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Former Seventh-day Adventist Pastors: Qualitative Study Report

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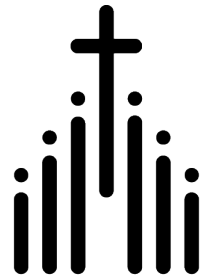
PASTORS' HEALTH AND WELLNESS

JULY 30, 2021

FORMER SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PASTORS:

QUALITATIVE STUDY REPORT

René Drumm, Petr Činčala



INSTITUTE *of* CHURCH MINISTRY

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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Using a qualitative in-depth interview approach, this study aimed to understand the experiences of individuals who served as Seventh-day Adventist pastors and chose to leave pastoral ministry within the Adventist Church. Little is known about the conditions under which pastors leave the ministry or their reasons for making this decision. Thus, Church administrators and leaders have been disadvantaged in curbing pastoral departures from denominational employment. This report aimed to bridge that gap by providing detailed information gathered from 14 individuals¹ who had voluntarily left pastoral ministry for other pursuits.

The research questions included:

1. When pastors withdraw from full-time ministry, what do former pastors recall as conditions that led to that outcome?
2. What strategies did former pastors use to prolong or truncate their careers in pastoral ministry?
3. What interventions might have been helpful/successful in keeping them in the pastorate?

This report offers information on how the study was conducted (methods), what we learned (findings), and what we, as researchers, believe are important key conclusions, as well as our recommendations based on the analysis.

¹ All of the names of the participants are pseudonyms to protect their identities. However, the pseudonyms reflect gender identity. Similarly, all people and places that participants name are masked (either changed or deleted), as are references to specific Conferences and/or Unions.

METHODS

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Researchers used purposive and snowball sampling techniques for participant recruitment. Starting with former pastors known by the researchers and then adding names and email addresses from the Ministerial Department of the North American Division, we contacted potential participants via email. The initial email message included the intent of the study, as well as its goals, objectives, and procedures. The email also spelled out the research inclusion criteria, asking each participant the following:

- Are you/were you credentialed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church?
- Are you older than 18 years of age?
- Did you leave pastoral ministry of your own volition?

Participants were required to answer “yes” to each question to be eligible for interview. The research goal was to have participants who differed in age, length of time in ministry, ethnicity and culture, and gender.

For participants who met the research criteria and were favorably inclined to participate, we set up an interview appointment. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they would need to consent to participate in writing.

DATA GATHERING

The original research plan was to gather the data through face-to-face interviews. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 11 of the 14 participants were interviewed via Zoom or phone conference.

Researchers used an interview guide to maintain consistency throughout the study. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two and one-half hours. The conversations were audio recorded with the participant’s knowledge and consent, understanding that

participation was entirely voluntary and that their identity would be kept confidential. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The digital recordings were transcribed using a proscribed process designated by the lead qualitative researcher. The analysis followed the conventions of qualitative coding using thematic analysis and the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method generates both descriptive and explanatory categories, leading to interpretive insights into the emerging themes. Researchers examined specific instances of the codes to clarify similarities and differences throughout the dataset.

Researchers reviewed each transcript for major themes, subthemes, and variant types. Major themes were those which emerged consistently across at least five participants. Researchers identified subthemes whenever major themes demonstrated discrete types within the category.

FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Our sample consisted of 14 participants in total, including 12 men and two women. There were four participants between ages 30–39, six participants between ages 40–49, two participants between ages 50–59, and two participants between ages 60–69. Participants self-reported their ethnicities as follows: four African American, one Asian, two Hispanic, six White, and one “other” (White and Hispanic). Time of service to the church varied; six participants served in ministry for 1–10 years, three served for 11–20 years, three served for 21–30 years, and two served for 31–40 years. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participant Demographics

GENDER	Male 86%	Female 14%			
AGE	30-39 29%	40-49 43%	50-59 14%	60-69 14%	
ETHNICITY	African American 29%	Asian 7%	Hispanic/Latino 14%	White/Caucasian 43%	Other 7%
LENGTH OF SERVICE	1-10 years 43%	11-20 years 21%	21-30 years 21%	31-40 years 14%	

RESEARCH QUESTION #1

WHEN PASTORS WITHDRAW FROM FULL-TIME MINISTRY, WHAT DO FORMER PASTORS RECALL AS CONDITIONS THAT LED TO THAT OUTCOME?

Study participants shared a number of factors that eventually impinged on their decision to leave pastoral ministry. The most often cited challenges that led to a decision to seek other career options included: (1) having ongoing challenges with church members, (2) encountering difficulties with Conference leadership, (3) feeling dissatisfaction and discord concerning the Adventist Church's organizational structure, (4) feeling constrained by traditional approaches to ministry, (5) sensing a lack of caring from administration and church members, (6) having spiritual doubts and doctrinal differences, and (7) lacking the training needed to do their jobs well.

HAVING ONGOING CHALLENGES WITH CHURCH MEMBERS

Participants recognized that in any church or people group, there will be individuals who present challenges. Some of these difficulties are considered normal and help leaders to grow by improving their people skills. However, our study participants made a distinction between these expected challenges and ongoing disrespect or power struggles with church members. Even if there were no direct power clashes, when members did not want to carry any of the leadership burden, it created challenges for the pastor. The following quotes from participants illustrate these challenges.

The bigger challenge probably was feeling like you're managing a group of people, and you're managing their problems and their interactions and their dysfunctions I had a vision of 90% [of pastoring] was just ministry, witnessing and evangelism, and, like, all this cool stuff happening. And maybe 10% is like, this garbage over here that you've just got to deal with because of human nature and other stuff. But I feel like in reality, it felt very much the opposite, like 90% of what I was doing, was playing dad to some dysfunctional kids I spend the majority of my time with people that were challenging. (Atticus)

What was challenging was very difficult church members. People that just made your life miserable. People that talked about you. People that made false information about you, and spread it to other people. (Ralph)

If you're in a good church that really respects pastors, then they'll respect your time. They'll respect your family. But some churches and some members really just don't care. (Silas)

Sometimes people pretend as if they know more than everybody else. And sometimes people set out to challenge your leadership, and there are people who sometimes will feel like the church belongs to them. And that posed a big challenge for me. (Milo)

I think some of the challenges were lack of ownership or engagement from the members. Members who would have a hands-off approach, an, "I don't want to lead. I'll just come. I don't want to really do anything. I'll just come." And it was quite taxing having to motivate people who just did not want to be motivated In terms of ministry, I would make sacrifices to do things to lead out the church and then the members who lived right there, didn't make similar sacrifices. And it felt like, "You know what? I don't want to keep catering [to these people]." Sometimes it felt like adult babysitting almost. (Finn)

[I told my congregation] "I'm gonna preach the entire year on the book of Revelation, and I'm going show you how Christ is actually the point and center of every single chapter." And I did that and . . . that created a lot of dissonance. The church was upset because I'm preaching Christ. So they start writing letters to the Conference and threatening to withhold tithes and threatening to . . . unless I do something [different]. [One time] we got a threatening note on my desk, with an axe on it, saying, "We will kill you" from church members. (Theodore)

ENCOUNTERING DIFFICULTIES WITH CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP

Likewise, participants acknowledged that administrators and employees do not always agree on issues pertaining to work life. However, the pastors we interviewed shared that their experiences with their Conference leaders were often lacking, negative, or perceived as unjust. The following quotes from participants offer insights into the difficulties they had with Conference leaders.

They [the Conference] was getting ready to move me to a new district. A single church district It was gonna be nice. I was excited for that. But then, kind of last minute, they yanked it away . . . once they found out that we were going to homeschool our girls for a little bit longer From our perspective, we had our own reasons and rationales for wanting to keep our kids home a little bit longer. And we just felt like as much as that may be important [to support the school], you really have no right to speak into our world and say how we or when we do anything in regards to school, the schooling of our children So we had all the departures, Sabbath's at the local churches. We had the introduction Sabbath at the other church, and then boom. Then, they were reintroducing us back to the other churches. (Atticus)

A pastor's supposed to be a parent. They're supposed to raise up the church, raise up the leaders, and then leave when the leaders have taken their positions. And instead, I found myself in a system where the Conference is running the show, telling me what to do in my local church. Totally disconnected They don't know my people. (Evelyn)

So, there's really nowhere you can go if you don't have a good relationship with your superiors. And, that's still a huge issue that many of my colleagues faced in my Conference Because we saw that those who were not liked, or those who didn't have the greatest reputation, weren't being treated fairly We knew that people were being sent out to this area where nobody is because the administration didn't like them. Or, we knew that, this guy was being moved, because he needed to be taught a lesson. (Silas)

The Conference president asked to visit me and told me I was being reassigned. He said, "You need to understand this is not a termination this is a re-assignment. You will have options." As we talked, I pointed out that he was only referring to one option. The move would be to a church that was about an hour away. He told me, "You need to move immediately and no commuting." We had two children in the local church school and there were four months of school left. I talked with a long-time church administrator/ mentor, he said that was a violation of denominational policy. If a pastor was instructed by the conference to move and had children in school they were allowed to finish the school year prior to moving. I had no time to prepare my family or the church. My "reassignment" was immediate. And no one from the local church or conference had ever indicated they were unhappy with my ministry. (Randy)

[I felt] pressure from leadership at the Conference level to raise goals, to meet tithe demands, to do this stuff. And I internalized a lot of that pressure. It was almost like you were being squeezed because you're getting pressure, and you're supposed to pass it on down. (Finn)

The pressure came down. I was threatened by Conference president, you know, to get in line or get out . . . I sat with him, and he . . . said, "Think about your wife and kids." I lived in a parsonage at the time. He said, "It'd be a shame if you have [to change your] house or a job in the middle of winter." . . . Then afterwards, I said, "If I can't preach Christ, then I'd rather scrub toilets." And a few months later, I was, I was fixing toilets. So [laughs], in a nutshell . . . it's been a journey. (Theodore)

ACCOLADES FOR CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP

Although many participants expressed challenges with Conference leaders, some recalled positive interactions and admiration.

I felt like if anything, [my] Conference was very good in terms of mentoring, trying to equip their pastors. Our Conference leadership, I felt like was very progressive in the way that they would challenge us to grow and, and try new things and just support us as we face challenges in our local churches. I mean, I don't feel like I could ask for any more from a church Conference standpoint. (Atticus)

I remember that my ministerial director showed me a lot of support. He lives over an hour away. He drove here to meet with me and with [my wife]. He responded to almost all of my calls. I had a very good ministerial director who showed his best support. My Conference president, whenever I needed to drive to the Conference office and meet with him and talk with him because of all the tension that was happening, also always had time for me, came down even here to my church and took me several times out to the restaurant just to have a good conversation. I understand that they're busy, they have so many other pastors and so many other things to look into. So specifically speaking from both of them, those are the two main guys who showed me support, and I have good relationships with them until this day. So, when I left the Conference, it was not like I'm off their list and they are off my list. We remain with good relationships. So, I know a lot of pastors might be very critical about the Conference and how the Conference treated them. I'm not this guy. I really felt that the Conference did quite a bit. (Leo)

The secretary and the president, pretty much, they said this: "Everybody has their own journey to try to find out what they're called and answer what they wanna do. And we want to be supportive of that. So, we would like to offer you a couple options. One, if you want, you can go to Andrews University. And we'll pay for the first year. If you want to do your MDiv, you could do your MDiv. And we'll pay for the first year. But if you want to study anything else, you could study anything else and we'll pay for the first year. We'll cover all expenses. We'll cover at your move and everything. No questions asked. Because we want to let you know that we're supportive of anything . . ." But also you're one of ours, and we wanted to take care of you, pretty much. That's one option." Which was very generous. "Option two would be if you don't wanna go to Andrews and knowing that the last month is gonna be August in working, we can go ahead and continue to keep you on salary and benefits for the next three, four months until you find another job so that your family's being looked out for." So, that was super generous, and I was like, "What in the world!" My wife cried. We were just like, you know, part of me was like, "Maybe I should just stay." (Jude)

EXPERIENCING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE ADVENTIST CHURCH STRUCTURE

For some participants, it was not individual administrators with whom they differed, but rather the structure and organizational processes of the Adventist Church. That is, they experienced ongoing dissatisfaction with how the Church operates or functions. The quotes from participants below illustrate the ways in which participants felt at odds with the institutional structure.

What made it difficult was the structure in the conference that I was in, which I think is pretty Adventist, pretty typical. The pastor is like a consultant. If I were to describe the way a pastor is treated, they're treated like a consultant on an assignment to a group of people for a short period of time. (Evelyn)

The way the structure is set up, there's very little accountability. So, you have a lot of human beings floating around the planet that are paid a very lucrative salary, many of whom their spouses are working for the denomination that may or may not be qualified for that position. But because of their relations they have this great job and salary. And then they get to travel all around the planet all on tithe dollars. I would love to know how many tithe dollars have been spent, how much of God's money, quote unquote, has been spent to debate, or research, or write books on, or produce videos, conferences, on whether or not a human being with different genitalia can be a minister or not. It's demonic in my opinion. And yet it's fully justified within the denomination to operate this way. (Ezra)

And talking to my associates, it seems like the tendency in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination is to progress from pastor, you gotta move up. And then you get to move up or you have to [get out]. So, there's this kind of like lateral ladder that they have so that people can continue to grow in experience and then responsibility, etc., etc.

And I started thinking and realizing I don't want that. I know I can't stay as a youth pastor forever. But there's certain things that I don't like how things are done. (Jude)

FEELING CONSTRAINED BY TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO MINISTRY

Many participants shared their interest in innovation and creativity in ministry. When their desires to initiate new approaches to established ways of operating were thwarted, particularly by Conference leaders, participants felt frustrated and ineffective. The following quotes from participants exemplify the ways in which they felt constrained in doing their work.

I met a young lady at one of my churches that I was pastoring who was having her 7th child. So I was wondering what was happening, and the leadership wanted me to disfellowship her for the 6th time, and I was saying, "No, we need to find out what was going on." I visited with her, and she shared with me some challenges, and the big thing was that she was sexually abused by her father, who was now a prominent man in the church. So, I decided this young lady needs help, but I did not have the skills set to help her, and so I decided to pursue a masters in psychology. Out of my nativity, I decided I'm going apply to the university and get into a program. Shortly thereafter, I was called in by the Conference and administration and they were telling me that you are not supposed to do that. I am supposed to get permission to study so . . . [Laughter] I really wanted to help people but I found that a lot of times when I tried to help, I felt like I was boxed in. (Milo)

I feel that in the Adventist Church, because there's so much conformity, that people that are brilliant in the sense of they are creative, they're outside the box. There's no place for them. And so, they have to leave. (Evelyn)

And that was the point where I said, "You know what? I'm gonna organize my life around equipping and sending, as opposed to keeping people and getting them to come to church programs." It doesn't mean church programs aren't important, but the primary organizing principle of my ministry I felt needed to be equipping and sending. And the organization just wasn't built for that. It was built for getting people to come here be a part of programs. (Felix)

Somebody is going through a divorce Why would I be talking to people about distinctive of Adventist theology? I need to be talking about the teaching is of Jesus, which I absolutely, adored Jesus of the Gospels. I did not adore Adventist theology as portrayed in my undergraduate and graduate degrees. And to get out of my situation, and get into the real life of ministry, I realized that my constituents in my church had an expectation, unstated and stated, for me to be the front man of the Adventist distinctive theology was wildly discouraging. I had no interest in fulfilling that role within the church. I had a lot of interest in interfacing with my community, with finding ways to help people through the spiritual issues that they were facing. But I had no interest in preaching about, pardon my terminology, the [explicative, explicative] crazy teachings on what happened in 1844, and what was going to happen at the end of time. I mean, I had no interest in that. (Caleb)

SENSING A LACK OF CARING FROM ADMINISTRATION AND CHURCH MEMBERS

Perhaps one of the most painful challenges that former pastors recalled was the pervasive sense that their administrators and/or church members did not care about their welfare. Participants shared their ongoing hurt about the lack of outreach by church leaders before and after they left the ministry. The quotes from participants below illustrate the ways in which they felt a lack of caring.

The challenge that I had was lack of support and care for pastors. It's almost like I'm a mercenary—you go, bring the soldier, and bring the money in. As long as I do that, everything is fine, but other than that, when you reach out for some help, there's none. Even to the point when I sent in my resignation there was very little communication where that is concerned, and even after I left there was not even a letter to say, "Thanks for your service. Wish you well." Not even a conversation. So, it tells me that I made the right decision. (Milo)

Toward the end of my ministry at the [unnamed] Church, . . . the senior pastor that was leaving was absolutely clueless, clueless about women in ministry. In fact, I would describe him as abusive in his behavior. Verbally, attitudinally, . . . even though he was a very popular speaker This man preached with passion and tears in his eyes about the equality of women and the need for ordaining women

and treated me like trash. And I mean it was just time, after time, after time.
(Patricia)

Does anybody call me? I've lost my marriage. I lost my career. Does anybody call? No. Why? Because I think at the end of the day, there's a culture within Adventism that breeds inauthenticity I would be saying, "Hey, I'm gonna come and meet with you. I want to sit with you. I want to talk with you. I live 30 minutes down the street from you. Let me come meet with you and your family and make sure you guys are going all right." None of that. (Ezra)

HAVING SPIRITUAL DOUBTS AND DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES

Some participants left pastoral ministry after a time period of having spiritual doubts and/or doctrinal differences with traditional Adventist theology. Eventually, the disconnect became more and more challenging to navigate. The quotes from participants below offer insights into the types of doubts and differences they experienced.

I feel like I've grown out of it [Adventism]. I've grown, and the church still stayed small. And so, we thought about women's ordination for 30 years. Like, for me, I'm not even gonna have those conversations anymore. It's just, it's stupid. It's really dumb to me. I'm so past that, it's irrelevant. I won't even engage with people, because it's just so irrelevant. It's almost like telling me the world is flat. I'm not gonna even have stupid conversations with people about that. So, in some ways I felt like I just outgrown it. Since 1995, I've been on record for being LGBTQ inclusive. I was a chaplain at one of our Adventist universities. I was the very first chaplain to start a gay support group for kids. (Ralph)

But they [Conference administration] heard a sermon I preached that they didn't agree with during camp meeting. So, they wanted to talk to me And so, we had a conversation. And in our private conversation, he wanted to talk to me about my theology. And I was very willing to do that, but I was caught a little off guard. Because the things I said in my sermon were things that are being taught at Andrews. And I was just like, "Okay, well. Fine. I'll sit in front of the committee, and defend myself." And I had to sit in front of the committee for some of my theological views, and that was a little frustrating. Because you would think, in such

a large organization like ours that you would be able to have views, theological views that aren't necessarily on par with everybody else's. I'm in a Union right now that is for women's ordination, while the majority of the world church is against it. So, on one hand, we'll say, "We can have a theological view that doesn't bode well with the world church." But on the other hand, you, as a pastor, can't have a theological view that doesn't bode well with the Conference. (Silas)

The scandalous message of grace is that, it's Jesus plus nothing and that equals everything. And . . . there are so many strains of other things that you can believe in. You got the gospel of health, the gospel of Ellen White, gospel of unique theology. And so, you can really pick and choose which strain you want to be a part of. And that was a problem for me, . . . because when people add extra things to walk with Christ, it really confuses people. So, I feel like I was having to help people get unconfused all the time. And that was the challenge for me. (Felix)

I left because of the Gospel. I left pursuing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I left because I refused to preach anything else from the pulpit; other than the cross and salvation. I left because, I think that the commission is to go, it doesn't mean to proselytize into a particular doctrinal system. (Theodore)

LACK OF PRACTICAL TRAINING

Looking back on their early experiences in pastoral ministry, participants recalled being underprepared for the practical aspects of ministry such as engaging in church administration, providing emotional or social care for church members, or even conducting funerals. The quotes from participants below offer insights into the lack of preparation they felt for pastoral work.

When I first came in, there really were no expectations as an intern under a senior pastor. I didn't know what to do, and although my senior pastor was great and we have a great relationship to this day, there really wasn't a plan for how to train new pastors. Or what they should expect, or what they should be doing, or how they should be doing it. So, learning on the job was frustrating . . . I don't believe that I was prepared to pastor. I learned to pastoring on the job. And, that's not to say that a lot of other professions don't learn quite a bit on the job. But when you don't,

when you're not prepared to do much of anything other than maybe do a Bible study, or you know, talk theology. (Silas)

We studied a lot of theory and theology, and all this stuff. You don't use that stuff in real pastoral work. I can't think of one practical time where I had to explain the importance of "vav" to a church member that couldn't pay their rent or had a family member deported. Didn't understand why God had forsaken him. [We need] more practical coaching, teaching. (Theodore)

I came into ministry from a perspective of a great deal of ignorance in terms of the structure of ministry, the day-to-day operations of ministry We spend a great deal of time in ministerial education . . . preparing pastors to speak about the distinctives of Adventist theology . . . [which is] largely irrelevant . . . to the challenges and day-to-day operations of church administration. Church administration is an entirely different beast It's a huge part of what a young minister is going to be doing on a day-to-day basis. How to operate a board meeting? How to lead a church through a nominating process in leadership choice? How to develop local leadership? My first ministry experience was in a four-church district in rural southwestern [state]. So that was the baptism by fire. I didn't have any undergraduate experience telling me what to do to perform a funeral. Yet, I spend the first year of ministry doing upwards of 10 funerals. I was an expert by that time I was in my first year. But nobody, nobody prepares you for that . . . I remember one of my parishioners, she was a beautiful lady in her late 60s. Just retired. Her husband had just retired. And she goes in for a relatively minor elective surgery, and comes out in casket. And I was so wet behind the ears. I had no idea what I was doing. I mean these kinds of things that young ministers are going to deal with, and to be placed in that kind of situation was baptism by fire. That, I felt, was genuinely upsetting from the perspective of a young minister. I was sufficiently ignorant to not know what I didn't know. But I knew enough to know that you don't put a young person into that kind of position and just say, "Swim." (Caleb)

Maybe schools can do a better job and training pastors. Honestly, I think pastors need training in psychology counseling before you graduate. And also leadership. I think those two are key because some pastors don't know how to lead,

unfortunately. And they just take all the responsibility, and then they get burned out. And then they quit, you know. (Jude)

I would ask the church to consider encouraging and providing pastors with the emotional and psychological support [education]. I believe pastors have good training theologically. We have some good speakers. But psychologically, they're not prepared for the work that is ahead of them. And because it's mainly dealing with people and people are different, you need to be able to pace yourself to know when to step away, to know when you lean forward and you give yourself to it. I believe, including in the seminary training more clinical perspective of working with people. What I received in the chaplaincy training would be a game changer for pastor. Because I believe with all the counseling the pastors do as well, and grief counseling, and premarital counseling, and marital counseling, our theological training is not sufficient. It should be more than just read the Bible verse and prayer. I believe that will be beneficial for many pastors. (Leo)

RESEARCH QUESTION #2

WHAT STRATEGIES DID FORMER PASTORS USE TO PROLONG OR TRUNCATE THEIR CAREERS IN PASTORAL MINISTRY?

Researchers asked about the forces at work to that kept participants in pastoral ministry and those that provided permission to leave or presented an urgency to leave. The challenges participants faced, as cited above, offered the context that invited participants to begin thinking about leaving pastoral ministry. In this section we explore the key aspects of what tipped the scales for participants in their decision-making processes.

FORCES TO STAY IN PASTORAL MINISTRY LONGER THAN DESIRED

The three primary barriers to leaving pastoral ministry were fears about (1) being able to generate income to support their families, (2) lack of other options, and (3) having the mindset that once they accept a call to pastoral ministry, it is for life. The quotes from participants below illustrate these three often cited reasons for staying in pastoral ministry beyond the time they thought they would leave.

FEARS ABOUT GENERATING INCOME

I didn't know how I was gonna make money when I left. (Silas)

The income piece was the big thing. I figured, you know, I better stay because if I leave, I may not have an income. (Milo)

LACK OF OCCUPATIONAL OPTIONS

A lot of guys, you know, they're grappling with various things. And many of them feel like, they don't have any other options. So, they continue to stay in the SDA pastoral employment they've got. And it really becomes detrimental to their faith. (Felix)

What do you do? When you are fifty-five years old, and you've got years ahead of you still, and you're tired and weary. But you love what you do. You just . . . don't like the system that continually is oppressive and abusive. Where do you go, what do you do? (Randy)

MINDSET THAT THE CALL OF PASTORAL MINISTRY IS FOR LIFE

Just the culture mindset that says, "Once you're ordained, it means you're a pastor and you can't move around and do different things for God." That was the mindset when I was a pastor in the body of the Adventist tribe. That was like the unspoken rule So, that really inhibited me. (Evelyn)

I've heard that when God calls you to be a pastor, that's your calling. And that's what you gotta do. And I felt that if I want to say, "No, I don't want to do this," I would be a Jonah, and I'm running away from God. (Jude)

FORCES TO LEAVE PASTORAL MINISTRY

The three primary forces at work leading participants to leave pastoral ministry included: (1) understanding the difference between pastoring and ministry, (2) sensing God's leading, and (3) noticing negative family impacts stemming from pastoral life.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PASTORING AND MINISTRY

Once participants began thinking about leaving pastoral ministry, something that helped them make the decision to leave was a new understanding of the meaning of ministry in contrast to pastoral ministry. These individuals often had a heart to serve others and lead them to Christ. In some cases, like the examples above, they felt that being a pastor was "ministry." Over time, they discovered that ministry included many other approaches to being God's representative.

The Lord gave me the gift of leadership. And now that I've got another assignment. I'm gonna use that gift in another area of ministry. But I didn't leave the ministry. I left the pastorate. (Silas)

When I talked about that [leaving] with a few people, they would say, "What happened to the call?" So, I had to do some introspection and took a look at that, and then I realized I wasn't leaving ministry; I was leaving pastoral work. (Milo)

And now I work, uh . . . still I'm in ministry by the way, even though I left the ministry, I did not leave the ministry. (Leo)

Let me just clarify, I have not left ministry. I've shifted the focus. Let me put it this way, for the sake of our discussion. I am no longer hired or employed by the church. I'm very much still involved in ministry but with leaders specifically, whether outside the church and inside the church. (Asher)

And to be clear, we didn't leave ministry. We just left parish ministry within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. You know, so, we're still ministering today just to different platforms. (Theodore)

SENSING GOD'S LEADING

Beyond understanding many different paths to ministry, some participants made the decision to leave pastoral work because they sensed God's leading them in another direction. Participants prayed for guidance, for doors to be opened or closed as God directed. From there, they made the decision to leave pastoral ministry for another type of ministry. The quotes below illustrate these processes.

But our philosophy about making moves in our lives is always, if we don't feel like the Lord is leading us there, we're not going to make a move. So, it was pretty much prayer, my wife agreeing that she thought that the Lord was leading me in another direction. (Silas)

I'm a clinical chaplain at the hospice This November will be a full year since I started my chaplaincy, officially, at the hospice. I know God has called me, I have no doubt about it, no doubt whatsoever. And I surrendered to His call. (Leo)

[The decision to leave] was a call by God. I had been training leaders for years as a pastor and then as a Conference president. And while a pastor, I was travelling the world for the GC training some of the senior leaders around the world as my opportunities arose to do that. So I knew for a number of years that eventually I wanted to train leaders full time. And the season came to do that. God spoke to me a couple of years before I left, to say that He was releasing me to go do it. (Asher)

NOTICING NEGATIVE FAMILY IMPACTS FROM PASTORAL LIFE

Participants shared that the toll pastoral life takes on the family at times feels overwhelming and crushing. When these participants judged the cost of continuing in ministry on the family as too high, this served as impetus to leave pastoral work. The participant quotes below offer examples of negative family impacts.

Primary factor [to leave]: family. I wanted my family to be secure emotionally, spiritually, and financially, my wife and my two children . . . I wanted have a better life for them The stress it placed on my family was one that was beyond comprehension, I got moved quite a bit and when I got moved of course the family

moves. My children no longer had their friends. So, I watched them cry a lot, that they didn't have any friends. They were isolated at church almost like they were traumatized. They wanted to meet new people but then when they entered the church it took a long time for them to integrate and build friendship . . . and so it was tough for them. (Milo)

What I remember at some point is, this is a lot for us, as a family. We took a "staycation" one year. We didn't go anywhere for Sabbath services. We went to a park and we were having a great time. One of my kids said, "This feels so great. This doesn't even feel like a Sabbath. It feels like a Sunday." And that's when it sort of hit me. I'm doing something wrong here. Because if Sabbath is just go, go, go. Set up, let's go, back home. Just turn around, let's go, set up and break down. And by the time we got home at Saturday night, we were exhausted . . . And I realized in that moment that something was off here of what we are really doing. I never wanted my work at any point to make my kids hate God, church, Sabbath, those kinds of things. (Finn)

By this time, [my son] was finishing academy, [my daughter] was in finishing junior high. And my kids said to me; they were by now watching too, they said, "Mom, you are going to kill yourself, you are working too hard." Yet I felt pressure to work harder in order to measure up to the male pastors in the conference. (Patricia)

The hardest part for me was my family. Pastoral ministry requires a lot of time and a lot of sacrifices For me, family is very important. I consider myself a family person When I went into the ministry, I gave God an explanation and myself a promise that I would lay down on the altar of ministry many things, but not my family. A lot of things I could sacrifice and agree with and swallow, even though it would be hard, but not my family. My wife did not want me to be a pastor, not because she felt that I'm not doing it right or well, but because she felt a lot of pressure and expectations as a wife of a pastor and she felt not measuring up to what is expected for her, a lot of guilt, a lot of judgment. It was very hard for her. So, because family is more important to me, I decided that I can do ministry and not necessarily be a pastor. (Leo)

RESEARCH QUESTION #3

WHAT INTERVENTIONS MIGHT HAVE BEEN HELPFUL/SUCCESSFUL IN KEEPING THEM IN THE PASTORATE?

Study participants offered many ways that they believe would be helpful for Church administrators and leaders to take to bolster longevity in the pastorate. The key suggestions included: (1) supporting and advocating for pastors proactively, (2) focusing resources on local churches, (3) supporting the pastoral family, and (4) providing comprehensive administrative, church member, and lay leader training.

SUPPORTING AND ADVOCATING FOR PASTORS PROACTIVELY

Participants were clear about their desires to have had Church administrators and leaders provide advocacy and support for them during their time in pastoral ministry. There was a widespread sense among participants that they were on their own to solve any problems in their ministry. Further, participants often felt that church members' complaints were given more credence than the pastor's perceptions in a conflict situation. The key issue for these former pastors centered on a noticeable lack of proactive relationship building from Conference leadership. This lack of relationship surfaced when pastors reached out in pain or shared their needs which were ignored or given false promises for help.

Really have some good lines of communication open with your young pastors. I feel like you have a short window to be able to convince them that . . . just some early positive sense of fulfillment and that you're making a difference and that you're in the right context and that good things will come out of this in a positive way. Making sure there's a good fit, or trying to make every effort that there's a good fit. (Silas)

What did, what did the administrative do for me? They gave me a salary. And they gave me a church facility with a key. So, they empowered me to go and do this thing. But then from there, it's just you, you know. They will give you your benefits. And if you get sick, you've got good health coverage. But I think coming alongside and really [offering help] in a way that's very genuine. (Ezra)

By investing in the ministers and the pastors, you are going to find that the morale is going to go high, and you are going to get more out of the people. Having served in the military, that's the standard. Invest in the troops, and they are going to get the job done—they'll even go to death to carry out the mandate. So, that's what I would suggest. (Milo)

And when Conferences hire ministerial directors, to pick someone who would be able to provide that pastoral care to pastors and be their friends. Someone they would not be afraid of as an administrator who, you know, remind them that they need to have so many programs, so many baptisms and everything, that someone who would care for them without judgment, which I believe is mainly a character if you, uh . . . become ministerial director with the right pastoral attitude. (Leo)

FOCUSING RESOURCES ON LOCAL CHURCHES

Study participants demonstrated a heart for local church ministry. They recalled giving their full attention and energies to their calling. Participants wanted to build up the body of Christ within their churches, but they felt that the resources needed to do that were not available to them.

I felt like God gave me an incredible vision for that church. I would take a couple of my key head elders and we would go [to the Conference] with an innovative plan. The Conference would look at it, listen to it, affirm it, see the validity to it, and, and make a promise, and do nothing with it. (Ezra)

Everything that is done at the Conference and NAD level needs to support the local church . . . and return the authority to the local leader. The local leader should be asking the Conference for support. And then the Conference responds. Not the Conference someone sits in office, and dreams of some program that they love, and then spreads it out to all the churches. Like, they're little computers that need a software download. (Evelyn)

SUPPORTING THE PASTORAL FAMILY

Participants were clear about the need for more thoughtful support of pastoral families. Some examples include more consideration when asking families to move to a new district, building relationships with pastor spouses, and recognizing family's sacrifices for the ministry.

Interviewer: What types of things could Church administrators have done to have a different outcome for you?

If they could show a little bit more interest in my family, especially my wife, because once you move a pastor, transfer a pastor to another district, he's not just the only one who is being impacted. The family, the entire family unit, the finances get impacted, and the relationship is shaken up, and even to show some gratitude to the spouse, to say, "This must be a tough one." But nothing, nothing, no support. (Milo)

But I believe they [administrators] need to pastor the rest of the pastors and their families, not just pastors—wives, kids—because quite often they could be overlooked. That Jesus-like care, pastoral touch would be spread throughout our whole denomination. It's not like a boss approach, that, "I'm in the Division or I'm in the Union, I'm the Conference office." But more like a servant approach, which I believe will open up more pastors with vulnerability and to being able to grow with the right motivation. (Leo)

PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE ADMINISTRATIVE, CHURCH MEMBER, AND LAY LEADER TRAINING

Participants shared that their church members lacked a clear understanding about the roles and responsibilities of pastors. This confusion, lack of information, or misinformation leads to church members being demanding, complaining, or violating boundaries. All of these are energy draining for pastors, and they become depleted and discouraged about getting on with the work they were called to do.

There's a disconnect between the ministry and administration, so morale is very low. And you don't get a sense that they have your interest at heart. I think building

relationships and . . . we have meetings on a regular basis so administration can come around, interact, other than when it's time to kind of download information, cause most times is when they're downloading information or it's gonna be a one-on-one—something happened at the church. You get a call. So, once you get a call, you know, what did I do? You're in trouble And I think that there's a lack of that, there's a lack of that relationship. (Milo)

I think there are Conferences that are being intentional in training the church members. I think that would help pastors from getting burned out when it comes to that. Educate church members in taking care of the pastors. (Jude)

When I came to my church, I saw that some systems were not in place there to run the church. And I needed to put certain systems in place and schedules and rotations that would minimize the burnout among church members because they're volunteers, they are not paid for it. And only a few are really pulling the whole wagon. And it's not fair to all members. And also the pastors not being as much solo, but able to explore a team approach to ministry. (Leo)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report sounds an alarm about brokenness and, simultaneously, celebrates resilience. We find brokenness and resilience not only in our participants and their families, but also on every level of SDA Church organizations from the General Conference to the local church. Although many participants shared their painful leaving experiences, they also recounted the ways in God led them to new ministries and blessed their lives.

Neglecting to examine and repair the breaches in the systems surrounding the pastorate is costly, not only in turnover costs, but costs to the denomination through the loss of gifted leaders, marital discord ending in divorce, and children of pastors who lose respect for the Church organizations that harmed or neglected their parents' cries for help. Echoing the findings from the participants, the research team recommends the following:

1. Develop a system of organizational leadership that proactively supports and advocates for pastor health and wellbeing. Wholeness and health are part and parcel to our unique Seventh-day Adventist theology and yet our pastors are not engaging in the most basic principles of self-care, emotional care, and spiritual care. It is important to emphasize that "pastor health and wellbeing" includes that of the pastor's family.
2. Discover and define best practices for Conference administrators and provide comprehensive training in that leadership model. Pilot test and evaluate the model so that the benefits and unintended consequences are clear. Once a model is ready for comprehensive implementation, provide a rewards-driven model for compliance.
3. Advocate for a decided shift in pastor education on the undergraduate, graduate, and seminary levels. Traditionally, these independent and often change-resistant systems can be very difficult to influence; however, these findings call out for a change in how Adventist institutions approach pastor education. We must move from a "theology only" model to more practical education in the administrative and leadership activities of the pastorate.

4. Create training for church members on lay church leadership and how to appropriately interact with their pastors and Conference officials. Church members may be largely unaware of the difficulties and challenges their pastors face, let alone their own contribution to pastor stress.