

Editorial: ‘Independence Day:’ Why did the pastor leave?

July 2, 2025

On Independence Day, we celebrate telling King George III of Great Britain what we thought of his policies and what we were going to do about it. We were breaking free.

Though we celebrate our nation’s birthday on July 4, 1776, we weren’t officially free until the Treaty of Paris in 1783, when George III accepted the 13 American colonies’ independence ... after we routed his army at Yorktown in 1781. A strong victory helps persuade a king.

For the last two years, I’ve left the country on or near July 4. It’s an interesting thing, as a U.S. citizen, to leave the country when my fellow citizens are celebrating our independence from Great Britain. It’s a bit more interesting this year as I depart for Australia.

I’ve left then, not to avoid celebrating our independence, but because that’s when Baptist World Alliance annual meetings take place. This year is the 23rd Baptist World Alliance World Congress. We will begin reporting on it next week from Brisbane.

Confluence of concerns

As I prepare for this trip, I’m also preparing for a longer period away—a sabbatical. I have a lot to say about that, but I will save most of it for when I return. What I will say here is I am extremely grateful for the significant investment the *Baptist Standard* board of directors has made in me and our organization by granting me this time away.

As I prepare for BWA in Australia and the several-week sabbatical to follow, I'm also in contact with churches seeking ministers through our classified ads. I communicate with them and pray for them each month. Seeking a minister carries a weight different from other staff searches—inside and outside of the church. And too often, minister searches are disheartening.

So, I have my own (hopefully temporary) leaving and others' (permanent) leaving on my mind.

When I was called away from one church I served, a compassionate and key leader came to my office distraught. He exhaled as he sat down, "What do we do?" Another way of phrasing his question is, "Why did the pastor leave?"

The church had experienced significant conflict and minister turnover. He wanted to know what the church needed to do to improve the ministerial staff situation. I had quick, certain and specific advice for their specific situation: "Call ministers from this area." They did, and it seemed to work well.

But ministers leave churches for many reasons, and not all of them are bad.

Why did the pastor leave?

I'm going to start with a couple of positive reasons ministers leave a church.

Frequently, a minister is called to another place of service when he or she has grown, matured, developed into the leader needed in another place. They have produced good fruit in their current ministry, and that ministry is enjoying the results. This is incredibly positive.

Another positive reason a minister moves to another ministry position is because he or she has accomplished what God called him or her to do and

is being called by God elsewhere.

Churches in either of these situations often are healthy and celebrate the minister's new call, even while they grieve the loss and wish they didn't have to find a new minister themselves. They understand and even cherish the independent nature of Baptist ministry and, more so, the independence of God's Spirit to move wherever and whenever the Spirit will.

And here's the not-so-positive. Some churches celebrate a minister's leaving as "good riddance." In that case, the problem could be the church, the minister or both.

Other churches don't celebrate a minister leaving because they are angry or ashamed of it. They may have a low view of themselves, maybe thinking they are not worthy of a long-tenured minister. They ask, "What's wrong with us?"

Still other churches are known as "pastor killers." They chew up and spit out minister after minister. Some see it as their job to do that. Or they work their ministers to death, sometimes literally. These churches have a systemic sickness.

Churches of one of these types that either don't celebrate a minister's departure or celebrate it for the wrong reasons need to take stock of themselves. They also should submit to the guidance of a seasoned minister who can help them start on the road to becoming a healthy church.

One way to prolong pastoral tenure

Being a minister is hard. I've worked in manual labor, retail, social work and other non-ministerial jobs. I've been blue collar and white collar. In my experience, nothing required all of me the way being a pastor does.

Too many pastors, after years of being "on" 24/7, of being all things to all

people all the time, of spending themselves and being spent leave either physically or mentally because they're empty and need a reset.

For churches working their ministers to death—or whose ministers are working themselves to death—there's one thing you can do to improve your ministers' and your church's situation. Give your ministers a sabbatical. Yes, you can.

It is a significant investment—of time and money. It also is a sacrifice for those churches that don't already have a sabbatical in their budget and/or policy. But a church needs to ask itself if it's worth the investment to keep its minister(s) strong and healthy—spiritually, mentally and physically—so their minister(s) can continue to lead the church well.

Also, there are organizations and individuals who have the means and the desire to help you afford a sabbatical and to provide interim ministerial staff. They're just waiting for you to reach out to them.

Something worth celebrating

I haven't been on a sabbatical yet, but I'm really looking forward to the one I mentioned earlier. Even though I haven't enjoyed a sabbatical yet myself, I've heard from many ministers over the years who have. Not a single one has complained about being given a sabbatical. Not a single one has wished they hadn't taken one. Most say it changed (almost) everything for them.

What does a sabbatical have to do with Independence Day? A minister asking for a sabbatical is not the American colonists telling King George III where to go. Giving a minister a sabbatical is not conceding ground. It's a powerful investment in your minister and, by extension, your church. That's something worth some fireworks.

Scott Collins will serve as our interim editor while I am on sabbatical. Scott recently retired as vice president of communications for Buckner International, where he served more than 30 years. Prior to that he was head of communications at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

I will write next week's editorial from Australia. Then, Scott will oversee opinion content until I return.

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