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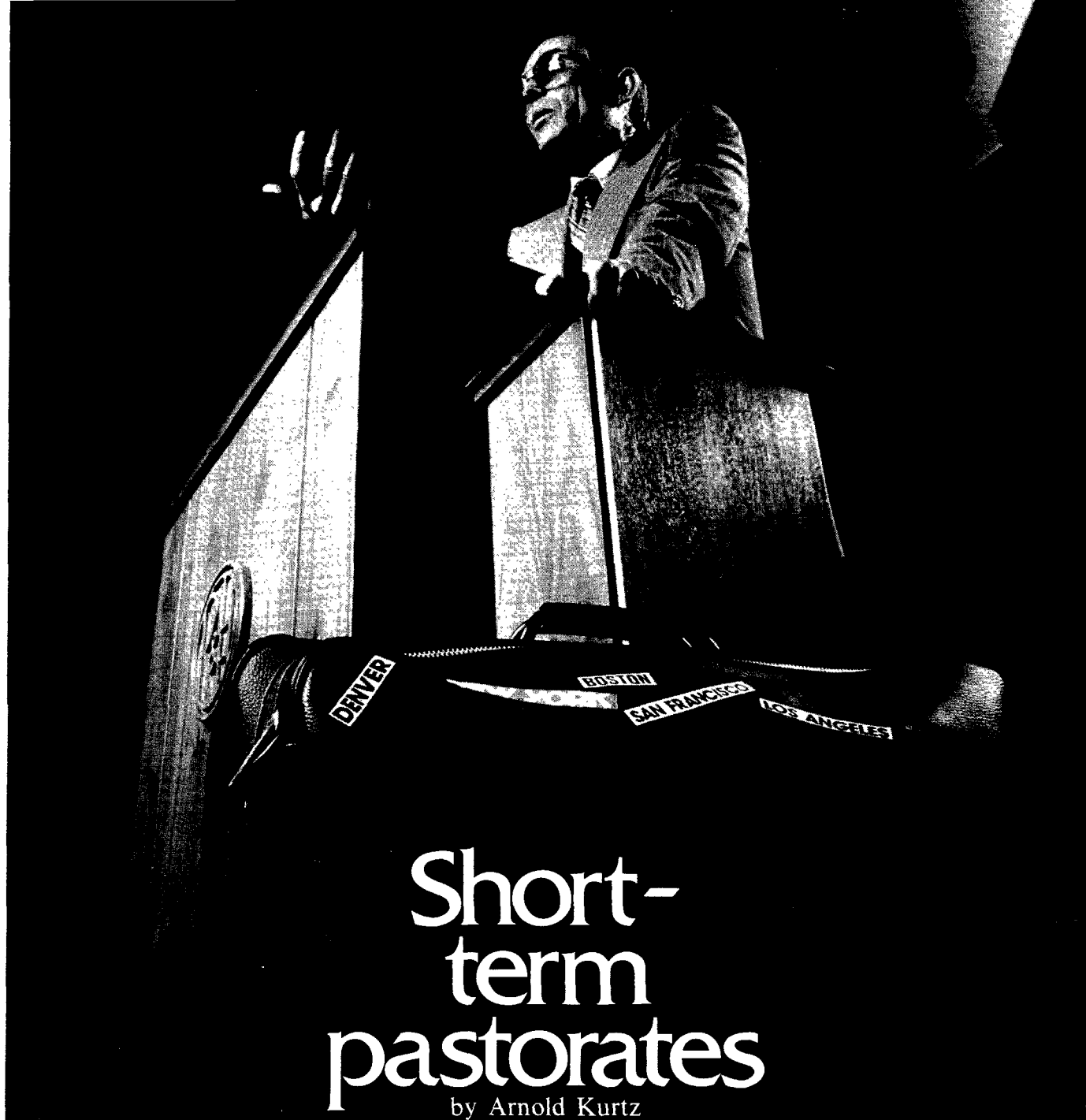
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Short-term pastorates

by Arnold Kurtz

SKIP BAKER

Generally speaking, ministers move too frequently. Recently the American Lutheran Church, a denomination of approximately 3 million members and 4,200 active pastors, had 1,200 address changes among its clergy and 950 actual position changes in one year!¹ More than 20 percent of its full-time professionals moved during that year. In some denominations ministers move, or are moved, even more frequently. Many pastors of my acquaintance move every two or three years. Research, much of it in connection with church growth, supports the conclusion that short-term pastorates have a negative effect on congregations.

In its report to the 1976 General As-

Are they stepping stones to success or roadblocks to church growth?

sembly of the United Presbyterian Church, the special committee of Church Membership Trends declared, "Growing congregations . . . are characterized by stronger pastoral leadership." "The church . . . must adequately recognize strong pastoral competence as a decisive factor for the vitality and out-

reach of a congregation."² Lyle Schaller notes that "dozens of surveys have demonstrated that rapidly growing congregations tend to be churches with long pastorates, and stable or declining congregations tend to have short pastorates."³

Several factors are involved in the negative impact of short pastorates on church growth:

First, there is persuasive evidence that the most productive years of a pastorate seldom *begin* before the fourth, fifth, or even sixth years of a minister's tenure in a given congregation. Of course, there are exceptions to this generalization, but these exceptions are probably quite rare. Start-up time in a new pastorate is now

described as a period of twelve to eighteen months;⁴ therefore, many ministers, in reality, move before a transition has been made from start-up to significant productivity. Ministers who move too soon, often concluding that their work is ended when it is really only beginning, are greatly deprived—as deprived as those much-married people who are unable or unwilling to work through the adjustments of the post-honeymoon period to the satisfaction and rewards of an ever-deepening relationship.

In addition, short-term pastorates contribute to passivity in congregations. Most congregations with a history of short-term pastorates greet the new minister with a passive stance—“Another minister, another program” or “He’ll need the first year to get acquainted, so let’s not rock the boat.” This passivity is particularly noticeable in churches that have served as proving grounds for beginning ministers. A young pastor said to me recently, “I used to wonder why my plans for my first church, which sounded so great when I discussed them with denominational officials, fell flat in the church. I began to understand when a dear old lady explained, ‘Son, you’ll soon be gone and we will have another minister; he will have his ideas. We can’t get too excited.’” Churches that have had a new minister at least every three years not only greet the new one with a passive stance but settle into further passivity about the third year, since everyone knows that the pastor will soon be moving on to “greater challenges.” Short pastorates also contribute to passivity in some members who may spend the first year of a new minister’s tenure grieving over his predecessor’s departure and deciding whether or not they want to risk the hurt that accompanies the loss of a close friend by building friendship ties with the new minister. The special kind of role-relationship inherent in the pastoral office is not sufficiently appreciated, and too readily flouted, in short-term pastorates.

Perhaps the most important reason that church growth is inhibited by the frequent changing of pastors is the increasing value being placed today upon relationships. Short-term pastorates might be justified if we were to take a purely functional view of the role of the minister. Laymen, however, are as much concerned today about *who* the minister is as they are about *what* he does. Their overall satisfaction with their experience in the church is closely entwined with

their relationship with and feelings about the pastor. Growing churches are enthusiastic about their faith, their church, and their minister. This enthusiasm is hard to sustain if the pastor changes every two or three years.

The matter of pastoral tenure is receiving special study today. One research group currently studying the subject has defined the long pastorate as one that lasts ten years or longer. This was an arbitrary choice influenced somewhat by Levinson’s research, which reveals transitional points in males at ten-year intervals. Levinson also discusses the difficulty of sustaining a dream for longer than six to eight years.⁵ Some see eight years as an optimal length for a ministry in one congregation, with five years being the minimum.

There are obvious benefits for clergy and congregation alike in long-term pastorates. Longer pastorates provide a stable ministry in a world of flux and change. Longer pastorates are needed to effect significant and lasting change in a congregation and to institutionalize that change.

Recently, a pastor made a classroom presentation explaining the processes and results of a Doctor of Ministry project carried out in his congregation over the past two years. His task was to aid this congregation in the designing and implementing of its own intentional, or goal-oriented, corporate ministry. The project called for broad-based member participation in identifying and articulating a congregational statement of purpose as well as specific goals or operational objectives for the achievement of this stated purpose. According to this pastor, a new congregational life style is emerging—new norms, expectations, and clergy-laity relationships. The congregation is assuming increased responsibility for its corporate life and destiny. If the changes now in the process of being institutionalized are perceived as desirable ones, it would be unfortunate indeed should the pastor, now in his fourth year, be moved before this chapter is written. The chapter is not completed until this congregation is able to negotiate a pastoral change without surrendering these specific gains.

It would be helpful for ministers to think of their tenure in a given place in terms of chapters instead of years. For example, in my last church the first chapter was completed after about fifteen months, when all the families had been visited, one cycle of events of a church year had been completed, and we

had moved with a new set of church officers into the next cycle. The second chapter involved a complete remodeling of the church sanctuary and the erection of a church recreation center—two items that were high on the congregation’s agenda when I arrived. The third chapter, potentially the most fruitful for growth and development, was never written because of my transfer to the Seminary.

Ministers, as well as congregations, benefit from longer tenures. In addition to bypassing the stress of transition for himself and his family, the pastor finds that longer pastorates impose continuing demands on him for study and professional growth that can be avoided in short-term ministry. Given the reality of human inertia, the temptation to repeat our start-up routine (and sermons) is all too strong and with unfortunate consequences.

Pastors and congregations need time to learn how to work through tensions and conflict situations. As frustrations mount and our coping resources become depleted, it is natural to focus our energies on relocation rather than on meeting what is happening in the here and now. It is true that periodic changes and new situations have value, but the concept being emphasized here is the need for a pastor to gain the continuing capacity to work through new understandings and new role expectations with any congregation. This is impossible for a minister whose career flits lightly over a succession of pastorates.

There is today a growing awareness of the debilitating effect of frequent pastoral moves. Some denominations in which pastoral changes are handled through denominational offices are now severely limiting these moves, particularly interconference moves. Where denominational offices compete for good pastors across conference boundaries with few restrictions, and where pastors mistakenly view these moves as steppingstones to success, congregations and pastors will continue to pay a high price—far beyond the moving bill! ■■

¹ Roy M. Oswald, *The Pastor as Newcomer* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1977), p. 1.

² Lyle Schaller, *Assimilating New Members* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴ Oswald, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵ Daniel Levinson, et al., *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

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