

THE COMING SHORTAGE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Facing the Facts, Finding the Way

Jesus put it bluntly: “the laborers are few.” He did not mince words. He challenged the disciples to face the facts and find the way forward. He told them to pray to the Lord of the harvest. They were to ask for laborers for an abundant harvest of souls.

God raises up gospel laborers at times and seasons for the compelling advance of His glory and name. He did it at times during the twentieth century. Informed Christian leaders share a common urgent concern now in the twenty-first century. There are plainly not enough younger pastors, missionaries, and evangelists to replace the aging, graying, retiring, and dying generation of Christian leaders. They are just not there, not in the needed numbers. They are not on the horizon. They are not on the radar. We need to open our eyes and get real.

On March 1, 2017, the Barna Group sounded the alarm in a study called [“The Aging of America’s Pastors.”](#) In summary, they found that there are far fewer young pastors than in the early 1990s. The average age of pastors has advanced by 10 years since then. Christian young people are less interested in vocational church ministry and more interested in other models of influence. Most pastors are finding it difficult to find a successor to mentor. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, said: “There are now more full-time senior pastors over the age of 65 than under the age of 40. It is urgent that denominations, networks and independent churches determine how to best motivate, mobilize, resource and deploy more younger pastors.”

In the summer of 2017, I studied the same issue, not being aware at the time of that recently released Barna study. My study encompassed approximately 2,000 active pastors, pastoral staff, missionaries, camp directors, and chaplains. I found that almost 40% of the senior pastors were 60 and older, and 75% of senior pastors were 50 and older. The same essential percentages held true for missionaries, camp directors, and chaplains, except that an even higher percentage were over 60 years old. These are men in my immediate circles, not in the broader base of the Barna survey. Only about 10% of the pastors in my survey were under the age of 40. The number of men serving in “second man” pastoral staff positions who might conceivably become senior pastors was only about one-fourth to one-third the number needed. I challenge you to study your own circle of pastors and Christian servants and see what you find.

What factors have contributed to the decline in Christian ministry? Ministerial enrollment in Christian colleges generally declined during the early 1980s then leveled off for 15 years. Ministerial interest has declined precipitously in recent years. Numerous Bible colleges and seminaries have struggled to remain open while others have closed, further eroding the base of willing workers. The decline of solid Christian families is without a doubt a major factor. Too many parents prefer for their children to enjoy the good life of material comfort and success, prioritizing the temporal over the eternal.

Even worse, the pull of hedonism, the pollution of pornography, and incessant distraction of visual media compromise the moral character, mental acuity, and spiritual focus of people young and old. Adolescence extends well into one’s twenties with all too many young adults maturing late and wasting some of their best years in aimless, purposeless, self-absorbed living. Moral

clarity on the most basic of biblical issues is confused by a culture that has reversed God's intentions for His creation on almost every front. Many fine young people and young adults are going against the flow of the culture and seeking to put God first and foremost in their lives. How we commend them for their holy pursuit of God's plan for their lives!

We must find a way forward. We must strive to accomplish the Great Commission in our day. Earth's population is approaching 8 billion. A billion is a 1,000 million. A million dollars is a stack of \$1,000 bills eight inches high. A billion dollars is a stack of \$1,000 bills 666 feet high – 111 feet higher than the Washington Monument. Think about the world's population. Are we alarmed at how many are dropping into hell daily? The world needs to be reached for Christ. "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few."

As Christ said, **meeting the need begins with earnest prayer**. He has promised to answer our prayers. We know what God did in the twentieth century, and we know that He can do it again. Thousands of Bible-believing churches were planted at home and abroad. Thousands of Christian schools were founded to educate young people. Numerous Christian colleges and seminaries prepared willing servants and leaders to go forth. Christian camps strongly contributed to the advance of the Gospel. God touched thousands of pastors, missionaries, evangelists, Christian educators, and workers to go with the Gospel. Many fine mission boards facilitated and upheld missionaries in their quest for souls. God can do it again! But we must seek Him in earnest prayer. We all need revival, repentance, and return to our first love!

Churches should be revitalized with a renewed emphasis upon effective evangelism, discipleship, and mentoring. **Preaching should renew and expand its emphasis upon the work of the ministry, missions, and full-time Christian service**. Churches should look first within their own membership for men for ministry. Pastors should challenge young people and determine to develop preachers and leaders from within. Likeminded pastors should seek to network to prepare men for ministry in creative ways if necessary. Christian colleges and seminaries should willingly partner with churches to find efficient, affordable, and effective ways to quickly prepare the next generation of pastors and missionaries. The leadership crisis is upon us. It is time to take action.

The sheer number of churches that will face the coming shortage of pastors could be overwhelming. Churches can no longer expect a large stack of resumes showing up in the mail when there are pastoral vacancies. Churches may need coordinated assistance in finding pastors. Churches and pastors may need guidance in how to transition pastoral leadership. Many retirement-age pastors will be looking for fruitful and fulfilling ministry in their upper years.

There is much to do. But all the gifts and resources are at God's disposal. He has everything under His control. His power and purposes have not diminished in the least. God is able! He can do more than we can ever imagine! We must humble ourselves before Him, seek His face, and renew our devotion to Him.