

Editorial: Are we entering a pastoral drought?

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Helping churches find ministers—and vice versa—is one of the most important things the *Baptist Standard* does. We are not a placement service or a hiring platform, but [our classifieds page](#)—which is predominantly ads for open ministerial positions—is consistently one of our most visited webpages.

We have new listings each week from churches seeking all manner of ministerial staff. I stay in contact with these churches through the duration of their search. From our correspondence, I've seen two things.

Encouragingly, I've seen churches successfully conclude their searches, calling new pastors and ministers even during the toughest weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soberingly, I've also seen churches despair whether they will have even a single resumé to consider or a candidate to interview.

On one hand, I celebrate Christ's continuing provision for his body—the church. On the other hand, I wonder what God desires for the many open pastorates and ministry positions. Like the churches with long-term searches, I wonder if we are entering a pastoral drought.

So, I asked a few people more acquainted than me with the state of the pastoral search process among Texas Baptist churches. I wanted to know is it really taking longer to find ministers, and are there really fewer ministers to find?

Texas Baptist pastorates by the numbers

To gain a general picture about the state of the pastoral search process, I asked Texas Baptists staff members for the number of BGCT-affiliated churches, the ratio of full-time to part-time pastoral positions among them, age demographics of pastors currently serving, how many open positions existed, and how many students in BGCT-affiliated schools plan to enter the pastorate.

As of July 20, Texas Baptists reported 5,302 churches: 2,814 Anglo; 889 African American; 1,066 Hispanic; 310 intercultural (Arabic, Brazilian, Burmese, Chinese, Congolese, Ethiopian, Indian, Nigerian, Ukrainian, Vietnamese and others); and 223 multicultural.

Note: 2,488 BGCT-affiliated churches—almost 47 percent—are designated as something other than Anglo. Noted below: The pastors of the majority of these churches are bivocational, impacting pastor compensation, the pastor's ability to pursue theological education and training, and the pastor search process.

During spring 2022, 90 churches were on my contact list. Most of those had placed a classified ad with us for an open ministerial position. Some had openings I knew about outside of our classifieds. Also, most of the churches were in Texas and affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas; some were in other states.

Texas Baptists does not gather age demographics. As a result, I was not able to determine how many Texas Baptist pastors are young adults, middle-aged or senior adults. However, a wider study shows an aging pastorate.

A [2017 Barna study](#) determined 17 percent of American pastors were 65 or

older, compared to 6 percent in 1992. Also, 15 percent were 40 and younger in 2017, compared to 33 percent in 1992. The median age of pastors increased by 10 years—from 44 to 54 years old—from 1992 to 2017. Barna noted several reasons for this shift, not all of which are troublesome.

The following numbers were reported in spring 2022 for Texas Baptist pastors:

- 4,768 pastors: 1,724 full time; 1,018 bivocational; 81 interim; unknown status for 1,945, likely due to incomplete or unreturned annual church profiles.
- Large majorities of African American and Hispanic pastors—reported as 90 percent each—are bivocational, significantly more than Anglo pastors—reported at 55 percent. The “word on the street” is these percentages are growing. Filling a bivocational pastorate comes with its own set of challenges, as noted above.
- More than 300 Texas Baptist churches were reported to be without a pastor.

Karl Fickling, coordinator of Texas Baptists interim church services, observed anecdotally: “The pandemic greatly slowed the movement of pastors. Older pastors didn’t retire because they didn’t want to leave their beloved churches in a bind,” younger pastors were reluctant to relocate during the pandemic, and “interims have stayed in place longer than usual,” which he also attributes to the pandemic.

And then he reported what search committees have communicated to me: “There is a smaller pool of resumes, making the search hard.”

Preparing pastors

Churches seeking pastors is only one part of the equation. Pastors are another part; there have to be pastors to seek. Baptists in Texas have sought to meet that need almost as long as there have been Baptists in Texas.

Steve Mullen, Texas Baptists' director of theological education, reported 61 undergraduate and 184 graduate students—including 35 Doctor of Ministry degree students—attending [BGCT-affiliated schools](#) in 2021 “indicated their desire to pursue pastoral ministry.” In 2022, that number increased by 43 to 80 undergraduate and 208 graduate students.

Not all these students come from Texas, nor do all of them stay in Texas.

Putting the numbers together

Based on the information provided, more than 300 Texas Baptist churches are without a pastor. In 2022, 288 students in BGCT-affiliated schools intended to pursue the pastorate. Admittedly, this is a snapshot, but it is a view that seems to confirm observations.

If all 288 students seek an open pastorate in Texas this year and each one is called by a Texas Baptist church, at least 12 pastorates still will be open in Texas Baptist churches. Who will fill them?

In reality, not all 288 students will become pastors, not all of them will stay in Texas, and not all of them will seek a pastorate this year. Additionally, some of them will seek a pastorate and not be called by a church. Of those who are called to pastor a Texas Baptist church, there is a good chance some of them will be bivocational.

The question we'd all like answered: Why?

On its face, it looks like Texas isn't preparing enough pastors for Texas churches, and not because Texas isn't trying. But preparing pastors also is just one part of the equation. We also need to consider why more pastorates are open than there are candidates to fill them.

I have heard all the following reasons:

- Pastors and churches aren't calling out the called.
- Pastoral ministry and theological education are not seen as important or necessary.
- Theological education is not affordable or accessible, though this is changing.
- Many churches are in undesirable locations.
- Many churches offer too little compensation.
- Some churches have bad reputations and are avoided by possible candidates.

There is some truth in each of the above reasons, but no single reason is a complete explanation by itself. The truth is more complicated and less comfortable. We all have a part to play in the current state of the pastoral search process.

What do we do?

Before pointing fingers and rushing to fix problems, we need to listen for God's direction. What does God want to happen in our churches and with our pastors? Sounds "super spiritual" for an editorial, but try living into it; it's not as trite as it sounds.

God might want us to change our expectations of how a church should function and what a pastor is and does as part of that functioning.

God might have something to say about how we call, prepare and compensate our pastors. We may need to make significant changes.

God definitely has something to say to each person God calls to the pastorate about where that person serves and why. The only right response is to submit to wherever God leads.

God also has something to say to churches with bad reputations, something those churches need to hear and heed, regardless of a pastor search.

Yes, God has something to say to all of us about the state of the pastorate.

Are we entering a pastoral drought? Drought is a strong word, but “dry season” wouldn’t be saying too much. It also wouldn’t be saying too much to lay the responsibility for this dry season on all of us.

If your church is seeking a pastor, I recommend the resources available [here](#).

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