

Thriving pastors—Healthy churches

Introduction

Scratch the skin of a healthy church and underneath you're likely to find a thriving pastor. Talk to a thriving pastor and you'll discover s/he works in a high health congregation. The two belong together. The church, to be healthy, needs thriving pastors. And pastors, in order to thrive, depend on healthy churches. Each contributes to the well-being of the other. But what are the factors that help create this picture of health, and what detracts from it?

During 2007, the Ministerial Leadership office of MC Canada's Christian Formation ministry conducted an extensive survey of pastors in Mennonite Church Canada, going back to 1975. The goal of this research project was to throw light on what makes pastors thrive – to increase our understanding of the dynamics and factors relating to pastoral wellness and retention and those that do not. This year's Assembly offers delegates an opportunity to hear the summary report on the findings of this initiative, and to explore together the implications of what we have learned so far.

As I write this, the Ministerial Leadership office is in transition. Sven Eriksson, Denominational Minister for the past five years, has retired. Beginning in the fall of this year, Karen Martens Zimmerly will assume the responsibilities of this office. The annual Assembly falls neatly between these two events and as such affords delegates of Mennonite Church Canada a unique opportunity to add their perspectives and observations to the discussion of pastoral health in our church.

The Executive Summary that follows highlights a number of important implications for pastors, congregations, Area Churches, Mennonite Church Canada, and our training institutions. We need your feedback to the following questions:

- How do these findings relate to your observation and experience?
- What can you affirm, and what questions does this raise?
- Do you support the suggestions given for follow-up?
- Which matters do you consider to be of highest priority?
- What counsel would you give to MC Canada leaders as we anticipate initiatives which respond to the findings of this project?

This venture has helped identify and focus some important factors in the field of pastoral calling, formation and support. We look forward to a thorough engagement on this topic with delegates as we together strive to nurture thriving pastors and healthy churches.

—Dave Bergen, Executive Secretary, Christian Formation, Mennonite Church Canada Pastoral Trends Survey

Executive Summary of Findings

Preamble

The current study provides valuable information in an attempt to understand the dynamics of pastoral retention and attrition among Mennonite Church Canada current and former pastors. However, prior to reporting the findings, it is important to realize that the results listed below represent trends of respondents' experiences, feelings, and suggestions. In other words, these key findings reflect the most frequently reoccurring responses within the group. Although this study focuses on perceptions of pastoral issues by pastors and former pastors, these are foundational in the attempt to understand what enhances pastor retention rates and what encourages pastor attrition rates.

Representation of the Participants with the Greater Population

In the present study, 201 or 19.84% of the participants represented in the Mennonite Church Canada Database completed the survey (31.1% women and 68.9% men). 83.1% were married and 8.3% were single. The age ranged from 21 to 86 (average age = 54.2). The largest age cohort was represented by the 41-50 year-olds. Demographics from the current study such as position type and provincial representation parallel those in the 1975-2007 Mennonite Church Canada Database study, thereby indicating that the participant pool is an adequate representation of the larger population of Mennonite Church Canada pastors and former pastors. However, note that in both the current study and the 1975 -2007 Mennonite Church Canada Pastoral database, the senior pastor position represents the largest cohort (50.2%), followed by the associate pastor position (10.4%) and less so for the assistant, interim, and intern. All results need to be prefaced with these representations.

Key Findings

The findings can be best delineated into implications for pastors, congregations, Mennonite Church Canada, and training institutions.

Implications for the Pastor

Based on the success secrets of pastors and how pastors deal successfully with stress, there are a number of things that pastors can do to increase their level of being successful. Probably the most effective and consistent throughout the study is that of having mentors and spiritual coaches; of continuously seeking ways to develop professionally and personally; to ensure that the spouse and family are a priority; to develop a clear set of boundaries between church work, personal time, and family time; and to have other outlets that provide a healthy perspective on work (i.e., hobbies, sports, personal time, etc.). Also critical is the ability to identify support factors and how to seek them, how to nourish them, and how to make the most of these, as they are so important in the success of current pastors.

Pastors also need to be more proactive in helping their congregations provide clarification of expectations and a more manageable set of work expectations. Part of this solution is a more realistic expectation of the pastor as well as a good understanding and acceptance of his or her limitations. Some pastors fall prey to their own unrealistic expectations that they are capable of doing more than is humanly possible. Involving others through delegation would be of great

benefit. This might mean more professional development for pastors in the art of delegation, team building, and the art of effective persuasion of volunteers.

Part of being successful is having a good sense of the congregation's needs. This is best done through any number of needs assessment methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, town-hall sessions, etc.). Outcomes can be instrumental in strategic planning for pastors to ensure that most of the needs of their congregations are being addressed. More encouragement and maybe even more training might be of benefit to help pastors with conducting insightful needs assessments.

Implications for the Congregation

The success of pastors can be attributed to the support and encouragement from their congregations. Repeatedly demonstrated in the present study, pastors benefited from the support that came from their congregations in the form of encouraging mentors and spiritual coaches; accommodating congregational leadership; willing members that actively participated and volunteered at all levels of ministry; sensitive church community that respected and encouraged personal time and family time of the pastor; and caring individuals who included the spouse and provided provisions for the pastor's family. Encouragement comes in the form of affirmation of the gifts and abilities of the pastor, of work done well, and of difficult situations handled well.

The congregation also has a key role to play in developing future pastors by recognizing, affirming, and celebrating the gifts of persons, regardless of age, shoulder tapping, encouragement of the younger generations to take more responsibilities in church leadership, and mentoring prior to entering ministry.

The complexities of pastors working for congregations are challenging at best, given that each member can be potentially viewed as one of the employers. Although many pastors felt strong support from their congregations, working for many people can encourage expectations that are demanding, unclear, and unrealistic, leading to high levels of pastor attrition. Poorly articulated expectations of congregations and the unreasonable demands placed on the pastor predispose him or her to being overworked, experiencing fatigue, and potentially leading to burnout. Open communication between pastor and the congregation often helps to alleviate these misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations. Active participation by church members in worship and church duties often makes for meaningful corporate identity, providing a supportive working environment for the pastor. The power invested in church leadership also has the potential of turning abusive as it is directed toward the pastor in various unhealthy ways, especially in some of the past practices of "letting-go" of pastors. The dignity of all people, especially in the church, needs to be uplifting, especially during times of conflict between congregation, church boards, leadership teams, and the pastor.

Overall, congregations need to learn more about what it means to be a supporting group for their pastors. Workshops and resources that focus on communication, encouragement, and support should be circulated from church to church to help promote and encourage these behaviours at the congregational level. Professional development for chairpersons on how to actively support the pastor through encouraging more congregational volunteering would also be of benefit.

Implications for Mennonite Church Canada Office, Area Church and/or Denominational Office

Key to the success of pastors is the support by the MC Canada office, area church and/or denominational office in the form of resource people, resources, and policies. Pastors thrive with the affirmation they receive from their area church ministers. Attuned to the current needs of their pastors; the sensitivity to listen to the struggles and challenges of their pastors; the heart of an advocate in times of need; the foresight to anticipate and guide their pastors through conflicts; the ability to provide appropriate resources and contacts to other experts in a timely manner; and the nurturing of their souls; these regional representatives become powerful liaisons of support for the pastors in their regions.

Although many pastors are grateful for the support they have received from the MC Canada office, area church and/or denominational office, more is required that focuses on the holistic caring of their pastors, the spouses and families of pastors, including emotional, intellectual, physical, psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing. First, by being actively involved in the hiring process to ensure that both the pastor and the congregation clearly see each other's perspectives, visions, and dreams to ensure better matches. This would include providing more background information about the congregation's personality to the pastor as well as providing background information about the pastor's abilities to the congregation. Second, identifying and encouraging pastors' gifts, and affirming their strengths. Third, by finding what the current challenges are (e.g., issues dealing with work, conflict management, family time, pastoral care for the pastor and spouse, and moral/ethical temptations) and providing timely connection to resources as well as resource people, especially mentors and spiritual coaches, for each pastor. Along with the challenges are support people who would be willing to hold the pastor accountable as he/she goes through these challenges. Fourth, some current pastors have not experienced success in their last 12 months of ministry and are in need of support. Fifth, by soliciting the common needs of pastors and creating resource opportunities through professional development workshops, retreats, and personal time away from the office that nurtures and sustains pastors. Sixth, there is a need for advocacy for the pastor and mediation with congregations early and throughout times of conflict. Each of these actions will provide more meaningful and needed support to pastors.

The MC Canada office, area church and/or denominational office should also take active leadership in finding innovative ways to help congregations and pastors in providing resources. First, to help congregations become more aware of their unrealistic expectations of their pastors as well as find ways to train pastors in skills that deal with redefining these expectations. Second, the MC Canada office should create resources and professional development opportunities for the nurturing of their pastors. These professional development opportunities could also include further education toward a graduate degree. Third, to be aware of and to address the various reasons that pastors resign and the reasons for attrition. Fourth, to provide support that deals directly with the current issues pastors are facing. Fifth, to continue promoting the critical factors that support pastors' ministry.

Also important is for the MC Canada office, area church and/or denominational office to become more aware of the complexities of the hiring and "letting go" processes from the perspectives of the pastor. Leading experts need to find ways to address these complexities, finding processes and creating policies that would support more meaningful and amenable transitions for both the

pastor and the congregation, while maintaining a high level of integrity with regard to human rights policies and biblical standards. Excellent suggestions have been presented by study participants and are found in the report.

The MC Canada office needs to prepare for the future vacancy of pastor positions within the next three to five years. Future expectations of current pastors suggest that 36.55% will be leaving MC Canada for various reasons including retirement (15.86%), leaving church ministry temporarily (15.17%), no desire to ever return (4.14%), and employment in another denominational church (1.38%).

Implications for Training Institutions

Although not directly identified in the questionnaire, many of the open-ended responses by participants highlighted the importance of training. Critical is the training of new pastors as well as the continued development of experienced pastors. The training of new pastors should take into account the various competencies that current pastors see as important, yet least competent or trained in. These include areas such as developing leaders, delegating, family time, conflict managing, self-care, teamwork, dealing with emotions, and self-time. As mentioned earlier, specialization required of certain populations should be addressed by training new pastors in more of the following areas: to minister to women, early childhood and children, junior high and senior high youth, singles, and alternative. Also important is the development of mentoring relationships, spiritual advisor interactions, and the networking of peers. Ongoing professional development that helps meet the various issues that pastors deal with would be another key area of focus of training institutions.

Also important is a continued contact between MC Canada and the institutions to ensure that the needs of future and current pastors are met in both formal (courses) and informal (workshops) training, and to ensure that issues identified in the present study are adequately addressed. Added to this is the ability for pastors to develop professionally and to use their participation at these workshops as part of their graduate training requirements.

Conclusion

The current study provides invaluable information in understanding the dynamics of pastoral retention and attrition among MC Canada pastors, providing implications for pastors, congregations, Mennonite Church Canada, and training institutions. Critical to the future success of MC Canada pastors, their congregations, their area church, and their training institutions is applying what has been stated by the participants in the present study into practical responses that will benefit all and that this be done in a timely manner.

–Summary report by Dr. Dieter Schönwetter, Project Director