

# GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

## Understanding Pastoral Stress

Research shows that . . .

- 20% of pastors (1:5) are burned out;
- 20% to 33% of pastors leave ministry (not all for negative reasons);
- 50% of seminary graduates leave ministry within five years of graduation.
- One of eight pastors is thinking of resigning.

### *Why do pastors dropout?*

There are several reasons. Here are just a few.

First, pastors are part of what is labeled a *helping profession*. Helping professions include doctors, nurses, counselors, clergy, and others in similar jobs.

People in the helping professions often become depressed when they become resentful of the demands being made on them. Thus, a *Helping Profession Syndrome* is brought about through compulsive care giving. When people give care to the exclusion of their own legitimate needs, exhaustion, stress, and depression (the symptoms can vary) become visible.

Psychologist John Bowlby explains, "A person compulsively gives to others what he would like to have for himself which of course leads to a severe deficit in the emotional balance of payments. Other people's needs then begin to be felt as demands and the individual is likely to break down into guilt laden resentment, leading to depression."

Why do not pastors just change their practice? Some pastors indicate they fear if they say no to demands placed on them they will then be rejected and abandoned, which in part would prove they are unlovable.

Second, there is a lack of pastoral care. Who is the pastor's pastor? Most pastors do not have mentors or solid advisors, counselors, or friends.

Third, pastors suffer loneliness. Very few persons, other than fellow pastors, really understand the role or demands of pastoral work, hence, they experience feelings of loneliness and isolation in the midst of meaningful work.

Fourth, pastors experience geographical relocation. Pastors move often. When they do almost everything changes, requiring massive readjustments.

Fifth, pastors face economic and career uncertainty. A pastor's ministry career depends greatly on his or her relationship with a particular church. Much of one's career is out of the pastor's direct control.

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Sixth, there is a lack of ministry completion. A pastor's work is never really complete. This lack of feeling that a job is finished leads to long-term frustration that the job is impossible.

Seventh, the pastor's spouse is not supported.

- **Lack of Support:** Care for the pastor's spouse is usually inadequate in a local church. Many spouses do not trust church members enough to share needs and difficulties, especially when the problems are with the pastor.

- **Parsonage Living:** Parsonage living also creates stress. When the home belongs to the church, there are always tensions. Getting the church to provide maintenance or upgrades may be difficult.

- **Inadequate Pay:** It is often difficult to live on a pastor's salary. Many spouses are forced to work outside the home, even when they have small children.

Eighth, conflict within the congregation creates stress. This includes unwarranted criticism, too high of expectations of the pastor and his/her family, and continually trying to overcome apathy on the part of church leaders.

Ninth, the existence of personal problems. This includes feelings of personal or professional inadequacy, lack of professional worth, insufficient training, insecurities, and family problems.

Tenth, the normal life transitions of pastoring creates stressful situations that must be negotiated by every pastor. There are three predictable times when pastors face a crisis.

### *Three predictable times of crisis*

Observation of pastors has found three primary times when they may drop out of ministry.

The first crisis comes three to five years after leaving seminary (or other educational institution). It does not take very long for new pastors to experience a dose of reality that shatters many seminary-days ideals.

The second crisis occurs 15-20 years into ministry, or about the time of middle-age for some. It is at this time that pastors realize they have not reached the lofty goals they imagined when first entering pastoral ministry. Discouragement establishes a foothold in their thinking, as they see their goals may never be met.

The third crisis takes place as pastors enter the last decade of their professional ministry and begin to look ahead to the insecurity of retirement years. The potential lack of adequate income, loss of personal identity, and other insecurities come together in a fog of fear.

### *Thinking it through*

What stresses are you (or your pastor) facing right now in life and ministry?

As a church leader, how well is your church caring for the pastor, other staff members, and their families? What can you do to improve your care?

Does your church offer ministry staff a regular sabbatical every six to seven years? If not, investigate what other churches are doing and set up a policy and plan soon.

**Growth Points** is published twelve times a year. Subscription price is \$20 (US Funds) per year. Permission is granted for use in a local church. For other reprint usage, advance permission must be obtained.

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“As I look at the United States today, I see people who are receptive to spiritual things. We need to learn how to communicate to them in a way that draws them to Jesus Christ.”

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AND LEADERSHIP

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#### *FACULTY-MENTORS*

**DR. GARY MCINTOSH** is Professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot. He has served as a consultant for hundreds of churches in North America. Dr. McIntosh is also the Founder and President of the Church Growth Network, which provides a wide range of professional consulting services in the areas of church growth analysis and strategic planning. He is the editor of the *Growth Points* leadership letter. Having published over 300 articles and written over 25 books, he is a prolific writer. He and his wife, Carol, have two sons and seven grandchildren.

**DR. ALAN MCMAHAN** has served in churches in North America and on the Pacific Rim. He has also taught in the areas of missiology, church growth, leadership, organizational development and evangelism. He has been active in training undergraduate and graduate students including mid-career professionals, Bible school teachers, pastors, and denominational leaders through the U.S., Canada, and much of Southeast Asia in the effective means to develop leaders and grow churches. He has served as Vice President for the Alliance Theological Seminary and as the Academic Dean at the King’s College in mid-town Manhattan. He and his wife, Terri, have

two sons, and two grandchildren, and live in La Mirada, CA.

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