

## Pastor's Corner – 12-1-2018 – Help Wanted

Did you know that the Adventist church in North America is facing a pastoral shortage just over the horizon? The Baby-boomer generation (which composes the bulk of Adventist pastors) is rapidly approaching retirement and there are not enough young people studying theology to take their place. This shortage will impact smaller churches first but eventually will spread to our larger churches unless a solution is found.

There are several options available to us to address this issue. One is to encourage more young people to study theology and enter pastoral ministry. If more young people would become pastors we would have young blood to fill the ranks. We could theoretically double our pool of potential pastors if we could get past the women's ordination thing. After all, more than half of our church membership is female. If more ministry opportunities were available to them we might see more young women training for pastoral ministry.

Another option is to recruit pastors from other world divisions. The seminary is bursting at the seams with students studying to become pastors, but the great majority are from divisions outside of North America and may not integrate well with some of our churches. These would essentially be "missionary" pastors here in America.

The third option is to prepare churches, first the smaller ones and then the larger ones, to continue the Adventist mission without a settled pastor.

Interestingly enough, this latter option was the standard practice of our denomination all the way until Ellen White died in 1915. For the most part, we didn't set pastors over local churches. Instead, they were tasked with the responsibility of raising up new congregations in areas where the Adventist message hadn't yet been established. Once a new congregation was born the pastor would help the church organize and choose leaders, then he would move on and start the process all over again. Rather than rely on the regular ministry of a pastor, churches were expected to care for themselves as well as make an impact in their community and spread the Adventist message. Our early pioneers, including Ellen White, were strongly opposed to the idea of settling pastors over the churches. They believed that doing so would be a significant mistake and would negatively impact our mission.

It was during this time when pastoral resources were allocated to church planting (rather than church caretaking) that our denomination experienced its greatest growth rate. And as feared by our pioneers, there was a sharp decrease in church growth once we started to move away from this model.

So why did we do it? Why did we start to settle pastors over the churches when so many pioneers opposed it? Why move to the settled pastor model when the previous model was having such great success?

Obviously, I wasn't there, but it seems to me that the same ailment that afflicted the Israelites worked its way into the minds of Adventists. Remember when God first brought the Israelites into the promised land and he established himself as king over them? He raised up judges from time to time to guide and deliver but other than that, the people were to take care of themselves. They didn't have a king to rule over them. No centralized power. Just priests and Levites who pointed the people back to God.

Well, the Israelites looked at all the other nations and saw how they were governed and how they all had kings to rule them. And the Israelites decided they needed a king as well. So they begged God to let them have a king. They begged the prophet Samuel to give them a king. "Let us have a king, so we can be like the other nations," they pleaded. And God gave them what they wanted.

In the same way our church in the early 1900's started to plead, "give us a pastor so that we might be like the other churches." In time we moved away from using pastors as church planters and installed them as caretakers for existing congregations. We wanted to be like the other churches and have pastors over our congregations, and in time that's exactly what we got.

Today we are faced with a pastoral shortage and maybe it's time we revisit the model that worked so well in our past. Maybe we should seriously consider allowing churches to care for themselves and use pastoral resources to start new congregations in unreached (or under-reached areas).

I think this approach would have several positive effects on our church. First, it would force local congregations to take responsibility for themselves and the mission in their territory. They wouldn't have a pastor to look to and expect that he (or she) would be doing the caretaking, evangelism, administration and whatever else. Those ministry responsibilities would go back into the hands of the church body where it belongs. A congregation working together to do these things will always be more effective than a single professional trying to do it all.

A second positive effect would be that pastoral resources could be freed up for starting new work. Every conference runs on a tight budget. The money given as tithe only allows for the hiring of so many full time pastors. If every church demands their own pastor there simply isn't any money left to hire church planters. When you have a finite resource (the number of pastors) you have to decide where to best use that resource. Is the priority maintaining existing churches or is it starting new work? Re-adopting our original model would make mission (rather than maintenance) the priority again.

A third positive effect would be the possibility of creating new kinds of Adventist churches. Let's be honest, the traditional idea of "church" has less appeal in America than it once did. If we are going to reach the majority of Americans who have no interest in "church" we're going to have to try new methods. We're going to have to have churches that don't really look like churches to traditional folks. By freeing up young pastors and young Christians to try new things we open the possibility of creating ministries that will reach the unreached.

As challenging as it is to plant a church, it is exponentially more difficult to try and transition a well established congregation from maintenance to mission. Jesus warned about trying to pour new wine into old wineskins but that's exactly what we try to do. We keep pushing to transition traditional, established churches into contemporary missionary churches and it blows up in our faces almost every time. If more pastors were tasked with church planting we could pour new wine into new wine skins. We could sidestep the whole "traditional vs. contemporary" debate by creating something new.

There are other benefits to adopting this model that we don't have time to discuss right now. I know the idea of going pastorless is a bit radical and a bit scary but it's something we should start talking about. It would be better if churches could intentionally move to this model by choice rather than have it thrust upon them because there are simply not enough pastors to go around.

So, what do ya'll think? Does the Bismarck Seventh-day Adventist church really need a pastor? Are we ready to go pastorless? Let me know what you think.

Have a Happy Sabbath  
Pastor Tyler