

Editorial: A chilling thought about the pastoral drought

August 3, 2022

Two weeks ago, I wrote on [the current state of pastoral searches](#) in Texas Baptist churches, not knowing how much conversation it would generate. Given the number and type of responses I received, this clearly is a topic of concern for many of us.

I listed six reasons people have given for a dearth of pastoral candidates but didn't consider them at length. I'm also not going to parse them here, because they actually may be a symptom of a more fundamental reason.

I'm about to suggest something I'm having a hard time stating, not because I don't have the words, but because I don't want to type them.

What if we have a lack of pastoral candidates because God isn't calling as many pastors?

All options on the table

If we're going to lay out reasons for a pastoral drought, we need to consider all the possibilities—including those for which God is responsible.

The six reasons listed in my previous editorial fall within our purview. They are things we can fix. They also all rest on one fundamental thing completely outside our ability.

God calls people to ministry; we don't. Could there be fewer ministerial students and candidates because God isn't calling as many people to congregational ministry?

If that's the case, why wouldn't God be calling as many people to congregational ministry? I can think of two possibilities: (1) God's doing something new and different and calling people to that, or (2) God's withholding pastoral leadership from our churches for some cause on our part.

The first possibility calls us to pay more attention to what God is doing in the world and to align ourselves with that. The second possibility is the chilling thought mentioned in the headline. If God is withholding pastoral leadership because of us, what are we to do?

Repent?

First, let me be clearer. By "some cause on our part," I mean our sin, our disobedience. What we are to do, then, is repent of that sin.

What sin are we to repent of? And I use "we" intentionally, because I don't think there are some of us who don't need to repent. Likewise, just because a church has an open ministry position doesn't mean that church is being disciplined—punished—by God. There are churches with full staffs being disciplined by God and in other ways. So, yes, by "we" I mean all of us.

If, however, we got together around a table and listed every sin of the church, my guess is our list would begin with hot-button moral issues. Something about sex would be in the top three, I'm certain.

Various forms of injustice would be near the top of the list. We'd probably also list grievances, infighting and other things that make us sound more like protesters and counterprotesters meeting in the street than the people of God unified in Christ. Without a doubt, we need to repent and rid the church of all these things.

What might appear far down on the list—or might not make the list at

all—are the ways in which what we call “church” is more about our preferences, expectations and culture—about us—than it is about seeking first the kingdom of God—about Jesus Christ. It’s a subtle turn away from God, because it’s baptized in God-language.

In fact, we are so certain of the way we “do church” that we expect God to send us people to manage our stage show. I wonder if God is so fed up with our insistence on doing things our way that God’s turning off the tap of pastoral leadership. And as with climate change, the “most vulnerable” are experiencing the effects first.

God’s activity elsewhere

What really sets me to wondering is seeing what God is doing elsewhere in the world and among people who have immigrated to the United States from elsewhere in the world.

Voice of the Martyrs recently reported about a woman in Iran who has been a Christian less than five years yet has started more than 30 house churches. You should listen to her story on [VOM Radio](#). It will be 24 minutes well spent.

Albert Reyes, CEO and president of [Buckner International](#) and vice president (USA) of [Baptist World Alliance](#), reported to me 2,700 Zomi Baptists—from Myanmar/Burma—from 48 churches around the United States gathered in Nashville, Tenn., July 29 to Aug. 1, for the [Zomi Baptist Churches of America](#) annual meeting. Reyes spoke and preached during their annual meeting, which he described as “electric.” See for yourself [here](#) and [here](#).

These are just two recent examples of the vibrancy and vitality of the church ... “elsewhere.”

Yes, that hits me, too, like a gut punch.

But we mustn't ignore the math. Compared to the 2,700 Zomi Baptists from 48 churches attending their annual meeting, [Texas Baptists reported](#), "More than 1,600 participants in-person and online [representing 5,302 churches] gathered together for the 2021 Texas Baptists Annual Meeting Nov. 14-16" in Galveston.

When I look elsewhere in the world and when I look at international communities in the U.S., I see a vibrant and growing church. We ought to learn from them why that is.

What are we to do?

Don't we need pastoral leaders for such vibrancy to happen among us, too? Why would God turn off the tap of pastoral leadership when our need is so great? Perhaps for the same reason God sent Israel into exile and chastised the churches at Laodicea, Ephesus and Sardis.

Some of our churches have grown cold toward God and warm to the world—liberal, moderate and conservative churches alike. Some of our churches are deaf to God's direction and attuned to their own traditions and expectations—again, without respect to theological position.

The six reasons listed in the previous editorial are all things we can fix. So, what if we fix them? What if pastors call out more of the called? What if theological education is cheap and ubiquitous? What if we do all the things we can do—and do them all right—and it doesn't change the situation, because those things aren't our biggest problem?

Our biggest problem may be we need to stop and ask God: What do we need to repent of here? Who will you send to lead us through repentance and restoration so we can be about your work in this world?

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com. The views expressed are those solely of the author.