for us by the death of Jesus."<sup>41</sup>

The Lord's Supper is to be partaken in all genuineness, by believers only, following a period of self-examination and confession. The Baptist Faith and Message defines it like this, "The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming."<sup>42</sup>

Healthy churches observe both baptism and the Lord's Supper during congregational worship, affirming salvation and the commitment to Christ, the body of believers, and Christ's

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<sup>40</sup> Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

<sup>41</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, 990.

<sup>42</sup> Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

work on earth. Like baptism, Towns elucidates, “If baptism is the first act of obedience for the Christian, then the Lord’s Table is the ultimate expression of his Christianity. It is the symbol that is continually used by the child of God to express his fellowship within Christ and other Christians.”<sup>43</sup>

In both baptism and observance of the Lord’s Supper, healthy churches are given freedom of expression in the symbolic acts, provided they are performed in accordance with the confines of Biblical worship and in accordance with God’s Word.

With these distinct biblical attributes, including biblical evangelism, biblical discipleship, biblical worship, biblical fellowship, and biblical ordinances, of a healthy church, the writer will explore the distinct challenges faced by pastors. Statistically, in Southern Baptist Churches, a number of pastors change churches after a few years, with a small number remaining for a long tenure at a single church. Numerous studies have shown a positive association between long-tenured pastors and church health. As a result, this project will focus on Southern Baptist pastors who have served the same ‘healthy’ church for ten years or more. Utilizing interviews and surveys, the project will ascertain the central habits and attitudes of the pastors to identify their response to common ministry challenges and thereby encourage, guide, and instruct short-tenured pastors to remain faithfully at their posts for the “health” of the church.

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<sup>43</sup> Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today*, 651.



## Chapter Two

### Seeking Insight into the Position

#### *Pastor, Overseer, Elder*

There are two distinct local church offices specifically identified and prescribed in Scripture. The two offices are those of “pastor” and “deacon.” Having defined the parameters of a Biblically healthy church, as described in scripture, the next key considerations of this project are the characteristics of the church’s pastor. This is significant to note because there are three specific words used interchangeably in the scriptures to describe and define the role and responsibilities of the single office of pastor. These words are translated “bishop/overseer,” “elder,” and “pastor.”

In *The Baptist Faith and Message*, amid the definition of the church, is the first mention of the leadership roles within each church congregation, “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation, each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”<sup>44</sup> In light of the Southern Baptist Convention’s narrative, which is Scripturally-based, two offices are delineated whereby churches are provided Holy Spirit inspired guidelines for the selection of those who serve in the office of pastor (elder).

Further, the position of elder, bishop, and pastor, in the Southern Baptist Convention is a single office with differing aspects. The SBC position is supported through Scripture, specifically New Testament passages in the original language in which the translated terms for “pastor,” “overseer/bishop,” and “elder” are three names for the same leadership position.

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<sup>44</sup> Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

### *Defining Synonymous Terms - “Pastor,” “Overseer,” And “Elder”*

Given the synonymous nature of the terms translated as pastor (*poimēn*), overseer/bishop (*episkopos*), and elder (*presbuteros*), it is imperative to establish a relational understanding of the terms, their use in Scripture, and the qualifications for the singular office of leadership which they describe. In the book of Acts, chapter 20, the apostle Paul writes, “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church... Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (*episkopos*). **Be shepherds** (*poimainō*) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

Later in Titus 1, verses 5 through 7, the apostle Paul writes, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders (*presbuteros*) in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.<sup>7</sup> Since an overseer (*episcopos*) manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain” using two of the terms interchangeably.

The apostle Peter also uses the roots in I Peter 5:1-2, “ To the elders (*presbuteros*) among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds (*poimainō*) of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them (*episkopeō*) —not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve...” again using all three terms in unison. Fundamentally, each of these passages leads to synonymous usage – a pastor is an overseer is an elder – all three, during the period of the early church different words described the same leadership role.

While they are used synonymously, to clarify further it is important to define the terms which are used reciprocally throughout the New Testament. The English word “pastor” is translated from the Greek noun ποιμαίνω (*poimēn*) which in the original language is defined as “to shepherd, pastor.”<sup>45</sup> More commonly used in the New Testament is the Greek verb *poimainō*, which describes the role of shepherding or pastoring and is defined as “to serve as a tender of sheep, herd, tend, (lead to) pasture,” and it is figuratively extended “to watch out for other people, to shepherd, of activity that protects, rules, governs, fosters.”<sup>46</sup>

The second word in the trilogy is ἐπίσκοπος transliterated *episkopos*, the Greek noun translated into English as overseer or bishop. It is defined as “a superintendent, an overseer who is gracious in looking down upon the one protected and in care for him” and is the word from which “Episcopal” is derived.”<sup>47</sup> The verb from the same root is *episkopeō* and means “to look or watch over.”<sup>48</sup>

The final term, “elder” is the Greek noun πρεσβύτερος which is transliterated *presbuteros* meaning “elder, usually used as subst.; an elder, a member of the Sanhedrin, an elder of a Christian assembly.”<sup>49</sup> While the term also refers to an individual advanced in age, it also serves as a title for the office of “elder,” which denotes someone “who is older and spiritually mature and who provides spiritual leadership in the local assembly.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, 1995, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2000, 842.

<sup>47</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, 1995, 35.

<sup>48</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words Volume 2* (Vol. 2), 2015, 67.

<sup>49</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Concordance*, 1995, 35.

<sup>50</sup> P. P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 2008, 634.

The word, elder, connotes maturity, spiritual experience, and the wisdom and understanding often ascribed to those of a certain age. At the same time, the overseer is more indicative of the character of the office and pastor, a descriptor of the work performed. In each instance in Scripture, the terms are synonymous with a single office in the early church in which “elder” highlights who the man is, “bishop” delineates what he does, and “pastor” stresses the attitude and character of the man.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Biblical Qualifications for the Synonymous Terms - “Pastor,” “Overseer,” And “Elder”*

Given the terms defined, it is crucial to include the Biblical qualifications for the office of pastoral leadership in the church. The passages most often utilized as qualifiers for the office are found in Titus 1, I Timothy 3, and I Peter 5, the former penned by the apostle Paul and the latter by the apostle Peter, both under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The passages are similar, though not identical.

In Titus 1 verses 6 through 9, Paul describes the role of an elder in a community of believers:

<sup>6</sup> An **elder** must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe<sup>[b]</sup> and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.<sup>7</sup> Since an **overseer** manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. <sup>8</sup> Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. <sup>9</sup> He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

In I Timothy 3:1-7, Paul uses these descriptors for those who desire to serve as an overseer in the church:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an **overseer** desire a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Now the **overseer** is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of

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<sup>51</sup> M. Couch, (Ed.), *A biblical theology of the church*, 1999, 170.

full<sup>[a]</sup> respect. <sup>5</sup> (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as to the devil. <sup>7</sup> He must also have a good reputation with outsiders so that he will not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap.

And finally, Peter uses these characteristics to describe the shepherd (pastor) position within the local body of believers:

To the **elders** among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> Be **shepherds** of God's flock that is under your care, **watching over them**—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Here, then, in these three passages, are seen the Biblical qualifications and characteristics of those who serve as pastor, overseer, and elder in the church, penned nearly 2,000 years ago. It is clear a shepherd (pastor) should look ahead to where the sheep (congregation) are going, overseeing what is ahead and anticipating what the flock will encounter; only then can the pastor discern the people's temptations and how to counter the errors.<sup>52</sup>

It is also evident from the passage in Titus 1, that part of establishing order in the church is the appointment of elders, which is followed by a listing of their qualifications. Paul also makes clear pastoral leadership as a priority in 1 Timothy, as Timothy remained in Ephesus to ensure the proper foundation in the churches there. The churches, as a gathered body of believers, had to be led, first by Christ, and beneath Christ by its pastors who have a unique obligation to mirror the character of Christ.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Above Reproach***

As described in the epistles to Titus and Timothy from the apostle Paul, and the churches in Asia Minor from the apostle Peter, the predominant characteristic for the position of pastor is

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<sup>52</sup> M. Couch, (Ed.), *A Biblical Theology of the Church*, 1999, 171.

<sup>53</sup> M. Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 2012, 48.

living a life above reproach, a lifestyle such that no criticism is warranted. It is indeed, as Paul reminds, a noble task to desire to serve as an overseer. The role is both meaningful and vital – one that cannot be taken lightly.

The Lord Jesus made the provision for the appointment of elders; it is not of human, business, or democratic origin. It is a divine concept, designated by Jesus, who developed the structure as well as the leadership ‘offices’ and their functions for the local church. Like the apostles, the elders are given the task of accomplishing the ministry of the Word and led by the Holy Spirit; they are to direct the activities of the body of believers.

The Bible defines the role of the position clearly. While not a final list, the pastor’s role includes, though is not limited to:

- Teaching God’s Word, provide sound doctrine, and refute false teachings (I Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9-11, Acts 20:29-31).
- Watching over the body of believers (Hebrews 13:17)
- Shepherding the church (I Timothy 3:5, I Peter 5:2)
- Ministering and caring for the body of believers and growing them in their faith (Ephesians 4:11-13)
- Protecting the church from internal and external attacks (Acts 20:29-31)
- Leading and ruling, guiding and acting as servants (Titus 1:7, I Tim. 5:17, I Peter 5:3)

The Scriptures are equally clear in the character requirements for pastors. In Titus 1:6 and I Timothy 3:2, one serving as a pastor is to be a one woman man, devoted to his wife, loving her with fully, thus illustrating Christ and His bride, the church. A pastor should be able to manage his own family first, leading his children into submission, and the discipline and admonition of

the Lord (Titus 1:6, 1 Tim 3:4-5, Eph. 6:4). Additionally, a pastor should be sociable and welcoming, opening his home in ministry to others (Titus 1:8, 1 Timothy 3:2).

A pastor is a faithful overseer (Titus 1:7), a steward, managing the body of believers and the resources of the church. It is not ownership, but responsibility, and within his role, the pastor must remain humble (Titus 1:7) admitting when he is wrong, accepting responsibility, and working toward restored relationships. In like manner, a pastor should not be quick-tempered or hotheaded, but gentle, calm, and peaceful (Titus 1:7, I Timothy 3:3). A pastor must have self-control in all areas of his life (Titus 1:8, 1 Timothy 3:2), always acting as an example to the body of believers (I Peter 5:3).

In the office of pastor, a man must be respectable (I Timothy 3:7), with no one able to testify to any sinful behavior. His life, internal and external, must be devoted to Jesus, holy and spiritually mature (1 Timothy 3:6), and not prideful. The pastor should be upright, loving what is good, demonstrating integrity in all his relationships (Titus 1:8). A pastor must be sober, not given to drunkenness or other addictive behaviors (Titus 1:7, 1 Timothy 3:3). In the same manner, a pastor not be greedy but have financial integrity in all circumstances (Titus 1:7, 1 Timothy 3:3, 1 Peter 5:3).

Scripture is clear on the character to which a pastor is held accountable. Alongside these characteristics, pastors must also engage in spiritual disciplines in order to offer realistic counsel to others for implementing similar character and disciplines in their lives, after all, those deemed godly are spiritually disciplined, as is found in the examples of the heroes of Christianity's past, including Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and many more.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 10.

Author Mark Driscoll, in his book *On Church Leadership*, elucidates, “While the various words are used interchangeably, they each refer to a different aspect of the same role in the same office. As an elder, a man has the rank and authority to rule and govern a church. As a bishop, he has the responsibility before God to rule and protect a church. As a pastor, he has the high honor of caring for Christians and evangelizing non-Christians.”<sup>55</sup> Given the definitions in the original language, the roles delineated in Scripture, and the characteristics stated for a pastor, this study aims to increase knowledge and understanding through scholarly and biblical study to determine how pastoral, spiritual discipline, holy habits, and tenure, contribute to the health of the local church.

### ***Queries Utilized in This Study***

To increase knowledge and understanding of how pastoral habits affect the health of local churches, the following interview questions were used to determine how pastoral, spiritual discipline, holy habits, and tenure, contribute to the health of the local church. In each instance, the biblical characteristics of a healthy church, in conjunction with the scriptural definition of a pastor’s responsibilities and traits, described herein were the inherent foundation of the queries and the responses.

The interview questions were devised based on the current body of work on the subject matter regarding the key habits of long-tenured pastors of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the effect of those habits on their ministry and the health of the church body to whom they have ministered in the past or are currently ministering. Every question is presented with a goal to gain a greater understanding of the fact that “the long-term consequences of unhealthy leadership

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<sup>55</sup> M. Driscoll, *On Church Leadership*, 2009, 14.



are a threat to the health and effectiveness of the church” and to shed light on the corrections needed to make positive changes in the lives of pastors and their churches.<sup>56</sup>

The first query is stated thusly, “*Describe your personal holy habits and spiritual disciplines. Of these, which do you feel is more effective in your ministry and the health of your church?*” It is based on the current school of thought which adheres to the personal spiritual habits and formation as among the five themes of *Resilient Ministry* including personal growth in the areas of worship, prayer, and Bible study and evidenced by “the ongoing process of maturing as a Christian, both personally and interpersonally.”<sup>57</sup>

Query two asks pastors to “*Explain the role of your wife and your immediate family regarding your position as pastor as well as their role in the church’s ministry.*” There are no misgivings about the crucial role a pastor’s spouse and family play in sustaining ministry leaders. In *Resilient Ministry*, authors Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie support the premise of pastors guarding their family members from excessive ministry obligations in saying “...spouses are the only safe people with whom to share candidly the conflicts, disappointments, and stress of ministry” and as a result, “...ministry stress fills the marriage.”<sup>58</sup> It is this author’s belief a healthy marriage is borne of protecting your spouse and family, so that they can be the sounding board and confidant pastor’s so desperately need. Quite simply, a healthy marriage is essential to longevity.

The third query asked pastors, “*Do you have a spiritual mentor and accountability? Describe the relationship and how it was effective for your ministry.*” Asked to discern the negative effects and moral failures in the ministry associated with lack of accountability, this

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<sup>56</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 19.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

question seeks to address the problem many leaders have with allowing work and ministry to encroach on every area of life – from spiritual to family to accountability to health and more.<sup>59</sup>

Inquiry four asked, “*How do you view criticism and complaints by members of the congregation? What is your initial response to the criticism/complaints and the person presenting them? What is your long-term response?*” Appreciating the fact that no leader, regardless of greatness, value, or esteem, is immune to the complaints and criticism of those around him, these inquiries seek to discover the proper handling of said criticism in order to improve and grow in spirituality and maturity. The management and treatment of criticism is crucial for those in leadership positions; in fact, it is good for leaders to invite criticism for the purpose of honest appraisal in order to respond rightly to it.<sup>60</sup>

Query five asked pastors, “*Do you have a personal health regimen? Could you please describe it?*” While possibly seeming more superficial than the other queries, good physical health has been validated in numerous scientific studies to overcoming the negative impacts associated with the anxieties and stressors of life. Richard Swenson, in his book *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, agrees, explaining why, “Lacking margin in physical energy, we feel under-rested and overwhelmed. With no strength left for our own needs, let alone the needs of others, we put our tiredness to bed, hoping tomorrow will be a stronger day.”<sup>61</sup> Proper physical care, including a physical health regimen, the proper diet, and relaxation techniques, provide human bodies with the ability to operate at peak performance.

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<sup>59</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 146.

<sup>60</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 249.

<sup>61</sup> Swenson, *Margin*, 121.

Question six inquired, “*Was there an event or series of events during your tenure that you feel moved you to a higher level of leadership in which the church trusted you with greater and more effectual changes?*” with the goal of discerning what events led pastors to greater leadership because of enhanced trust. Through this query, this author hoped to gain a greater perception of the events, including tragedies, successes, conflicts, failures, agreements, negotiations, which brought pastors and the body of believers to greater understanding, trust, and effectiveness in their communities and beyond.

The final inquiry asked the pastors, “*What changes did God lead you to make in yourself during your tenure so you could be more effective for God and in ministry?*” From the inquiry, this author hopes to glean invaluable insight into the personal growth pastors experience through their tenures with growing healthy churches. Effective spiritual leadership comes freely through the progression of an individual’s continual, intimate relationship with the Savior. Pastors and all believers fall short without life-changing intercession - the result of an ongoing personal relationship with God.

The results of these queries seek to illuminate the fact that the “faith of our fathers that successfully withstood dungeon, fire, and sword is the same faith that leads us safely through contemporary dangers, toils, and snares” and thereby exposes the importance of positive pastoral, spiritual disciplines and holy habits on the health of the local church.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 118.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Key Findings Personal Strategies and Characteristics**

#### *Holy Habits and Spiritual Disciplines*

Southern Baptist Pastors currently serving or retired were interviewed, who had served a tenure of ten or more years with their respective churches. Each church was deemed healthy during the pastors' tenures based on the Biblical Foundation of a healthy church. The applied research of this project yielded helpful information regarding how each pastor's holy habits and spiritual disciplines enabled them to have a long tenure and, as a result, positively affected the health of the church to which he was ministering.

This chapter will present the key findings from the interviews of the aforementioned Southern Baptist Pastors. Answers from the interviews were compiled and compared regarding each pastor's personal spiritual disciplines, and holy habits as the writer sought a consensus among the interviewees in regard to habits and disciplines effectiveness, wife and family roles, the value of spiritual mentors, response to criticism and complaints from congregation members, personal health, events leading to greater trust and effectiveness, and self-improvement.

Through the research and interviews, the author will endeavor to identify key characteristics and habits of longer-tenured pastors in the hope of enabling shorter tenured pastors to persevere and reach a point where the church they pastor is more healthy and fruitful. The writer will compare the personal pastoral, spiritual disciplines, and holy habits, described by the interviewees in an effort to identify characteristics of long-tenured pastors.

In this chapter, the information gleaned will demonstrate the implementation by pastors of certain personal strategies and characteristics, which work effectively to help them get through the early years of conflict, arriving at longer tenure and healthier churches featuring mutual trust

and understanding and the ability to lead their churches effectively to greater health and growth. As noted in *The Peacemaking Pastor*, pastors, particularly those of short tenure or freshly graduated from seminary, are simply not equipped to navigate conflicts well, which often results in increased challenges and frustrations.<sup>63</sup> It is the sincere hope of the author that the data gathered here can be utilized to aid newer, struggling, shorter tenured pastors to navigate conflicts in home life and church life and make positive biblical personal changes to breakthrough and lead their churches to greater health.

### **Part 1: Findings on Personal Habits and Spiritual Disciplines and Their Effectiveness in Ministry and the Health of the Church**

Upon interviewing tenured pastors, a number of significant, and sometimes surprising results were discovered. The findings gleaned from the interviews will increase the depth of understanding the characteristics of longer-tenured pastors and help compile guidelines to aid shorter-tenured pastors in the navigation of their personal life as well as church life and make biblical changes for the betterment of themselves and their churches.

#### **Finding 1: Interviewed Pastors Have Daily Bible Study**

Of the pastors interviewed, all were having a daily Bible study, but only ten of the twelve interviewed indicated their personal Bible study was separate from their sermon/teaching preparation Bible study.

#### **Finding 2: Interviewed Pastors Have a Specific Time of Prayer for Their Church**

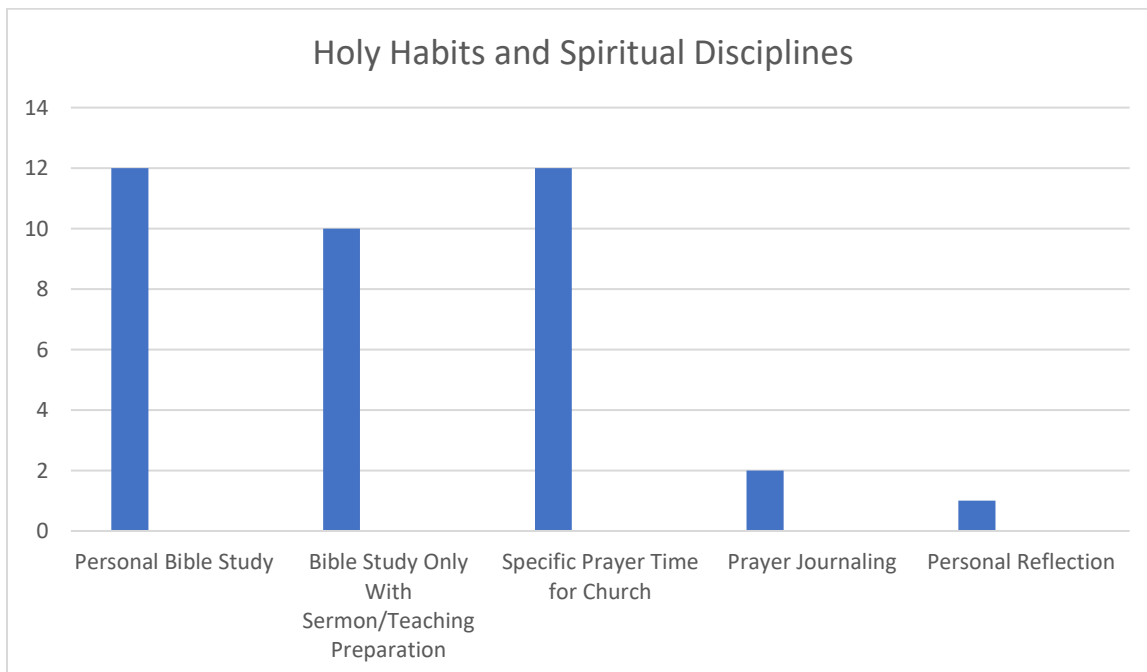
Each of the interviewed pastors explained they have a specific time of prayer set aside for their church. Only two of the twelve utilized a prayer journal during their prayer time.

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<sup>63</sup> Alfred, Poirier, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 2006, 15.

The pastors interviewed indicated the effectiveness of an active prayer life and daily Bible study as effective influences of ministry as well as the health of their church. The majority (67 percent) felt prayer was the most effective spiritual discipline, positively effecting their ministry and the health of their church. Pastor 3 offered this, “I have found that nothing is or will be accomplished for the glory of God and His kingdom without committed prayer,” while Pastor 1 confessed to continual struggle with maintaining prayer as a focus and habit.

The remaining pastors cited time spent in the word and personal reflection. Pastor 4 explained, “I would say the most effective is my time in the Word because this is a chief element in my shepherding of the congregation, which is essential in the instruction, correcting, training, as well as protection against false doctrine.” Pastor 2 added, “Every morning when you read the word intensely, the Word reads you.” Pastor 7, who regarded reflection as a significant discipline, stating, “I spend a significant amount of time in reflection. This discipline is especially helpful in gaining healthy perspective and sense of renewal.”



The findings for Part 1 were in line with current research and conclusions drawn by the existing body of work on the topic of pastor tenure. For example, Dallas Willard, in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines, Understanding How God Changes Lives*, explains, “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom” and “Spiritual disciplines, exercises unto godliness are only activity undertaken to make us capable of receiving more of his life and power without harm to ourselves or others.”<sup>64</sup> The authors of *Resilient Ministry* are in agreement, explaining that just because one has a staff position in the local church or ministry, it is not an affirmation of spiritual maturity, but rather, “For pastors and ministry leaders to grow in resilience for a lifetime of fruitful ministry, they must pursue a vibrant relationship with God.”<sup>65</sup>

Healthy spiritual disciplines among spiritual leaders, as the research indicates, are a firm foundation upon which are healthy, vibrant churches grown. In a direct negative correlation, Scazzero asserts, “If you were to ask them (emotionally unhealthy leaders) to list their top three priorities for how they spend their time as a leader, it’s unlikely that cultivating a deep, transformative relationship with Jesus would make a list.”<sup>66</sup>

Failure to nurture a healthy relationship with God cannot provide the necessary foundation for health and growth that comes from spending time with God in prayer, study, listening, and introspection.

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<sup>64</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines, Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco, Harper, 1991), 156.

<sup>65</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 37.

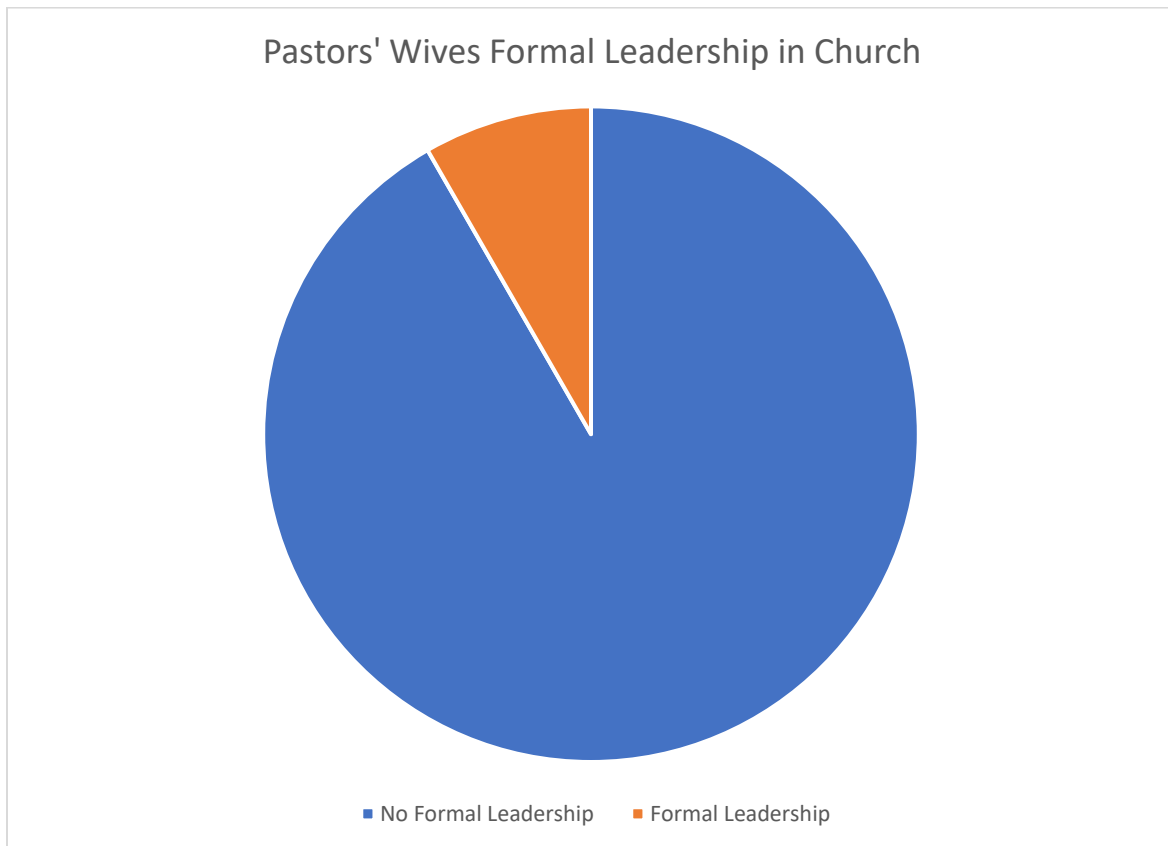
<sup>66</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 31.

## Part 2: Findings on the Role of Wife and Family in the Pastor's Life and Church Ministry

When asked about the role of their wives and immediate family members in relation to their position as pastor as well as their roles in the church's ministries, the following findings presented.

### Finding 1: Interviewed Pastors Stated Wife and Children were Active in Church

One hundred percent of the pastors interviewed explained that their wives and children were active in the church at which they ministered, but eleven of the twelve stated their wives had no formal leadership role in the church outside of their unique area of giftedness or passion. The wife of one of the interviewed pastors serves on staff in her area of giftedness as a worship leader.





## Finding 2: Interviewed Pastors Mentioned a Concerted Effort to Insulate Family from Church Business

The pastors interviewed all mentioned a concerted effort to insulate their wives and children from church business, with many commenting similarly, “I told the church they hired me and not my family members.” All of the pastors were in agreement that being family focused apart from the church was important, with Pastor 4 explaining in regard to his wife, “I have limited my church conversations with her, as I don’t believe she needs to be aware of everything that happens in the life of the church.”

The pastors also felt the necessity to be husband and father apart from their role as pastor. All agreed, there should be no pressure on their families to “do” extra or “be” more within the church than the responsibilities/roles expected of all parishioners. The general consensus was, as Pastor 11 stated, “The pastor is a husband, a father, and a minister in that order.” Pastor 3 chimed in with equal fervor regarding his wife’s role, “First, she is my wife . . . Second, she is a mother to our children and Nana to our grandchildren. Third, she is a great pastor’s wife to the church family as a confidant, counselor, listening ear, teacher, and a reflection of Jesus Christ.”

Prioritizing this question was significant because, as the authors stated in *Resilient Ministry*, “The effects of ministry on marriage and marriage on ministry are rarely discussed, yet intimately connected. Ministry is not a nine-to-five job. It is an absorbing lifestyle. The way pastors navigate this lifestyle will influence their marriage and family. Conversely, their marriage and family life will directly affect their churches.”<sup>67</sup>

In the estimation of the author, the pastor’s wives and children must have the freedom to have a life separate from the church while maintaining an active, healthy relationship with God.

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<sup>67</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 170.

It can be a difficult barrier to maintain, but as Henry Blackaby states in *Spiritual Leadership*, “Wise leaders strive to preserve their families in the midst of the pressures on their professional lives.”<sup>68</sup> A precedent is then set, according to the hierarchy set by God in Scripture – relationship with God, family, and the church, respectively.

The issues arise when pastors are without intimate friendships and minister without the support of mentors. Therefore, the pastor’s wife becomes both friend and mentor – the only trusted person with whom challenges, conflicts, stresses, disillusionment, and disappointments with the church and ministry can be shared without fear.

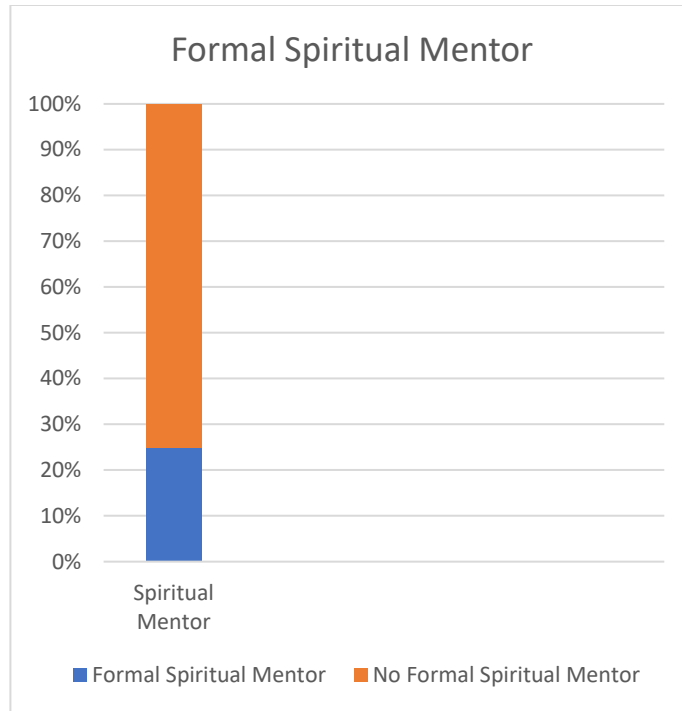
### **Part 3: Findings on the Value of a Spiritual Mentor/Relationship/Effect on Ministry**

Here, the findings show that only three of the twelve pastors interviewed had a formal spiritual mentor. Several of the pastors mentioned their main accountability was with their wife, which in all honesty, surprised this writer. Pastor 9 stated clearly, “My wife is my accountability partner” while Pastor 8 intoned, “I have never had a specific spiritual mentor. . . My accountability has always been first to the Lord and then to my family.”

One of the pastors who had a mentor during his long tenure described a long term relationship in which they “spent many an hour on our knees and face before God in prayer.” Another pastor (Pastor 1) did not single out a spiritual mentor, but an accountability group in which he had chosen the members from those he felt he could trust implicitly. Pastor 12 lamented he had also tried the accountability group approach with a group of mature, godly men in his congregation, but “found it was too much of a burden for them to bear.”

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<sup>68</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 135.



The correlation between pastors and mentors, or the lack thereof, may be related to an abundance of caution, a lack of trust, fear of transparency or potential harm to the ministry, or any number of reasons which seem sound at the time. Newton Royer, the well-known Lutheran writer, seems to agree when he points out that if a man intends to stick around for some time to come, he will be very cautious as he mingles with the people in any of the very many possible relations; he will guard his tongue, watch his acts, even his facial expressions, lest he leave a deleterious impression upon the hearts of the people whom he has been commissioned to bless. Motives are also sanctified to some extent. Anyone can be impressed by a new minister; it is the man who stays year after year whose inner life is exposed and really begins to make an impact.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Gary Brady, “A Long Term Pastorate – Pitfalls and Positives,” *Banner of Truth*, November 15, 2013, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2013/long-term-pastorate-pitfalls-positives/>.

## **Part 4: Findings on Reactions and Responses to Criticism and Complaints by Congregation**

When the interviewees were asked how they viewed criticism and complaints from members of their congregation as well as their short-term and long-term responses, the findings showed some variance in responses and results.

### **Finding 1: More than Half of the Interviewees Reported Learning From Criticism**

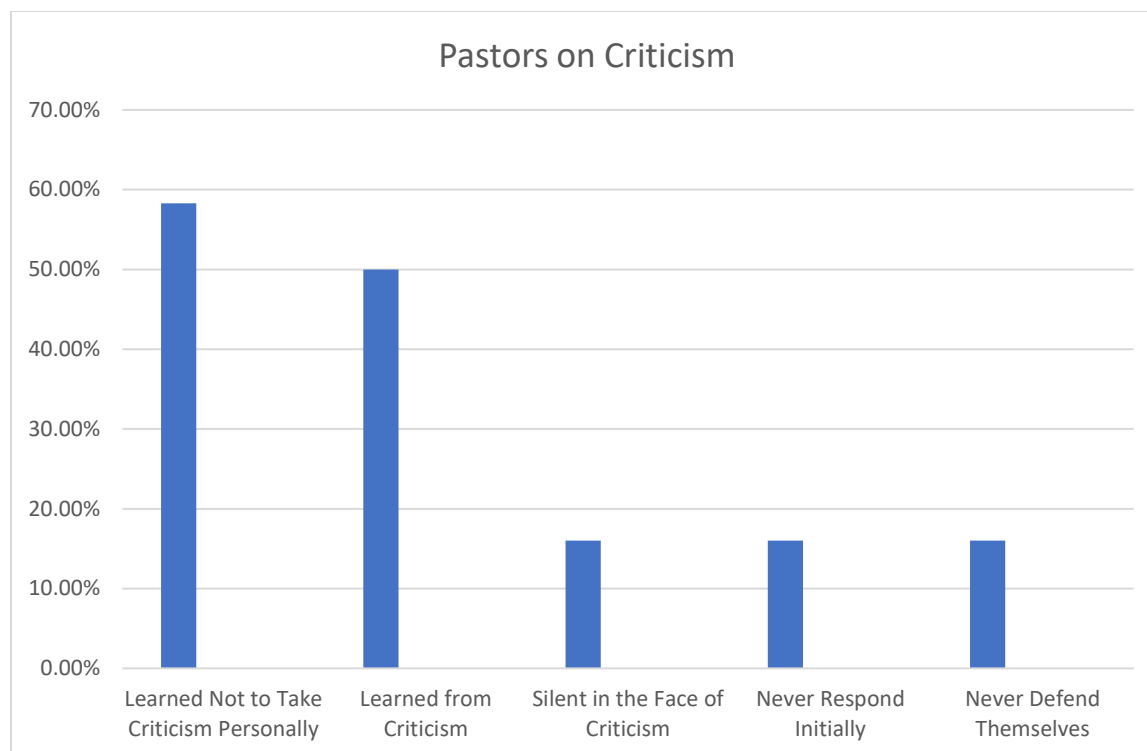
Seven of the twelve pastors interviewed mentioned that from criticism and complaints, they had learned not to take either personally. Pastor 3 explained, “God taught me to be open to confession when needed and to bathe the critique in prayer.” At the same time, Pastor 11 had discovered he had to “be disciplined, not letting his emotions take control, all while loving the whole body.”

Six of the twelve interviewees reported learning from criticism. Pastor 12 elucidates, “My initial desire is to defend myself, but I have learned to listen more and learn from the criticism.” The pastors seemed to be in agreement with the statement of Pastor 9, who concluded, “all criticism is not bad.”

### **Finding 2: Short-Term Responses to Criticism Variations**

Two of the twelve pastors interviewed explained they remain silent in the face of initial criticism, taking the pathway of never offering an initial response. Pastor 2 explained he had come to understand that “people need an outlet...and I need to ask myself if I have a blind spot.” Pastor 4, added, regarding criticism. “I try to identify any adjustment that can be made.”

Two also remarked they never defended themselves in light of criticism. Pastor 1 stated, “I never explain or defend myself. I am learning to lead with love.”



It is evident to the author that this approach is a positive one in light of criticism, allowing the members of the congregation to speak their mind, and allowing the pastor the measure of self-reflection needed to make adjustments or course corrections and confess sin as needed. Though it is important to note, when criticism rears its head, it does not always have a solid foundation on which to stand.

Dr. Kevin Blackwell expounds on the subject of criticism, “One hundred percent of pastors who lead their church to revitalize will hear and experience negative criticism, guaranteed. It is easier said than done, but effective long term pastors have a short term memory in regard to destructive unwarranted criticism. Don’t let a small minority of people or a person discourage God’s direction for His church.”<sup>70</sup> A pastor must always examine criticism in light of its foundation, as well as regarding God’s commands. A mind closed to change or the possibility

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<sup>70</sup> Kevin Blackwell, “Church Health and Pastoral Tenure,” (DrKevinBlackwell.com, n.d.).

of personal improvement can stagnate a church's growth. The bottom line is clear, as Henry Blackaby so eloquently stated, "Successful leaders are not successful because they never err in judgment but because they continually learn from their mistakes."<sup>71</sup>

### **Part 5: Findings on the Efficacy of Personal Health Regimens**

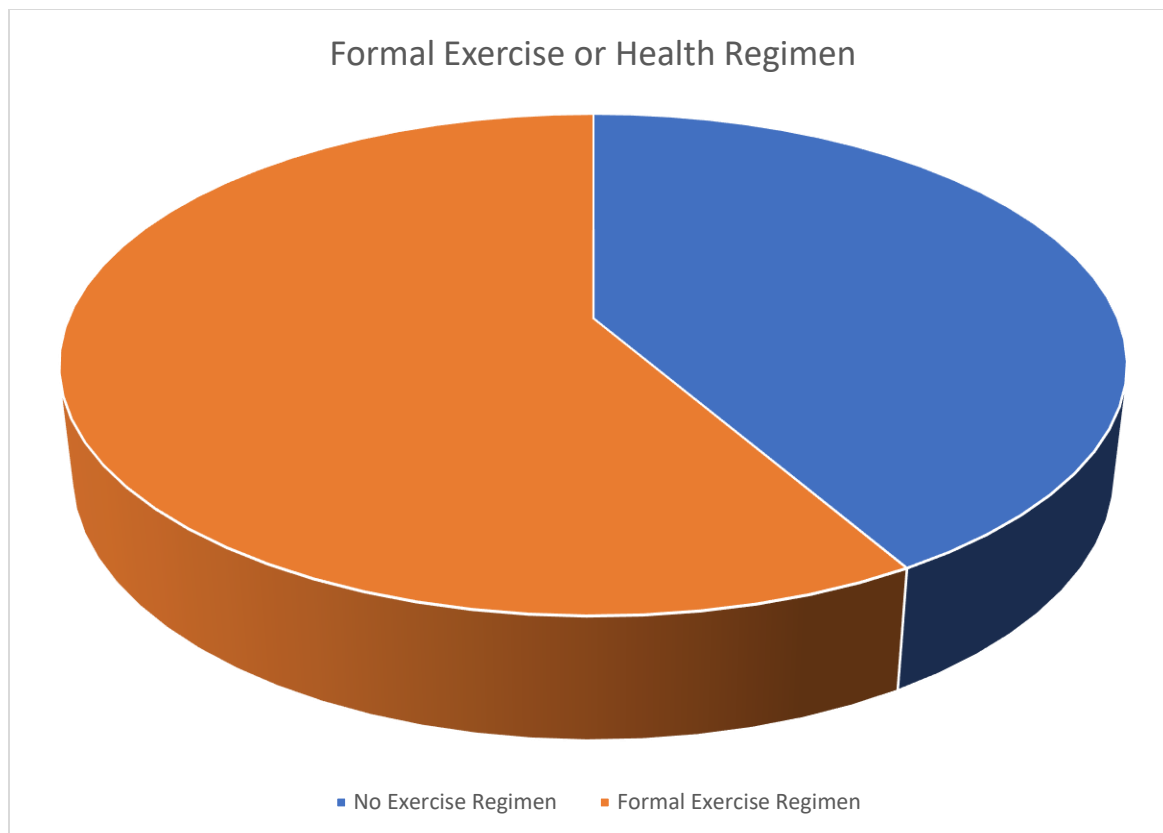
The pastors interviewed offered diverse responses when asked about a formal personal health regimen. Responses included physical activities and other stress-relieving hobbies. The interviewees were split on formal versus informal health regimens.

#### **Finding 1: Interviewed Pastors Split on Formal Health Regimen**

Of those interviewed, seven of the 12 reported having a formal exercise regimen, which was followed weekly, while five stated they have no formal exercise or health regimen. Pastor 1 declared, "I engage in vigorous exercise at least six, sometimes seven days a week," and Pastor 6 stated, "I work out 4-6 times a week by running and working out using the Max Trainer for 30-45 minutes."

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<sup>71</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 191.



**Finding 2: All Interviewed Pastors are Intentional Regarding Balance**

While they did not agree on the need for a formal health regimen, all agreed activity was a much needed stress reliever, whether it was softball or yard work. Pastor 11 even mentioned a hobby which he pursued to ease stress, “I didn’t exercise much, but I took up a hobby. I loved learning and performing magic tricks.”

Given the fact that “75 percent of pastors report being ‘extremely stressed’ or ‘highly stressed’ with 90 percent working between 55 to 75 hours per week and feeling fatigued and worn out every week,” there is no doubt that pastors need to be intentional in regard to work-life

balance.<sup>72</sup> In this project, the interviewed pastors agreed on the need to be intentional regarding balance and activity regardless of whether they had a formal health regime.

### **Part 6: Findings on Events in the Life of the Church Which Led to Higher Levels of Leadership, Trust, and Effectiveness**

All the pastors interviewed were asked about an event that led them to a higher level of leadership in which they gained greater trust from the church, which resulted in effectual changes. Each pastor identified at least one event during their tenure. Pastor 9 elaborated on an event in his ministry, “There was an event that took place ten years ago . . . It was one of the most difficult events I have ever experienced. Through it, I was faithful in proclaiming the Word and not wavering from it. The result was overall trust in me, and my leadership became considerably more apparent.” Pastor 2 shared this as his experience, “There were failures, things that didn’t go well or work out as planned. Through it all, I learned to be less agenda-driven and more in tune with God.”

In the majority of circumstances, seven of the 12 interviewed explained that challenges helped the church to grow and to trust them more. Pastor 5 illustrates with this response, “When I came to my church, there was a culture of distrust which forced me to work very hard at building trust and respect with staff members and the congregation. It took time, but ultimately leaders trusted my judgment when it was time to hire additional staff as well as with other significant decisions.”

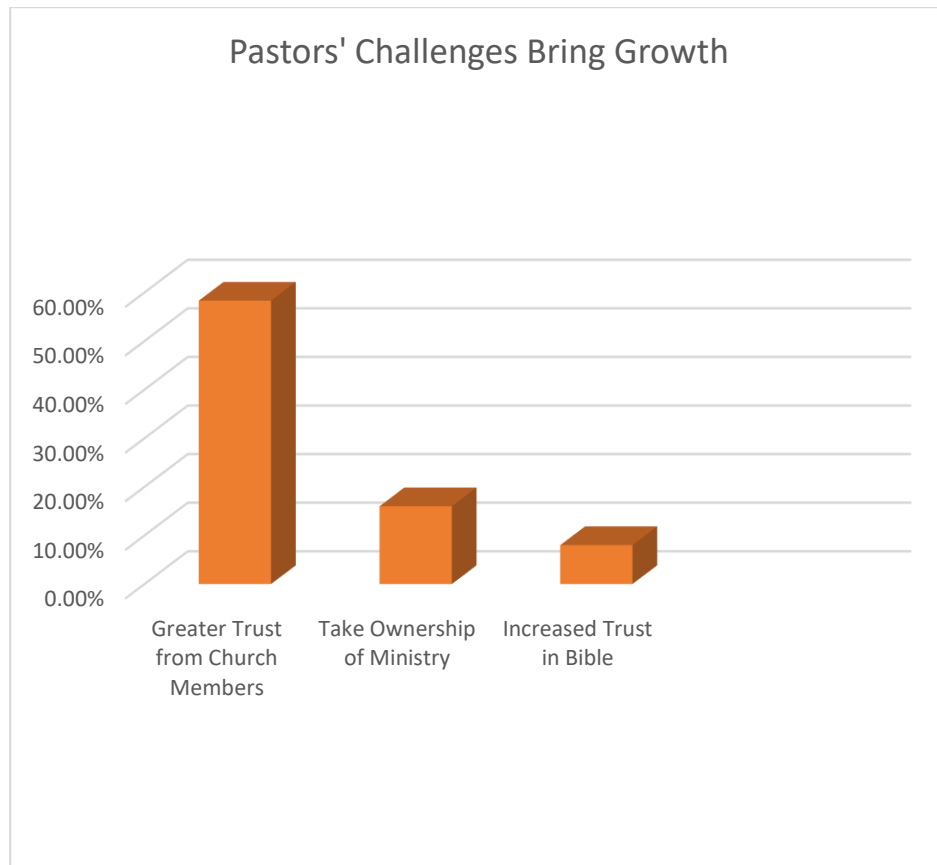
Two interviewed pastors explained that challenges helped them to take ownership of their new ministry, and one offered how challenges drove him to trust the Bible even more. Pastor 11 described a big challenge in which he had to trust God at His Word, “A deacon was trying to get

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<sup>72</sup> Bill Gaultiere, “Pastor Stress Statistics,” Soulshpherd.org, 2018.



me fired, but I didn't overreact or attack him personally. I had to trust God for the outcome and in the end, the remainder of the deacons overwhelmingly supported me.”



Ultimately, as evidenced from the experiences of the interviewed pastors, leadership, trust, and effectiveness aren't gifts given by a congregation, but roles earned through actions, honesty, and teachable spirit as Peter Scazzero explains, “the first and most difficult task we have as leaders is to lead ourselves.”<sup>73</sup> Pastors who have committed to long tenures lead with the future in mind, which positively alters their perception of criticism, personal attacks, and problems in the present. It allows the pastor to view events in the life of the church with a focus on the future and the needed timeframe to battle effectively and deliver solutions that achieve higher levels of leadership, trust, and effectiveness.

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<sup>73</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 20.

### **Part 7: Findings on God’s Leadership in Self Improvement and Its Value**

In the final question, the pastors being interviewed were asked, “What changes did God lead you to make in yourself during your tenure so you could be more effective for God and in ministry?” The pastors were 100 percent in agreement that God had led them to make changes in themselves. Among the changes mentioned were learning humility, how to fully rely on God, collaboration, and how to be less confrontational. The pastors agreed that a willingness to learn, change, and grow, is key to long tenure and health and well-being of self, family, and the church.

<b>Changes God led Pastors to Make during their Tenure Resulting in Greater Effectiveness</b>	
Learned Humility	2 of 12
Learned to Rely on God	2 of 12
Learned Organization	1 of 12
Learned to be Less Confrontational	2 of 12
Learned to Pray for Alternate Outlook for their Church	2 of 12
Learned to Be More Relational with Congregation	1 of 12
Learned to Be Collaborative	1 of 12

Pastor 11 summed up his response, this way, “Love all the people even if some refuse to ‘like’ you.” Pastor 6 admitted to being confrontational early on and explained how God had shown him the need to change. Pastor 1 expressed how “the Lord led him to pray for a greater understanding of how to feel.” Pastor 3 offered he had learned to “seek God’s wisdom constantly and focus on humility continually.” Pastor 12 explained how God taught him “to never preach from a bully pulpit.” Pastor 9 proclaimed the fact that “everyone has to change with the times, or you will die. I changed my study habits; I changed my style of preaching, whatever was needed to spread the Word.”

Longer tenured pastors surveyed for this project clearly understood the need to change, learn, and grow in leadership. Change is inevitable as is learning to grow as a leader, as Henry Blackaby explains, “A major aspect of a leader’s wise decision making is having a teachable spirit...defensive leaders learn nothing.”<sup>74</sup>

In the final chapter, this writer will identify key characteristics and personal strategies of longer-tenured pastors in an effort to encourage and enable shorter-tenured pastors to persevere and achieve a more successful ministry with a healthy and fruitful church. It is the hope that the information gleaned from this project will help shorter-tenured pastors effectually work through conflicts to a position of mutual trust and understanding with their parishioners and gain the ability to lead effectively for growth and the spread of the Gospel.

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<sup>74</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 185.

## Chapter Four

### A Biblical Strategy

#### *Holy Habits and Spiritual Disciplines*

The author, as a pastor, is concerned with the issue of pastoral tenure. As mentioned earlier, there is a correlation between church health and the tenure of its pastor, and other studies to this end will be cited later. Furthermore, the author's desire is to not only weather the storms of pastoral ministry for the benefit of the church he pastors, but he wants to encourage other pastors to the same end. It is the author's hope that the information gathered will help provide a biblical strategy derived from the findings which shorter tenured pastors can implement to effectively work through struggles to find a place of greater trust and understanding with their congregants. The goal is to gain the ability to lead effectually for the growth of the church body and the spread of the Gospel, and there are few issues of greater importance. After all, the church is not man's idea or invention. The church is God's idea, as Jesus explicitly stated in Matthew 16:18, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Few issues are of a higher importance than the health of the Lord's church.

This study is also paramount due to the sad state of so many churches in the SBC today. Studies show the vast majority of Southern Baptist Churches are not growing. Currently, "65 percent of churches are declining or plateaued."<sup>75</sup> While this rate is lower than the earlier figure of 80 percent, it means far fewer than half are growing. The decline from 80 percent to 65

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<sup>75</sup> Thom Rainer, "Dispelling the 80 Percent Myth of Declining Churches," (ThomRainer.com, June 28, 2017).

percent is in part due to churches closing their doors. In addition, baptisms declined three percent in 2018, the lowest numbers in 30 years.<sup>76</sup>

Pew Research Center surveyed more than 35,000 Americans and found a decline of eight percent among those who identify as Christians.<sup>77</sup> The latest surveys on attendance trends among churches across the country by Barna.com are in agreement; church attendance is on a decline overall.<sup>78</sup> Long a marker for growth, studies show attendance declines and seem to confirm it as a mark against the health of churches. In direct contrast, studies which indicate that three-fourths of growing churches have pastors who have served for more than four years corroborates the connection between pastoral tenure and growth and health.<sup>79</sup> It is interesting to note that the connection between pastoral tenure and church health also seems to have some correlation to church size, which places SBC churches, which are often in the small to mid-size range squarely in the mix for shorter tenures and thus failing health and attendance declines.<sup>80</sup> With SBC churches in decline or not growing, many closing their doors, and baptisms down to a historic low, this study is crucial in helping shorter tenured pastors facing challenges to stay the course. Chapters four and five have as their goal the dissemination of a strategy that is first and foremost biblical, but also practical.

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<sup>76</sup> Kate Shellnut, “Southern Baptists Down to Lowest in 30 Years,” (ChristianityToday.com, May 23, 2019).

<sup>77</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pewforum.org, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>78</sup> “Church Attendance Trends Around the Country,” Barna.com, May 26, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

<sup>79</sup> Charles Arn, “Pastoral Longevity.”

<sup>80</sup> Kelly Shattuck, “7 Startling Facts.”

Being a pastor can be difficult, but for those who stay, their churches often experience a revival. The point of this project is to help pastors “stay.” Dr. Kevin Blackwell in an article entitled “Church Health and Pastoral Tenure” explains the phenomenon, “Every pastor who leads a church to revitalization will experience hardships, long days, gut wrenching meetings, and nasty emails. . . . We must see a continual increase in pastoral tenures if we want to see lasting revitalization and the strengthening of churches across North America. Too many times pastors leave a church right at the point of breakthrough.”<sup>81</sup>

Numerous studies have shown the significance of pastoral longevity. The findings show the beginning of churches in decline came at a time when pastors began to come and go every two to three years.<sup>82</sup> Given this information, and other supporting evidence, pastoral longevity is important to the growth and the spread of the Gospel, which flourishes when pastors and congregants trust one another deeply. As shorter tenured pastors understand the magnitude of staying the course in their respective churches for the long term, it is the hope of this author that they can use the information gathered as a part of this study to enable them to do so.

Pastoral longevity means not only church growth by the numbers, but more importantly, the successful spread of the Gospel in which hearts and lives are changed for eternity. In his book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Thom Rainer’s research labels the years six through ten as the years of “fruit and harvest” which he describes like this, “a church is likely to experience some of its best years, by almost any metrics, during this period of a pastor’s tenure. Indeed, in my interviews with both pastors and members, I have heard this theme repeated. Both parties have worked through the tough times. They now trust each other and love each other more

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<sup>81</sup> Blackwell, “Church Health and Pastoral Tenure.”

<sup>82</sup> Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 75,

deeply.”<sup>83</sup> What will it take for pastors to make it to the aforementioned years six through ten? That is the concern of what remains in chapters four and five.

Before moving on it must be stated that it is vital and necessary for every pastor to take inventory of the church he pastors in order to confirm its biblical health. Chapter one listed six definite marks of a healthy church as given in Scripture. These characteristics are neither negotiable nor arbitrary, for they are the clear teaching of God’s Word. All of the suggestions and strategies to help a pastor endure and have a long tenure prove to be for naught if the church is not biblically healthy.

This work has referenced the sad reality that most SBC churches are not growing, and it is not the point of this work to vilify pastors. However, many pastors oversee churches that have simply lost their focus; they are no longer healthy in a biblical sense and are lacking in the six areas mentioned in chapter one. Carey Nieuwhof addresses this very issue in an article entitled “5 Tell-Tale Signs Your Congregation is Insider-Focused.” One poignant quote from Nieuwhof’s article follows, “Churches that stop growing almost always have lost their heart for outsiders.”<sup>84</sup> This quote touches on the lack of biblical evangelism, one of the key characteristics of a biblically healthy church. Appendix B will list five tell-tale signs of a church that has lost its evangelistic thrust and focus. Every pastor is encouraged to consider the biblical health of his church, especially in the area of evangelism, as he answers these five questions.

Kevin DeYoung also assists pastors in identifying the general health of their churches in his article entitled “9 Marks of an Unhealthy Church.” DeYoung admits it may be difficult to

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<sup>83</sup> Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, 81.

<sup>84</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, “5 Tell-Tale Signs Your Congregation is Insider-Focused,” [careynieuwhof.com, https://careynieuwhof.com/5-tell-tale-signs-your-congregation-is-insider-focused/](https://careynieuwhof.com/5-tell-tale-signs-your-congregation-is-insider-focused/).

identify the signs of an unhealthy church and has offered nine tell-tale marks.<sup>85</sup> These nine unhealthy church characteristics are listed in Appendix C for the pastors information and edification. Again, this article is offered as a way for pastors to stop and ask, “is my church a biblically healthy church?” Each of the nine questions raised by DeYoung may not be specifically addressed in chapter one of this work, but they may serve as a catalyst for identifying biblical deficiencies in church health. It is not the scope of this project to address the deficiencies a pastor may find regarding his church’s biblical health as he ponders the nine questions. Nonetheless, each pastor must consider his church’s health an issue of utmost importance as he moves forward with the goal of attaining long-tenure.

Finally, Marielle Thomas offers insight on unhealthy churches in her article entitled “5 Signs You’re Part of an Unhealthy Church.”<sup>86</sup> As pastors peruse her questions and search for answers they will find a few directly related to the six characteristics of biblically healthy churches given in chapter one. Again, for the purpose of this work and the goal of sharing these identifiers is to serve as a catalyst for the pastor to recognize areas where his church is lacking in biblical health. Thomas’ five signs can be found in Appendix D.

Having offered some practical tools for helping pastors assess the biblical health of their churches and identify areas of weakness, this project will now look at each of the seven questions posed to the long-tenured pastors. The substance of each question will be discussed and a strategy for helping the pastor navigate each issue will be offered.

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<sup>85</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “9 Marks of an Unhealthy Church.” [Thegospelcoalition.org](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/9-marks-of-an-unhealthy-church/), March 10, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/9-marks-of-an-unhealthy-church/>.

<sup>86</sup> Mariel Thomas, “5 Signs You’re Part of an Unhealthy Church,” [Churchleaders.com](https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/159210-5-signs-you-re-part-of-an-unhealthy-church.html). May 24, 2019. <https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/159210-5-signs-you-re-part-of-an-unhealthy-church.html>.



## **The Necessity of Personal Holy Habits and Spiritual Disciplines**

If pastors are going to lead others to know and become like Jesus, they must know Jesus themselves, becoming more like Him daily. Boiled down to its irreducible minimum, God's will is for both pastors and all believers to become like His Son as clearly stated in Romans 8:29, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."

The Lord Jesus also charged us to "make disciples." This verb is in the imperative form, the crucial command of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." Disciples were learners, sold out to and committed to their teachers, much like an apprentice to a master as in the trades today - electrical, shipbuilding, etc. The first-century believers would have understood the command clearly as "In the Greek world philosophers were likewise surrounded by their pupils. Since pupils often adopted the distinctive teaching of their masters, the word came to signify the adherent of a particular outlook in religion or philosophy."<sup>87</sup>

Thus today, following and becoming like Jesus is a command for pastors and disciples (believers) personally, and pastors in particular, as part of their calling to reach the lost. Pastors must set the tone as the leaders (overseers/elders/pastors). It is a spiritual discipline emphasized by Jesus in Luke 6:40, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher." The command to pastors as leaders is reinforced by the Apostle Paul in both his letters to Timothy and Titus, in which they are reminded of the importance of setting an example for the churches in which they minister.

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<sup>87</sup> Derek RW Wood and Ian Howard Marshall, eds, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

Dallas Willard, in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, explains his belief that the church is not as effective and impactful in the world because it fails to focus on human transformation... all the problems and ills in the world...which Willard calls the “distressed human condition,” can only be solved spiritually.<sup>88</sup> So, if pastors are going to make disciples and be Christ’s ambassadors, they must be in pursuit of Jesus themselves in order to be capable of leading others to do the same. Willard continues using the example of one who desires to be an accomplished athlete. To do so, the athlete must exercise and practice and pursue the sport, about which Willard elaborates, “A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.”<sup>89</sup>

The goal of pastors is spiritual growth, not necessarily numerical growth. It requires pastors to focus on who people should be, not what they should do. In churches, the goal is unclear, covered in a myriad of activities, rather than recognizable – to be more like Christ. Pastors must focus on who they are becoming, one who is more like Christ, as well as who they are leading others to be.

In his book, *From Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster, explains, “The life that is pleasing to God is not a series of religious duties. We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God.”<sup>90</sup> Spiritual disciplines permit pastors and, in turn, believers, to receive His grace and allow God to transform them, which is the ultimate goal, becoming more like Christ.

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<sup>88</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, VIII.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 4.

The Bible mandate comes from I Timothy 4:7-8, “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” In other words, “discipline yourself.” First-century readers would have understood the brilliant athletic imagery here, as first-century athletes trained and competed naked, stripped-down, so there was no restriction in movement or in the ability to build themselves up. Paul’s admonition to Timothy is to discipline himself spiritually toward godliness as an athlete would do physically toward strength and condition.

Among these spiritual disciplines are Bible study and prayer, the importance of which is emphasized by Kent Hughes in *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, “Reading God’s Word is essential, but meditation internalizes the Word and responds, ‘I delight to do your will, O my God’ (Ps. 40:8).”<sup>91</sup> Of course, the Biblical basis for Bible study is refined in Romans 12:2 “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will. Again, the goal is transformation, becoming more like Christ. Paul, in his second letter to Timothy, reminds Timothy all scripture is from God and urges Timothy to study the Word. Dallas Willard reminds in similar fashion, “a relationship with God, as with any person, soon requires a contribution from us, which will largely consist of study.”<sup>92</sup>

The problem with study and an effective devotional life among pastors is it must be planned for, as a part of the daily routine, in order for the Word to speak, strengthen, and condition them to be more like Christ. As Martin Luther explained, regarding the habit of Bible

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<sup>91</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. Crossway, 2007.

<sup>92</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 176.

study, “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.”<sup>93</sup> Without the study of the Word and the Master, pastors cannot hope to become more like Christ.

In addition to the admonition to study, the scripture also urges obedience to the instruction to pray, as found in Ephesians 6:18-20. Through prayer, pastors and believers expose themselves openly to Christ, allowing Him to imprint His character on their lives. Because prayer ushers humanity into the presence of God, it is central in the transformation to become more like Christ. Prayer also works to help see the will of God more clearly and pray more effectively for themselves, the church, and the lost.

Every long-tenured pastor in this study was engaged in the spiritual discipline of prayer, many citing prayer as the most important of all spiritual disciplines. In the Old Testament, David offered up an example of prayer in Psalm 63:1 as the way to seek God. Jesus, followed in Mark 1:35, with another example of an effective posture of prayer. In the centuries that followed, Martin Luther espoused the fact that “to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”<sup>94</sup> Chapter five will offer some practical ideas to encourage these vital spiritual disciplines; a strategy to assist the pastor who may be so inundated with studying for sermons and presentations he forgoes his own spiritual discipline and growth in Christ.

### **The Question of Wife and Family in Church Ministry**

In a recent survey of Protestant Pastors, more than half of pastors are discouraged, while three-fourths consider leaving the ministry due to stress or burnout.<sup>95</sup> It is important to

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<sup>93</sup> Kevin A Miller, ed., *Christian History*, “Martin Luther's Early Years: Did You Know?” Issue 34, Volume 11, Number 2, 1992.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Anugrah Kumar, “Nearly 3 in 4 Pastors Regularly Consider Leaving Due to Stress,” *Christianpost.com*, June 21, 2014.

understand that pastors, like everyone, are human beings, who are not immune to stress. An unhappy spouse or family can contribute to stress, which begs the question, why are spouses and families of pastors unhappy? In fact, among pastors, “Eighty percent believe their pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families, and thirty-three percent said it (pastoral ministry) was an outright hazard.”<sup>96</sup> As pastors face their unique ministry stress and burnout, wives and families can suffer, leading to pastoral family crises, particularly for shorter tenured pastors and their families who have not yet set foundational boundaries.

Pastors need to prioritize their wives, families, and spiritual lives which requires an understanding of ministerial duties as well as skill development in setting boundaries – both professional and personal – which, can, in turn, maintain spiritual, emotional, and physical health and wellness among the pastors’ family members. Pastors and their spouses must take a purposeful stance regarding their spiritual lives, making their personal spiritual development a priority, one that takes precedence over pastoral responsibilities.

Thom Rainer, in an article entitled “Seven of the Greatest Stressors on Pastors,” explains, “No one can serve in a church or do any job with joy if their spouse is unhappy,” which is often a result of the fact that “spouses are expected to fill roles in the church because of who they married, not because they are equipped or desirous to do so.”<sup>97</sup> The situation is similar for pastors’ children, who are more susceptible to unrealistic expectations from the congregation regarding their attendance and roles within the church.

In *Resilient Ministry*, authors Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie expound on the importance of pastors protecting their spouses and family members, “the overall objective should be for

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<sup>96</sup> Bill Gaultiere, “Pastor Stress Statistics,” Soulshpherding.org, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Thom Rainer, “Seven of the Greatest Stressors on Pastors,” TomRainer.com, December 16, 2013.

spouses to feel connected to the concerns of their partner who is pastoring but not become crippled by the emotional difficulties. Another way for pastors to address the tension between church and family is to manage the expectations of the congregation.”<sup>98</sup> These ideas mirror Biblical mandates for husbands and pastors, beginning with the pastors’ first responsibility as a Christian. In Ephesians 5:25, they are told, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” a statement indicative of sacrifice and unconditional service.

Pastors must obey 1 Peter 3:7 as well, “Husbands, in the same way, treat your wives with consideration as a delicate vessel, and with honor as fellow heirs of the gracious gift of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered,” being sensitive to her limits and stressors and not asking too much of her. In addition, for their children, pastors must adhere to the instructions given in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Pastors must prioritize their children and not make them feel they are less important than the church.

Should a pastor lose his family, he also loses his vocational ministry according to God’s Word in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, “An overseer must manage his own household well and keep his children under control, with complete dignity. For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for the church of God?”

### **The Inquiry into Accountability and the Need for Spiritual Mentors**

In regard to the inquiry into accountability and the need for spiritual mentors, the reality is everyone has blind spots; everyone has areas of weakness. Accountability and encouragement

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<sup>98</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 175, 182.

are important to all Christians, but it would appear they are vital to pastors. Many of the pastors in the study did not have a formal accountability partner, but many indicated there was someone (often a spouse) with whom they could share and receive feedback.

Scriptures address the need for trusted advisors in the book of Proverbs, where chapter 11 verse 14 says, “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers.” It is followed up in Proverbs 15:22, where the Word states, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” Each of these verses touches on the principle that there is wisdom in receiving wise counsel. In fact, Proverbs commends the friend who will be brutally honest in Proverbs 27:6, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.”

The sad truth is many studies show pastors to be lonely, as showcased in the article, “The Secret Pain of Pastors,” which states, “Seventy percent do not have someone they consider a close friend.”<sup>99</sup> A similar study acknowledges, “The primary failure of 9 pastors out of 10 in the Southern Baptist Convention...is the lone ranger syndrome. Their ministry is a solo act.”<sup>100</sup> Pastors need to find a trusted friend, a confidant and be intentional in forming a long-term healthy relationship with them. Also, the mentor and accountability partner can help pastors through what turned out to be a huge problem with almost every pastor in the study - taking criticism personally.

### **The Subject of Criticism and Complaints**

Dealing with criticism is vital as well as difficult for everyone. Handling criticism or critical people, means, first, learning not to take it personally. For most long-tenured senior pastors, criticism comes with the territory. They have discovered most criticism is unwarranted.

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<sup>99</sup> Philip Wagner, “The Secret Pain of Pastors,” churchleaders.com, September 5, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Joe McKeever, “The Number One Failure of 90 Percent of Pastors,” joemckeeper.com, 2008.

They have moved past attempting to please people, and instead, turn their focus to pleasing God and being the shepherd God desires.

Younger, shorter-tenured ministers tend to fall into the trap of seeing criticism as a series of personal attacks. The first priority is remembering that criticism is most often directed at the role or position, not the person or minister. Henry Blackaby cites oversensitivity, noting that criticism will happen to pastors, and as leaders, pastors must be able to handle it well, fair or unfair as constructive criticism is helpful.<sup>101</sup>

Criticism will come and dealing with it properly and effectively will have a tremendous impact on the life and ministry of the pastor. Biblically, pastors are to handle critics with meekness which is defined as strength restrained as described in Matthew 5:5. Pastors should not seek to retaliate should the criticism be unwarranted as instructed in Romans 12:19. In like manner, should the criticism be constructive and warranted, it should be considered as in the aforementioned Proverbs 27:6.

### **The Need for a Personal Health Regimen**

Biblically, 1 Corinthians 6:19 explains humans are given one body, and it is vital to take care of it. People's lives and the bodies in which they live are a gift. In I Timothy 4:8, Paul reminds Timothy that physical exercise is of benefit. Proverbs 23:2 labels gluttony a sin while Proverbs 23:20-21 labels excess drinking and eating as sins. The Bible is clear, God is concerned with how people live in the bodies He provided and how they care for those bodies as stated in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, "that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable."

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<sup>101</sup> Blackaby and Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 277-248.



Statistics, provided by [pastoralcareinc.com](http://pastoralcareinc.com), show the need for balance and physical health to alleviate stress for pastors:

- Seventy-two percent of the pastors report working between 55 to 75 hours per week.
- Eighty-four percent of pastors feel they are on call 24/7.
- Seventy-eight percent of pastors report having their vacation and personal time interrupted with ministry duties or expectations.
- Sixty-five percent of pastors feel they have not taken enough vacation time with their family over the last five years.
- Over 50 percent of pastors are unhealthy, overweight, and do not exercise.<sup>102</sup>

Another study showed “76 percent of pastors were either overweight or obese, compared to 61 percent of the general population.”<sup>103</sup> The lack of exercise, for pastors, as well as the general population, has resulted in problems including obesity as well as lack of energy and rest. The Bible supports that the body requires care and maintenance. This “maintenance” includes regular exercise as well as nutritious food, which helps control weight, reduces the risk of heart problems and other medical issues, and encourages sound judgment. Exercise develops endurance, both physical, mental, and emotional, which can help pastors overcome the challenges and obstacles of ministry.

### **The Move to a Higher Level of Leadership, Effectiveness, and Trust**

Trials and challenges will come, and God uses them. James 1:2-3, offers this encouragement in the midst of trials, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” In Romans 5: 3-4, the writer explains, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

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<sup>102</sup> “Statistics in Ministry,” [pastoralcareinc.com](http://pastoralcareinc.com), 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 61.

Every pastor who participated in the survey gave accounts of situations they had faced, which challenged them. The pastors attested that the trials helped them grow and propelled them forward as more effective leaders in their churches. It is much like Proverbs 24:10, “If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!”

Challenges and changes are inevitable for pastors, as they are for every leader. Regardless of the profession or ministry, conflict resolution is key, propelling the leader, team, or organization forward or disrupt it. Leaders who behave responsibly in the midst of challenges, conflicts, and changes will gain respect over time. Facing challenges with endurance is crucial to leadership, as John Maxwell explains, “Leadership is a process, not a position.”<sup>104</sup>

Being given the title as “pastor” is the beginning of leadership. Until a pastor proves he is a person of integrity by dealing with conflict and challenges, he will not move up to the highest level of leadership and trust. As he deals with challenges, conflict, and change within his church, he will be trusted with a higher level of leadership. The hope is pastors will see challenges in light of what they truly are – opportunities to grow personally and then move the church in which they minister forward.

### **The Inevitability of Change**

Pastors must be willing to learn and grow as individuals and be willing to make the changes necessary in themselves as well as their churches. Long-tenured pastors understand this concept, having experienced it and, in most cases, embraced the inevitability of change. They are not the same people they were years ago when their ministry began. They have learned, grown, and made adjustments along the way. John Maxwell backs this idea, “Each time a leader moves up to a higher level of leadership, greater skill is required. For that reason, each step of growth

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<sup>104</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*, (New York: Center Street Publishing, 2011), 1.

requires further development on the part of the leader.”<sup>105</sup> This study showed the long-tenured pastors grew and were willing to change themselves and their mindsets when necessary.

For would-be leaders, flexibility is key to positive changes and success. Growth comes from the ability to change. The long-tenured pastors were willing to grow, learn, and change themselves for the better to help improve their churches. These pastors have seen changes in culture and the impact those changes have had on the church. Adaptation for churches is often difficult, but it is required to reach a changing culture with the timeless message of the Gospel.

To change and adapt, pastors must be honest and humble as they face the challenges facing their ministries. It takes time, and the first changes needed are often internal changes in the pastor as the leader as the pastors in this study attested.

Biblically, pastors, like all believers, are in the process of becoming like Christ, which means changing spiritually and making positive changes. Philippians 1:6 explains the premise, “...being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” As pastors become more like Christ, they change in their thoughts, behaviors, and habits; they are marked more by the fruit of the spirit than the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-26). In turn, with change, pastors, “put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry while, “as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Colossians 3:5 and 3:12).

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<sup>105</sup> Maxwell, *Developing The Leader*, 15.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

#### ***The Final Words***

The target audience for this project is pastors, in particular, those pastors who may be struggling or even considering giving up their calling or leaving their current church. Of course, it is true God does often move people, and it is well beyond the scope of this work to discuss and understand when it is appropriate for a pastor to leave his post. Many volumes have been authored on the topic and thus, the body of work is extensive. However, as has already been cited, studies show it appears pastors often move too quickly, most often just before a breakthrough, the time at which the pastor's influence and leadership are most effective. Many of the aforementioned leadership studies and church health surveys cited in this work show the stark realities. In essence, many pastors leave too soon and there exists a correlation between church health and pastoral longevity.

Ministry is difficult. The constant demands placed on a pastor and his family by the church can be harsh, and the spiritual warfare is always intense. Furthermore, it is often impossible to pinpoint the exact source of the proverbial "attack" on a church and its pastor. Still, the Bible is clear that the enemy of our souls is active and organized as stated in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Consider the words of Paul to the pastors in Ephesus recorded in Acts 20:29-30, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."

In addition, the Apostle John mentioned in 1 John 2:19, those who were opposed to the Lord Jesus had actually been among the church. The letters sent to the seven churches in Revelation from the Lord Jesus are likewise as chilling. They cite the various types of persecution, along with attacks and issues within the church, many centered on false teaching and those who manipulate the Lord's people (the Jezebel spirit). Again, volumes could be written to document and discuss the challenges churches, in general, and pastors, in particular, face.

The author has considered quitting many times and often finds himself greatly discouraged. He, like many others, needs the insight and encouragement given by the pastors who were a part of this study, those pastors who did not give up, give in, or quit. He hopes other pastors may draw similar encouragement. These long-tenured pastors had biblically sound and healthy churches, and the Lord used them in great ways.

Among the interview questions, a few stood out and were unanimously embraced by the pastors interviewed. They have all been discussed previously, but the point of this concluding chapter is to offer encouragement and practical applications for the pastor who may be struggling in some of the key areas surveyed. In fact, a strategy for navigating each of the seven issues discussed in the survey questions will be offered.

First, every pastor interviewed engages in personal holy habits apart from his "work." They all read the Scriptures or pray for their own edification and personal growth. The magnitude of prayer to these long-tenured pastors was paramount, universally cited as being of utmost importance. One might argue the results of question one make common sense and should go without saying. Still, any pastor knows the demands on his time and the temptation to set aside his personal holy habits, which help him grow in his own faith and relationship with Christ.

While it may be undemanding to offer ideas on how to facilitate personal time with the Lord and pursue personal holy habits, nonetheless, some suggestions will be presented to assist and encourage the reader. It is understood that every pastor's schedule, personality, and proclivities are unique, but strategic ideas will be offered. In addition, the heart behind the holy habits will also be in focus. The "why" behind the holy habits is crucial and is under scrutiny as well. Having discussed in the previous chapter the goal of every believer, which is to be more like Jesus Christ, it is time to offer some strategies. Again, the interviewed pastors were unanimous in their pursuit of growing to be more like Jesus; it is a vital aspect of endurance and the ability to attain a long tenure.

A recognized danger to the pastor is going about his holy habits in a perfunctory manner. Author Dale Wolery explains, "Spirituality can be like that, especially for pastors and other ministry professionals. It can be difficult to maintain a consistent, vibrant, growing relationship with God that impacts our relationships with others because God stuff can become so familiar and so available that we no longer anticipate it with eagerness."<sup>106</sup> Richard Blackaby agrees and offers, "God did not create people in order to watch us perform religious rituals and scurry busily about accomplishing religious tasks on His behalf. He made us for a relationship, so we could commune with Him and enjoy His presence."<sup>107</sup> Understanding the danger of a desultory approach to personal, spiritual activity, Buchanan's definition of holy habits becomes helpful, "Holy Habits are that: the disciplines, the routines, by which we stay alive and focused on

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<sup>106</sup> Dale Wolery, *Why is Spirituality so Hard for Pastors?* NACR.org, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Henry T. and Richard Blackaby, *Fresh Encounter: God's Plan for Your Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 3.

Him.”<sup>108</sup> Holy habits are routines and practices, but they have as their goal a closer relationship with God and a growing love for Jesus Christ.

Pastors do not want their flocks going through the spiritual motions, so they must guard themselves against the practice as well. Mark Buchanan writes, “The easiest thing in the world is to engage holy habits for the wrong reasons...” and goes on to argue from Scripture “the goal of the disciplined life is love.”<sup>109</sup> Pastors must remember - any habit of reading and meditating on Scripture, prayer, fasting, etc., has as its goal to love God and others.

Could it be the antidote to going through the motions is the habit of confession? The habit of following the example of the Psalmist and asking God to “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me . . .” (Psalm 139:23-24). Concerning confession, Richard J. Foster writes, “But it is also a discipline because there are things we must do. It is a consciously chosen course of action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty.”<sup>110</sup> To avoid complacency and a mechanical approach to spiritual disciplines, it is vital for pastors to develop a habit of confession, a habit of opening themselves up to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit for the cause of love. It is simply part of the progression of becoming more like Christ. According to *How to Beat Burnout*, confession is an important aspect of spiritual discipline that helps keep one from “losing that thrill over the Scriptures.”<sup>111</sup> There may appear to be a contradiction brewing in this discussion of holy habits, but the antidote to the possible contradiction is for pastors, and all Christians, to not lose the

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<sup>108</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Your God is Too Safe* (Sister, OR: Multnomah Books, 2001), 131.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>110</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 4.

<sup>111</sup> Frank Minirth, Don Hawkins, Paul Meier, and Richard Flournoy, *How to Beat Burnout* (Moody: Chicago, 1986), 128.

aforementioned “why” behind the habits. One key is to take time to let the Holy Spirit bring conviction, conviction which results in confession.

While it did not stand out in the interviews, the holy habit of meditation was mentioned. The previous paragraph’s focus on confession renders meditation vital to a focused and healthy regimen of holy habits, a regimen that keeps a proper focus. Confession comes as the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, but this requires one to listen and be aware of the Holy Spirit’s message. In Psalm 139, David asked God to do a thorough evaluation of his life in order to reveal sin. Again, the implication is David was willing to listen to God’s response. He was intentional in listening to God and responding to what was revealed. This is an example of meditation and its results. Why does it matter? It matters because it speaks to long-tenure, for long-tenured pastors have an active and growing relationship with God.

The author contends an active and growing relationship with God requires meditation as a holy habit to be practiced. Foster defines meditation as “the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word.”<sup>112</sup> Foster goes on to explain that meditation for the Christian is not an emptying of the mind but a filling of the mind.<sup>113</sup> It has as its desire, communication with God. The pertinent question for pastors surrounds the mechanics of engaging in meditation. While it is not within the scope of this work to analyze right or wrong ways to meditate, Dr. Oscar Owens, Jr. offers five straightforward steps that are important to biblical meditation. The five steps are listed in Appendix E.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 17.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>114</sup> Oscar Owens, Jr., “How to Meditate: Connect with God in 5 Steps,” Westa.org. <https://westa.org/how-to-meditate-connect-with-god-in-5-simple-steps/>.



Having discussed meditation, Scazzero recommends to leaders the practice of Sabbath. He describes Sabbath in the following manner, “Biblical Sabbath is a twenty-four hour block of time in which we stop work, enjoy rest, practice delight, and contemplate God.”<sup>115</sup> Scazzero’s concern is not a specific day of the week. Instead, he is concerned that leaders, especially pastors, not allow work to disrupt the God-ordained rhythm of life, which includes a weekly Sabbath. *Resilient Ministry* suggests taking a day off in the middle of the week in which to observe Sabbath. This day of taking a break must be scheduled and honored like any other important calendar meeting or event.<sup>116</sup> In actuality, Sabbath and meditation can work together and support one another.

As expected, Bible reading and prayer stood out as key holy habits among long-tenured pastors. These most basic and fundamental habits are undoubtedly vital, but this work encourages pastors to pursue meditation as briefly described in order to maintain a growing and vibrant relationship with God. Along with meditation, observing a Sabbath every week is vital. When one considers the attacks of the enemy and the bevy of pitfalls and temptations pastors face, it seems prudent to practice meditation and Sabbath rest and add them to a regimen of spiritual disciplines.

There was also unanimity regarding question two. Every long-tenured pastor indicated set boundaries between the church and their family. In other words, there was no pressure for spouses or children to participate, serve, or be part of the church. The adage “you hired me and not my family” was stated in the interviews on multiple occasions. Most of the practical ideas encouraged here by the author are anecdotal, simply based upon Scripture and experience.

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<sup>115</sup> Scazzero and Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 144.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Pastors must remember this simple fact; without their family, they have no ministry. It could also be stated this way, a pastor's first ministry is his family, and if he falters in that ministry, he loses the privilege of pastoral ministry. Scripture is clear on this: "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect" (1 Timothy 3:4).

In addition, husbands are commanded to love their wives as they love their own body and to love them as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25, 28). The implication in these commands is conspicuous; the moment a pastor is more concerned with his career or service to those in the church than he is with his wife and children, he is in sin.

This is not to suggest a pastor's family should not be part of his church, but in the end, pastors ultimately serve and work for the Lord and will give an account to Him as to how they ministered to and led their family, first and foremost. While it was not a direct answer to question two, pastor eight made the statement expressing one of his greatest regrets was missing so many of his children's ball games and special events due to meetings. As he looked back, he realized many of those meetings were unnecessary and were never more important than his children. Pastors must guard family time and have boundaries in place to help prioritize them. The famous pastoral maxim is true, pastors are the only father their children will ever have, and pastors are not likely the first nor the last pastor to serve their church.

What then, are some actionable items for pastors concerning the establishment and maintenance of healthy boundaries between family and pastoral ministry?

Guarding family time was previously mentioned, but what are some ways pastors can effectively engage in this critical habit? Like most important activities and habits in life, guarding family time must be a scheduled calendar event. For a pastor to declare his calendar is

full or that he has a scheduled event on a certain date, even if that event is time with his family, is perfectly acceptable and suggested. Rod Edmondson agrees with that sentiment and offers several other practical ways pastors can protect their family. In addition, Edmondson's first suggestion, "disciplined down time," also supports the habit of Sabbath. Another idea espoused by Edmondson is for pastors to have their family trump everything else on their calendar. For example, a phone call from a pastor's wife or children should never be ignored and take priority. This may mean excusing one's self from a meeting or cutting off another conversation, but the pastor's family should understand they are his top priority.<sup>117</sup>

As previously stated, the author was surprised at the results of question three and the fact that more of the long-tenured pastors did not have a formal spiritual mentor or someone, other than their spouse, to whom they were accountable. That said, it is a biblical principle for God's people to have accountability and someone with whom there can be abject honesty. For example, Proverbs 27:6 refers to the wounds of a friend in a positive manner. Galatians 6:1 commands Christians to hold one another accountable and intervene when a sinful habit is developed. Relationships of this nature do not happen without intention and planning.

*Preventing Ministry Failure* offers insight on how a pastor might go about developing a close relationship that would lend itself to mentoring and accountability and refers to relationships of this nature as "level five," suggesting that pastors must be proactive in their formation.<sup>118</sup> Wilson and Hoffman suggests that pastors "take initiative with boldness." Furthermore, these relationships are to be pursued with someone of the same gender.<sup>119</sup> Six

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<sup>117</sup> Ron Edmondson, "7 Ways I Protected My Family Life as a Pastor," Ronedmonson.com, August 7, 2018, <http://ronedmondson.com/2018/08/7-ways-i-protected-my=family-in=ministry.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure: A Shepherd Care Guide for Pastors, Ministers, and Other Caregiver* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 59-63.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

practical steps are offered in forming these level five relationships and are outlined in Appendix F.

Question four and the responses received were also significant on several levels. First, every pastor interviewed admitted they had encountered criticism and complaints. Pastors, no matter how amenable, friendly, caring, gracious, educated, or experienced, will face criticism and entertain complaints. This is to be expected because neither pastors nor their flock are perfect. Jeff Iorg writes, “Leading Christians is painful because they do sinful things that complicate our lives as leaders, our attempts to lead them, and the organizations of which they are a part.”<sup>120</sup> Also, leading change is difficult. Iorg says, “Success means change, and change usually means pain for someone.”<sup>121</sup>

The most common answer to how the pastors viewed criticism and complaints was learning from the criticism and complaint. In many cases, it surrounded learning specifically not to take the criticism and complaint personally. Pride and ego must be in check in order to properly deal with criticism and complaints. Willick and Babin write, “Ego clouds and disrupts everything: the planning process, the ability to take good advice, and the ability to accept constructive criticism. Often the most difficult ego to deal with is your own.”<sup>122</sup> Pastors must remember the church they pastor is not “their” church. It is Christ’s church, and the work is for His glory and purpose. Without this reality, always in the forefront, the ego can get out of hand.

The author believes Jeff Iorg offers one key to properly handling the criticism and complaints, which can arouse anger due to feeling threatened. Iorg offers, “Lowering our threat

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<sup>120</sup> Jeff Iorg, *The Painful Side of Leadership* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>122</sup> Jocko Willick and Leif Babin, *Extreme Ownership*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2017), 100.

level through developing security in Jesus Christ is essential for leaders. The security of the believer must become a personal reality, not simply a doctrine to debate.”<sup>123</sup> A pastor must keep his focus on the Gospel of Christ and the hope offered within it, in order to deal well with criticism. In that sense, question four and question one go hand in hand, for spiritual discipline is the key to properly navigating criticism and complaints. After all, nothing can change who the Lord Jesus is, what He has done, and the righteousness we have in Him. This reality must be a pastor’s focus if he is to combat unhealthy responses to criticism and complaints. That stated, is there a practical idea or application regarding how one views criticism and complaints? Again, every pastor who had long tenure had dealt with criticism and complaints in his ministry. While elementary on some level, Thom Rainer, in his book *Who Moved My Pulpit?*, encourages pastors to “Stop . . . And Pray”<sup>124</sup> He recommends praying for wisdom, praying for strength, and praying for courage. First and foremost, stop and pray. Before answering, pray. Before offering a reason or excuse, pray. Before defending yourself, pray. Before engaging in any conversation over the issue at hand, pray.

However, it benefits a pastor to go a bit deeper on this issue. Ken Sande has done extensive work on emotional intelligence and suggests self-awareness is vital to navigating relationships and the challenges they provide. He espouses the READ principle and the SERVE principle in order to more effectively traverse relational challenges.<sup>125</sup> READ and SERVE are both acrostics corresponding to a quiz which can be utilized to help one have a better view of himself and his current situation. Both READ and SERVE are introduced in Appendix G.

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<sup>123</sup> Willick and Babin, *Extreme Ownership*, 22.

<sup>124</sup> Thom Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit?* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 33.

<sup>125</sup> Ken Sande, “READ and SERVE quiz,” rw360.org., <https://rw360.org/2014/05/26/w-quiz/>.

*Resilient Ministry* comments on emotional intelligence in the following manner, “Pastoral ministry requires learning about ourselves and how we function in various environments and under various circumstances.”<sup>126</sup> Burns, Chapman and Guthrie also offer ways a pastor can develop a higher emotional intelligence. The stakes are very high, they write, “emotional intelligence plays a critical role in the resilience of pastors to ministry for the long haul.”<sup>127</sup> This is pertinent information for this work. Putting Sande’s READ and SERVE to practice is a good start and goes hand in hand with the system given by Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie. One of their practical ways to develop emotional intelligence is to accurately identify emotions. In other words, one must be able to name and acknowledge emotions in order to respond appropriately.<sup>128</sup> Again, this is where READ proves helpful. Another simple and practical way a pastor can develop the emotional intelligence to help him deal with criticism and complaints is receiving feedback from others. For example, it is stated that pastors need to be aware of their non-verbal communication. They can get feedback on this from family, peer groups, and confidants. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie write, “most people, even within our close group of family and friends, won’t have the courage or concern to give us this feedback. We must seek it out.”<sup>129</sup> Again, pastors must be proactive and intentional in developing the emotional intelligence that will help them in the inevitable times of criticism and conflict.

Question five’s results were also surprising. Understanding the aforementioned physical health crisis among pastors, the author assumed there would be unanimity among the respondents. While the pastors interviewed did not all have an active exercise regimen, they each

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<sup>126</sup> Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 107.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

had some form of activity that offered rest and relaxation. That stated, physical health is an important aspect of any pastor's life and critical to longevity. In *How to Beat Burnout*, the authors state the first area where changes are made in a burnout victim's life is the physical. They write, "Just feeling better physically often begins to change a person's burned out emotions and gives them the strength to begin other changes."<sup>130</sup> For pastors who have no active exercise regimen here is a word of caution from *High Calling, High Anxiety*: "Go Slowly." It took years to get out of shape, and it will take time to get back in shape. Building an exercise program slowly, over a period of 12-16 weeks, is safer and more effective than doing too much too soon and risking injury.<sup>131</sup>

There was unanimity in regard to question six. Every pastor interviewed admitted there were events that allowed him to gain more trust and effectiveness as a leader. In actuality, these events were most often challenges. They were times of difficulty. This is both frightening and encouraging for pastors. Challenges may not be fun to endure but weathering the proverbial storm of tough situations helps solidify a pastor's ability to lead. In actuality, questions four and six go hand in hand. Criticism and complaints are often part of the events that grow leaders. To this end, the READ questions are crucial. *Thriving Through Ministry Conflict* offers a similar idea: "Self-awareness allows you to be able to manage yourself, you are able to better understand relationships and, as a consequence, to better manage relationships."<sup>132</sup>

Whatever the source of the challenge or the manner of event a pastor faces, they provided an opportunity to deepen relationships and provide leadership. In *Developing the Leader Within*

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<sup>130</sup> Minirth, Hawkins, Meier, and Flourney, *How to Beat Burnout*, 103.

<sup>131</sup> O.S. Hawkins, *High Calling, High Anxiety* (Dallas: Annuity Board of SBC, 2003), 104.

<sup>132</sup> James P. Osterhaus, Joseph M. Jurkowski, and Todd A. Hahn. *Thriving Through Ministry Conflict*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 101.

*You*, John Maxwell offers practical programs to assist a leader in identifying and developing solutions to problems, but for the sake of this work his focus on the leader's attitude is instructional. Maxwell states, "A leader's attitude is caught by his or her followers more quickly than his or her actions."<sup>133</sup> The significance for pastors is obvious, during challenging times a leader's attitude is critical. Maxwell offers six stages of attitude change which will be presented in Appendix H.

The final question of the survey was also unanimously embraced in the following manner: every pastor interviewed shared he had been led to make changes in himself during his pastoral tenure. This is significant on many levels, speaking to personal growth, spiritual maturity, and a variety of leadership skills. The pastor who believes he has all the answers and every skill necessary to lead the Lord's church is simply foolish. The pastor unwilling to "change" will struggle to survive long term in his church. Simply put, change is a necessity for pastors.

By "change," the author is primarily referring to personal change, while changes in methodology and style may be necessary, personal change, or growth, is vital. Maxwell comments, "If you want to continue leading, you must continue changing."<sup>134</sup> Of course, continual growth in the pastor's love for and relationship with Jesus is vital, and again, it was the focus of question one. The long-tenured pastors in the study also identified their own weakness in key practical skills such as vision casting, teamwork, and organizational management. As they grew in these areas, they were able to lead their churches more effectively.

Change, here on earth, is inevitable. For pastors and congregations, every believer must remember to focus on the reason for change - to be more like Jesus Christ and lead others to

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<sup>133</sup> Maxwell, *Developing The Leader*, 101.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



Him. This project identified behaviors and practices of long-tenured pastors in the hope of providing guidance and encouragement for shorter tenured pastors to remain faithful to their calling and press on. It is certain longer tenures offer significant ministry advantages, none more evident than the changes which bring greater trust between pastors and the flock to whom they minister.

Looking back over the seven questions and their practical ramifications for pastors, it is blatantly obvious that intentionality is required. Every question led to practical suggestions that require the pastor to make a choice. Will he develop new and critical holy habits? Will he protect his family and make them his primary ministry? Will he seek out and develop level five relationships that lead to mentoring and accountability? Will he grow in emotional intelligence in order to deal with criticism and complaints more effectively? Will he take care of his temple and develop healthy habits? Will he lead with a proper attitude and develop a positive attitude? Will he continue to grow and change in order to lead his church in the most effective manner? The stakes are high. Church health and the cause of Christ drive the need for pastors to have longevity.

## **Appendix A**

### **Pastors' Interview Questions**

You were asked to participate in this study because I view your church as a biblically healthy church with these characteristics ...

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Describe your personal holy habits and spiritual disciplines. Of these, which do you feel is more effective in your ministry and the health of your church?
2. Explain the role of your wife and your immediate family regarding your position as pastor as well as their role in the church's ministry.
3. Do you have a spiritual mentor and accountability? Describe the relationship and how it was effective for your ministry.
4. How do you view criticism and complaints by members of the congregation? What is your initial response to the criticism/complaints and the person presenting them? What is your long-term response?
5. Do you have a personal health regimen? Could you please describe it?
6. Was there an event or series of events during your tenure that you feel moved you to a higher level of leadership in which the church trusted you with greater and more effectual changes?
7. What changes did God lead you to make in yourself during your tenure so you could be more effective for God and in ministry?

## Appendix B

### Five Tell-Tale Signs Your Church is Insider-Focused<sup>135</sup>

1. Personal Preference Drives Decision-Making
2. Emotion Trumps Mission
3. Sacrifice is Non-Existent
4. Any Growth is Mostly Transfer Growth
5. Innovation is Dead or on Life-Support

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<sup>135</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, “5 Tell-Tale Signs Your Congregation is Insider-Focused,” careynieuwhof.com, <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-tell-tale-signs-your-congregation-is-insider-focused/>.

## Appendix C

### Nine Marks of an Unhealthy Church<sup>136</sup>

1. The more peripheral the sermon topic, the more excited the people become.
2. The church staff does not enjoy coming to work.
3. The pastor and his wife do not get along.
4. Almost no one knows where the money goes.
5. The leadership team never changes or always changes.
6. No one is ever raised up from the church for pastoral ministry or sent from the church into missionary service.
7. There is a bottle neck in decision making.
8. The preacher has become erratic.
9. There are issues everyone knows about, but no one talks about openly.

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<sup>136</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “9 Marks of an Unhealthy Church.” Thegospelcoalition.org, March 10, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/9-marks-of-an-unhealthy-church/>.

## Appendix D

### **Five Signs that Signal You are Part of an Unhealthy Church<sup>137</sup>**

1. Leadership does not have a clear vision.
2. Leadership can never be challenged.
3. You are comfortable, but never convicted.
4. Congregants are content with being pew warmers.
5. Outreach is never planned or preached.

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<sup>137</sup> Mariel Thomas, “5 Signs You’re Part of an Unhealthy Church,” Churchleaders.com. May 24, 2019. <https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/159210-5-signs-you-re-part-of-an-unhealthy-church.html>.

## Appendix E

### Christian Biblical Meditation in Five Steps<sup>138</sup>

1. Read the Scripture - with your eyes and ears.
2. Reflect - Meditate, ponder, think about, and chew on the words of God.
3. Respond - Talk to the Lord (pray, praise and worship Him).
4. Receive from the Lord, Rest in Him, Rejoice in Him.
5. React in Obedience, act and do what He has revealed or done in you.

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<sup>138</sup> Oscar Owens, Jr., “How to Meditate: Connect with God in 5 Steps,” Westa.org, <https://westa.org/how-to-meditate-connect-with-god-in-5-simple-steps/>.

## Appendix F

### Steps for Finding and Growing a Few Good Same-Gender Friendships<sup>139</sup>

1. Brainstorm a list of potentials.
2. Assign an intimacy value to each relationship (not all are level 5 worthy).
3. Rank current relationships by intimacy value.
4. Pray for these individuals regularly.
5. Take initiative with Boldness.
6. Allow intimacy to develop naturally.

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<sup>139</sup> Wilson and Hoffmann, *Preventing Ministry Failure*, 59-63.

## **Appendix G**

### **READ Yourself Accurately<sup>140</sup>**

- Recognize your emotions (What am I feeling?)
- Evaluate their sources (Why do I feel this way?)
- Anticipate the consequences (What will happen if I follow these feelings?)
- Direct them on a constructive course (How can I use these emotions for good?)

### **SERVE Every Person You Meet**

- Smile (home, workplace, church, store, telephone)
- Explore and Empathize (Show interest in and compassion for others)
- Reconcile (Be a peacemaker)
- Value (Express appreciation and respect)
- Encourage (Give courage, inspire, put wind under others' wings)

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<sup>140</sup> Ken Sande, "READ and SERVE quiz," rw360.org., <https://rw360.org/2014/05/26/w-quiz/>.



## Appendix H

### The Six Stages of Attitude Change<sup>141</sup>

1. Identify Problem Feelings.
2. Identify Problem Behavior.
3. Identify Problem Thinking.
4. Identify Right Thinking.
5. Make a Public Commitment to Right Thinking.
6. Develop a Plan for Right Thinking.

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<sup>141</sup> Maxwell, *Developing The Leader*, 108-109.

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## **IRB Approval/Waiver Page**

**From:** IRB, IRB

**Sent:** Monday, August 13, 2018 11:07:09 AM

**To:** Larson, Thomas Stanley

**Cc:** Hicks, Donald Quentin (School of Divinity Instruction); IRB, IRB

**Subject:** IRB Approval 3364.081318: A Case Study on the Key Habits of Long-Tenured Pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention

Dear Thomas S. Larson,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to this approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**The Graduate School**