

# GROWTH POINTS

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

## Tension in Churches

by Gordon E. Penfold, Th.M., D.Min.

Pastors and church leaders regularly face a quandary as they try to determine what they need to do. Many pastors feel they have their backs against the wall. They want to make changes, but either they are afraid to roil the waters or they don't know how to lead. Church bullies intimidate them. Church boards are often uncooperative and controlling. Consequently, pastors struggle and the churches they pastor struggle.

Other pastors are simply on cruise control. They draw their pay and don't rock the boat. Some also lack the skill and backbone to develop a vision of a preferred future and pursue it to a fitting conclusion. Others simply walk down the path of ministry blissfully ignorant of the impending cliff before them.

The challenge for pastors described above is echoed in an email I recently received from a church district leader. It read as follows (minus names and locations): "I have a friend who pastors a church in Any City, USA. He's been beat up pretty good there and needs a change. I've encouraged him to resign for quite a while, but he has nowhere to go. I've told him I'm going to share his contact info with you in case you're aware of something in your network that might open some doors for him. He does not need a conflicted situation."

In further conversations with this pastor, it was discovered that the church patriarch in that congregation does his best to see to it that pastors in the church endure for no more than four years. The evidence seems to support this contention. The last three pastors lasted only four years and then the church "helped" them depart!! In contrast, this pastor made it through to the start of year seven before he felt the squeeze and the need to leave. Church members quit giving so he could no longer receive his salary. He had no choice but to leave.

Shortly after receiving this email, I had a conversation with another pastor. This pastor was ready to resign after more than ten years of ministry. Only as he prepared to resign did he recognize the church patriarch. The patriarch often appeared to agree with

the proposed direction suggested by the pastor. However, with a simple nod of the head, the patriarch repeatedly swayed the entire congregation to move in the direction of his choosing, a direction that invariably conflicted with the pastor!

The plight of these pastors is nothing new. The role of the pastor in a church and the role of the leadership team is a relationship frequently fraught with tension. This tension can be particularly acute in older churches with well-established leadership.

### *Causes of Tension*

The uneasiness between pastor and leadership team members can be caused by numerous dynamics. Here are three factors that frequently contribute to pastor-church upsets.

**Fuzzy Expectations** of the church towards the pastor and the pastor toward the church. When a pastor and/or church fail to deliver on assumed values, frustration increases and the specter of a showdown looms on the horizon.

Linus Morris writes in *The High Impact Church*, "The greatest difficulty facing pastoral leadership is defining the role. Is the pastor to be a prophet, teacher, resource person, enabler, religious expert, preacher, counselor, therapist, CEO, facilitator, leader, equipper, administrator, shepherd, social activist, or all of the above?"

When I share this quote with pastors, I take a deep breath and try to read the entire list. Pastors nod in agreement with the descriptions given. In frustration, many pastors simply relegate themselves to playing the role of "pastor, fetch." They mechanically obey the mundane commands of their "overseers," the self-appointed taskmasters of the

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congregation, all the while fuming with hidden resentment.

**Transitory Pastors:** Many view pastors as interlopers; temps on the church scene. After all, pastors come and go. The congregation remains. With the average pastoral tenure at about three and one-half years, churches are accustomed to the revolving door of pastoral ministry. Consultant Bob Humphrey describes such churches as experiencing “vision whiplash” since every pastor brings their own “vision” to the church. Churches think, “And he too will pass!” while refusing the leadership overtures of the pastor.

**Power Struggles** often pit the pastor against a church bully or a church patriarch or matriarch. The question naturally arises: Who will the church follow? This issue is really nettlesome for pastors, especially effective pastors. These are pastors whose gifting, desires, and abilities fit the profile of an effective leader, but a church boss stands in the way of progress.

Many church bosses view themselves as the keeper of the Holy Grail, the protectors of *their* church. Their job is to defend the church against all enemies; especially against the pastor who desires to bring needed change to a declining congregation. This issue is especially true for young pastors. “After all,” these people reason, “what does a young pastor know?”

What are symptoms of this kind of behavior? First, individuals who are church bosses work quietly behind the scenes to undermine the pastor’s authority. I have heard people actually say, “It’s time we take our church back.” This typically means that it’s time to regain authority from the pastor. Second, others orchestrate a conspiracy to remove the pastor. This may be an attempt to manipulate the finances as a means of leverage or the dissemination of rumors and falsehoods. Either can prove disastrous for the pastor, his family, and the church!

The Apostle Paul described these individuals in Acts 20:29-30. “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.” Epic power struggles are nothing new in the church. Unfortunately, they are just as destructive today as they were in the first century!

### *Working Towards Solutions*

What must be done to overcome these challenges? First, the pastor and congregation must come to an agreement

about expectations. This should be a part of the call or appointment process. When this doesn’t occur, conflict becomes a certain inevitability down the road. Nail down both church and pastoral expectations before you say, “I do.”

Second, pastors and congregations need to work hard to increase pastoral tenure. This includes an adequate salary, housing allowance, and insurance provisions. In our day, church members are less committed to ministry, but their demands for ministry excellence grow. To alleviate this problems, church members must pick up the ministry gauntlet and serve shoulder to shoulder with the pastor. Pastors also need to understand that their most effective ministry usually begins in year six or seven of their tenure! They must commit to a church for the long haul.

Third, the church leadership and the pastor must learn to work together. Each must learn their role. Pastor and church must recognize that Christ has appointed the pastor to **lead** the congregation (Hebrews 13:7; 17; Revelation 2-3). This is not the prerogative of the “church boss.” Likewise, the congregation must accept the responsibility of **doing** the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12). In my experience the most fruitful church governance model is one where the pastor leads, the church “board” holds the pastor accountable for the effectiveness of ministry, the staff (paid and unpaid) manage the ministries of the church, and the congregation does the work of the ministry.

Pastors and churches who lock themselves in a power struggle forget that the ultimate leader and owner of the congregation is Jesus Christ. And they forget the mission is making disciples. However, when the leadership and the pastor unite and pull together in Christ’s economy, there is no limit to what God can accomplish through the church.

Questions to Ponder:

1. What do you need to change about your leadership style to become the pastor Christ desires you to become? All of us can improve in our leadership style.
2. If you are a lay leader (either formally elected or recognized by the congregation), are you helping or hindering the pastor as he leads God’s flock?
3. If you are hindering the pastor, what must you change in order to be responsive to Christ,

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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, strategic planning, and generational change. He is the editor of the Growth Points newsletter. Having published over 100 articles and written over 16 books, he is a prolific writer and church growth expert.

**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, Billy and Jonathan, and live in La Mirada, CA.

“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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