

The phone call and the email came the same day. The call was from a Church of England vicar asking if there was any statistical evidence for the optimum length of time an incumbent should serve in a parish, and the email was from someone writing an article on length of ministry. Both made me think, "What might be the optimum length of time a Christian leader should stay in a particular position?"

A friend of mine became Principal of a well-known Theological College when he was 48. The expectation was that he would stay until he retired at 65, but he said to me, "I'm not sure I want to stay all that time, as all my ideas will be fulfilled in the first 10 years and then I don't want to stay on and undo whatever good I've done in my last years." In the event, he retired at 60 and has had a fruitful ministry ever since.

A minister came to a well-known church with great enthusiasm as he began his ministry; he was 52. The congregation quickly endorsed his 10-year plan and the goals for achieving them. After 10 years 8 had been fulfilled, one had been partly accomplished, and by then the church realised the tenth was not possible. Even so, most reckoned a pass mark of 85% very acceptable. They looked forward to his remaining years, but, as he was unable to find more targets for the next 3 to 5 years, the remaining years of his ministry were disappointing and undid some of the good work previously established. How could he have assessed the optimum length of his ministry?

What information is available?

The Springboard Analysis

An English Church Census was held in both 1989 and 1998, in each case going to about 38,000 churches. Over 27,000 churches responded in 1989 and 19,000 in 1998. Encouraged by Bob Jackson, Springboard asked Christian Research (CR) how many churches had responded to *both* Censuses. The answer was nearly 9,000. That meant comparative information was available across a wide (and statistically random) sample of English churches. A third of these, 3,029 churches, were Anglican, the largest denominational group. Springboard then asked CR to analyse these churches across a wide variety of variables looking at issues of growth.¹

"Growth" in this context was taken as the total number attending a particular church on a Sunday (including children) which had increased more than 10% between 1989 and 1998. "Decline" was defined as when the number decreased more than 10%. Between +10% and -10% change the church was defined as "static." This is quite a low definition of growth, just over an average of 1% per year, but, even so, only 22% of churches had grown in this period, 14% had remained static, and 64% had declined, of which 32% had declined more than 40%.

The percentage which had grown by the length of service of the current minister was:

- 12% 1 or 2 years
- 20% 3 or 4 years
- 19% 5 or 6 years
- 19% 7 to 9 years
- 15% 10 to 13 years
- 8% 14 to 17 years
- 8% 18 or more years

It will be appreciated that in the 9 years being measured some ministers will have changed. It can be seen that, of the proportion of churches which grew, the percentage growing declined after a minister had been at the church for 10 years, and declined much more after he/she had been present for over 13 years. Ministers sometimes talk of having a "10-year itch," and this would seem to be corroborated by this piece of research.

Historical experience

Some will say that there are well-known examples of ministers who have served with great effect a long time in a particular church, much more than 10 years. This is quite true. The full list would be very long, but well-known examples include:²

- 52 years Willie Still, Gilcomston
- 40 years George Philip, Sandford Henderson, Glasgow
- 39 years James Philip, Holyrood Abbey Church, Edinburgh
- 38 years Charles Spurgeon, Metropolitan Chapel, London
- 37 years Dick Lucas, St Helen's, Bishopsgate
- 33 years Malcolm Widdecombe, Pip and Jay Church, Bristol
- 32 years Edward Bailey, St Michael's, Winterbourne, Bristol
- 32 years Mark Rushton, Round Church, Cambridge
- 31 years Leslie Virgo, St Martin of Tours, Chelsfield, Kent

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- 31 years David Holloway, Jesmond, Newcastle [Senior Minister since 2004]
- 31 years Jonathan Couper, Christ Church, Bridlington, still in post in 2013
- 30 years Jonathan Fletcher, Emmanuel, Wimbledon

- 29 years Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Westminster Chapel
- 26 years Clive Hawkins, St Mary, Eastrop, still in post
- 26 years David Bracewell, St Saviour's, Guildford
- 25 years Paul Perkin, St Mark's, Battersea, still in post
- 25 years John Stott, All Souls, London [followed by 36 years as Rector Emeritus]
- 25 years Tony Shepherd, St Peter's, Harrogate, still in post
- 24 years John Coles, St Barnabas, North Finchley [Curate since 2006]
- 24 years Mark Cockayne, St Mark's, Haydock, Liverpool, still in post

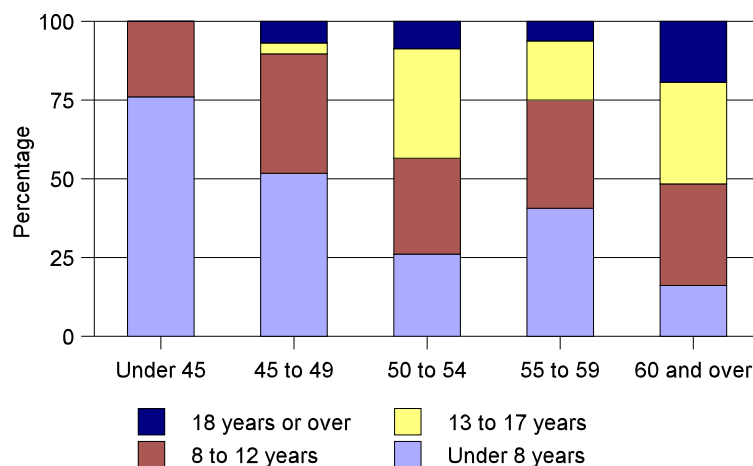
This list of 20 examples could easily be extended, covering more denominations. It should be noted that this list includes different churchmanships. It shows that long-term ministries can be very successful. Such was the view also of Robert Schuller, who built the Chrystal Cathedral in Los Angeles which was fitted with an enormous door at the back of the serving table, through which Robert would wave to the many people attending the church while staying in their parked cars outside.³ There is, however, a moral that may be drawn from his mega-church experience. After Robert Schuller retired (having served for 51 years), his son was unable to keep the enterprise going, and the church and its outbuildings were sold to the local Roman Catholic Church in 2012 to offset bankruptcy.⁴

One consequence of a long ministry is the need for great care in choosing that person's successor. Where successfully done, the momentum of the ministry often continues. Succession is always important, but especially so when a minister has served an entire generation, often, later in his ministry, marrying the children of those he had married near its beginning! All those listed above happen to be male.

Larger British Churches

There are over 300 Anglican, Baptist or Independent churches where the Sunday congregation is 350 or more. An analysis of age of appointment for Anglicans (readily available through Crockford's) by length of service is illustrated below:⁵

Figure 17.4.1: Length of service by age of appointment of Anglican vicar



The chart shows relatively few incumbents staying for 18 years or over, but a significant proportion who stayed for between 13 and 17 years, having been appointed either in their late 30s or late 40s. The latter will be likely to stay in their present church until retirement, but the former will probably be wondering whether to move on or to stay.

Overall a third, 35%, have been in their present church for between 8 and 12 years, a proportion much the same whatever their present age. These are all larger churches, and the average length of service is about double that of those serving as vicars of smaller churches. Does the "10-year itch" rise to 15 if a minister is in a larger church? Does it vary by denomination? Table 17.4 on the next page shows the proportion of senior ministers by length of service in 3 denominations of larger churches:

Table 17.4: Length of service of those then serving as senior minister in larger churches in 2008

Denomination	Up to 4 years %	5 to 9 years %	10 to 14 years %	15 to 19 years %	20 years or over %	Average length in years	Base (=100%)
Anglican	25	35	24	9	7	9	187
Baptist	33	33	13	13	8	9	52
Independent	24	8	32	20	16	12	25
Overall	26	32	23	11	8	9	264

The Table does not indicate total length of ministry but rather current length of ministry. Nearly three-fifths (58%) had served under 10 years, a quarter (23%) between 10 and 14 years, and a fifth (19%) 15 years or more. Those in larger independent churches had served longer.

For larger churches, how does length of service vary with the growth of the congregation, using the same criteria for growth as in the Springboard analysis already given? Figure 17.4.2 indicates.

Figure 17.4.2: Growth or decline by length of service in larger churches⁶

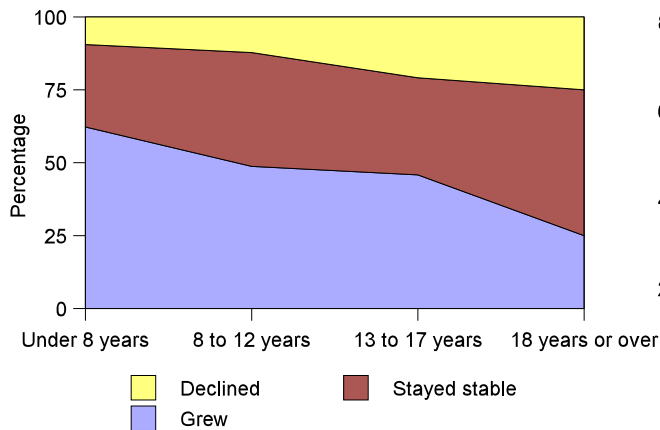


Figure 17.4.3: Percentage of Anglican churches, the congregation of which declined, by length of service of incumbent across the 1990s

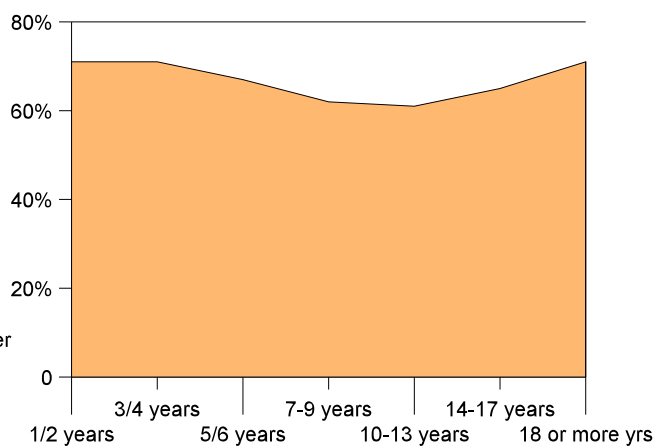


Figure 17.4.2 shows clearly that growth is more likely when ministers have been in their church for 17 years or fewer (and more when less than 8), while the proportion of churches remaining static or declining increases after about a 13-year term. This thus supports the Springboard analysis and suggests that, if growth of a congregation is the aim of ministry, then serving more than about 15 years (the middle of the 13 to 17 year band) makes that growth less likely.

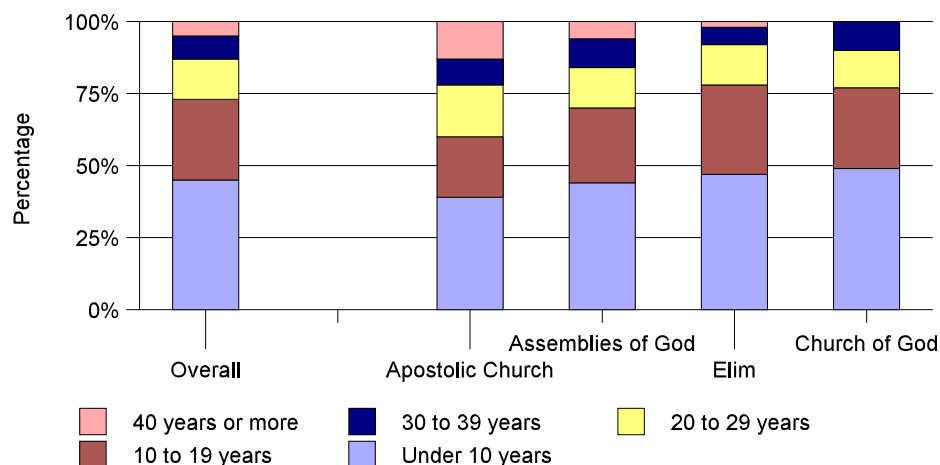
While this growth analysis supports the Springboard findings, the small rate of decline when ministers have so far served for a short time does not. The Springboard analysis of a random sample of all Anglican churches, not just the larger ones, shows that some decline is very likely at the beginning of a new ministry, but this lessens after about 4 years, as Figure 17.4.3 indicates. This graph indicates when the likelihood of decline is least – after a minister has served for between 10 and 13 years. Less than 6 years the decline is more substantial as it is if service is 14 years or more.

Pentecostal churches

William Kay's book *Pentecostals in Britain*⁷ looked at many aspects of Pentecostal leadership ministry. One facet of this was the length of time that ministers had been in service (not necessarily in one church). The results are reflected in Figure 17.4.4 on the next page.⁸

Those in the Apostolic Church had served the longest on average, 19 years, against 14 years for Elim and the Church of God. The AOG was in between with 16 years.

Figure 17.4.4: Length of time in ministry for Pentecostal pastors, 1997



Christian

agencies

Thus far we have looked at church leaders, but there are some 5,000 Christian organisations in the UK, all led by someone. An analysis of how long a CEO or Executive Director has served would be quite possible from an analysis of the past editions of where this information is to be found, in the UK Christian Handbook.⁹ No such analysis has ever been done so far as I know, but the number of agencies is counted with each publication. The number has dropped since 2003, and in the 2006 publication, when nearly 500 had closed in the previous few years, I looked at which were the main agencies which were closing. The type of agencies closing most was (in order): Bookshops, Conference Centres and Evangelistic agencies.

However, there were many agencies closing which had only been in existence for 10 or 25 years, and many of these had never had a second CEO other than the original founder. In other words, after serving, and hopefully fulfilling their vision, for, say, 15 to 25 years, they had retired without passing it on, or perhaps not finding anyone suitable to whom to pass their organisation on, and so it closed. This is circumstantial evidence, not factual, but it would seem to reinforce the point made above that, when someone serves in the long-term (of the order of 20 years or more), the issue of succession becomes very important. A number of agencies have closed because there was no successor.

Conclusion

Is there an optimum length for Christian ministry? Perhaps. This brief paper has shown for church leaders:

- 1) Leaders staying less than 6 years are the most likely to see their congregation decline.
- 2) Leaders staying for between 7 and 13 years are those most likely to see their congregation grow, and this would appear to be true whatever the size of their church.
- 3) Leaders staying longer than 15 to 17 years are also likely to see their congregation decline (or decline again after growth).
- 4) These comments assume that the purpose of church leadership is to see an increasing number of people in the congregation.
- 5) Those responsible for larger churches (in excess of 350 people) are likely on average to serve longer than those serving in smaller churches.
- 6) There are many brilliant exceptions in churches where leaders have served for more than 20, 30 or even 40 years or more with great success.
- 7) There is some evidence to suggest, though, that when a leader serves for 20 or more years, the succession plans need to be very carefully worked out, if the good work done is not to be undone. This would appear to be true for Christian agencies as well as churches.

How can a leader serve successfully for 20 years or more?

In order to serve for, say, 10 years, a leader must have a goal, or target, or vision at which to aim. After 10 years that vision needs renewing. Some leaders seem able to do this, and thus open up the possibility of a successful long-term ministry, while others are not able, for whatever reason, and probably need to move on to another church or challenge.

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The book *God's Questions*¹⁰ gives some suggestions as to how a "second vision," as it is sometimes called, can be developed. Not easily, but it may help to think through answers to questions like:

- 1) What do you observe to be the key problems in your area of ministry (the church in general or the areas of expertise you have in your organization)?
- 2) If you could change one thing about your present position, what would it be and why? (In other words, localise the problem as well as observing it in general terms; the answers may not be the same).
- 3) What is the biggest hindrance you currently face with respect to evangelizing your local community? [This is a church question; if you are an agency, substitute whatever is your key task.] What could you do to remove or at least reduce its impact?
- 4) If resources were not a hindrance, what innovative feature would you bring in over the next 6 months?

This latter question is especially important as the thinking in it begins the process of strategy and priorities and with that the opportunity for vision. The answers to the questions need to be discussed with others, in your family, your church, your organization or business. Part of the task is to try and envision them to think beyond the obvious – not just to go faster down the existing track, but to branch out on a new track (or tack) altogether.

There is a fifth, much harder, question to add to the above. I had the privilege of talking to one of the overseas Bishops who had decided not to attend the 2008 Lambeth Conference. His views and those of the American Bishops on homosexuality were very different. His incisive comment was, "If we feel they are wrong, did we make mistakes or omissions along the way to cause them to believe as they do?" He agreed that sometimes we need to look backwards in order to focus forward more clearly. "Anyone wishing to see what is to be," said Machiavelli, "must consider what has been."¹¹

NOTES

- 1) *Church Growth in the 1990s*, Christian Research report for Springboard, 2000.
- 2) Some taken by courtesy of an email from Mary Davis, author of article in *Evangelicals Now*.
- 3) As in his book *Your Church has a Fantastic Future*, Robert Schuller, Regal, 1986.
- 4) Religion News Service, 22nd March, 2012.
- 5) Analysis of Larger Anglican Churches, Brierley Consultancy, 2006.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 2006 or 2008.
- 7) *Pentecostals in Britain*, William Kay, Paternoster Press, 2000.
- 8) The detailed data is given in *Religious Trends* No 5, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2005, Table 9.16.4.
- 9) The *UK Christian Handbook* was first published as a unified directory in 1983 and was published initially by MARC Europe and then by Christian Research every 2 or 3 years subsequently. Each volume contains the name of the CEO of each organisation as well as many other details.
- 10) *God's Questions*, Peter Brierley, ADBC Publishers, 2008, Page 130.
- 11) Quoted from *Prophetic Untimeliness*, A challenge to the idol of relevance, Os Guinness, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003, Page 103.

25th February, 2013