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What Makes a Pastor Effective?

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WHAT MAKES A PASTOR EFFECTIVE?

At its 1994 year-end meeting, the North American Division (NAD) voted to study a cross-section of 100 pastors of Anglo churches in the division.



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The aim of the study was “to look for any common denominators in education, experience, conference leadership, evangelistic programs, methods and personality profile,” to name some of the factors considered. “Each of these pastors should have baptized at least a total of 50 during the past three-year period.”

The NAD Office of Information and Research commissioned the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University to conduct this study.

Three years later the study was launched. Peter Swanson, teacher of counseling and pastoral care at the Andrews University Theological Seminary, joined with the Institute of Church Ministry to make this project his Ph.D. dissertation (successfully defended in 1999).

Early on, two decisions were made: (1) Effectiveness should be more broadly measured than by simply the number of baptisms a pastor reports; and (2) Pastors with lower performances must be included in order to determine contrasts. The names of pastoral subjects were obtained by asking local conference ministerial directors to identify high and low baptism pastors

as well as more and less overall effective pastors in their conferences.

A number of instruments were adopted or developed for this study: demographic inventories, time-on-job measures, and a personality measure. Swanson’s dissertation explores more fully these instruments. This paper is limited to describing correlations obtained from one instrument—The Adventist Pastor Inventory (API). Consisting of 98 questions, API elicited information about the pastors’ background, education, experiences, goals, and methods of ministry. It also considered the congregations of the pastors studied, especially the various ministries with which each was involved. In the end 232 pastors supplied usable API surveys.

Measures of pastoral effectiveness

How is pastoral success measured? Parishioners desire a minister who is deeply spiritual, a sensitive listener, and one who cares passionately for the congregation. However, such qualities are very difficult to quantify. In order to test which items might be associated with success in the ministry, it was necessary to select some measurable outcomes.

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Our study also referred back to the NAD action and counted baptisms. But the indicator of baptisms in itself does not ensure a growing church. For example, if a pastor baptizes twelve new converts in a given year, but the congregation loses three to death, four to apostasy, and seven to transfers out, the "growth" is actually minus two. So we decided to look at other assessments.

In the end, considering the limitations, from the information on the API, we created four measures of pastoral success that had statistical relevance.

1. *Percentage of membership growth from 1993 to 1995.* A healthy church is a growing church. This measure was constructed by subtracting the membership of the church or district (if more than one church) at the end of 1992 from the membership at the end of 1995 and dividing the result by the 1992 figure.

2. *Baptisms as a percentage of membership from 1993 to 1995.* We asked: "How many were baptized into your church or district during the three-year period 1993-1995?" Number of baptisms alone, however, is not a good measure since it is much easier to baptize twenty people in a church of 600 members than it is in a church of 25 members. So the total number of baptisms was divided by the 1992 membership to obtain a size-adjusted measure.

3. *Baptisms from a non-Adventist background as a percentage of membership from 1993 to 1995.* While every baptism is equally important, one measure of a congregation's success is how well it is reaching beyond its own borders to win converts from outside the church. So pastors were asked: "How many of your baptisms came from a non-Adventist background?" That number was divided by the 1992 membership figure.

4. *Average Sabbath worship attendance as a percentage of membership.* An important goal of a healthy church is to have as many members as possible participating in the worship services. Pastors were asked for their average Sabbath worship attendance. This figure was divided by the 1992 membership to adjust for size.

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These are certainly not the only measures of pastoral success, but they do say something about the health of congregations, outreach to nonmembers, and extent of member participation. Furthermore, they are all measurable and can be correlated with items describing pastoral demographics and experience and with congregational characteristics.

Membership growth

The percentage of membership growth over the three-year period was correlated with many items on the API, but most of the figures obtained were not significant. Only three API items predicted growth at better than what statisticians call the .05 level (odds that no relationship exists are fewer than 5 in 100). They were in descending order of strength:

- ◆ Congregation operates a divorce-recovery group.
- ◆ Congregation has an Adventist Youth Association.
- ◆ Congregation operates a church school.

What these items have in common is a congregation that seeks to meet various people needs such as those of children, youth, and divorced persons. The congregation with a variety of ministries that address felt needs will attract

members and be a growing congregation. Effective pastors are those who lead congregations in establishing and performing such ministries.

Three other items were of borderline significance (odds that no relationship exists are fewer than 10 in 100):

- ◆ Congregation operates a Pathfinder Club.
- ◆ Pastor has hosted a visiting evangelist within the last year.
- ◆ Pastor has conducted a comprehensive lay training program within the last year.

The first item carries out the theme of the first group—that of meeting real human needs. The second item deals with intentional outreach and the third with the power of harnessing the membership in the work of the church.

Baptisms as a percentage of church membership

The API had far more items that statistically predicted baptisms as a percentage of membership than items predicting percentage of membership growth. In fact, the first eleven items listed below correlated at the .01 level (odds that no relationship exists are fewer than 1 in 100). Nine items follow at the .05 level, and five were borderline items. They are arranged in descending

order of strength as predictors:

- ◆ Pastor himself/herself held public meetings within the last year.
- ◆ Church membership tends to be younger in age.
- ◆ Church located in new, growing community.
- ◆ Pastor hosted visiting evangelist within the last year.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of being a full-time evangelist.
- ◆ Pastor recently conducted comprehensive lay-training program.
- ◆ Pastor held felt-need seminar within the last year.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of pastoring "mega" church.
- ◆ Congregation has a women's ministry.
- ◆ Greater percentage of congregational members are involved in church activities.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of ministering on radio or television.
- ◆ Congregation is current in following up media leads.
- ◆ Pastor currently involves lay members in evangelism.
- ◆ Congregation has a divorce-recovery group.
- ◆ Pastor himself/herself has held evangelistic meetings.
- ◆ Pastor has worked as a literature evangelist.

- ◆ Pastor has held prophecy seminar within the last year.
- ◆ Church building is physically attractive.
- ◆ Church more likely to be urban than rural.
- ◆ Congregation has a Pathfinder Club.

Borderline

- ◆ Pastor has taken public evangelism class/field school.
- ◆ Pastor has taken personal evangelism class/lab.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of being a conference administrator.
- ◆ Atmosphere of main congregation is supportive.
- ◆ Pastor has only one congregation.

Emerging themes in the study

Several themes emerge from the above listing. Foremost is that of intentional evangelism. Pastors who have high baptismal ratios in comparison with the size of their congregational memberships foster various direct evangelism approaches. These include hosting visiting evangelists, personally holding public meetings, conducting felt-needs seminars, following up media leads, and conducting various types of prophecy seminars. They have soul-winning as a top priority.

Another theme is the involvement of lay members in the work of the church. The effective pastors conduct comprehensive training programs for their members and actually involve a greater percentage of them in the work of the church. A third theme is that these successful pastors are well-prepared for the work of evangelism. While at college or seminary they have taken classes, labs, or field schools in both public and personal evangelism. They are more likely to have had experience as literature evangelists than are low-baptism pastors. They also tend to pastor only one congregation.

Fourth, pastors with a high ratio of baptisms also tend to be people with long-term goals such as being pastor of a "mega" church, going into full-time evangelism, having a radio/television ministry, or becoming a conference president. We might say they are ambitious in the best sense of the word.

Such pastors also pastor congregations that have a variety of programs to meet human needs, such as a Pathfinder Club, a women's organization, and a divorce-recovery group. Finally, their congregations meet in attractive buildings and have a supportive climate. They tend to be more urban or suburban than rural and to be located in new and growing communities.

Baptisms from non-Adventist background as a percentage of church membership

The predictors for this success measurement are similar to the ones above although not quite as extensive:

- ◆ Pastor himself/herself held public meetings within the last year.
- ◆ Greater percentage of members involved in church activities.
- ◆ Church located in new, growing community.
- ◆ Pastor hosted visiting evangelist within the last year.
- ◆ Church membership tends to be younger in age.
- ◆ Pastor recently conducted comprehensive lay-training program.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of being a full-time evangelist.
- ◆ Congregation is current in follow-

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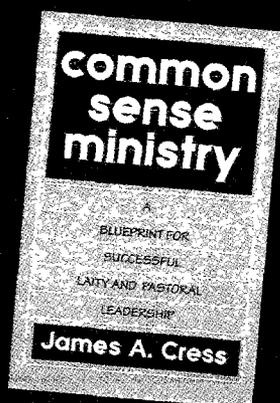
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ing up media leads.

- ◆ Pastor currently involves lay members in evangelism.
- ◆ Church more likely to be urban than rural.
- ◆ Pastor held felt-need seminar within the last year.
- ◆ Congregation has a women's ministry.
- ◆ Pastor himself/herself has held evangelistic meetings.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of going into teaching.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of ministering on radio or television.

Borderline

- ◆ Pastor has held prophecy seminar within the last year.
- ◆ Pastor has used small-group method recently.
- ◆ Congregation has a Pathfinder Club.
- ◆ Church building is physically attractive.
- ◆ Pastor has taken personal evangelism class/lab.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of earning an advanced degree.
- ◆ Congregation has a men's organization.
- ◆ Atmosphere of main congregation is supportive.

Nearly as many significant predictors were found for baptism from a non-Adventist background as for total baptisms as a percentage of membership, but the general trend is somewhat weaker with more predictors in the borderline group. Six items no longer appear: (1) Congregation has a divorce-recovery group; (2) Pastor has worked as a literature evangelist; (3) Pastor has only one congregation; (4) Pastor has goal of being a conference administrator; (5) Pastor has goal of pastoring a "mega" church; and (6) Pastor has taken public evangelism class/field school.

On the other hand, four new items appear in this list: (1) Pastor has goal of going into teaching; (2) Pastor has recently used small-group method; (3) Pastor has goal of earning an advanced degree; and (4) Congregation has a men's organization. In spite of these differ-

ences, all six themes for total baptisms as a percentage of church membership appear on this list also.

Sabbath worship attendance as a percentage of membership

One measure of congregational health, and, therefore, pastoral effectiveness, is the proportion of the membership who regularly attend the Sabbath worship services. Nine items significantly predicted this measure with an additional four items as borderline. The first three items are significant beyond the .01 level:

- ◆ Pastor has an associate pastor.
- ◆ Pastor has program on local radio or television.
- ◆ Congregation has a divorce-recovery group.
- ◆ Church located in new, growing community.
- ◆ Pastor is more recent in present pastorate.
- ◆ Congregation has a Pathfinder Club.
- ◆ Congregation has more children and youth Sabbath School departments.
- ◆ Pastor has only one congregation.
- ◆ Greater percentage of members involved in church activities.

Borderline

- ◆ Pastor himself/herself has held evangelistic meetings.
- ◆ Church building is physically attractive.
- ◆ Pastor has goal of working in chaplaincy.
- ◆ Congregation operates a church school.

This list for worship attendance is quite different from the two concerning baptisms. Five of the fourteen items are new, including the top two. When combined with the nine repeated items, the theme strongly emphasizes providing congregational services—an associate pastor and only one congregation on which to concentrate, local media, multiple children's departments, church school, Pathfinders, divorce-recovery groups, and an attractive church plant. The pastoral goal of chaplaincy may indicate a minister interested in providing

counseling. Even the fewer years in the present pastorate may suggest fresh sermons and lack of burnout.

Gone are most of the intentional evangelism items and the heavy involvement of laity in outreach. The effective pastor who builds attendance with a high percentage of the membership seems to be somewhat different from the one who baptizes a higher percentage of the membership whether or not those baptisms come from an Adventist background.

Conclusions

What defines an effective pastor according to this research? Again, of course we have not studied criteria like spirituality, being a good listener, vision, and love for the flock—much less being a powerful preacher. These are, no doubt, very important but are prohibitively difficult to measure. However, if we stay with the four measurable outcomes described above, an effective pastor can be summarized as follows:

1. Is intentional about winning souls and employs a wide variety of methods to do so.

2. Does not try to do it alone but mobilizes, trains, and oversees the involvement of a large percentage of the congregation in evangelistic activity.

3. Has had practical training in public and personal evangelism.

4. Is forward looking and not satisfied with present achievement; has goals for new avenues of service.

5. Leads the congregation in establishing a wide variety of ministries designed to meet people at the level of their felt needs.

6. Generates within the congregation a climate of caring, fellowship, and support.

7. Leads the congregation to make the physical plant and everything around it as attractive and appealing as possible.

Not all of the factors discussed are under the direct control of the pastor. However, pastors can maximize effectiveness by integrating into their ministry these seven measurable approaches. In so doing, they may also meet the less tangible needs and expectations of their parishioners. ■