



## Longevity in Pastoral Ministry

My pastor announced his retirement recently following 33 years of leading our congregation. That is a long time in pastoral ministry at one church. Depending on which variables you use to calculate the tenure of pastors, around five years is typical. In the Midlands of South Carolina among Baptists we have an amazing number of pastors who served churches 30 years or more.

Tenure of more than 30 years in a spiritual role that demands consistency is tough. Sundays come around 52 times a year. The ability to handle not only joy and fulfillment, but sadness and failure can take a toll on a pastor.

People who take their Christianity casually and not seriously weigh heavily on a pastor. Overly churched culture Christians who want to control the congregation are not good allies for pastors.

My six decades in church ministry, research about pastoral longevity, and my observation cause me to suggest the following about tenure. Not every situation matches this model, but one or more of the attributes below may fit.

**First**, typically it takes 18 to 36 months for the clear glossy coat surrounding a new pastor – called the “honeymoon” period – to wear off. When that happens, the congregation discovers this new leader is truly accepted as their pastor. Often by the end of 36 months the pastor and congregation discern a consensus on God’s empowering vision. The spiritual and strategic direction of congregation is set for up to seven years. If consensus is not forthcoming the pastor likely moves on to another ministry setting by their fifth anniversary.

**Second**, during the up to seven years following consensus on direction, the ministerial and personal confidence in the pastor increases with each passing year. Pastoral folklore says that around the seventh year there is a crisis that challenges a pastor’s tenure. That may or may not be true.

**Third**, around 10 to 12 years into the tenure of a pastor the consensus on the direction of the congregation wanes. No spiritual and strategic movement in a congregation lasts forever. This is a typical and expected pattern. Upwards to 80 percent of pastors and congregations push harder to make the earlier direction work. Only 20 percent seek a new consensus around the spiritual and strategic direction of the congregation.

**Fourth**, in congregations without a new consensus the confidence in the pastor as a person begins to diminish incrementally each year. The confidence in pastoral

leadership drops dramatically year over year. Somewhere between years 15 and 20 the gap between personal confidence and leadership ability is so great that the pastor's ministry in their congregation may end. This situation divides the congregation and affects it for years to come.

**Fifth**, if a new consensus emerges, the pastor and congregation settle into a mutual appreciation relationship. This may allow the pastor's tenure to be unlimited. Even in this case a figurative fork in the road appears. Congregations who go one direction can soar with faith for a new season of seven years. Congregations who go in another direction settle into a mediocrity. They are comfortable with ministry that is good enough.

**Sixth**, often in the second decade of a pastor's tenure there is a point where half of the active members have connected with the congregation during the tenure of the pastor. When this happens, loyalty to that pastor continues to increase. It creates an enduring relationship with between pastor and congregation. In these cases the pastor gets great grace from the congregation as they journey together over succeeding years.

**Seventh**, once a pastor has been in a congregation for a generation or more, the relationship bond is secure. At that point, the possibility exists for a 30-year or more tenure.

**The Wild Card:** The key to a long tenure is to renew the personal relationships between the pastor and congregation every seven years. Take intentional actions to discern once again God's empowering vision. Renew the spiritual and strategic direction. Live into the vision of God for the congregation with great faithfulness.