

Pastor's Corner – 12-8-2018 – Too Soon to Retire?

Last week in the Pastor's Corner I pointed out that our Adventist church will be facing a shortage of pastors in the coming years as Baby Boomers retire and there aren't enough young people preparing for ministry. One of my proposed solutions to this upcoming challenge was that churches might have to learn to be self-sufficient and continue doing the work of God even without a full-time pastor. I even went so far as to suggest that a church such as Bismarck might be able to succeed with such a model. Of course, if several churches were to agree that they could be self-led that would free up the Conference to hire pastors to start new churches in places where the Adventist message is unrepresented or underrepresented.

As a result of the Pastor's Corner several of you asked me if I was trying to hint at something. Maybe foreshadowing a soon departure on my part. I just wanted to take a moment to put that one to bed. Of course, God can always change things, but for now, we plan to stick around. Now, let's move on to the topic for the day.

I'd like to introduce you to a little known passage tucked into the dark recesses of the book of Numbers. I wouldn't be surprised if most of us haven't read this passage, or if we have, we didn't take note of it. Take a look at what it says, "The Lord said to Moses, "This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the tent of meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites" (Num 8:24-26).

The Levites were the tribe that had been specially set aside to be God's workers. They were selected from the other tribes when they took a firm stand with Moses against those who prodded Aaron to make the golden calf. When Moses asked for people to rally to his side, it was the Levites who answered. As a result, they were the chosen tribe among the chosen people. They were the spiritual leaders and they received God (rather than land) as their inheritance. They were the spiritual leaders of the community and in this passage God places some age restrictions on the Levites.

I want to point out that God doesn't give a reason why he put an age limit on the Levites. He offers no explanation. All he says is that they are allowed to work in the tent of meeting from age 25 to 50 (David later lowers this age limit to 20). I'm sure that the work of the Levites was physically demanding and better suited to strong young men. After all, hauling a bull onto the altar of burnt offering was no easy task. So perhaps God was just trying to save the backs of those Levites who were over 50. Whatever God's reason, it's not all that important. What is important is to consider how this would have impacted the spiritual leadership structure of the Israelites.

Essentially, God set up a mandatory retirement for primary spiritual leaders. He said that they could be active from 25-50 but then they had to step back. Those who retired weren't sent out to pasture, however. They took on a new role. Rather than leading they were to become supporters. They were to use their wisdom and experience to help the next generation of leaders do their work effectively.

In this paradigm there are three phases of spiritual leadership. There are those who are under 25 who are in training to become primary leaders. They are the leaders of the future. Next you have those who are actively serving as the primary spiritual leaders aged 25-50. They organize the work, they carry it out, they set the spiritual tone. They are the leaders of today. Finally, you have those who have moved out of primary leadership into a wisdom role. They no longer hold the reins, but they are there to offer support, council, and wisdom to the current group of leaders.

Obviously, churches don't follow this Biblical council. But what if we did? How would church be different if we understood that everyone who was approaching their late 40's was moving towards spiritual retirement? What if it was understood that all those church board positions needed to be held

by people between 25 and 50? What if we started to believe that elder does not mean elderly and that young people are capable of spiritual primary spiritual leadership? Sometimes I think we forget that our Adventist church was started by young adults.

In God's leadership structure there is a place for everyone. There is a balance between the wisdom of the more "seasoned" members and the energy and creativity of the young. If we were to adopt this paradigm two things would need to happen. First, we would have to be more intentional about mentoring younger leaders so that they were ready to step up and lead. Second, we would have to learn how to step down from leadership at a certain point. We would have to learn how to retire from primary leadership and move into a mentoring role.

I'm currently 42 years old. 43 is right around the corner. If I were a Levite living in the time of Moses that means that I'd already be looking at my sunset years as a spiritual leader. I've got just over seven years before it's time to hand the reigns over to the next generation. After that, it becomes my job to encourage those new leaders. To take them out to dinner, pray with them, offer suggestions, and support the things they come up with. They will be successful because I (and my fellow retired leaders) will use our influence, money, and experience to make sure they are successful.

More food for thought. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this topic. What do you think, are we ready to raise up a new generation of leaders?

Happy Sabbath
Pastor Tyler

P.S. I'm not calling our elders elderly. I just like the play on words so I stuck it in there. Though there are churches that are more concerned with electing elderlys rather than elders. As far as I'm concerned our elders are young spring chickens!

P.P.S. Yes, the last full paragraph *is* a foreshadowing. I actually believe following this example would be healthy for the church and will do my best to follow my own council.