

Career Expectations Among SBC Associate Pastors:
Ensuring a Leadership Legacy?
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the career trajectories of associate pastors in SBC churches. Recent denominational surveys have shown a potential generational leadership gap. A total of 463 associate pastors were surveyed. While many had a desire to remain in those roles for the duration of their careers, some noteworthy trends (church size, associate pastor role, and if they feel called to their current position) were observed among those who sensed a call to be a lead pastor. Those aspiring to be a lead pastor were asked how their pastor is preparing them. Several points of application are introduced for churches and seminaries as well.

Introduction and Rationale for Study

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” is a question asked from preschool days all the way through young adulthood. Many children daydream while orbiting the kitchen as astronauts, being teachers in a class of stuffed animals, or being President of the family. This question extends beyond childhood fantasy though, and becomes a crucial issue for emerging adults seeking to find their career path in college and beyond. The position of the United States as a leader in the global marketplace, technology, and other areas depends on millions of college students and young adults putting themselves on a career trajectory to maximize their contribution to the culture. Assessments such as the ASVAB are given to help young adults discern their potential career paths. Ferry, writing on the career expectations of young adults, found that the foundational times of life are key in determining potential career paths (family, community, and school).¹

For the local church though, the issue is much greater than a stream of production—the issue is the health and effectiveness of the Bride for whom Christ died (Ephesians 5:25), and has

¹Natalie M. Ferry, “Factors Influencing Career Choices of Adolescents and Young Adults in Rural Pennsylvania,” *Journal of Extension* 44 (June 2006).

promised to sustain until heaven and earth are made new (Revelation 21-22). As in any professional field, opportunities for advancement towards more influential and senior leadership positions are available, though not all who enter ministry will assume those positions. Patricia Yang, writing for *Pulpit and Pew*, found that the majority of those who find themselves in ministry will remain in associate roles for long periods of time, if not their entire ministry career.² For Chang, this “structure of opportunity” reduces the career expectations of ministers to capitalizing on opportunities for advancement, something James Meek takes contention with in the article. For Meek, the assumption that all ministers set out to climb the ladder to senior pastor roles in influential churches is one he cannot make. The diversity of gifts and roles in ministry is affirmed in Ephesians 4:11, so ministry is not to be assumed as a “one size fits all” calling. It should be noted however, that Yang concedes that there are many in ministry who enter in associate roles with a long-term career trajectory to become lead pastors. The question becomes of those serving in associate roles, how many desire to make the transition into a lead pastor role, and how are they being prepared for that role?

That is the question this study sought to examine, in particular within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation’s largest Protestant denomination (16 million members in over 50,000 churches³). This study itself is a reflection and follow-up to the researcher’s doctoral thesis at Southern Seminary, which sought to explore the leadership development of associate pastors in SBC churches as they are discipled by their senior pastors. The major findings from that study were inconclusive, as it was difficult to find any connection between the lead pastor’s

²Patricia Yang, “Factors Shaping Clergy Careers, *Pulpit and Pew* 2005. <http://pulpitandpew.org/node/841>

³Information taken from SBC website, <http://www.sbc.net>.

discipleship and the associate pastor's growth as a leader. In fact, the data led the researcher to conclude that factors such as longevity, personal interaction (or lack thereof), and generational differences were at work in the lack of leadership development. Among the five churches interviewed for leadership development effectiveness, there were some clear conclusions that could be observed.⁴

LifeWay Christian Resources compiles a bi-annual survey of churches and church leadership. This survey collects data on minister age, education, position description, salary and benefits packages, and other demographic data. Typically this data is collected to allow for churches to determine a fair and appropriate compensation package for their ministry leadership based on churches of similar size, location, and qualifications. Additionally, the survey allows for a descriptive understanding of the profile of SBC church ministry leadership. Of particular interest to this study is the breakdown of senior pastors in SBC churches according to age.

	2008 (n = 4743)	2012 (n = 4387)	2014 (n = 6268)
< 25	28 (0.6%)	11 (0.3%)	15 (0.2%)
26-35	593 (12.5%)	457 (10.4%)	642 (10.2%)
36-45	1,143 (24.1%)	952 (21.7%)	1,397 (22.2%)
46-55	1,609 (33.9%)	1,450 (33.1%)	1,894 (30.2%)
56-65	1,053 (22.2%)	1,142 (26.0%)	1,815 (28.9%)
> 66	317 (6.7%)	375 (8.5%)	505 (8.1%)

⁴For a brief summary of these conclusions, please refer to the article I wrote for LifeWay's Pastor's Today Blog. <http://blog.lifeway.com/pastorstoday/2014/01/27/practices-for-developing-younger-leaders/>

A few observations can be drawn from this table:

1. The overwhelming majority of SBC senior pastors are over the age of 45, and the number of these appears to be increasing over time
2. The number of young SBC pastors (< 35) is potentially decreasing in the SBC, leading to an aging pool of senior pastoral leaders
3. Over 30% of SBC senior pastors are within the “twilight” of their career ministry, approaching the last 10 years before retirement age
4. This is a strong sample of SBC pastors, the confidence interval at the $p = 0.01$ level was 1.87, 1.95, and 1.63
5. There are not enough senior pastors in place to make lateral moves to churches with retiring senior pastors, so the pool of leadership candidates must come from somewhere else⁵

Generation Name	Live Births
Baby Boomer (1946-1964)	75.9 million
Generation X (1965-1979)	51.5 million
Millennials (1980-2000)	77.9 million

Thom and Jess Rainer in their book *The Millennials*, offer some conclusions based on their research with generations. The table above shows their findings of birth rates for each generational identity.⁶ In the Rainer’s research, a potential gap can be found in the Generation X category, with a significant population decrease from the Baby Boomer and Millennial generations. When this is brought together with the LifeWay Compensation Study, it provides some insight into the future of church leadership in SBC churches. Two inferences can be drawn

⁵The assumption by the researcher is that this pool of leadership candidates will come from associate pastor positions, which are occupied by emerging leaders.

⁶Thom Rainer, and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 8.

from this: as the Baby Boomer generation transitions into retirement, a population deficit among Generation-X pastors could lead to a potential leadership vacuum of older, experienced pastors; and that the next period of SBC ministry leadership will be largely occupied by Millennials. This means that as the Baby Boomer generation begins its transition into retirement, the lack of a comparable population base to make equal replacements means that the potential pool for replacements will come from the Millennial generation—also this means that the bulk of SBC ministry leadership for the foreseeable future will come from the Millennial generation.⁷

Research Methodology

A concurrent mixed-methods strategy was selected in order to develop a perspective that combines both the quantitative and qualitative elements necessary to draw substantial conclusions. An eight-question demographic survey was utilized by the researcher for the quantitative analysis of this study, and an additional open-ended response question was the basis for the qualitative analysis. The survey was entered into the online survey tool SurveyMonkey for distribution to participants. Electronic distribution was chosen because of its speed, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness. Because of this, a mass distribution of the survey could be sent in a short period of time and be completed by the participant at their convenience.

In the SBC ecclesial structure, local churches voluntarily cooperate with one another on three levels: the national convention, state conventions, and local associations. In the associational structure, churches in neighboring communities (or in larger cities within the urban setting) partner for ministry, missions, partnership, and fellowship. There are 1,143 local

⁷It is appropriate to note that there are some assumptions taken here, the comparison of these two pieces of data does not explicitly state that a lack of Generation-X replacements can be found for the large number of retiring pastors, but that there is a potential vacuum of proven, mature, and effective leaders.

associations affiliated with the SBC, and each of these was contacted by the researcher for participation in this study. Associations were chosen as the contact point because of their relative proximity to the local churches, which lends itself to a greater familiarity with the particulars of each congregation and its ministry staff, which were safeguards to ensure appropriate responses to the survey.

Associational contacts, as available, were collected from the individual state convention websites. Either the associational director, or administrative assistant, was asked to forward the survey link to churches in the association who had a paid (full-time or part-time) associate pastor/minister.⁸ Age, gender, and position were not delimiting factors in this study—the only requirements were that survey participants not serve as a senior or lead pastor in the church, and that they were somehow compensated for their work in the associate pastor role.

The questions asked in the demographic instrument were:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. In what state is your church?
4. What is the size of your church (average weekend attendance)?
5. What is your tenure at your current church?
6. How would you describe your position?
7. Do you feel called to your current position?
8. Do you aspire to one day become a lead pastor?

⁸Associate pastors were defined in the contact as anyone who does ministry, provides ministry leadership, or oversees a ministry area who is *not* the lead/senior pastor. Examples included children, student, education, executive, music, recreation, or any combination.

The final question in the survey asked each participant “If you answered yes, what are you and your lead/senior pastor doing to help get you ready for that position?” The purpose in this question was to evaluate what pastors in the local church are doing to invest in and mentor younger ministers on their staff who have a desire to be a lead pastor. It was left open-ended in the survey delivery in order to allow for respondents to provide as much information as they wanted. A total of 105 participants gave responses to this question, and the analysis of these responses is below. A grounded hermeneutic approach was used in order to analyze the qualitative responses, which involved sorting and analyzing data to categorize the different responses as they were actually recorded by the participant. Responses were tallied based on frequency of mention, so one respondent could have multiple categories associated with the response—this is why the total number of category responses is greater than 105.

In the month-long window for this survey to collect responses, 468 responses were collected. Of those 468, five were discarded for falling outside the parameters of the study (they were senior pastors who had mistakenly taken the survey). After the removal of disqualified responses, a total of 463 usable responses were collected for this study. In order to have a generalizable sample to an unknown population, 384 were required.⁹ The appropriate statistical analysis was performed on the data, with the results and discussion in the section below.

There are several limitations to generalizing this study, the most notable that it is difficult to generalize this to single-pastor churches without an associate-level minister on staff. Many of the associations who declined to participate shared that they had no churches in their area who fit the profile. In fact, 60% of churches in this study reported less than 300 members (< 100 were

⁹An unknown population is assumed because there is no clear data on how many associate-level ministers there are in SBC churches.

21% of SBC churches, and 100-199 were 23%). Another limitation to this study is in the demographic question which asked about ministry role description. The Combination/Other was broad by design, but the nuances of each role could not be determined, and how that might contribute to understanding the profile of prospective lead pastors.

Results & Analysis

The concurrent mixed-methods model for this study allowed for all of the data to be collected at one time, rather than a staggered approach or sequential approach. Each respondent participated in the entire survey instrument, answering the eight quantitative questions and if appropriate the final qualitative open-ended response. Of the 463 completed surveys, 405 were male and 58 were female. The average tenure at the current church was 6.9 years, with a standard deviation of 7.1 years. The average church attendance was 584, with a standard deviation of 1,165. A total of 37 states were represented, with 15 respondents not giving their location.

Aspire to be LP?	
Yes	109
No	260
Not Sure	94
X2	109.259
df	2
p	< 0.0001

Gender		
	Male	Female
Yes	107	2
No	205	55
Not Sure	93	1
X2	55.176	98.734
df	2	2
p	< 0.0001	< 0.0001

State	Rate	State	Rate	State	Rate	State	Rate
Alabama	7	Illinois	11	North Carolina	42	Tennessee	41
Arkansas	10	Indiana	12	North Dakota	1	Texas	74
Arizona	2	Kansas	1	Nevada	12	Utah	2
California	3	Kentucky	50	New Mexico	1	Virginia	11
Colorado	2	Louisiana	8	New York	4	Washington	5
Connecticut	4	Maryland	3	Ohio	12	Wisconsin	4
Florida	21	Michigan	3	Oklahoma	17	West Virginia	2
Georgia	27	Missouri	18	Oregon	3	No answer	15
Hawaii	2	Mississippi	21	South Carolina	7		
Iowa	2	Montana	1	South Dakota	1		

In this study, the number of those who answered they aspired to be a lead pastor was in the minority of those who took the survey. A chi-square analysis of the data reflected a very significant finding with this question, $p < 0.0001$. It shows that many serving in associate pastor roles do not have a desire to transition into a lead pastor position, and many who are currently serving in those roles are not sure about their long-term career goals.¹⁰

Men overwhelmingly responded to this survey, but a number of women serving in associate roles participated as well. A chi-square analysis demonstrates a very significant finding among both genders, both showed $p < 0.0001$. With a degree of confidence, it can be inferred

¹⁰During the researcher's Ed.D. studies, a similar question was posed to 99 associate pastors, 34 responded yes, 22 no, and 43 unsure. A chi-square analysis yielded a p value of 0.0346, but the sample was smaller, came from churches agreeing to participate in a lengthy survey process, and was specifically looking to analyze associate pastors with a desire to be a lead pastor. The demographic in the current study lends itself to being a more accurate perception of SBC associate pastors' career expectations.

that overwhelmingly women serving in SBC churches in an associate role do not have a desire to one day become a lead pastor.¹¹

Generations

	Male	Female	Total
Millennials (< 34)	154	16	170
Generation X (35-49)	135	16	151
Baby Boomers (50-68)	106	25	131
Silent (69 +)	9	1	10

Generations and LP Desire

	Millennial	Gen-X	Boomer	Silent
Yes	57	38	13	1
No	67	83	102	7
Not Sure	46	30	16	2
Total	170	151	131	10
X	3.895	32.44	117.004	
df	2	2	2	
p	0.1427	< 0.0001	< 0.0001	

These tables show a healthy mix of generations participated in this study, to allow for a fairly comprehensive profile of the demographics of SBC associate pastors. An insufficient number of responses were from the Silent generation to perform a chi-square analysis. A chi-

¹¹During the revision of the SBC statement of faith in 2000, a shift towards a complementarian view of gender roles was apparent as the language was amended to limit the office of pastor to qualified men. However, many churches who belong to the SBC also cooperate with the more moderate CBF, which allows for the ordination of women to pastoral ministry. The fact that this was such an overwhelming finding should not be surprising given the conservative resurgence and its lasting effects in SBC churches.

square analysis within the generations showed significant findings for Baby Boomer and Generation-X, but not for Millennials. Because of this insignificant finding among Millennials, it is impossible to rule out chance as a factor in the responses. This was disappointing, as Millennial associate pastors were the target group for this study.

Despite this, some observations can be made from the generational data. As associate pastors aged, their desire to become a lead pastor decreased. Among Millennials, 33.5% affirmed a desire to be a lead pastor, only 25% of Generation-X expressed this desire, and only 9.9% of Baby Boomers affirmed their desire to be a lead pastor. In conjunction with this, the desire to remain in an associate role rose with age, 39.4% of Millennials expressed no desire to be a lead pastor, but that rose to 55% for Generation-X and 77.9% for Baby Boomers.

Job Description & LP Desire

	Admin	Children	Combo	Education	Music	Youth
Yes	5	2	42	11	4	44
No	30	20	78	24	51	57
Not Sure	5	5	31	9	12	32
Total	40	27	151	44	67	133
X	31.253	20.669	24.016	9.046	56.633	7.053
df	2	2	2	2	2	2
<i>p</i>	< 0.0001	< 0.0001	< 0.0001	0.0109	< 0.0001	0.0294

As respondents identified their position description and their desire to become a lead pastor, only a couple of positions had many who expressed a desire to become a lead pastor. Chi-square analysis of each job description yielded significant or very significant findings ($p < 0.05$ for each category). Among those who described themselves as youth ministers, 33.1% expressed

a desire to become a lead pastor and 42.9% did not. Administrative ministers were at 12.5% and 75%, children's ministers were at 7.4% and 74.1%, education ministers were at 25% and 54.5%, combination roles were at 27.8% and 51.7%, and music ministers were at 6% and 76.1%. In a focus on youth ministers, education ministers, and combination roles yielded a chi-square analysis of $X^2 = 36.705$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$. In this group, 97 (29.6%) expressed a desire to be a lead pastor, 159 (48.5%) answered no, and 72 (22%) answered not sure. Forming another group with the remaining categories yielded a chi-square analysis of $X^2 = 107.936$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$. In this group, 11 (8.2%) answered yes, 101 (75.4%) answered no, and 22 (16.4%) answered not sure. These two groups were formed because of their distinct differences in the rate respondents affirmed a desire to become a lead pastor.

Called to Current Position & LP Desire

	Career	Long-Term	Short-Term	Unsure	No
Yes	21	27	51	5	5
No	151	49	37	16	7
Not Sure	36	36	12	9	1
Total	208	112	100	30	13
X2	145.928	6.554	23.422	6.201	
df	2	2	2	2	
p	< 0.0001	0.0377	< 0.0001	0.0450	

Those associate pastors who reported a career calling demonstrated a much lengthier tenure than their peers, but 56.8% of those who responded were below the median tenure in this study (5 years).

Tenure & Current Calling

	Career	Long-Term	Short-Term	Unsure	No
Average	9.27	4.96	4.54	6.6	4.77
St.Dev	8.74	4.68	3.95	4.33	3.52

Tenure at Current Church

	Career	Long-Term	Short-Term	Unsure	No	Total
> 3 years	43	40	35	6	5	129
3-5 years	54	33	33	10	4	134
6-10 years	46	31	28	8	4	117
11-15 years	26	6	3	6	0	41
16-20 years	16	0	0	0	0	16
20+ years	23	2	1	0	0	26

One of the demographic questions asked if the respondents to assess their calling to the current ministry position—if it was short-term, long-term, career, unsure, or not called. Among those who responded they felt called short-term, 51 (51%) had a desire to become a lead pastor, which was the highest rate. Associate pastors who felt a career calling were at 10.1%, long-term were at 24.1%, and unsure were at 16.7%. Those who did not feel called to their current position ($n = 13$) did not have a high enough sample for a chi-square analysis, so it is impossible to rule out chance as a factor. Career-called associates also had the highest response rate who were certain they did not have a desire to become a lead pastor at 72.6%. Associates called long-term were at 43.8%, associates called short-term were at 37%, and those unsure of their calling were at 53.3%. Those called long-term to their current position seemed to be the group most indecisive of their long-term calling, with 32.1% unsure of their desire to be a lead pastor.

Category	Rate	Career	Long-Term	Short-Term	Not Sure	No	X	<i>p</i>
Small Church (< 299)	226	39.4%	23.4%	26.1%	8.4%	2.7%	97.186	< 0.0001
Medium Church (300-999)	163	50.9%	18.4%	16.6%	4.9%	3.1%	128.28	< 0.0001
Large Church (> 1000)	73	47.9%	26%	19.2%	4.1%	2.7%	49.945	< 0.0001

Church Size	Rate	Yes	No	Not Sure	X	<i>p</i>
Small Church (< 299)	226	28.6%	50%	21.2%	30.171	< 0.0001
Medium Church (300-999)	163	21.5%	60.1%	18.4%	52.876	< 0.0001
Large Church (> 1000)	73	9.6%	68.5%	21.9%	42.278	< 0.0001

Church Size & Current Calling

Attendance	Rate	Career	Long-Term	Short-Term	Not Sure	No	X	<i>p</i>
< 100	56	24	9	15	7	1	27.214	< 0.0001
100-199	92	37	20	28	6	1	48.761	< 0.0001
200-299	78	28	24	16	6	4	28.923	< 0.0001
300-399	48	20	17	7	3	1	29.917	< 0.0001
400-599	68	34	12	15	4	3	45.971	< 0.0001
600-999	47	29	11	5	1	1	58.213	< 0.0001
1000-1999	55	27	14	10	3	1	39.901	< 0.0001
2000-5000	13	7	5	1	0	0	-	-
> 5000	5	1	0	3	0	1	-	-
No Answer	1	1	0	0	0	0		

Church Size & Lead Pastor Desire?

Attendance	Rate	Yes	No	Not Sure	X	<i>p</i>
< 100	56	16	28	12	7.429	0.0244
100-199	92	28	47	17	15.023	0.0005
200-299	78	21	38	19	8.385	0.0151
300-399	48	15	23	10	5.375	0.0681
400-599	68	16	37	15	13.619	0.0011
600-999	47	4	38	5	47.792	< 0.0001
1000-1999	55	4	41	10	43.022	< 0.0001
2000-5000	13	1	7	5	-	-
> 5000	5	2	2	1	3.000	0.2231
No Answer	1	1	0	0	-	-

Among those 226 respondents which were under the median (300) of this study, 65 (28.6%) expressed a desire to be a lead pastor, 113 (50%) answered no, and 48 (21.2%) were unsure. The chi-square analysis for this group yielded a very significant finding, $p < 0.0001$. For churches between 300 and 999 in attendance ($n = 163$), a chi-square analysis yielded a very significant finding ($p < 0.0001$), where 35 (21.5%) affirmed a desire to be a lead pastor, 98 (60.1%) expressed no desire to be a lead pastor, and 30 (18.4%) were unsure. Among churches with a weekend attendance over 1000 ($n = 73$), a very significant finding ($p < 0.0001$) was yielded from a chi-square analysis. In these churches, 7 (9.6%) affirmed a desire to be a lead pastor, 50 (68.5%) stated no desire to be a lead pastor, and 16 (21.9%) were unsure. The table below shows these findings compared to one another.

A few observations and inferences can be made from this data. For one, smaller churches typically have more associate pastors with a desire to become a lead pastor (the percentage drops from 28.6% to 21.5% to 9.6%), while larger churches tend to have more associate pastors with a greater desire to remain in those positions (the percentage rises from 50% to 60.1% to 68.5%). Career calling tended to be connected to church size, as larger churches had a higher percentage of career-called associate pastors, and short-term calling tended to be prevalent more in smaller churches. Few in any church indicated they were not called to their current position, larger churches tended to have fewer who were unsure of their current calling. Associate pastors who understood their calling as long-term seemed to be lowest in medium-sized churches compared to the other categories. The table below shows the three church categories and a chi-square analysis of current calling. Ultimately, the data shows that church size is a factor in understanding the career trajectory of associate pastors, and their understanding of their current position. Larger churches seemed to be more likely to have longer-tenured and longer-called associate pastors, which could be due to a number of factors (salary, stability, location, responsibility), while smaller churches could expect turnover as associate pastors in these churches transition into other ministry areas, which included associate pastors transitioning into lead pastor roles.

The open-ended, qualitative analysis of this study focused on the last question of the survey, and was intended for those who had expressed a desire to be a lead pastor. It asked: “What are you and your lead/senior pastor doing to help you ready for that position?” Of the 109 who reported they had a desire to be a lead pastor, 105 offered open-ended feedback to this question. Their answers were categorized using a grounded hermeneutic approach, with

particular keywords (or synonyms) as the framework after multiple passes through the data. The categories were tallied, and because individual responses might have fit in multiple categories, the total is much higher than 105. Certain categories were expected to show in this study by the researcher, which were “Nothing,” “Skills,” and “Mentoring.” A total of eight categories of data emerged from the responses, which were: Nothing, Competency Growth, Relationship, Balance, Mentoring, Education, Preaching, and Other. The table below represents these categories in order of their occurrence.

Category	Frequency
Nothing	44
Competency Growth	39
Preaching	31
Relationship	26
Mentoring	22
Education	19
Other	18
Balance	1
Total	200

The category of Nothing was the highest frequency (n = 44, 22%) of response, and the individual responses given offered insight into why the lead pastors were doing nothing to develop their associate pastors for a lead role. Responses in this category included “I find it difficult to confide in him,” “he’s more focused on his publishing,” “he would be supportive, but right now we’re focused on current tasks,” “he schedules guest speakers now once he found out I

wanted to be a lead pastor” and “go to school for that.” Regrettably, more information is needed to develop a complete understanding of how these lead pastors relate to their staff.

The next category of Competency Growth (n = 39, 19.5%) offered more feedback from the survey respondents. Competencies can be defined as the skills necessary for effective ministry, that can be learned, taught, and improved upon. Responses in this category included: ministry initiatives and oversight, supervising and delegating hospital visitation, leading mission groups, “teaching classes across age groups,” leading staff meetings, moving from a specific age group to church-wide ministry responsibilities, serving on the elder board, and sharing the pastoral responsibilities like long-range planning and church interaction.

The most specifically mentioned pastoral competency was Preaching, which led to it receiving its own category (n = 31, 15.5%). In this category, the associate pastor was most commonly given the opportunity to preach when the lead pastor was unavailable or out of town. But in some cases, the associate pastor was given regular opportunities to preach, even if the lead pastor was in attendance. Typically the opportunities for preaching were sporadic, but some respondents reported their lead pastor offering regular preaching opportunities (i.e., once a month, or a multi-week series). One related his preaching opportunities as the starting point to an increased sphere of influence within the church, going so far as to describe his role as “I am an assistant to the pastor.” A few respondents shared they took any preaching opportunity they could, even outside their current local congregation. Unfortunately, some respondents reported that preaching opportunities were their only real sources of growth and development towards becoming a lead pastor.

The next category of Relationship focused on the interpersonal dynamic of the ministry team—how the lead pastor and associate related to one another, both professionally and personally. In many ways this is a private dynamic, much of what happened in this category occurred outside the vantage of the congregation at large. One wrote of his lead pastor, “he is supportive and has my back in any situation,” another responded, “I get to see the inner workings of what our pastor deals with daily.” Several that reported their pastor was discipling them or allowing them the opportunity to discuss pastoral ministry, with one respondent reporting “he consistently trains me and sets an example for me.” The overwhelming impression from this category was that lead pastors maintained an “open door” policy with their ministry staff, and for the associate pastor this was seen as a valuable training tool. For these ministry teams, it was obvious that a personal rapport and healthy relationship was there. Lead pastors were also willing to make themselves available to invest in the life of the younger associate, even when it meant exposing vulnerability or taking up time.

Mentoring differs from Relationship because in the Mentoring category (n = 22, 11%), specific intentionality was observed on the part of the lead pastor to raise up the associate. In these responses, it was clear that the lead pastor was intentionally raising up the associate pastor, almost in the sense of a master with an apprentice. Lead pastors shared pastoral duties, but followed this delegation with feedback and occasional supervision. Many respondents (n = 14) specifically used the word “mentor” to describe the relationship they had with their lead pastor. One associate pastor used the words “train and guide” to describe the relationship—in these mentoring situations the lead pastor was intentional (even if it was informal) in taking the associate pastor to a place of maturity and greater ministry effectiveness through specific actions.

Education emerged as a distinct category (n = 19, 9.5%), as responses focused on formal education as preparation for ministry—either by itself or in conjunction with other categories. Some of the responses included: the lead pastor had encouraged him to return to school, the respondent specifically mentioning formal seminary training in their growth process, or credited their education for their development in ministry. In most cases, the process of formal education served to complement the field work in the local church, but occasionally (n = 5) formal education was the only mentioned process of growth.

Balance, with one respondent, was the smallest category established for the analysis of the qualitative open-ended responses. The respondent answered, “teaching leadership principles and biblical meditation class for more spiritual insights. Also he is directly counseling me in areas that need to be improved such as home life, character, and discipleship principles to teach other [sic] how to walk with Christ.” Of all the responses, this was the only one that mentioned the necessary balance between pastoral ministry and the importance of personal devotions, growth, and family. This was the biggest surprise of the analysis, that so few lead pastors and associate pastors were focusing the necessary attention on their homes, families, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance, when Scripture states that an elder is to manage his household well, to be a one-woman man, and whose children are believers (cf. 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1).

The final category of Other (n = 18, 9%) was organized as a “catch all” for responses that did not fit in any other category, or that had elements in the response that did not fit a previously established category. Responses in this category included “I am circulating resumes,” “You name it, I do it,” several responded their current role was a preparatory ground, and “I am in the

process of being ordained.” No real trend or observable process could be drawn from this category, and many of the responses did not directly contribute to the stated aims of this study.

Conclusions

This study sought to explore the career expectations among SBC associate pastors, and for those who expressed a desire to become a lead pastor to explore the role of the lead pastor in the career and ministry development of the associate pastor. A concurrent mixed-methods approach was developed and used for these questions. Following the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative dynamics of this study, nine conclusions can be inferred.

First, in the SBC, associate pastors do not always consider their role a “stepping stone” towards a lead pastor role. In fact, the data showed that any of the associate pastors surveyed understood their calling to their position as a career calling, and did not have a desire to one day become a lead pastor. Among older associate pastors, this was exceptionally the case—Baby Boomers were almost exclusively career-called to their current positions without a desire to become a lead pastor. The generation of greatest interest to this study, the Millennials, did not yield a significant chi-square analysis. Even when the generations were separated by gender to focus on male associate pastors (to reflect the SBC shift towards complementarian gender roles), no significant finding could be observed ($p = 0.5538$).

Second, lead pastors largely are not taking an active role in the leadership and ministry development of their associate pastors. The responses in the “Nothing” category lead to a number of explanations or inferences. It requires too much effort for the lead pastor to develop the associate in addition to the pastoral duties he is expected to do, lead pastors may have a sense of

competition or suspicion of an associate with a desire to be a lead pastor, or the lead pastor may operate under the paradigm that the associate was called to fulfill a specific job description. In order to fully understand why so many lead pastors were not involved in the development of their associate, additional research is necessary—at best what can be concluded from this study is conjecture and anecdotal observation.

Third, many associate pastors do not have a clear understanding of what their long-term career expectations are. A large number of associate pastors ($n = 94$) reported they were not sure if they had a desire to be a lead pastor. Also, 143 respondents stated they were either not called to their current role, unsure, or there for the short term. Millennials in particular were unsure of their current calling; of the 170 responses, 67 were short-term, unsure, or not called. The current calling for Millennials was very significant, but the lead pastor desire was not. However, it can be inferred that as a whole associate pastors are still figuring out their long-range career trajectory, and this is especially the case among Millennials—who are in the early stages of their career.

Fourth, preaching was the most common ministry skill focused on by both lead and associate pastors. Most of the development of associate pastors in SBC churches from the lead pastor primarily comes from the pulpit ministry, some exclusively. While this is an essential part of pastoral ministry, it is in reality only a fraction of what a pastor must do in a given week. Also, much of the preaching opportunity was given while the lead pastor was unavailable—only a few respondents reported their lead pastor regularly giving preaching opportunities. This means the primary source of feedback, the lead pastor, was often not present to serve as the “expert” to help sharpen the associate’s skills. But it must be noted that pastoral ministry is more than the pulpit,

and while many lead pastors invested in the competency development of their associates, the breadth of competencies developed was not enough to generate additional categories or significant discussion. These lead pastors are focusing on specific areas over and against others, therefore not allowing a full picture of pastoral ministry to be developed in their associates.

Fifth, only the professional development of the associate pastors was emphasized by most of the lead pastors. Only one associate reported that his lead pastor invested in his personal devotion, home life, and maintaining the necessary work-life balance for effective pastoral ministry. The importance of the minister's home and personal walk was in large part overlooked by the lead pastors in this study.

Sixth, prospective lead pastors tend to be currently serving in particular ministry positions—youth, education, and combination positions. The positions of children's ministry, music ministry, and administrative ministry had few respondents who had a desire to be a lead pastor. A chi-square analysis confirmed this, with the positions of children's ministry, music ministry, and administrative ministry in one pool, and youth ministry, education ministry, and the combination/other category in another. Both groups yielded very significant findings ($p < 0.0001$).

	Group A (youth, education, combo)	Group B (children, music, administrative)
Yes	97 (29.6%)	11 (8.2%)
No	159 (48.5%)	101 (75.4%)
Not Sure	72 (22%)	22 (9.4%)
Total	328	134

Seventh, women who participated in this study as a whole did not have a desire to become a lead pastor. This should be expected given the SBC's transition towards a complementarian view of gender roles and the growing influence of groups such as the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood—where in the Danvers Statement it says “some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.”¹²

Eighth, lead pastors who were invested in the ministry and leadership development of their associate pastors established a healthy personal rapport and relationship with them. In these relationships, the associate pastor almost always reported the availability of the lead pastor to talk about ministry, which showed the willingness of the lead pastor to be interrupted and to invest his time and effort to the development of a prospective lead pastor. These relationships were identified as largely occurring in the church office setting, but previous work has demonstrated that effective ministry and leadership development happens outside the office as well.¹³ The health of the relationship the associate has with the lead pastor serves to build the trust and openness necessary for the lead pastor to truly invest in and develop the associate pastor. It causes the relationship to go beyond coworker to one like Paul had with Timothy where he referred to him as a “son in the faith” in 1 Timothy 1:2.

Ninth, the theological seminary plays an important role in the leadership and ministry development of prospective lead pastors. Many of those who responded credited their formal education and training as pivotal to their ministry and leadership development as a prospective lead pastor. In some responses, formal seminary training was the only form of development

¹²Danvers Statement, from CBMW website <http://cbmw.org/core-beliefs/>

¹³Scott Douglas, “Intergenerational Discipleship for Leadership Development: A Mixed-Methods Study” (Ed.D. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 98-100.

provided—in one case by the explicit statement of the lead pastor that seminary is where the associate should go to learn to be a pastor. For the bulk of the respondents, however, the theological seminary served as a complement to the training and development received in the local church.

Application

At the conclusion of this study, there are three areas of specific application that address the interconnected spheres of younger prospective or currently-serving associate pastors, the theological seminary, and the local church—especially the lead pastor.

The first specific application is to younger, or prospective associate pastors, to discern a career trajectory with the assistance of a pastoral mentor. The importance of discerning how God has called, gifted, and equipped a prospective minister on the front end of their journey will allow them to progress through their service to God in areas where they are good fits. As the data showed, there were a large number of associate pastors who were not solidly locked in to their current ministry position or prospective long-range career goals. The pastoral mentor can provide a healthy perspective for the younger minister to help him determine where God might have him serve. Spiritual gift assessments, leadership and personality inventories, and other instruments are helpful—but the wisdom from an older pastoral mentor is invaluable. For the younger minister, this mentoring relationship can help determine if there are character or competency issues to address. Leading from a “second chair” position, without pursuing a lead pastor position, still proves to be a valuable resource and opportunity within the local church.

The second specific application is for the theological seminary to help place students during their studies in churches that will prepare students for vocational ministry. The pastors in these churches should see their role as mentor, disciple-maker, and equipper. Students could have access to a list of churches whose ministry leaders are willing to work with and equip students with a particular desire for ministry service (youth, children, lead pastor, music, etc.). As students are progressing through their seminary training, they are not receiving it in a vacuum of local church participation, responsibility, and practice. It also seeks to connect students with ministry leaders who are committed to their development and growth as a ministry leader. Some of the associate pastors who were receiving nothing from their lead pastor responded that the lead pastor told them “that’s what seminary is for,” and this approach would bridge the gap between the church and seminary.

The third specific application is for lead pastors to intentionally invest in the long-range development and trajectory of their ministry staff. Unfortunately, stories abound of churches who work short-sighted or only for the sake of themselves. But a Kingdom-focused church will recognize the reality that many of the high quality ministry leaders in associate roles will move on to different settings. Instead of only getting associate pastors to fulfill the ministry responsibility they were hired for, lead pastors can benefit the Kingdom by intentionally investing themselves into their ministry staff—especially those who sense a call to a lead pastor position. Intentionally building into ministry staff members does not have to follow a formula, curriculum, or prescription. Instead, it is the desire of both the lead pastor and the ministry staff member to make the best use of their time together for long-term results. This intentionality includes access through an “open door” policy, shadowing ministry visits, honest discussion

from experience or wisdom, and the freedom to learn and make mistakes. Just as a teaching hospital serves to treat patients and to provide learning experiences for physicians, it is possible and advantageous for a local church to serve and disciple its community and to intentionally raise up the next generation of ministry leaders.

Further Study

Additional study from this project has tremendous potential to benefit local churches, theological seminaries, and pastoral ministry leaders. In particular, three areas of further inquiry stand out.

First, specifically looking at Millennials entering ministry, whether they are beginning their local church service or their theological studies at the seminary. The most effective means of access to this population would likely be through the theological seminary. Students upon their entry to seminary could be assessed for their long-term career objectives, and a longitudinal study in this area could assess those students again at their graduation and within their first few years after graduation. Because Millennials are the largest generation and the ones positioned to occupy leadership in SBC churches for the next few decades, the value of assessing and understanding long-term career objectives has a lasting effect on the health and leadership of SBC churches.

Second, a qualitative study that looked closely at churches with a demonstrated success at developing and equipping prospective lead pastors would provide insight into principles and practices that churches have used to effectively raise up future pastors. In these situations, the lead pastor as the catalyst and a number of proteges who would be considered “success stories”

could be interviewed to specifically look at what the lead pastor did to develop the protege, and how the protege responded to the the lead pastor's investment.

Third, a study involving associate pastors who have a generational ministry legacy (perhaps those who have served in an associate role for 20 years or more) could provide insight into how these associate pastors were able to attain that longevity. A study in this area would provide a list of principles and practices for career-called associate pastors to develop a ministry legacy that lasts beyond their tenure. It also could provide a change of expectation in many churches to demonstrate the value of recruiting and retaining high-capacity associate pastors for lengthy tenures.

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