

## **Where Have All the Preachers Gone?**

By Bob Young

I have been researching and writing about the current and upcoming preacher shortage for over 15 years. During the time I served at Ohio Valley University as chairman of the Bible program, I was in contact with dozens of congregations in the Mid-Atlantic region and in New England—areas of the U.S. often considered mission fields. I maintained a list of “churches looking” on the university website. I preached in hundreds of congregations and interviewed many church leaders. I became aware of many smaller congregations who had simply given up on finding a full-time minister willing to work with a small, struggling congregation for minimal pay. The reality is that larger congregations are requiring more and more ministers and smaller congregations are often going without. James Nored recently published a statistic that says nearly 1400 ministers across the U.S. quit ministry every month (across the broader spectrum of various kinds of churches). My experience and observation is that the number of available ministers is shrinking dramatically, especially preachers or pulpit ministers. Oklahoma Christian University has recently begun a new effort to reach out and encourage young men to consider ministry. Harding University has commissioned a study to investigate the decrease in the number of those desiring to preach.

Last year, Pastoral Care Inc. published an article by Jim Fuller entitled “10 Reasons Why Pastors Leave the Ministry” (<http://pastoralcareinc.com/MR/Books/EBooks.php>). In this essay I overview the reasons given in Fuller’s article.

### **1. The minister has a vision that is not shared by the church**

Most ministers want to see the church progress. They work, sacrifice, visit, and go the second mile to make it happen. They neglect personal needs and sometimes even their families. They hope the church will see the possibilities and respond to God’s purpose and mission. When the church does not respond with active involvement, ministers become disheartened. Fuller cites a survey where 90% of pastors said the purpose of the church was to reach the lost while 90% of the church members said the purpose of the church was to meet members’ needs. This “vision disconnect” is discouraging to ministers who believe they should be able to help the church see and accept God’s mission. At first, discouragement causes the minister to move on in the hope of finding a responsive church. Continued discouragement causes the minister to burn out, give up and quit.

### **2. Lack of support**

Fuller labels this point “lack of denominational support.” This does not refer to financial support, but relational and emotional support. In my experience and observation in churches of Christ, preachers who are discouraged do not seek out luncheons and meetings with other preachers. (Preachers who attend luncheons generally seem to give glowing reports.) Lack of support also refers to the absence of supportive relationships within the local congregation. When relationships with local church leaders become stressful, there is no safe place to turn, no one to ask for help. Ministers choose to keep their problems and negative feelings to themselves, and eventually are overwhelmed by the challenge and loneliness.

### **3. Loneliness**

While loneliness is third on this list, according to Fuller ministers report that “feeling alone” is often the most difficult problem to overcome. Many church members cannot understand this feeling—ministers are surrounded by people constantly. But ministers report that such relationships are seldom deep. One reason this is such a difficult problem for many ministers is that without a close, trustworthy friend or mentor, ministers keep feelings, thoughts, concerns, problems, sin, discouragement, depression and loneliness inside.

### **4. Stress**

The most frequently mentioned stresses relate to family and health: 94% of ministers' families feel the pressures of ministry, 80% report that it has negatively affected them. Another stressor is that the minister's family is not supposed to have any problems. The demands of ministry take a toll mentally, spiritually and physically. Worry, stress, and neglect of one's health often lead to stress, burnout and more serious health problems.

### **5. Unrealistic expectations**

Many ministers struggle with whether they can truly be themselves in ministry. Congregational expectations are for a minister who is super-spiritual, problem-free and has a super-active family. One survey found that 66% of church members expect a minister to live by a higher moral standard than they do, to work longer hours for less pay, and not to worry about the future.

### **6. Lack of appreciation**

Some ministers suffer continuing difficulties in their ministries, going from one church to another. Some ministers contribute to their own difficulties by limiting their ministry context, failing to build relationships, distancing themselves, failing to deal with personality conflicts, and being unyielding. Most ministers face difficulties sometime in their ministry, but these are manageable even though the resolution is sometimes the realization that they are not a good match for that church. Most problems are not unique but are normal. Real problems come when the minister perceives the normal ebb and flow of church work as personal attacks. Lack of appreciation is not to be confused with the usual difficulties of ministry and church work. Difficulties are healed through validation and rebuilding. Often churches expect ministers to have the needed skill sets, take the minister for granted when the skill sets are available, and fail to express appreciation. Appreciation normally follows a job well done. Everyone likes to feel appreciated but no one has control of the process. It is important that the minister avoid negative thoughts when appreciation is not forthcoming.

### **7. Stress-induced burnout**

Stress-induced burnout is a leading factor in ministry dropout. Burnout usually comes from negative stressors such as unrealistic expectations, lack of boundaries, feelings of inadequacy or ineffectiveness, conflict, time management problems, role confusion, insecurity, and overload. Burnout is emotional exhaustion.

## **8. Lack of motivation**

Lack of motivation is different from lack of vision. A minister may lack vision and yet be motivated to keep on. The lack of motivation discussed here takes away the desire to do the things typically associated with ministry. Such is often associated with low self-esteem and financial pressures. Depression is often a prelude to a lack of motivation. Major depression is characterized by lack of drive and energy to perform duties; being withdrawn and not wanting to be around others; and often having long periods of time preferring to sleep. Fuller notes that motivation is the “gasoline” that powers the car. When fuel runs low, one does not discard the car but provides the fuel necessary to continue down the road. Ministers often leave prematurely without seeking ways to be refueled.

## **9. Low self-esteem and low income**

At least half (some surveys say 75%) of all ministers live close to the poverty level. Yet in our society, self-worth is often tied to economic success. Many ministers lack the skills necessary for any other job, and time constraints may make a second job unfeasible. Many churches think the minister’s wife should not work outside the home. At the same time, churches struggle with budgets in times of decreasing church attendance, increasing costs, and decreasing contributions. Ministers start out with high expectations and often leave because of a lack of self-esteem. Others leave in search of fewer work demands and more benefits such as retirement, health insurance, vacation and appreciation of a job well done.

## **10. Lack of vision**

While most ministers begin with energy and vision, over time the vision dims and the energy declines. Churches help their minister by providing affirmation, acceptance, validation, belonging, and support. Ministers that experience resistance, rejection, isolation and stagnation find it difficult to maintain the vision and necessary energy. Ministers cannot afford to let isolation, lack of affirmation, health and financial pressures, and other discouragements prevent them from seeking God's direction. Ministers must protect and renew their vision regularly.