

Ronald Session: 'I want to change a generation'

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Ronald Session has been senior pastor of The Shiloh Church in Garland six years after serving as interim four months. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

- Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?

My first ministry assignment was an unpaid position at my home church in Houston as the youth minister for Damascus Missionary Baptist Church. I was pastor of ministry development at Victory Park Baptist Church for two years. My first senior pastorate was at Sims Chapel Baptist Church in Garland. Then I left there to become the executive pastor for Mount Pisgah Baptist Church in Dallas. Five months into that assignment, the former pastor of Shiloh, who is a fraternity brother of mine, asked me to be interim for a three- to six-month period so Shiloh could call a pastor. God began to overwhelm us in both numerical and financial growth, so we all eventually got around to the fact that God was blessing this partnership. All of this happened as I was still serving as executive pastor at Mount Pisgah.

Shiloh had agreed to allow me to fulfill my two-year obligation to Mount Pisgah so that I could keep my word to them. My friend at Mount Pisgah had enough foresight and wisdom to release me so that I could fully serve the people of Shiloh. He knew I would not quit otherwise. Within eight months of being let go, Shiloh exploded in growth, and we closed on

another property three times the size of where we started.

- Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Houston, Texas in a part of the city called the Sixth Ward, five minutes northwest of downtown by automobile. I grew up so close to downtown Houston that I could walk there if I wanted to. And I did on several occasions.

- How did you come to faith in Christ?

I grew up under Dr. L.F. Chaney, the first black pastor to hold an earned advance degree in education in the city. He was a faithful minister of the word. He led me to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, there were other faithful saints who saw something in me and began pouring into my life. There was I.H. Grimble, who perhaps had the most profound impact on my early ministry as anyone. Edna Walls and J. L. Hardeman were others who impacted my faith journey as well as my ministry.

- Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

I received degrees from Texas Southern University in Houston, bachelor of arts in psychology and master of arts in clinical sociology, and Dallas Baptist University, master of arts in theological studies. I'm currently at the project stage of my doctor of ministry degree from Anderson University in Anderson, S.C.

Ministry/church

- Why do you feel called into ministry?

I honestly can say from the time I was 12 years old, I knew God was inspiring me. It wasn't until I was 14 years old that I began to understand God was calling me to share his word. I was afraid no one would believe my call.

I used to evangelize adults throughout the community and beyond as a teenager. I eventually announced a call when I was 18 years old. Eighteen people gave their lives to Christ at my first message. I have a sense God wanted to use me in this way for a very long time now, and I still feel the same excited nervousness when I preach every week.

- What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

Preaching is a pretty amazing part of the work that I do, but I love being that guy who is able to sit with families in the most difficult seasons of life. I like being there when the baby is born. I like counseling young couples and not-so-young couples when they have decided to spend their lives together. I like sitting around talking with the seniors about days gone by. I love listening to young people tell me about what is on the horizon. Being in school so much has made these moments harder to come by, but when I do get them, I treasure them about most of the other things I get to do besides my family.

- What one aspect of congregational life would you like to change?

I'd like to see a decrease in the selfishness of individual members and among entire congregations. I work very hard to help Shiloh experience the liberation of generosity. We actively look for churches that are less fortunate than us to share our resources out of our own lack. Selfishness is anti-Christian. Christ gave his life for those who believe and thereby set a standard for how we should relate to one another.

I believe there would be fewer worship wars, fights over space, disagreements over methods and priorities if congregations learned how to put the needs of one another first.

- If you could launch any new ministry—individually, through your congregation or through another organization—what would it be? Why?

I would launch a fraternity-style mentorship program for at-risk boys. I am tired of the devastation that is taking place in our urban centers across the country. There is a reason these kids end up in the situations they do. Many are fatherless. Some are in the most dysfunctional environments. I don't want to sit in a circle and talk about what went wrong. I want to be able to affect real change in their circumstance. I want to be resourced well enough that if the rent needs to be paid, we could do it, but then assess why the financial crisis occurred in the first place.

I'd like to catch these young men before they have a negative encounter with law enforcement. We would make sure they would have bigger goals in mind to help them focus on pulling themselves up. I would invite members of law enforcement, businessmen, teachers, event planners and other professionals to help these young men gain understanding of a life other than the one that they have been living. I want to change a generation.

- What qualities do you look for in a congregation?

I look for congregations to be loving, cooperative, adventurous and faithful. If a congregation can hold these qualities in balance, I believe there is nothing they cannot accomplish for the kingdom. Congregations who are truly loving, not just to the people that they are familiar with but strangers as well, have a heart to reach the community. They don't mind sharing their faith and welcoming new people into their family of faith.

I look for an adventurous spirit in a congregation. When congregations are adventurous, they are willing to trust God to do some pretty amazing things. Shiloh showed that kind of spirit about five years ago when we moved into our current location. It was purely a faith move, and we had to trust God with all we had. It is still an exercise in faith, but by the grace of God, we are holding on.

That's the stuff that gets me up in the morning. I live for a people who are willing to trust God to do what everyone is convinced is impossible but they are willing to roll up their sleeves and see it through. That's good stuff!

I'm excited about the faithfulness of a congregation. When a group of believers stand firm on the truth to which they have committed their lives to regardless to the changing tides of culture, I'm encouraged. I see far too many congregations willing to compromise truth for bodies in the pews. Over and over again, the Apostle Paul encourages churches to remain steadfast in the faith. Why is that? I believe that even in the first century he knew how easy it would be to drift with culture and abandon the Christ.

- Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.

Not enough volunteers to do the hard work of leading the next generation.

Not enough resources to develop children and students. This is the area that we have taken the hardest hit.

Not enough resources to help the nearly 4,000 homeless that are within a five-mile radius of us.

About Baptists

- What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?

Baptists need to be clear about our stance on politics and religion. We have married the pulpit to a party and have left a significant part of our identity injured on the public square. You don't have to agree, but for many, Southern Baptists look more like the establishment rather than the counter-cultural of Christ followers we were intended to be.

We don't look as compassionate as I know that we are for the most part.

The conventions and associations should identify and disassociate with any pastor or congregation who subscribe to any divisive group that dulls the light of the gospel we preach.

About Ronald

- What is the impact of ministry on your family?

It has meant less time for them with me. It has been difficult at times to manage school, work and family. The messy details of life take all the attention a person has. Now multiply that by several people. My kids are the ones who miss out the most. They are teenagers who are extremely active, and I'm sure they would appreciate if their dad was able to be a part of more of their activities.

My profound hope is that they do not grow up and despise the church that I love so much. I pray that they love Jesus as much as I do.

- Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?

Peter, because he was a well-intentioned man but tremendously flawed. He was loyal to Jesus but did not always know the right thing to say or do. He had great enthusiasm, but he was unsure of himself when confronted with the new reality that God was going to include Gentiles in the promise. He is a character with great depth and complexity. He takes the conversation further, like when he chastised Jesus about his impending death, or when he announced Jesus was the Christ, or even when he cut off Malchus' ear.

He pushes the narrative to another level. I hope I am doing that in some positive way through my life and ministry. I think that I resonate with him perhaps more than the others in the bible.

- What single event during your life that has had the most impact on your ministry now?

My home church is the second-oldest African-American Baptist church in the city of Houston. We were having an afternoon service with guests when a Hispanic man who had obviously been drinking wanted to come inside to the worship service. The ushers wanted to know if they should let him in. I was the minister sent to the back to assist. I was led to allow him to come in if he would sit quietly and not make a scene. He did that but was asked to leave by an older member just moments after I said it was OK for him to stay. I was later admonished not to do that again, especially when there are guests in the service.

That had such an incredible effect on me that I swore that anyone would be welcomed to come and worship with the church I led. Until this day, that remains my understanding of the gospel call—whosoever will, let them come.

That is not to say I do not believe in order or church discipline. I do believe in such, but that was not the case. I do not believe in discriminating against people simply because they are living a worldly life. I expressly believe those are the very ones we are sent to share the good news of Jesus with.

Let them come!

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