

HOW LONG IN ONE PLACE?

This topic has been in my mind for a long time. I wanted to write this article about ten years ago, but my wife, who is a wise woman, encouraged me to consider it more carefully – so I put it on the back-burner. Having let it simmer all this time, I am now putting pen to paper. This is the question I want to consider: *What is the ideal length of time a minister should serve in a congregation?* Now you know why I have been procrastinating! For this is a complex subject. You might say; “It is impossible to answer that question because there are too many variables.” I have to agree – it is impossible to say how long one minister should stay in a particular congregation – because there are many considerations. These include, the relationship between the pastor and the members, his preaching and pastoral gifts, whether the congregation is static or changing, the ability of the pastor to feed his flock, the willingness of the members to receive his ministry, his wife and children and their needs, situation and education, and so on.

Having acknowledged all this I want to propose that *longer ministries are better for both the minister and his congregation than shorter ones*. “Longer” and “shorter” are relative terms. By shorter I mean ministries of 3-6 years. By longer I mean ministries of 7-15 years – although there are a number of pastors who have served in one church for 25-30 years.

You may be asking yourself; “I wonder how long Mr Haverland has served in various churches?” Let me save you the trouble of looking that up in the RCNZ yearbook! I served in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bucklands Beach from September 1983 to December 1990 (first as a vicar and then as the pastor); then in the Reformed Church of Bishopdale from January 1991 to December 2003; then I was installed in the Pukekohe Reformed Church in February 2004.

Reasons to Move

Before I present some reasons in favour of longer-term ministries let me acknowledge that there may be valid reasons for a minister to move after a relatively short time.

Sometimes a pastor may have to move because the relationship between him and the congregation has broken down to the point that a fruitful ministry is no longer possible. Our Church Order recognises this possibility in Article 16B. There may be other situations where the relationship is not at a breakdown stage but where a call to another congregation would be helpful for both the pastor and the church, allowing both to start over again, with both parties learning from their sins and failings. In situations like this a move may be wise and prudent. Eugene Peterson comments, “The pastor who in such circumstances insists on staying out of a stubborn wilfulness that is falsely labelled ‘committed faithfulness’ cruelly inflicts needless wounds on the body of Christ.”¹

At other times a pastor may be called away from his congregation after a relatively short time by a very needy church; the calling church may be in great need because of a long vacancy, or by division and trouble in the church in its recent history. Or a minister may be called to a unique opportunity in teaching or on the mission field. Short stays for these reasons happen more frequently when there are not enough ministers, as was the case in the early history of our denomination and as is the case now. This year, in our Reformed Churches in Australia and New Zealand, calls have been extended to ministers who have only been in their churches for three

to four years. If there were more pastors available this would help ease this pressure to move after a relatively short ministry.

As we consider reasons to move we can acknowledge that sometimes a change can be helpful and stimulating for a pastor. It is possible for a minister to become too comfortable in a church; the people and routines of church life become very familiar. That brings security and stability, but it can also inhibit growth and development, for both the minister and the church. Each church I have served has challenged and extended me in many areas and so helped me grow and develop.

A change may also be helpful for congregation. Every minister has certain strengths and weaknesses. Another pastor coming into a church may be able to develop a new area of ministry, relate to members that the previous man could not relate to, stimulate the believers in the church to further areas of service, and urge a greater zeal in witnessing and evangelism. A change of pastor may also be useful if a congregation has become too dependent on their minister and are tempted to trust him more than the Lord.

Reasons to Stay – for the Church

Having recognised that there are a variety of reasons why a minister may accept a call after a short time in a church I want to propose a number of advantages to a longer-term ministry. In putting these forward I am assuming that there is a healthy working relationship between the minister, the session and the congregation. Here are some benefits to the church.

Longer ministries provide greater stability. Calls from another church can be unsettling for the congregation, destabilise some people, and disturb church life. Yes, the church is built “on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20), but the Lord uses pastors to build the church and to add stones and cement them in place. If a man is a skilled builder then there are advantages in him staying on that building site for some time and continuing the good work he has begun.

Frequent calls and moves from one church to another usually disrupt future planning and hinder the forward movement of a church. Many churches have experienced a situation where the pastor receives a call to another church and, as a result, much of the forward planning is put on hold until the call has been decided. Whether the minister stays or goes has a distinct bearing on what the session is expecting to do in the following year and the years after that. A continuous ministry allows them to do long-term planning.

A settled and longer ministry is often more effective evangelistically. There are, of course, many variables here because evangelism takes time, concentration and hard work. Usually, however, in his first few years in a church, a pastor is pre-occupied with getting to know his own congregation. After that he is ready to look out to the surrounding community. It is often after he has been there for five or six years that the church will see some evangelistic fruit on the ministry. This is partly because the members have learnt to trust him and are ready to bring unbelievers to church to hear the preaching of the Word, and partly because the pastor has time to assess and evaluate evangelistic opportunities in their situation and community. More time in one place also gives the pastor and his family opportunity to develop the long-term friendships and relationships with unbelievers that are the most fertile ground for planting the seed of the gospel and seeing it germinate and grow.

We live in times of change; this is a feature of our post-modern world. In times such as these many people in society are looking for stability and security. In disturbed and disturbing times each local congregation can have a steadying influence on its members and on the wider community. A church will do that more effectively if there is stability and continuity in the ministry.

Most pastors will tell you that it takes at least three years to get to know the people in a congregation and do effective pastoral work and preach directly to where they are. As time goes on they will learn to trust him and will open up to him with their hurts and sorrows and allow him to minister to them. This is not to say that his pastoral and preaching work in those early years was *ineffective*, rather that it was *less* effective. If he leaves after three years he has lost the opportunity to capitalise on the pastoral foundation he has laid. If, however, he stays a long time in the church, and continues a systematic and regular programme of visiting and counselling, he will get to know his flock well, be more and more useful to them, and see them grow in grace. Spurgeon wrote; "Do not expect to get in the first year of your pastorate, that result which is the reward for twenty years' continuous toil in one place ... it is equally foolish to expect the people to be all at once the same as they might be after they have been trained by a godly minister for a quarter of a century."²

All of these are benefits to the congregation of longer-term ministries.

Reasons to Stay – for the Pastor

When considering the benefits of longer ministries there will be mutual benefits for both the church and the pastor. Let's consider some benefits to the latter.

If a pastor knows he is going to leave after three or four years in a church he will be tempted to ignore problems and sins in the lives of the members, thinking to himself; "Well, I'll be gone in a couple of years anyway." If he is committed to a long-term ministry he will have a greater incentive to deal biblically and thoroughly with problems in the church and sins in people's lives.

When a preacher moves from one church to another he can go back to texts and sermons he has preached before and rework them in his new situation. To go back to previous sermons is not wrong, but to do that all the time will be detrimental to the fresh and lively preaching that builds up the church. If a preacher is going to remain in a church for an extended period he must be committed to regular habits of reading and study, both of the Scriptures and good books. It is only as we feed ourselves that we can feed others and continue to do so. It is only as we grow ourselves in knowledge of God's Word that we can urge others to grow.³

Stability in one place will generally be better for a minister's wife and children. This allows for long-term relationships and friendships, and the security and stability of familiar faces and surroundings. Moving too frequently has disrupted the families of many ministers.

Staying in one church (or even moving to a smaller church) can teach us important lessons in humility and service. Our reasons for staying, or moving, may be driven by motives for worldly success or personal ambition. The book of Proverbs warns us; "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord."⁴ We need to remember this word of wisdom when we look with longing at the large and "successful" churches and wish we were there. Let's remember that the Lord can use his servants well in whatever place he puts them in his providence. Eugene Peterson offers Gregory of Nyssa as an example of one such servant.

Several times when my place seemed inadequate for my vision of what I wanted to do for God, a story held me fast to my place, the story of Gregory of Nyssa, who lived in Cappadocia in the fourth century. His older brother Basil, a bishop, arranged for his brother to be appointed bishop of the small, obscure, and decidedly unimportant town of Nyssa. Gregory objected; he didn't want to be stuck in such an out-of-the-way place. His brother told him that he didn't want Gregory to obtain distinction from his church but rather to confer distinction upon it. Gregory went where he was placed. And he stayed there. The preaching and writing that he did in that backwater community continues its invigorating influence to this day.⁵

Two centuries later St Benedict observed that many of the monks in his area were restless and would often "leave one monastery and set out for another, supposing themselves to be responding to a greater challenge, attempting a more austere holiness."⁶ Benedict put a stop to this movement by adding a fourth vow to the three standard promises to poverty, chastity and obedience; "He introduced the vow of stability: stay where you are."⁷ There may be times when we who are pastors need to heed that same advice.

If a pastor moves from one church to another after a short time he may be able to hide sins of character from the members of his church. The longer he stays the more likely it is that these will be noticed and the more likely it is that he will have to deal with them. That will be good for his sanctification. If a pastor has a godly character and is making progress in holiness he will, by God's grace and Spirit, have a powerful effect on the members of his church. He will demonstrate in his own life the truth he preaches. His character and speech will be a clear illustration of the gospel message. Paul wrote to Timothy; "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."⁸ Robert Dabney observes that the minister of Christian character succeeds "because he has made his people love and trust him. His judicious social intercourse, his affectionate zeal in their welfare, and especially his sympathy with their sorrows, have won their hearty confidence."⁹ Bryan Chapell makes the same point in more modern language in these words;

No truth more loudly calls for pastoral holiness than the linkage of a preacher's character and the sermon's reception. I must recognize that if I were to return to churches I have pastored it is unlikely that people will remember many specifics I said. They may remember a particularly vivid illustration, the way a verse had a telling effect at some crisis moment in their lives, or the impression a particular message left on their minds. Yet, not one person will remember a dozen words of the thousands I have spoken through the years. The people will not remember what I said, they will remember *me* and whether my life gave credence to the message of Scripture.¹⁰

Conclusion

As I wrote at the beginning, I have been thinking about this subject for many years. I recognise that it is a complex issue and that there are many things to consider when evaluating a call; there is no one standard formula that will apply to every situation. Yet I reiterate my main point – that, generally speaking, longer ministries of a pastor in a church will be more beneficial to both the pastor and the church than those that are shorter. I write to encourage those of us who are pastors to weigh this

up when evaluating a call and to encourage sessions and congregations to consider this in extending calls.

Part of our problem at present is our critical shortage of pastors. That is another issue (and probably another article!). Churches need ministers. The Lord provides pastors and teachers “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”.¹¹ Let’s put this calling before suitable sons in our families and before men in our churches. Let the men of our churches examine their lives for the gifts for the ministry and their hearts for a sense of call. Let’s pray more earnestly that the Lord will provide pastors and preachers for our churches and that they may have blessed, fruitful and *long* ministries in the places they serve!

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¹ E. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 29

² C H Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, p. 132

³ This, by the way, is one of the great benefits of the Ministers and Wives Conferences and of the RTC Preaching Conferences.

⁴ Proverbs 16:3

⁵ E Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, p. 74

⁶ E. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 19

⁷ *ibid.* p. 19

⁸ 1 Timothy 4:15-16

⁹ R Dabney, *Evangelical Eloquence*, p. 262

¹⁰ B Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*. P. 29

¹¹ Ephesians 4:11-13