



their pastor reported almost no change in worship attendance. Only half of churches with the same pastor reported any decline in worship attendance.

The relationship between clergy turnover and growth is less clear in conservative Protestant churches. Conservative Protestant churches that lost their 2001 pastor actually increased their worship attendance by an average of almost 18 attendees. Those conservative Protestant congregations that retained their pastor declined slightly in size.

Do pastoral turnovers create numerical decline? It's complicated. Many factors play a role in decreasing or increasing worship attendance and growing church vitality. Sometimes numerical decline even precedes the pastor's departure. Any picture of clergy turnover does not capture the *quality* of pastoral leadership. The consequences for the congregation are quite different when an effective leader departs versus when an ineffective pastor leaves for a new call.

### Positive Consequences of Clergy Turnover?

Research indicates that longer tenures give pastors more time to build relationships, lead through a period of change, and resolve long-standing conflict. Further, a new pastor can take several years to reinvigorate members' energy and investment in congregational life after such a transition.

New pastors are more likely to lead effectively if they listen to members' responses to the following:

- What issues and questions dominate the discussions at governing board meetings?
- What are the most important things that happened in the congregation in the past several years?
- What are some of the best things happening in the congregation right now?
- What are some of your hopes and dreams for the congregation over the next five years?

The first few years of a new pastorate set the stage for long-term effectiveness. In smaller churches especially, new pastors must first earn the trust of members. Visiting and building relationships helps the new pastor identify and affirm the gifts and talents in the congregation. In larger congregations, lay leaders want to see if the new pastor is a proactive leader who is willing to take the initiative or a more reactive leader who responds to others' initiative.

New ministers invariably inherit staff currently employed by the congregation. Lay leadership smooths the way when they quietly inform existing staff members that the new pastor will be given the

authority to build a new staff team and those terminations may be made by the new pastor. In this way, lay leadership and not the new pastor introduce the idea that staff changes may be necessary.

Advice to new pastors: Proceed with caution—only so much can be accomplished in the first year. It is enough to start a process where members begin to grasp a new vision for the future and become increasingly aware of new possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

### Long Pastorates as More Chapters

If a new pastor negotiates the first year or chapter with an interim understanding—as a transitional leader between the past and the future, the stage is set for the next successful chapter. Long pastorates are actually a series of terms or chapters. Change necessitates that the current contract between the pastor and the congregation must be renegotiated. A new contract calls for retraining lay leaders, recruiting leaders with different skills, employing a new leadership team, and perhaps even revising existing rules. Likewise, pastors must reassess their role, leadership style, and ability to recreate themselves for the new congregation forming before them. Pastors who grasp the concept of chapters are better equipped to serve beyond the first or second term, which lasts between five and ten years.

In year three, James is still in his first term as pastor of the small rural church. Absent any major conflict, after another two or three years, he can discern whether his gifts and skills are right for the congregation's next chapter. Gloria, in year ten, has clearly finished a first term. Her discernment will center on whether her call to the congregation is going to be a long-term pastorate. If Jeremy is going to seriously consider a new call, his job is to ask questions to learn about the congregation's focus and commitments. Together he and the lay leadership can discern if his gifts are likely to bear fruit for the church's next chapter.

In every chapter of ministry, the goal is to flourish. Lillian Daniel, a United Church of Christ pastor captures the joy of ministry: "I do love being a minister. I love the agility it calls forth in me and the chaos that only Jesus could organize into a calling."<sup>3</sup>

1. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2001–2008

([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)).

2. Material drawn from *Wisdom from Lyle E. Schaller*, edited by Warren Bird (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012).

3. "Minute Fifty Four," *What is Good Ministry?*

([www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu)).