

Wesley Shotwell: Measuring ministry by a 'different standard'

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Wesley Shotwell has been pastor of Ash Creek Baptist Church in Azle 19 years. 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?

In college, I served as the minister of youth and music at Oglesby Baptist Church in Oglesby and then as the minister to college students at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Waco.

My first full-time pastorate was Excell Baptist Church in Clarksville, Tenn., from 1987 to 1991. Then I was pastor of Hickory Hollow Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., from 1991 to 1997.

In January 1998, I began as pastor of Ash Creek Baptist Church.

- Where did you grow up?

Dallas until age 14, then Franklin, Tenn., during high school.

- How did you come to faith in Christ?

My parents were very faithful believers and influenced my life and my decision to follow Christ. Having grown up in church, the religious education I received, as well as the influence of many adults, made me aware of the work of the Holy Spirit convicting me of sin and convincing me of the need of a Savior. At the age of 11, I made that decision public on Easter Sunday 1973 and was baptized by my father the next Sunday.

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

Bachelor of arts in speech communication, Baylor University, 1984

Master of divinity, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987

Doctor of ministry, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, 1990

Ministry/church

- Why do you feel called into ministry?

Ministry gives me the opportunity to devote full time to activity with eternal significance. Every Christian should be engaging in spiritual activity for the well-being of others, but in ministry, we can devote more of ourselves in serving God and serving others. As a teenager, I knew I had certain gifts that would be useful in ministry and felt the Holy Spirit urging me to use those gifts in ministry.

- What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?

Funerals. That may sound strange and even morbid, but the crux of the gospel is the hope we have in the fact Christ has defeated death. It is at the funeral when you have the opportunity to remind people of why we have faith. People of faith can grieve, but we do not grieve like people with no hope. Funerals are the purest moment of ministry for me; a time when the message we convey can truly show God's grace. Also, funerals give us an opportunity to leave a positive impression of the gospel on people who do

not yet believe and who may never be in church except for this moment. Funerals can show unbelievers there really is hope in Christ.

- How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?

My perspective on success has changed. Like most ministers, I suppose, we search for some sort of objective measurement by which to define ministerial success. In business, success can be measured by units sold, profits gained or rising stock prices.

Ministry must be measured by a different standard, although as a young minister I fell into the trap of objectively measuring how successful I was by answering objective questions: How many people did I baptize? How many people came to Sunday school or worship? How much money did we collect? Do they like me? Did they like my sermon today?

While those questions are not irrelevant, the older I get, I realize success in ministry is deeper. It is not about whether they like my sermon or me. It is about people forming a community of faith that is faithful to the gospel.

When a 9-year-old boy came to me with excitement in his eyes to tell me he had told his friend about Jesus, I counted that a success. When a ministry of our church works to make someone's home livable, or a Sunday school class provides food for the hungry people in our community, or the RAs and GAs get excited about a missions project, it is a success. When the church is able to deal with conflict in a mature, Christ-like manner and compromise with each other and still love one another in unity if not in uniformity, that is a success.

Those kinds of things are not the things we report on the Annual Church Profile, but I think they are more important. Even though we cannot put an objective number on those things, they are the things that remind me of what a healthy community of faith is about.

- What qualities do you look for in a congregation?

1. Do they love one another? This is the most important one.

2. Can they deal with conflict in ways that are healthy and lead to solutions to problems that are better because of healthy conflict resolution? Do the people who disagree with a decision of the church still live in unity with the rest of the church?

3. Is there mature lay leadership who can make wise decisions?

4. Is there a heart for missions, evangelism, prayer, worship, ministry to the poor and oppressed, and a thirst for justice in the world?

5. Does the church reflect the demographics of the community in which it is located?

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

1. Competition on Sunday for the attention of people. Children's sporting events and other extra-curricular activities take families away from church attendance too often. Also, those who are more affluent are tempted to invest time and money in recreational activities that reduce their investment in church.

2. The challenge of reaching the millennial generation. It is very difficult to reach people in their 20s and early 30s. They are spiritual, and many of them grew up in church, but now they have no interest in church or organized religion.

3. Giving to the church by the next generation. Although they do not have the resources of older adults yet, many younger adults have not developed the spiritual discipline of tithing. In the decade to come, this could be a real challenge.

About Wesley

- Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

My Dad, *Larry Shotwell*. He was by far the most significant influence in ministry. I watched his leadership style and skills in ministry and learned from him how to lead people. He taught me about Sunday school and administration.

My Uncle, *Bob Edd Shotwell*. I listened to Bob Edd and my Dad talk and debate about church work when we were together as a family for holidays and other family get-togethers. He was a mentor to many, many people in Texas, and I learned much from him.

Larry Nixon. Larry was my pastor when I was in college. He trained a group of ministerial students in the church by meeting with us once a week to talk about ministry, preaching, pastoral care and other things. He allowed us to preach from time to time to give us experience.

- What did you learn on the job you wish you learned in seminary?

1. Leadership skills.

2. Church administration. How do you lead a church to put together a budget? What is the role of deacons, committees, staff, etc.

3. Conflict resolution.

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

Jeremiah. I identify with him often. Ministry is frustrating sometimes, and you wonder why you are doing it when things are not going as well as you think they should. Jeremiah faced incredible frustration and was very honest with God about how he felt. But he continued to be faithful, even though from his standpoint, he was a failure. Now we think of him as one of

the greatest of the prophets.

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