

Five Stages of a Pastor's Ministry

October 5, 2013 by Thom Rainer

For more than two decades I have studied, contemplated, and written about the tenure of a pastor. Why is pastoral tenure relatively brief on the average? Does that tenure contain common and distinct stages? Is there a particular point in the tenure when more pastors leave the church?

The more I study the phenomenon of pastoral tenure, the more I am convinced there are distinct stages with clear characteristics. Certainly I understand that there are numbers of exceptions to my delineations. I am also fully aware that the years I designate for each stage are not precise.

Nevertheless, I have some level of confidence in my findings. Though I have attempted to name the stages in the past, I offer in this article the “why” behind each stage.

- **Year 1: Honeymoon.** Both pastor and church have a blank slate and they enter the relationship hoping and believing the best about each other. Perhaps the pastor was weary of his previous pastorate, and perhaps the church was happy to replace their former pastor. For a season, neither can do wrong in the other's eyes. That season does not usually last long.
- **Years 2 and 3: Conflicts and Challenges.** No pastor is perfect. No church is perfect. Each party discovers the imperfections after a few months. Like a newlywed couple, they began to have their differences after a while. The spiritual health of both the pastor and the church will likely determine the severity of the conflicts and challenges.
- **Years 4 and 5: Crossroads, Part 1.** This period is one of the most critical in the relationship. If the conflict was severe, the pastor will likely leave or be forced out. Indeed, these years, four and five, are the most common years when a pastor leaves a church. On the other hand, if the pastor and the church manage their relationship well, they can often look forward to some of the best years ahead.
- **Years 6 to 10: Fruit and Harvest.** My research is not complete, but it's more than anecdotal. A church is likely to experience some of its best years, by almost any metrics, during this period of a pastor's tenure. Indeed, in my interviews with both pastors and members, I have heard this theme repeated. Both parties have worked through the tough times. They now trust each other and love each other more deeply.
- **Years 11 and beyond: Crossroads, Part 2.** During the first crossroads era, the pastor decides to stay or leave. Or the congregations may make the decision. During this relatively rare tenure beyond ten years, the pastor himself will go down one of two paths. He will be reinvigorated as a leader and ready to tackle new challenges and cast new visions. Or he will be resistant to the change around him, and then become complacent. I have seen both extremes, but I am still struggling to understand why pastors go down one path versus the other.

Pastoral tenure matters. It is far too short in many churches. I do think it is critical for us to understand tenure, because the health of the church is directly impacted by it. I will continue to study the issue and report to you as I have more pertinent information.