

MINISTERIAL ATTRITION: When Clergy Call It Quits The Relationship of Superintendents and Pastors¹

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Introduction

The work of pastor in contemporary American society is difficult. Much of this has to do with the fact that pastors stand in the gap between two realities, the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, seeking through prophetic word and deed to call forth a people whose communal life becomes an authentic expression of the kingdom of God in the world. This is hard work and it is dangerous.

It seems that people in the pews have been captivated by a consumer market orientation under which pastors become targets of customer dissatisfaction rather than priests, prophets, and shepherds over God's people. Beside this clash with contemporary values, the work of pastor is complex. As Will Willimon (2002) described accurately:

The pastoral ministry requires a wide range of sophisticated skills: public speaking, intellectual ability, relational gifts, self knowledge, theological understanding, verbal dexterity, management acumen, sweeping floors, moving folding metal chairs, serving as moral exemplar, and all the rest. No wonder failure is always crouching at the door. (p. 23)

All of this exacts a high price among clergy including strained family relationships, poor physical health, emotional stress, and worst of all for pastors, a sense of spiritual failure. Dan Spaite (1999), Nazarene physician and clergy person, asked in his book, *Time Bomb in the Church, Defusing Pastoral Burnout*, "What is this time bomb that ticks away with undetected certainty? It is the overworked, stressed-out lifestyle of the modern pastor. . . . It is the contemporary anomaly called burnout" (p. 9). Say the word *burnout* among any group of ministers and there will be quick recognition and emotional identification with the popular assumptions related to the effects of burnout such as emotional exhaustion, depression, and physical illness.

¹ Summary of the author's doctoral dissertation: "Clergy Retention in the Church of the Nazarene, the Role of the District Superintendent in Clergy Decision-Making Regarding Persistence in Active Vocational Ministry." Olivet Nazarene University. May, 2010.

The problem of burnout generally has been the subject of significant attention and research across the last 25 years and more. Herbert Freudenberger (1974) and Christina Maslach (2003) named this problem and placed it in the arena of psycho-social research with their work in the 1970s and, for Maslach, continuing through the next two decades. Early development of the idea was extremely personal in nature, rising from the testimony of those, like Freudenberger, who had experienced a loss so pervasive and troubling that *burnout* seemed the appropriate term.

Thankfully, Maslach (2003) and others worked to locate the genesis of the burnout phenomenon in social-relational contexts as well as intrapersonal psychology. Their work helped to shift understanding about the cause of burnout from *personality malfunction* to stress arising from “the *social* interaction between helper and recipient” (p. 2). The particular issues of clergy burnout began to gain greater attention in the early 1980s with the work of Roy Oswald. In the Forward to Lynne Baab’s (2003) book, *Beating Burnout in Congregations*, Oswald reflects on his work in this area:

For the past 15 years, I have led workshops to help clergy avoid the devastation of burnout. . . . Whenever I am in front of a group of clergy I can assume at least twenty percent of them are experiencing severe burnout, with another twenty percent already suffering some of the symptoms and perhaps bordering on burnout. (Forward ¶ 3)

The body of research has focused largely on the relationship between clergy burnout or attrition and variables such as church size, compensation, education, community context, family support, and physical health. My research had in view a specific variable that was especially at the motivational heart of the researcher: the role of the Nazarene district superintendent (DS) in the decision-making of the Nazarene pastor about leaving or staying in active ministry.

Significance of the Study

Among pastors of the Church of the Nazarene in the United States and Canada, 41% will leave active vocational ministry by the time they reach the 15-year mark in their vocational tenure (Crow, 2006). This statistic represents a problem of mostly untold personal pain for the pastors, their families, and congregations who have suffered under the ending of a pastoral career.

Of particular interest in my study was the role of a district superintendent in providing means by which the pastor can evaluate accurately the effectiveness of his or her ministry and make careful decisions relative to persistence in active vocational ministry. A key question here has to do with whether or not pastors and superintendents in the Church of the Nazarene

can enjoy this kind of relationship. The work of a Nazarene district superintendent is generally understood as including the responsibility to provide support for the pastors under their charge. However, there is also an apparent expectation that district superintendents will stand in the gap to protect the vitality of a congregation from the incompetence or malpractice of a careless pastor.

This can become a nearly impossible tightrope on which a district superintendent is called to balance his or her work. It places the pastor and district superintendent in a sometimes tenuous relationship. One oft-repeated theme in this study was the expectation violation that pastors have experienced when they called their DS for help in a time of church conflict only to experience their supposed advocate siding with the church board's wish to run them out.

For this reason and others, there is an evident strain of relational trust that exists between many Nazarene pastors and superintendents. One of the great surprises of this study was the number of pastors willing to attach their names to highly critical comments relative to their disappointment over what the DS did or, in most cases, did not deliver.

Burnout and Vocational Attrition Among Clergy

While there is broad recognition that burnout is a problem among clergy, it is difficult to speak in terms of consensus regarding the extent to which the clergy are experiencing burnout. Reports of scores of studies on the subject range from 6% to more than 50% of the studied populations experiencing moderate to high levels of burnout.

John Payne (1990) used as a control in his study of Presbyterian ministers the more than 11,000-person sample that has completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) with results available to current researchers. Payne reported that "burnout among the ministers of this study was found to be somewhat less than that of the normative group, but was still in the moderate range" (p. 77). However, he also noted that in his denomination "twenty percent of ministers serving congregations are actively seeking employment in other congregations" (p. 1). Dan Sewell (2002), studying attrition in the Independent Christian Church, concluded that "half of all ministers in the Christian Church who enter ministry will leave ministry. In fact, the average length of total ministry . . . is only seven years" (p. 5).

Perhaps the most substantive contemporary study of clergy attrition was completed by Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger (2005), through the Pulpit & Pew Project of Duke University. The study project was conducted among clergy of five major Protestant denominations who had left active ministry either voluntarily or involuntarily. One of the key observations from this study is a very important point of balance to the motivation behind my

study. As Hoge and Wenger wisely note, “To be sure, not all cases of clergy leaving pastoral ministry are necessarily bad for the clergy or for the church” (p. ix).

Efforts in Clergy Retention

Most who have written on this subject agree that pastors need someone to come to the rescue when the stress becomes unbearable and the vocation is in danger of being lost. The person most often mentioned to provide this ministry is the judicatory official, variously named. Bishops, overseers, and superintendents are the logical and rightful people to provide this safety net relationship for front-line pastors. However, as was noted previously, there is also considerable angst about this relationship.

The relationship of overseer (using the biblical term *episkope*, often translated as *bishop*) and pastor is relatively complex. On the one hand, most people recognize as a matter of common sense that pastors also need a pastor.

However, Hoge and Wegner (2005) reported that “half of our respondents said they could not speak openly with their denominational officials” (p. 99). In their study, 39% of currently active pastors felt supported by their overseers, while only 18% of those who recently left active ministry felt that they were supported. They also noted that “many ex-pastors speak with considerable passion about . . . the insensitivity and lack of support that they received from the denominational officials” (p. ix).

As we will see in the current study, this strain of relational trust is very much in evidence among pastors in the Church of the Nazarene, particularly among those who left active vocational ministry during the past three years. Gilbert (2003) does a good job of explaining the hesitancy of pastors to bring troubles to their overseer:

How do I say, “I am tired of this ministry, the people don’t cooperate, my family is complaining, and I have more and more doubts about God’s effectiveness in my life?” What if we say that to the wrong parishioner? *We dare not tell our bishop or judicatory leader.* He or she may be my pastor, at least in theory, but how can you have this person as your pastor when he or she is also your boss? (p. 47, emphasis mine).

Therein is the proverbial rub. No matter how much an overseer may desire to function pastorally for those under his or her charge, there is no escaping the fact that in most church groups there is, to varying degrees, a hierarchical reality. In addition to the nature of the relationship there is also the consuming administrative work that typically defines much of the role of bishop or superintendent. Consequently, pastors looking for help from their leaders are

often looking to people who are as stressed out and overloaded as they are. Recognition of this fact among pastors shows up regularly in the comments that Nazarene pastors in this study made about their hesitancy to contact their district superintendent in times of trouble.

Study of Nazarene Pastors

My study was conducted among two samples of the population of Nazarene pastors. The first sampling was of currently active pastors and focused on the degree to which they had “considered leaving vocational ministry” during the preceding three years. Those pastors who indicated a consideration to leave were questioned further on the circumstances that led to this consideration and on steps that may have been undertaken in the decision-making process regarding their persistence in active, vocational ministry. Questions regarding these decision-making steps included items designed to assess the pastor’s relationship to the district superintendent including the pastor’s assessment of *accessibility*, *trust*, and *guidance* with regard to the attitudes and actions of the district superintendent.

The second sampling was among pastors who became inactive or unassigned during the previous three-year period. These pastors were questioned regarding the circumstances that led to their decision to leave and steps that may have been undertaken in the decision-making process, including an assessment of relationship with their district superintendent during this time. Additionally, both samples were questioned regarding their sense of negative and positive feelings and personal assessments about their work in vocational ministry.

Thanks to my friends at Nazarene Research, 551 currently active pastors were randomly selected for participation in the study. This became Sample A from which 295 surveys were completed (53.5%). For Sample B, those who became inactive during the past 3 years, 248 pastors were selected for participation with 94 surveys completed (37.9%). These response rates yield a margin of error of 6% +/- for Sample A and 10% +/- for Sample B at the 95% confidence level.

A number of select personal interviews of members of each sample were also conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to gather additional narrative related to the data gathered in the online surveys and specifically to gather narrative data related to possible strategies for district superintendents to employ in relationship building with pastors in an effort to increase clergy retention.

Prevalence of Consideration to Leave Vocational Ministry

The leading research question was about the degree to which currently active pastors have engaged a serious consideration to leave active vocational ministry in the past three

years. This question was directly posited as, “During the past three years have you considered leaving vocational ministry?” The idea of leaving was further qualified as “not changing ministry assignments but finding a different vocation altogether.” Among these pastors, 60.2% reported no consideration to leave vocational ministry during the past three years. Pastors that considered leaving with no action steps taken were 32% of the sample. Pastors that reported an active consideration to leave including specific steps taken were 7.8% of the sample. Therefore, among currently active pastors in the Church of the Nazarene a total of 39.8% have considered leaving active vocational ministry in the past three years.

Participants in the research were provided nine descriptions of circumstances that may have led to this deliberation. Additionally, participants were invited to check “other” and asked to describe further their reasons for this consideration to leave. The responses between samples to this question were compared as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1
Reasons for Leaving or Considering Leaving

Reason	Sample A Active, considered	Sample B Inactive
Conflict with members	36.8	31.6
Personal fatigue	77.7	31.6
Impact on family	36.8	21.1
Financial stress	31.6	26.3
Inadequately prepared	4.2	0.0
Loss of vision/passion	35.0	8.4
Physical health	15.4	15.8
Doctrinal mismatch	3.4	1.1
Unable to secure assignment	11.1	14.7
Other	23.9	54.7

Reported as percentage of sample.
Respondents invited to check "all that apply."

Of particular note in these data is the remarkable higher incidence of *personal fatigue* and *loss of vision/passion* among currently active pastors who have considered leaving active ministry during the past three years. Another difference of note between samples is the number in Sample B (Inactive pastors) who selected the *other* option. The majority of respondents in Sample B selected “other” and chose to leave further explanation for the reasons to leave active ministry. Many of the responses appear as near replications or further

explanation of the response options offered as illustrated in the table above. The respondents seemed anxious to tell their particular story.

Both sample groups were asked to report persons with whom they consulted during the time of their consideration to leave active vocational ministry. The results are shown in the following table:

Table 2
Who was Consulted about Leaving?

	Sample A Active, considered leaving	Sample B Inactive
DS	20.5	66.0
No one	6.8	1.1
Spouse	88.9	91.5
Other family	24.7	36.2
Fellow pastor	53.8	56.4
Layperson	19.7	26.6
Stranger	0.1	1.1
Other	10.3	11.7

Reported as percentage of sample.
Respondents invited to “check all that apply.”

Of particular note in this representation of data is the fact that while only 20.5% of currently active pastors consulted with their district superintendent on the consideration to leave active ministry, 66% of inactive pastors report having consulted with their district superintendent on this decision.

Both samples were questioned on the identifiers used by Maslach (2003) as the “three core dimensions of the burnout experience” namely, *exhaustion* (the individual stress response), *cynicism* (the negative reaction to others and the job), and *inefficacy* (the negative evaluation of one’s own accomplishments). These negative identifiers are reported in the following table:

Table 3
Responses to the Maslach Identifiers of the Burnout Experience

	Sample B		Sample A	
	Inactive	Actively considered leaving	Considered leaving	Not considered leaving
Exhaustion				
Very often	22.3	26.0	33.0	3.0
Often	23.4	34.8	34.0	25.0
Occasionally	23.4	26.1	25.5	40.3
Rarely	30.9	13.1	7.5	31.7
Cynicism				
Very often	8.5	18.3	12.8	0.8
Often	13.8	22.7	19.1	10.2
Occasionally	33.0	31.8	33.0	32.0
Rarely	44.7	27.2	35.1	57.0
Inefficacy				
Very often	12.8	27.2	11.8	2.0
Often	18.1	18.2	24.7	18.8
Occasionally	25.5	32.0	34.4	41.0
Rarely	42.6	22.7	29.0	38.1

Reported as percentage of respondents in each category

Perhaps not surprisingly, the negative identifiers for the burnout experience are most prominent among currently active pastors who have considered leaving during the past three years. However, many pastors considering leaving do not report high levels of these burnout indicators. These responses indicate that while the markers of burnout are a significant factor in clergy attrition they do not appear to be the dominant factors among Church of the Nazarene pastors. In other words, many pastors considering transition do not report experiencing these classic markers of burnout at significant levels. However, a high percentage of pastors who are showing signs of burnout are considering transition. That is, more than 60% of currently active pastors who have considered leaving in the last three years marked “very often” or “often” for exhaustion.

Table 4 shows responses to the positive side of “job engagement” on which respondents were also questioned. Not surprisingly, these markers are highest among currently active pastors who have not considered leaving. However, those pastors who left active ministry during the past three years and are now officially inactive also demonstrate upon reflection high marks regarding these positive identifiers.

Table 4
Responses to the Maslach Identifiers of Job Engagement

	Inactive	Actively considered leaving	Considered leaving	Not considered leaving
Energy				
Very often	35.1	26.1	22.0	45.5
Often	30.9	26.1	42.9	36.4
Occasionally	20.2	43.5	31.9	14.8
Rarely	13.8	4.3	3.0	3.0
Involvement				
Very often	42.6	26.1	31.2	52.0
Often	30.9	34.8	46.2	36.2
Occasionally	18.1	26.1	20.4	10.0
Rarely	8.5	13.0	2.0	2.0
Efficacy				
Very often	26.6	18.2	13.8	28.8
Often	30.9	1.0	45.7	48.0
Occasionally	26.6	63.6	37.2	20.3
Rarely	16.0	13.6	3.0	3.0

Reported as percentage of respondents in each category

Comparing demographic data on the two samples yielded information that informs certain assumptions about factors that lead to clergy attrition. The first of these has to do with vocational tenure and is illustrated in Table 5.

This table shows that the consideration to leave among active pastors is most prevalent in the period between 10 and 30 years in active vocational ministry. This finding is similar to that revealed in the sample of pastors who left active vocational ministry during the past 3 years. However, among currently active pastors who have taken specific steps toward the consideration to leave, the highest prevalence in this category is among pastors whose total

Table 5
Years in Active Vocational Ministry

	Sample B		Sample A	
	Inactive	Actively considered leaving	Considered leaving	Not considered leaving
Less 5	14.9	4.0	3.0	10.0
5 to 9	19.1	9.0	10.0	18.6
10 to 19	28.7	26.1	39.4	23.7
20 to 29	25.5	26.1	34.0	26.6
30 or more	11.7	34.8	13.8	21.5

Reported as percentage of respondents in each category.

ministry tenure is 30 years or more. Table 6 shows a similar look at the prevalence of consideration to leave among samples in terms of tenure in the current (active pastors) or last (inactive pastors) ministry assignment.

Table 6
Years in Current or Last Assignment

	Sample B		Sample A	
	Inactive	Actively considered leaving	Considered leaving	Not considered leaving
Less than 2	20.2	39.1	14.9	13.6
2 to 4	35.1	26.1	20.2	30.5
5 to 9	27.7	17.4	38.3	31.6
10 to 14	7.4	9.0	16.0	10.7
15 or more	9.6	9.0	10.6	13.6

Reported as percentage of respondents in each category.

These statistics generally follow the observation in Crow's (2006) report that the median tenure among all Nazarene pastors is 4 years and 5 months. However, these data show that among currently active pastors who have taken steps toward the consideration to leave,

the majority have been in the current assignment less than 5 years with 39.1% in the current assignment less than two years.

Additional demographic components were studied and analyzed in terms of distribution across the samples. These components were: ministry setting (urban, suburban, small town, or rural) of the church being served; size of congregation served, and education level of the clergy. Statistical tests showed that for each of these variables the distribution was not significant.

Relationship of Pastors and Superintendents

Among the respondents in Sample A, only pastors who indicated a consideration to leave during the past three years were further questioned on their relationship to the district superintendent. As previously noted, only 20.5% of Sample A (active) pastors consulted with the DS compared to 66% of pastors who left during the past three years. Both groups were asked, “If you chose not to consult your district superintendent, why not?” The following table shows the results of quantitative answers to this question.

Table 7
Why Did Not Consult the DS?

	Active, considered leaving	Inactive
Didn't think about it	15.6	6.3
Afraid of consequences	26.6	9.4
DS would not understand	6.7	3.1
DS not approachable	5.6	15.6
DS not accessible	2.2	3.1
Other	43.3	62.5

Reported as percentage of those not contacting DS.

The most remarkable difference in these data is the pronounced increase among active pastors who are considering leaving to express reticence to contact the DS on the basis of being “afraid of consequences.” This may indicate a strain of relational trust between pastors and district superintendents which seems to be confirmed through analysis of the qualitative data as will be shown subsequently. Many pastors in both samples left comments about this question. Representative among the comments:

- “DS seems disconnected from real life and giving practical support.”
- “See him as a boss more than a friend; don't get to speak with him very often.”
- “My DS is great but I'm responsible, he's busy.”
- “Didn't want to add to his stress load, he is aware of our situation, hate to complain.”
- “I did talk with him but not until the decision had been made.”
- “I was ashamed and felt I had failed.”

These observations may begin to indicate that the DS is not generally viewed by the pastor as a partner in decision-making regarding persistence in active vocational ministry. A qualitative assessment of the narrative responses in these survey instruments reveals the general category of trust as a prominent theme. This general thematic category includes the ideas of not only potential negative consequences but also the regular comment from pastors who view the DS as too busy with other matters to be concerned about their trouble.

In an effort to gain further information about the relationship between pastors and district superintendents, persons in both samples that indicated they had consulted their district superintendent were asked, “When you consulted with your district superintendent, how helpful was the DS?” The majority of active pastors find their DS to be supportive and helpful. Significantly fewer pastors who left active ministry during the past three years now report high levels of helpfulness from their DS.

Further, both sample groups were asked to supply narrative in response to this question, “What specific words and/or actions from your district superintendent, if any, were helpful and appreciated by you?” And, “What specific words and/or actions from your district superintendent would you have wished for or would have been helpful?”

The comments from active pastors who did consult the DS are generally positive and seem to reflect a sincere appreciation for the presence and support of district leadership. There are certainly exceptions to this trend, but overall the positive comments outpace negative comments by a significant margin as will be demonstrated subsequently.

The researcher undertook a system of content analysis in order to arrive at discernable patterns and threads in the narratives. Four key threads emerged as repeated themes in the comments. These four threads are listed in descending order of frequency: communication, trust, church-pastor preference, and resourcing.

Communication primarily has to do with efforts that district superintendents make or that pastors wished they would make to initiate contact and conversation. A common response in this area is about the pastor's hesitancy to contact the DS under the assumption that he or

she is already overburdened with many responsibilities. The pastor does not want to be viewed as adding to the burden of the DS.

Trust is significantly related to the first thread, particularly the idea of whether the pastor feels that he or she has access to the DS. It especially appears when an expectation violation has occurred in the relationship. That is, the pastor expected or assumed things about how the DS might respond to a critical situation and then was disappointed that the response was different than what the pastor expected. The concern in this area is a relational concern. There was also an institutional concern that appeared as an oft-expressed fear of potential negative consequences if a pastor were to reveal areas of struggle or conflict.

Church-pastor preference was a third thread in these comments that has to do with whether the congregation or the pastor receives the support of the district superintendent during times of conflict or disagreement. Several respondents commented that when faced with this tension district superintendents tend to side with congregational leadership.

Finally, the thread of *resourcing* was a repeated theme in the comments and has to do with pastors desiring opportunities for continuing education and mentoring or coaching that is initiated and enabled by district leadership. Pastors apparently need and appreciate initiative by the district superintendent to facilitate these opportunities for growth and connection.

The researcher also applied content analysis in order to bring some quantitative assessment to the overall positive or negative tone of the comments. The researcher assigned one of four identifiers to the comments of each respondent in both samples. The following table illustrates the assessment of all comments across the samples.

Table 8
Assessment of Pastor-DS Relationship in Comments

	Active, considered	Active, no consideration	Inactive
Positive	39.5	33.0	30.9
Negative	18.4	7.7	29.8
Mixed	16.7	12.6	17.0
No comment	25.4	46.7	22.3

Reported as percentage of each sample.

The survey instruments also included a quantitative assessment of the relationship between district superintendents and pastors. Questions were designed to appraise the pastor's

assessment of *accessibility*, *trust*, and *guidance* with regard to the attitudes and actions of the district superintendent. Table 9 reports these results:

Table 9
Relationship of Pastor and Superintendent

	Active, considered	Active, no consideration	Inactive
Availability			
High level	57.3	67.8	47.9
Average level	21.4	21.5	22.3
Low level	10.3	9.0	12.8
Not available	11.1	1.6	17.0
Trust			
High level	49.5	62.7	33.0
Average level	29.9	28.2	30.9
Low level	12.8	7.9	26.6
No trust	7.7	1.1	9.6
Guidance			
High level	23.9	27.1	24.5
Average level	33.3	36.7	28.7
Minimal	33.3	27.7	30.9
No guidance	8.5	8.5	16.0

Reported as percentage of each sample.

These responses indicate a generally favorable assessment of the relationship between pastors and superintendents. However, clearly this relationship is rated less positively among inactive pastors with the variable of *trust* showing a remarkable downturn between samples. *Availability* is rated lower by inactive pastors while the variable of *guidance* shows similar ratings between the groups, although there is also a slight downturn among active pastors on this variable. Overall the factor of *guidance* is rated lower between samples than the variables of *availability* and *trust*.

In each area there was a lack of strong correlation which may help to corroborate the earlier suggestion that district superintendents have little influence on the pastor's decision-making process. However, pastors do express an interest in and openness to a ministry of pastoral care from the DS to help them navigate transition.

Possible Clergy Retention Strategies

Narrative responses to the online survey were analyzed to identify themes related to strategies or actions that district superintendents could employ to help pastors navigate the decision-making period. As analysis of the data has suggested to this point, this question may in fact have more to do with enhancing the DS-pastor relationship in the transition rather than in the decision-making process. This review brought the issue of intentionality of communication and contact to the front. This includes: mechanisms for initiating contact regularly, visiting the pastor in context, active listening, and expressing care, concern and understanding.

One theme that rises among the group of currently inactive pastors is the experience of being dropped from communication after leaving their congregation, even though they are still members of the district. As one pastor expressed it, “I felt like I was dropped like a hot potato.” Part of this theme has to do with the official language of “unassigned” as the role code given to inactive pastors. This language was mentioned by several as being offensive or hurtful.

This combines with recent polity changes in the Church of the Nazarene that now require clergy who remain in an unassigned status for four years or more to file their credentials. One respondent expressed how the application of this polity made him feel:

The only communication from my new district office or superintendent was to tell me that if I didn't plan on being in full time ministry I would have to file my credentials. That's like walking through the hospital and telling the soldiers with their legs blown off that they will have to resign their commission! It was very painful.

Throughout these narrative responses there are some key words that are repeated often and may serve to summarize the way the pastors who completed the online survey instruments express their desire for a particular kind of relationship with the district superintendent. These words are *visit*, *presence*, *call*, *show-up*, and *contact*. Representative among these types of comments are the following:

- “He travels to visit with us and our ministry.”
- “He personally came to manage conflict/disagreements with me and some members of my church board.”
- “I would appreciate a call once in a while to see how I am doing but he never calls.”
- “He is the invisible man. He never shows up, never calls, never emails.”

Part of the research design involved the conduct of select personal interviews to deepen and clarify narrative responses related gathered in the online surveys. The key question in these interviews was, “What do you think a district superintendent could do to be in a position to provide substantive guidance and encouragement when pastors are facing the decision to leave or to remain in active vocational ministry?”

Communication was mentioned most often as the desired component in the relationship between pastors and superintendents. This expansive category includes the particular ideas of communication that is regular, initiated by the DS, and has as its evident motivation a concern for the pastor rather than the promotion of a district agenda.

Partnerships that are developed and encouraged by the superintendent are a common theme. This includes mentoring relationships, accountability relationships among pastors, and partnerships between congregations facilitated by district leadership.

Renewal strategies are identified as something that pastors would like superintendents to offer in a deliberate way. These renewal strategies include the planning and execution of retreats, the connection of pastors to retreat and renewal ministries for individual or family use, and the promotion and assistance for times of sabbatical leave for pastors and their families.

Conflict management was identified by pastors as something that district superintendents could deliver that may make a difference in a pastor’s decision regarding persistence in active vocational ministry. However, these comments regarding conflict management seem actually to favor the idea and practice of presence more than a particular system or mechanism. In other words, during times of conflict between pastor and congregation, pastors seem to desire someone in authority to come beside them for emotional support even more than providing particular advice and direction.

Role identification is also related to conflict management and has to do with a clarity that is communicated to all regarding the role of the district superintendent in times of conflict. Pastors express a desire that they would not experience a violation in terms of what they expect from their DS during these conflict times and what actually is delivered. This undoubtedly relates to the desire for clear communication. This role tension is a shaping issue in the broad subject of the relationship between pastors and district superintendents in the Church of the Nazarene. One pastor expressed it in this way:

The ideal is for the DS to be the pastor's pastor. This is admirable, but impossible. Bottom line, he is my immediate supervisor and key to any new assignments. Confessing my inadequacies to him, no matter how good a pastor he is, is simply

shooting myself in the foot. When I need a confidante, it would have to be a pastor of another denomination or a friend of extremely high trust.

This tension may shed important light on why district superintendents are generally not invited into the actual decision-making process that pastors go through. However, this study also seems to show that pastors desire a meaningful connection with their superintendent as they navigate the powerful emotions and implications of making a decision to leave active vocational ministry.

Conclusions

This study revealed that among currently active pastors nearly 40 percent (39.8) have considered leaving vocational ministry during the past three years. Further filtering of those who have not only considered leaving but have taken specific steps toward a potential decision to leave drops the selection to just under 8 percent (7.8) of currently active pastors.

A review of the steps taken toward locating another occupation shows that more pastors report steps that are private such as updating a resume or discussing the potential change with family. Fewer pastors report steps that are public such as applying for another job or having a job interview. This suggests that the consideration to leave among pastors remains a relatively private consideration until nearer the time a decision is made and acted upon. This conclusion was supported by the fact that only 20.5% of currently active pastors report consulting with their DS while 66% of inactive pastors report consulting their DS on the consideration or decision to leave.

The questions of vocational tenure and (by implication) age of the minister are significant findings in this sampling of Church of the Nazarene pastors. In the review of literature on burnout generally and on clergy attrition specifically, there is a pervasive conclusion that younger people are more susceptible to burnout than older people. However, in this sampling, consideration to leave among pastors was most prevalent in the period between ten and thirty years in active vocational ministry. Additionally, among those currently considering leaving ministry, the highest prevalence in this category was among pastors whose total ministry tenure is thirty years or more. These facts, combined with the finding that most pastors leave fairly early in their last assignment, indicate that the pastors apparently most at risk for attrition in terms of vocational tenure and age are older pastors in the early stages of a new assignment.

This study suggests that many relatively content pastors who enjoy a good relationship with their district superintendent still leave active vocational ministry. The data does illustrate that tracking signs of burnout may reveal the approximately 25 percent of pastors who are

experiencing severe levels of exhaustion and considering leaving ministry. Many pastors considering transition do not report experiencing these burnout signs at significant levels. However, a high percentage of pastors who are showing signs of burnout are considering transition. More than 60% of currently active pastors who have considered leaving in the last three years marked “very often” or “often” for exhaustion. In another part of the survey, an even greater percentage of active pastors who are considering leaving reported *personal fatigue* as a reason for this consideration (see Table 1).

The data provide apparent confirmation of a widely held assumption among district superintendents namely, that pastors do not consult with their district superintendent about their consideration to leave active vocational ministry until the decision has been made and decisive steps have been taken. There seems to be a distinction, however, between the decision-making component of the pastor-DS relationship and the pastoral care component in the process and aftermath of a pastor having made the decision to leave active vocational ministry.

Although there seems to be generally high regard for the district superintendent among active pastors in terms of *availability* and *trust*, actual helpfulness that would be reflected in the study marker of *guidance* is rated significantly lower. This is not necessarily bad news for district superintendents. There is a need for continued relationship between inactive pastors and their DS. District superintendents may be in a position to provide important and meaningful pastoral service to these clergy persons that may or may not preserve them to traditional roles of ministry but could have significant effect on their spiritual and emotional health and upon their attitude toward the Church.

Recommendations

Among recommendations that come into view as a result of the study, the researcher suggests that future studies look at the question of whether or not improving the continued pastoral relationship between district superintendents and clergy members who become inactive can be shown to have any correlation to the eventual return of these inactive pastors to active vocational ministry.

Because this study revealed the issue of role identification regarding the tension between district superintendents as pastor to pastors and responsibility to the local congregation, the researcher recommends that future studies focused in the Church of the Nazarene undertake a thorough examination of the superintendency in this regard. The call is for clearer polity statements of expectation, responsibility, and authority of the district superintendent toward pastors and congregations especially during times of conflict.

A further recommendation for potential future study is for particular focus on the variable of divine calling in the question of clergy attrition. The researcher offers the hypothesis that much of the evident emotion in the responses of the pastors in this study, particularly among those who have become inactive, may be traced to deep, personal dilemmas regarding the understanding of divine calling and the present inability to pursue that calling through vocational ministry.

This study made clear that pastors desire the presence of and personal connection to those who are charged with their oversight responsibility. The researcher offers to district superintendent colleagues in the Church of the Nazarene that among implications to be drawn from this report may be a call to superintendents in the church to understand and conduct their work more from a pastoral theology that remembers and prefers the essential work of care and spiritual direction and keeps in proper perspective the secondary work of administration and accountability.

If the district superintendents will listen to the voices of pastors in the comments associated with this study there may be a poignant reminder that the real work of the office is to cast a biblical and theological framework for the work of the church rather than to default to a pragmatic consumer orientation that concerns itself mostly with attendance and finances. Some pastors obviously believe that these latter things are what the DS really cares about. Perhaps the work of DS needs a reimagining from being about managing conflict and gathering statistics to calling pastors and people to live together in ways that promote the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

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