

# Retired minister becomes pastor to pastors in San Angelo\_53104

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**By George Henson**

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SAN ANGELO—Lenard Hartley has retired, but he hasn't quit. If anything, he has expanded the scope of his influence and ministry.

Hartley led churches throughout the western half of Texas 53 years, but the last five years he has been pastor to a cadre of pastors in San Angelo.

Every Thursday morning from 8 a.m. until 10 a.m., the pastors meet for breakfast, fellowship and study. They also challenge one another, he said.

“Someone might say: 'You said you had a desire to grow in this area. What are you doing to make that happen?’” he offered as an example.

“What we are trying to do is develop godly men and apply the word of God to their lives in a way that meets needs in our world today.”

The weekly gatherings seem to meet a need for the men involved.

“I believe I have been mentored by Jesus Christ himself as he has worked through and spoken through a handful of men to shape and mold me for his purposes. I believe I would have already walked away from what God has called me to do had I not become involved with Bro. Lenard and this band of brothers,” said Jason McGuire, pastor of First Baptist Church in Sterling City.

Pastor Bobby Roger of Calvary Baptist Church in San Angelo added: “Our ministries and personal devotion to God have been deeply enhanced and, when needed, even changed for the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Timmy Russo of Family Worship Fellowship Ministries in San Angelo said the group provides a forum to float new ideas. “It is rare to find a safe environment where one can share views and thoughts without being reprimanded for thinking outside the box,” he said.

When Mike O'Neill was pastor of Northridge Baptist Church in San Angelo, he participated in the group. It was in part his weekly time with fellow pastors that gave him a vision for a new ministry as an associational director of missions.

“Because of God's intervention through mentoring and peer-to-peer learning, I grew and learned that God desired to use me in another area of ministry as director of the Coastal Bend Baptist Association,” he said. “I have no idea where I would be today if it had not been for the love and growth that I experienced there.

“It is very possible that I would not have remained in ministry or would have lived in a mediocre survival mode,” he said, adding he is praying a similar group will form in his association in the near future.

Hartley maintains his contribution to the group is minimal and the ministers gain most from one another.

But he was the one who initiated the group and is the person every pastor mentions when speaking of it.

When the group began to meet, Hartley was assistant pastor at PaulAnn Baptist Church in San Angelo—after his first retirement in 1988 had failed to “take.” In December 2003, Hartley retired again, but he doesn't plan to leave the group.

“I get as much out of it, or more, than they do. It's not a one-way street,” he said. “It is just such a rewarding experience. The bond of friendship is so great. It means a great deal that they pray for me—love, support and encourage me.”

In the beginning, the participants had a hard time being open about their struggles, he admitted. But that obstacle was overcome fairly quickly as the ministers began to get to know one another.

“I knew it would take time to build relationships and that it takes fellowship to build relationships. That's why we start with breakfast and just talking before we study. It is my firm conviction that you build churches and the kingdom of God through relationships,” he said.

Any initial reluctance to be transparent with one another is gone now.

“These fellows have gradually bonded so that they have confidence in one another so that they feel free to share, knowing the others face the same type problems they do,” he said.

Through the years, the pastors have studied numerous books and watched several video series.

A different person leads the discussion each week. Each meeting ends with a discussion of the men's needs and the blessings of the week.

Hartley said his expectations for what the group could become have been

exceeded.

“It's been much more rewarding than I had anticipated and by the men's own testimony of much greater value,” he said.

Like O'Neill, some have left the group, but others also enter the group that ranges from six to 12 men, depending of the pastors' ministry schedules.

“When new pastors are added, they come into a much richer environment than what it was in the beginning. They come in with the opportunity to be blessed by what these fellows have already developed and learned,” Hartley said.

One of the benefits of being a part of the group is participants learn how to head off difficult situations before they arise. The men share their mistakes and difficulties so others can learn from them.

“We try to be gut-level honest, and say, 'Fellows, here are some of the mistakes I made, and this was the result.' So we try to deal with a lot of things before they get there, but if something comes up, we deal with that,” Hartley said.

The ministers have spent some meetings simply praying over specific situations. Knowing the details of each pastor's struggles so his peers can pray specifically for them is another benefit, he said.

It comes down to a group of men who have bonded together for the benefit of all.

“There is just a sweet spirit about these guys. For them, ministry is not a bore or a chore but a joy—and that is what ministry should be, a joy,” Hartley said.

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.