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# GROWTH POINTS

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## Pastoral Tenure

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In a culture marked by speed, transitions, and constant change, the idea of staying in one place for a long time can feel foreign.

Yet when it comes to meaningful work and lasting impact, there is something to be said for tenure. The longer a person remains in a role, the deeper their roots, the stronger their influence, and the more fruitful their labor.

Tenure is about transformation over time. This principle is true in ministry leadership, but it applies just as well to business, education, healthcare, and other vocational callings.

The first year in a position is often about survival. You're learning names, systems, and unspoken expectations.

The second and third years involve building credibility, while introducing change.

But it's often not until years five, six, or seven that a leader begins to see the fruit of their labor.

Many people never stay long enough to reach that point. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median tenure for American workers is about 4.1 years. For younger workers, it's often much less. And while short stays may offer exposure and variety, they rarely allow the depth that leads to lasting success.

As of the most recent data:

- The average tenure of a solo pastor in a single church in the United States is about 3.5 to 4 years.

- For senior pastors, tenure is a bit longer—closer to 6 to 8 years, especially in stable or larger congregations.

- Denominational differences are significant. For example:

- > In mainline denominations (like Methodist, Presbyterian, or Lutheran), pastoral appointments are often shorter and more structured.

- > In non-denominational and evangelical churches, pastors often serve longer, especially when they're founders with strong community ties.

- In smaller churches—those with fewer than 200 members—the tenure tends to be significantly shorter, often 3 to 5 years. These churches face high turnover, sometimes because of financial strain, unrealistic expectations, or burnout.

- Larger churches, on the other hand, often reflect more stable leadership. Senior pastors in these settings commonly serve 10 years or more, especially if they helped found or revitalize the congregation. This kind of longevity allows a leader to move beyond surface changes and into true spiritual formation and cultural shaping.

## Why does this matter?

First, because tenure builds trust, and trust increases over time.

Vision is clarified through seasons. True discipleship, cultural change, and missional engagement require more than three or four-year cycles. Trust isn't granted overnight; it's earned through shared experience. When coworkers, staff, or team members know you're not just passing through, they warm up to you. Relationships and conversations become honest. People are more likely to follow a leader they believe is in it for the long haul.

Second, because tenure increases wisdom.

Every organization has patterns, histories, and hidden landmines. The longer you stay, the more you understand the why behind the what. You learn when to press forward and when to wait. You recognize which ideas will take root and which ones may fall flat. That kind of discernment only comes with time.

Third, because longer tenure correlates with church health and growth.

Conversely, short tenures lead to instability and repeated resets in vision and direction. Short pastoral tenures correlate to decline or plateau.

In church leadership, the early years are like plowing hard ground. The soil is resistant, and the work is slow. But once the soil is softened, seeds are planted, and over time, harvests come.

Longevity gives you the advantage of accumulated knowledge, relational capital, and strategic clarity.

That doesn't mean every role is a lifelong appointment. There are times when God calls a person to move on. But as a general principle, staying power leads to lasting fruit. It's not the fast start that counts—it's the faithful finish.

I often tell pastors: don't underestimate the power of staying. While the grass may look greener elsewhere, real fruit comes from digging in deep where you are. The Spirit of God moves in both the quick and the quiet, but it's often in the quiet, long obedience that transformation takes place.

For church boards and search committees, this reflection is just as important. If you're constantly seeing pastoral turnover every 3-4 years, it might be time to ask: Are we creating the environment for long-term ministry success?

For pastors wondering whether to move on, consider this—your greatest ministry may be just around the corner, and it might not require a new zip code.

For younger leaders wondering if they should stick it out: consider the value of tenure. The deeper the roots, the stronger the tree. The deeper the relationships, the stronger the commitment.

Success, in the end, often comes not from doing more, but from staying long enough for your work to matter.

Sometimes, the most strategic thing you can do is this: **stay**.

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