

Region, Role, and Size as Risk Factors in Clergy Attrition

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the duration of service of pastors in local Nazarene churches in the USA and Canada. Several questions jump to mind. Is there regional variation in pastoral tenure? Does congregation size influence pastoral tenure? Does the type of community in which the church is located influence pastoral tenure? Does the pastoral tenure depend on whether the minister serves as the senior pastor or associate pastor? An analysis will be done for each of these questions. The results will show that there are regional variations, size effects, and community type influences on pastoral tenure in the local church. Surprisingly, the interaction of these effects with the role of the pastors is more interesting than any single factor alone.

Background

A thorough study of risk factors for Nazarene Clergy attrition in the United States and Canada was carried out by the author in the spring of 2007. The work was undertaken in order to assist the department of Clergy Development of the Church of the Nazarene with the task of improving the fit between pastors (whether senior or associate) and congregations within the USA and Canada. The study was based on data from the Office of the General Secretary that was extracted by the staff of the Research Center of the Church of the Nazarene. With their generous technical and intellectual support and with the sabbatical funding given by Point Loma Nazarene University, three large databases of information were created. These databases are compilations of information on a cohort of ministers and are focused on pastoral service in the local church. With an appropriate formal agreement concerning confidentiality as approved by the director of the Research Center, these databases are freely available to researchers.

The cohort of 2143 ministers was selected from the General Secretary's records on 27-Mar-2007 (hereafter referred to as "the data extraction date") based on the following two criteria:

- The minister selected had been a pastor or associate pastor of a USA or Canadian local Nazarene Church at some point in their career.
- The minister held their first professional assignment (Evangelist, Song Leader, Pastor etc.) between 1-Jan-1980 and 31-Dec-1985 inclusive.

The *Pastor* database consists of information on work history, education records, and the data from the *District Minutes* for the first three local churches that the individual served in a pastor or associate pastor role. The *Assignment* database consists of the district minutes data for each and every local church that the individual served, census data for the surrounding community, and the duration of the assignment in years. In addition to recording how long the individual served the local church, the length of their professional service after the local church assignment (as D.S., Professor, Evangelist, etc.), time spent in school, and time unassigned were recorded following each assignment. As shown in Diagram 1 below, only the local church service blocks

are used to calculate pastoral tenure. The calculation is based on the dates served in the local church as a senior pastor or as an associate pastor. The time served outside of the local church is not examined in this study.

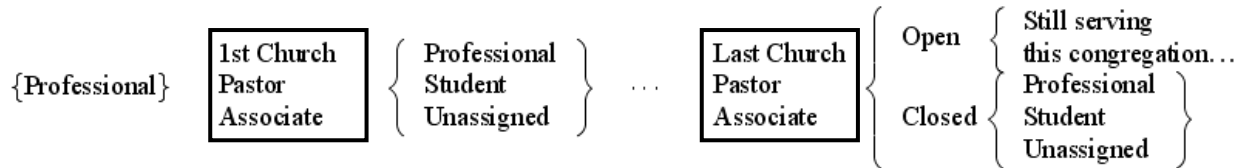


Diagram 1

We are now in a position to make a definition. A minister is said to be serving in an “open last assignment” if their role is that of pastor or associate pastor in a local Nazarene Church and, as of the data extraction date, the assignment which they held was open ended. An example of a “closed last assignment” would be serving in the role of District Superintendent following a local church assignment.

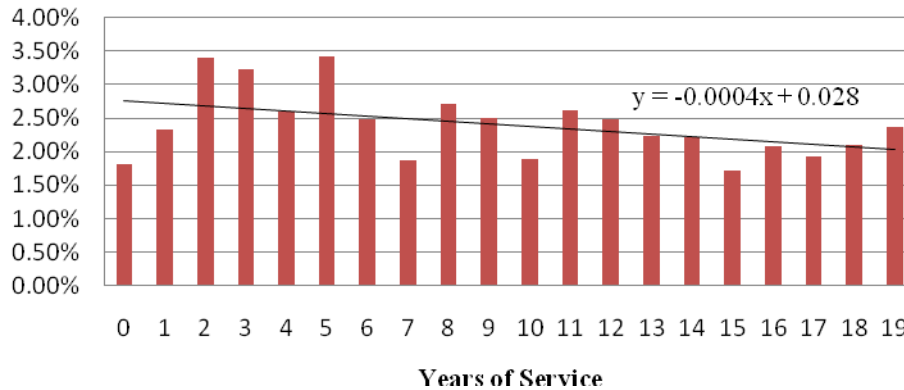
Since one in five Nazarene ministers (20%) in the 1980-85 cohort experienced a mid-career gap of 18 or more months of unassigned time, a determination of attrition was based on the individual being unassigned for 30 or more months following the last recorded entry. This definition is practical, but is of mild concern since clearly some of these ministers will return to serve as pastors or some other professional role within the Church of the Nazarene at a later date. No minister was classified as having attrited simply because they stopped taking assignments due to age (65), death, or formal retirement. For those ministers whose database records include a formal retirement date, the median age at retirement was 65.5 years of age.

The Fall 2002 issue of *Grow Magazine* included the article by the author: *Rate of Attrition Of New Nazarene Ministers*. With very similar results to the current study, one paragraph summarized the initial cohort study of just under 1000 ministers as follows:

Several factors were found to positively affect persistence in ministry. Attrition is less likely for Nazarene ministers who seek and are approved for ordination. Those who earn a degree from any of the Nazarene colleges or Nazarene Theological Seminary are more likely to persist than those who earn their degrees from other institutions or who withdraw before completing their degrees. Ministers who serve most of their career as a pastor are more likely to persist than associates; however, making a transition from associate to senior pastor makes attrition less likely.

The churches served by the cohort ministers numbered 3200. The annual attrition rate of new ministers in the Church of the Nazarene is relatively constant during the first 21-27 years of ministry. The annual rate of attrition averages slightly below 3%, so that at five years the total attrition is 16%, at ten years 25%, at fifteen years 33%, and at twenty years it totals 40%. Interestingly, there are no clear patterns based on age at attrition. This argues for a slight and ongoing over-supply of ministers.

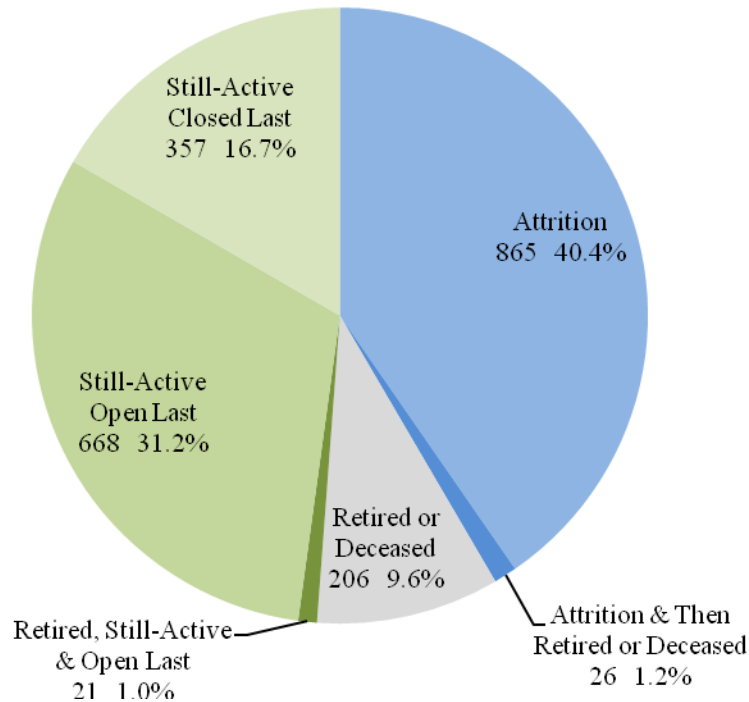
Attrition percent of remaining Ministerial Corps



There are arguments for why there appears to be an over-supply of ministers in the Church of the Nazarene. For instance, the self-interest of any educational institution is to produce more ministerial graduates. Alternately, the District Superintendent who has a church that cannot be filled may jump at the explanation of a correctable under-supply. Of course, the latter would lead immediately to the former. When a church is without a pastor, the time needed to fill the vacancy varies. Consider the roughly one quarter of the 3200 churches that experienced at least one 12-month period without a pastor and label them “slower filled”. Label the rest as “faster filled” churches. The faster filled churches tend to be in communities that are better educated, have a higher percentage of white-collar workers, have more people to draw from, have a younger population, have a net positive five-year migration into the county, and have less people living in or near poverty. The churches themselves that fill a pastoral vacancy sooner tend to be larger, raise twice as much, have six times the median debt, and send a higher percentage of their funds outside the local church.

While a tabular presentation of the data will follow, we begin with a pie chart that shows the distribution of pastors in their service to local churches on the date of data extraction.

Local Church Service Records of the Ministers in the 1980-85 Cohort



To put this pie chart in context, between 21 and 27 years after they started their careers within the Church of the Nazarene, 49% of the ministers in the cohort were still-active (357+668+21 /2143), while 42% were counted as being attritions (865+26 /2143). Of the still-active pastors, two-thirds were serving in an open last assignment (668+21 /1046). A total of 12% had retired or died (21+206+26 /2143) including 21 pastors who had returned to serving a local church congregation and thereby had an open last assignment. Taken together, these percentages give clear and compelling evidence of an incredibly committed corps of ministers.

The percentage (66%) of still-active pastors in an open assignment may seem low until one considers that a good number of these ministers are currently serving in other professional roles within the Church of the Nazarene (District Superintendent, Evangelist, Professor, etc.), are between churches, or will be back in the future. The summary data follows:

Is there a record of the person having either retired or died?				Attrition by being unassigned 30 or more months after Last Professional Assignment Before Death, Retirement, or reaching Age 65		
				Yes	No	Total
No	Was the last assignment open on 27-Mar-2007?	No	Count	865	357	1222
			% of Total	40.4%	16.7%	57.0%
	Yes	Count	0	668	668	
		% of Total	0.0%	31.2%	31.2%	
	Total	Count	865	1025	1890	
		% of Total	40.4%	47.8%	88.2%	
Yes	Was the last assignment open on 27-Mar-2007?	No	Count	26	206	232
			% of Total	1.2%	9.6%	10.8%
	Yes	Count	0	21	21	
		% of Total	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%	
	Total	Count	26	227	253	
		% of Total	1.2%	10.6%	11.8%	

The open last assignments turn out to make quite a bit of difference in the tenure calculations. Consider for a moment the possibility of a pastor having taken two three-year assignments and then settling in to his or her third assignment where they have served ever since. This could produce an open last assignment of length more than 20 years. As any professor of statistics will immediately point out, such skewing of the data argues strongly for using the median instead of the mean as the measure of a typical tenure since the median is less sensitive to extreme cases like the 20 year ongoing assignments. The patterns that emerge from the graphical study of medians were checked by doing t-tests on the means as a way to determine if observed differences in medians yield statistically significant differences in means.

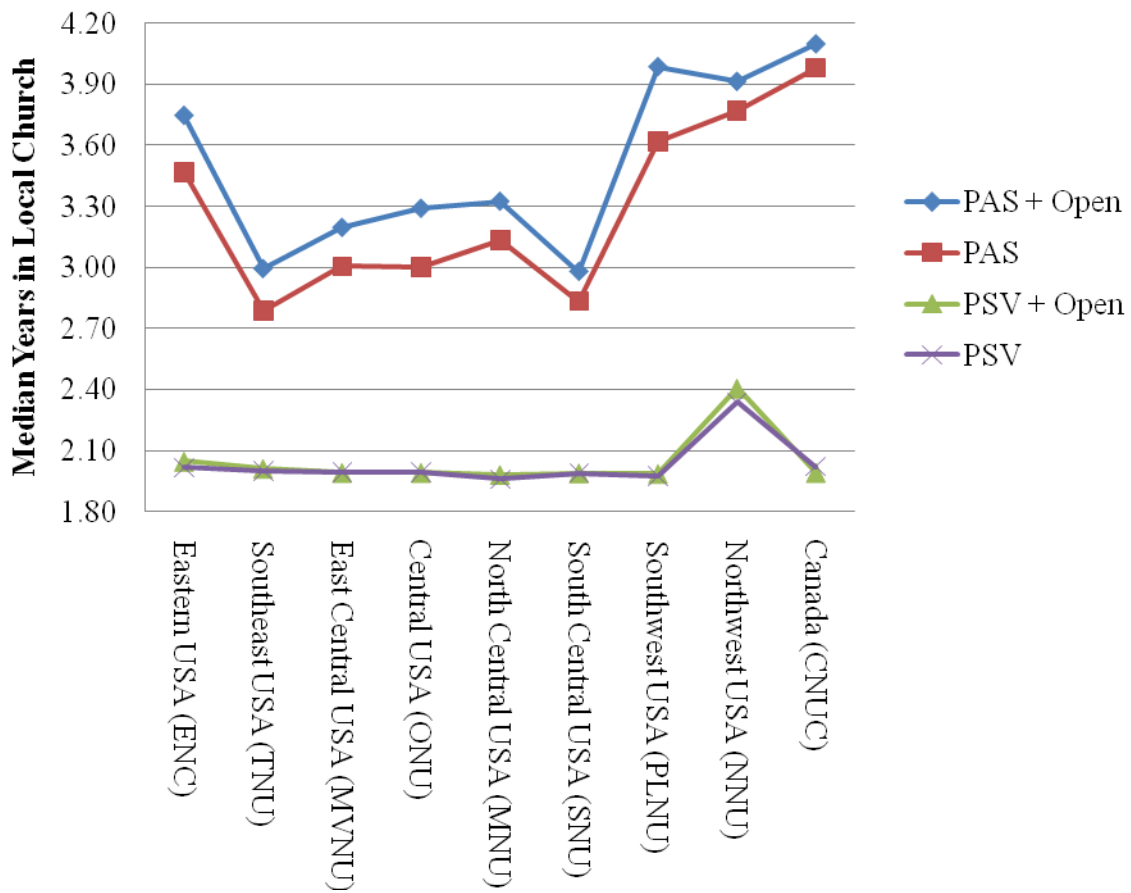
We will examine the median tenure of pastoral service through the lenses of five variables:

- The status of the last assignment (Open or Closed)
- The role of the pastor in the assignment (Pastor or Associate Pastor)
- The geographic region based on the educational regions in the manual (SNU, NNU, etc.)
- The population density of the church location (Rural, Suburban, and Urban)
- Sunday morning attendance in ranges (<100, 100-249, 250-499, and 500+)

Regional Variation

Through examination of the databases created for the sabbatical study, it was determined that there has not been a lot of geographic mobility over the 21 to 27 years for pastors within the cohort. Specifically, among the active pastors, 93% served four or fewer churches, 55% served on only one educational region, and only 4% served on more than two educational regions. Among the 6,839 pastor church assignments, there were 40 assignments serving a local congregation outside of the USA and Canada. With the exception of these 40 assignments, the region of service has been recorded. The senior pastor in a local church is noted in the official records by the abbreviation “PAS”. Associate pastors are indicated by the designation “PSV” which stands for “Pastoral Service”. In the graph that follows, the open assignments are not included in the PAS and PSV lines. They are included in the “PAS + Open” and “PSV + Open” lines.

Regional Variation East to West

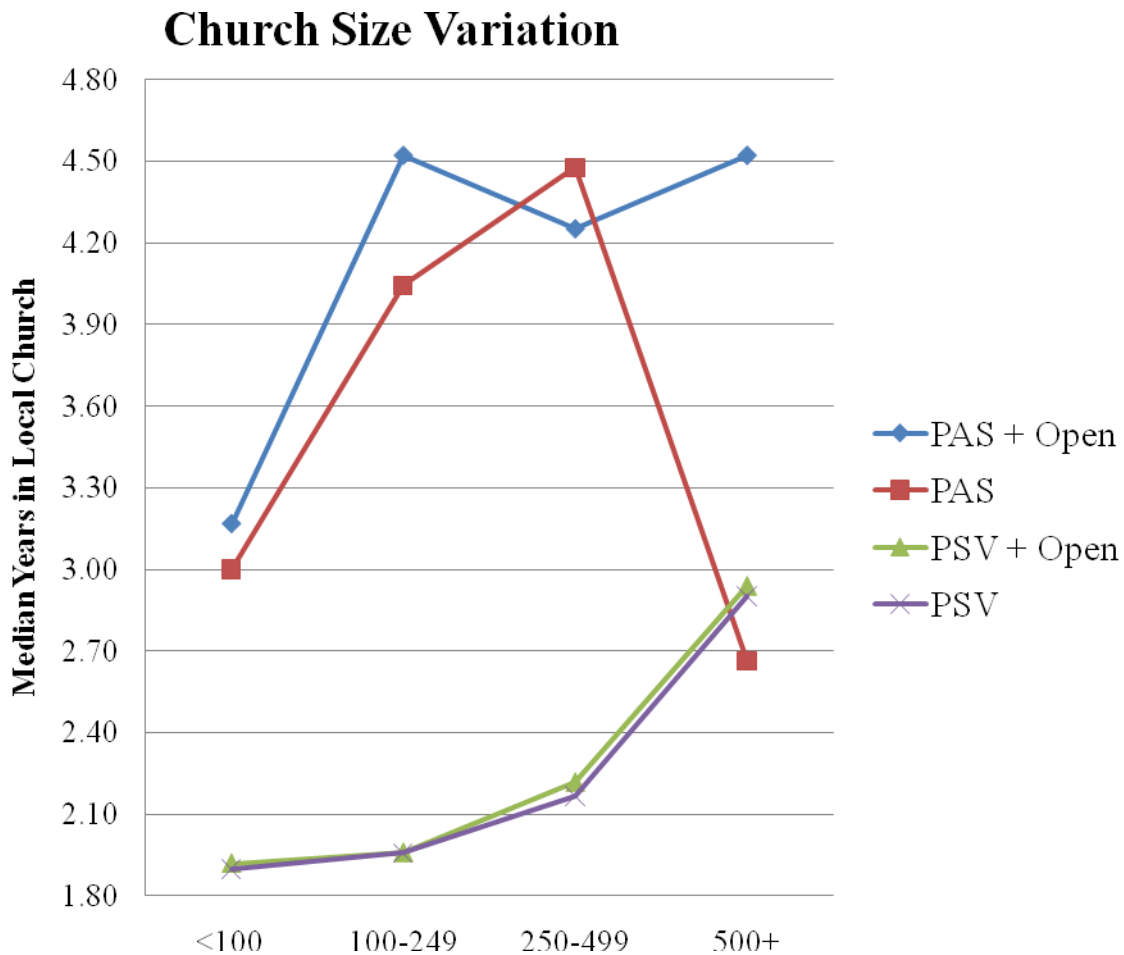


It will come as no surprise that the role is a larger source of variation than is region. So, let us begin with the associate pastors. With the exception of the Northwest region, there are no significant differences in associate pastoral tenure based on region. Turning to senior pastors, there are observable differences based on region. The Southern two regions (TNU, SNU) have significantly lower tenures than the Western two regions (PLNU, NNU) with the rest sandwiched between them. The exception is Canada which yields the longest tenure for senior pastors. The summary data follows:

Region	Median Years Spent as Pastor or Associate Pastor in this Assignment				Number of Pastoral Assignments			
	PAS	PAS + Open	PSV	PSV + Open	PAS	PAS + Open	PSV	PSV + Open
Central USA (ONU)	3.00	3.29	1.99	1.99	703	822	251	264
East Central USA (MVNU)	3.00	3.20	1.99	1.99	508	581	177	191
Eastern USA (ENC)	3.47	3.75	2.02	2.05	485	556	216	232
North Central USA (MNU)	3.13	3.32	1.96	1.98	464	513	145	153
Northwest USA (NNU)	3.77	3.91	2.34	2.41	338	400	239	252
South Central USA (SNU)	2.83	2.98	1.99	1.99	559	629	180	194
Southeast USA (TNU)	2.79	2.99	2.00	2.01	682	779	246	255
Southwest USA (PLNU)	3.62	3.99	1.97	1.99	422	497	331	347
Canada (CNUC)	3.98	4.10	2.02	1.99	90	105	28	29
Total	3.13	3.35	2.00	2.01	4251	4882	1813	1917

Church Size

In order to answer the question of whether or not church size plays a role in pastoral tenure, an estimate of the size of the congregation was taken to be the Sunday morning attendance. The yearly average Sunday morning attendance was recorded from the district minutes at the start of the assignment and then placed into one of four categories. Note that some of the medians are higher for church size than for regional variation.



Once again, the largest source of variation is role rather than church size. The lower two lines show almost no variation in associate pastoral tenure with regard to whether or not the last assignment is open ended. There is no significant difference in associate pastoral tenure between local congregations under 249 attendees. However, at each of the next two categories, there are significant increases in tenure as the size of the congregation increases.

Turning to senior pastors, there were only 19 churches with 500 or more attendees that were served by the pastors in this cohort. There is an unexplained anomaly shown for short tours of

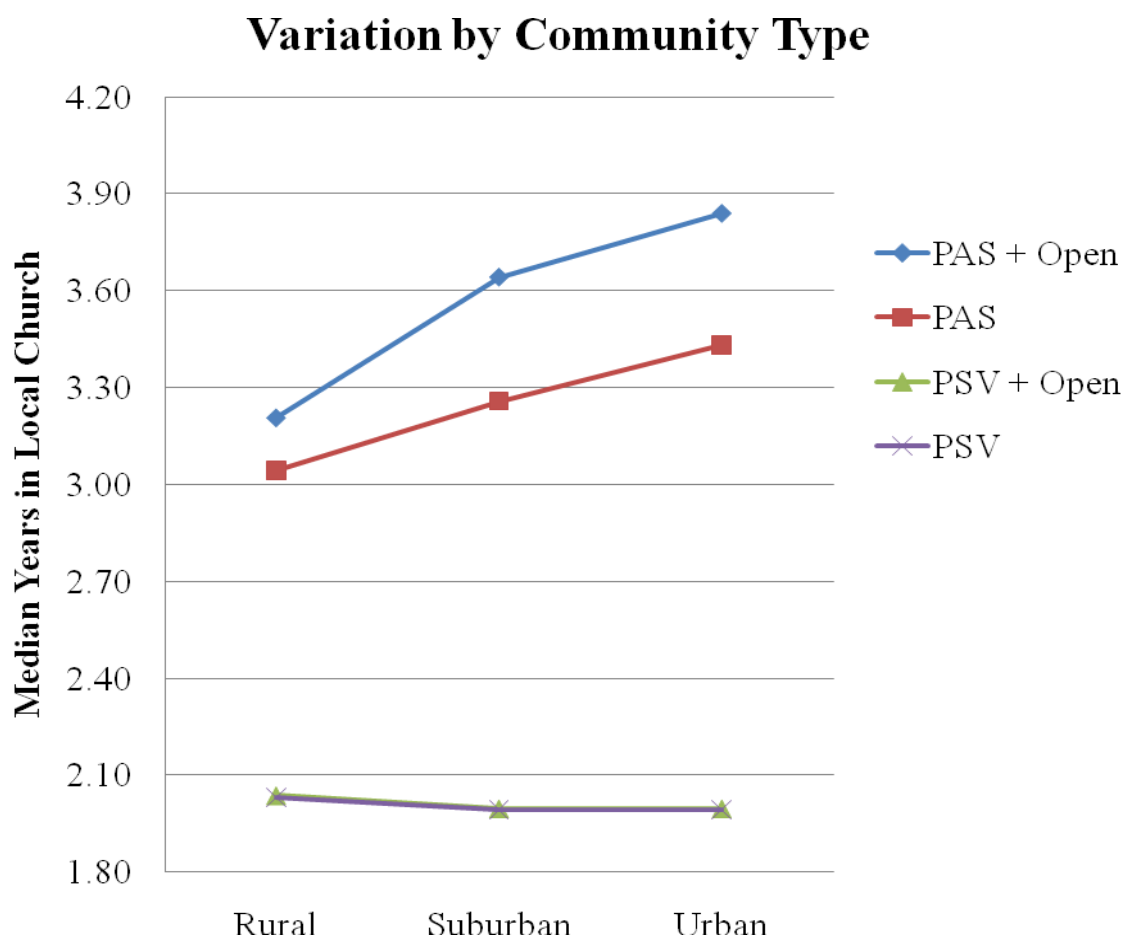
duty in these large church assignments. Note that it appears only in the closed assignments category. There is a statistically significant increase in pastoral tenure for serving in churches of size 100-249 that is larger than either the smaller churches or the 250-499 churches. The summary data follows:

Sunday Morning Attendance	Median Years Spent as Pastor or Associate Pastor in this Assignment				Number of Pastoral Assignments			
	PAS	PAS + Open	PSV	PSV + Open	PAS	PAS + Open	PSV	PSV + Open
<100	3.00	3.17	1.90	1.92	3496	3884	388	418
100-249	4.04	4.52	1.96	1.96	577	750	741	764
250-499	4.48	4.25	2.17	2.22	71	110	482	511
500+	2.66	4.52	2.90	2.94	19	38	198	220
Total	3.13	3.35	2.00	2.01	4163	4782	1809	1913

Community Type

What role does the urban vs. rural nature of the community surrounding the church play in pastoral tenure? To answer this question, churches were grouped into three categories based on population density:

Urban	At least 10,000 within three miles and 100,000 within five miles
Suburban	At least 2,500 within three miles and 5,000 within five miles
Rural	Smaller towns and rural areas



The largest source of variation is role instead of community type. The lower two lines are virtually indistinguishable. There is no significant difference in associate pastoral tenure between local congregations with respect to community type. For senior pastors, there is a significant difference in length of tenure between service in local congregations in rural and suburban communities. There is only a minor effect on pastoral tenure due to the differences between suburban and urban congregations. The summary data follows:

Type of Community	Median Years Spent as Pastor or Associate Pastor in this Assignment				Number of Pastoral Assignments			
	PAS	PAS +	PSV	PSV +	PAS	PAS +	PSV	PSV +
	Open		Open		Open		Open	
Rural	3.04	3.21	2.03	2.04	2505	2719	530	540
Suburban	3.26	3.64	1.99	2.00	932	1121	669	713
Urban	3.43	3.84	1.99	2.00	711	860	604	632
Total	3.12	3.35	2.00	2.01	4286	4917	1818	1922

Conclusion

We have examined the median tenure of pastoral service through the lenses of five variables:

- The status of the last assignment (Open or Closed)
- The role of the pastor in the assignment (Pastor or Associate Pastor)
- The geographic region based on the educational regions in the manual (SNU, NNU, etc.)
- The population density of the church location (Rural, Suburban, and Urban)
- Sunday morning attendance in ranges (<100, 100-249, 250-499, and 500+)

Bearing in mind that the mean is extremely susceptible to outliers, the order in which these five variables predict the mean pastoral tenure appears to be 1) Status (Open), 2) Role, 3) Region, 4) Community Type, and 5) Church Size. This analysis is based on linear regression analysis with dummy variables as needed and simple categories for Community Type and Church Size.

However, these variables cumulatively explain just less than 20% of the variability in pastoral tenure. More research is needed to explain the more than 80% remaining of what is going on. While it may be that ministers are reacting decidedly differently in their attrition behavior in the last few years, this author thinks it unlikely (see Ecclesiastes 1:9). Nonetheless, the effects of the calendar year as a predictor of attrition are worthy of continued study.

Appendix

Variables in the “Pastor Database”

One Record per Pastor—With First Three Church Assignments (2143 records x 750 variables)

Demographic and Career Data

- Dates and Assignment Counts
- Durations—Pastoral and Associate Pastoral Assignments
- Durations—Professional Assignments
- Durations—Student “Assignments”
- Gaps
- Demographics

Credentials

Education

- General Data
- First Listed Degree
- Years after (before) Professional Start to Degree
- Nazarene Education
- Which Nazarene Institution Granted Degree
- Type of Institution That Granted Degree (Y/N)
- Nazarene Education Dummy Variables (Y/N)

1st Assignment Data

- General Data and Duration
- Member Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 1st Assignment
- Pastor Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 1st Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Entry in 1st Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Exit in 1st Assignment
- 3-Mile Demographics for the 1st Assignment

2nd Assignment Data

- General Data and Duration
- Member Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 2nd Assignment
- Pastor Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 2nd Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Entry in 2nd Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Exit in 2nd Assignment
- 3-Mile Demographics for the 2nd Assignment

3rd Assignment Data

- General Data and Duration
- Member Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 3rd Assignment
- Pastor Turnover Data at Entry and Exit in 3rd Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Entry in 3rd Assignment
- Selected District Minutes Data at Exit in 3rd Assignment
- 3-Mile Demographics for the 3rd Assignment

Variables in the “Assignment Database”

One Record per Pastor per Assignment (6839 records x 217 variables)

Demographic and Assignment Data

Assignment Data

Member Turnover Data for this Assignment

At Entry

At Exit

Pastor Turnover Data in this Assignment

At Entry and Exit

Selected District Minutes Data at Entry in this Assignment

Selected District Minutes Data at Exit in this Assignment

3-Mile Demographics for this Assignment

Church staffing for this Assignment

Variables in the “Churches Database”

Multiple Records per Church (6839 records x 206 variables)

Church Data Identifiers

Member Turnover Data for this Church

At Entry

At Exit

Pastor Turnover Data in this Church

At Entry and Exit

Selected District Minutes Data at Entry in this Assignment

Selected District Minutes Data at Exit in this Assignment

3-Mile Demographics for this Church

Staffing for this Church

Note: Codebooks are available upon request from the author (gcrow@pointloma.edu).