

Acts 6:1) In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. 2) The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, *“It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables.* 3) *Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty.* 4) *But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”* 5) This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch. 6) They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7) So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Even though I’m no expert in church transitions, church growth, or church revitalization, all of my experience, research, and observation points to my **Top 3 Congregational Challenges**. I’ve not listed them in order of importance – all three emerge to some degree in any church; and sometimes, all three can engage at the same time.

- **Challenge #1 – Conflict Resolution**. I’m privileged to oversee the Doctor of Ministry program at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. This advanced doctoral journey is designed to raise the level of ministry excellence for pastors, church staff, missionaries, chaplains, church planters, and denominational leaders. Our DMin students can choose from 100 different course options. The most popular seminar, the one that always fills up the fastest, is entitled *“Conflict Resolution and Crisis Management”*. I’ve personally taught this class for 17 straight years. More churches experience congregational conflict today than in any other time in church history.

- **Challenge #2 – Pastoral Tenure**. In 1950, the average pastoral tenure among Southern Baptist Churches was 12 years – today it’s three years. In 1984, Highland Baptist Church called me as their pastor. The church at that time was only 28 years old, but I was the ninth pastor. You do the math. I literally spent my first few years there removing the stigma of short tenure. You’ve been blessed here at First Lafayette with long pastoral tenure. Your last two pastors combined for 61 years, which means your average pastoral tenure here is 30 years. In my first sermon as your Interim Pastor – 8 months ago next Sunday – I identified pastoral transition as one of the most vulnerable cycles for churches. I want to commend

you this morning (that means, I want to brag on you!) Because you've created a DNA of long pastoral tenure, and because you've remained unified and faithful during these months of pastoral transition, your next pastor, whoever he will be and whenever he will arrive, comes to a church positioned for a great future.

- **Challenge #3 – Organizational Imbalance**. Although “one size does not fit all”, as a church grows in size or as the ministry context changes, the organizational structure of the church must change to accommodate the size and the context, or chaos will erupt and escalate.

Acts 6 marks a transition in the historical development of the church. Chapters 1-5 describe the implementation of Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 – witnesses in Jerusalem. Acts chapter 6-12 will expand the Acts 1:8 challenge from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria. The missionary and church planting excursions of Paul in chapter 13-28 will complete the Great Commission “*to the ends of the earth.*” It is most interesting to me, that all three of our current congregational challenges – conflict resolution, pastoral tenure, and organizational imbalance, converge in Acts 6 as a crisis of leadership. “*there arose a complaint (literally “a grumbling, a murmuring” – a situation of conflict) by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution – certainly not deliberately neglected, but unintentionally left out. We can assume large numbers of widows in both groups. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul identified widows' ministry as one of the most significant ministry needs in the congregations he planted. Pure and undefiled religion, according to James 1:27 is “looking after orphans and widows in their distress and keeping oneself unstained from the world.”*”

By this time, phenomenal growth exploded and expanded the church, from the first prayer gathering of 120 in Acts 1, to 3000 converts added in Acts 2, to 5000 more men evangelized in Acts 4, to the conclusion in Acts 5:5 – *Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers – crowds of both men and women.*” Add it up, and these 12 Apostles, in leadership position only a few months, acknowledged their personal inability and the organizational impossibility to continue to preach and teach, while at the same time engaging all of the ministry needs in this now multigenerational, multiethnic, mega-church. So they proposed reorganizing and expanding the organizational structure to deal with the imbalance. The result of their decisions in Acts 6 increased their tenure and longevity.

We add now another function that matters in the church – **Leadership Matters**. What kind of leadership produces a healthy, growing church?

1. **Spiritual Leadership**. As the intensity of this congregational crisis escalated, the 12 Apostles, the spiritual leaders, appealed to the gathered church:

- *Select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit*

and wisdom. (Acts 6:3). *Martyroumenous* = honest report, well-attested. This word is used only this once in the New Testament and implied a person whose Christian testimony is indisputable, unquestionable, undeniable. Not only men of good reputation, but full of the Spirit and wisdom – leaders who gave evidence of allowing the Holy Spirit to work in them and who demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. These potential leaders also gave evidence of their wisdom – an emotional intelligence tempered by knowledge and experience – the kind of practical “know-how” required for administrating the widow’s ministry.

Often this congregational episode is viewed as the initiation of deacon ministry. Although the word deacon – *diakonos* – never occurs here, or elsewhere in Acts, the word “ministry” – *diakonia* – does occur several times. If deacon ministry IS rooted here, then we must take our cue from Stephen and Philip. Nothing more is mentioned of their administrative duties. However, Stephen will be stoned to death for this personal witness and Philip will become an evangelist. Deacon ministry looks a bit different now than it did then!

- **We must never settle for anything less than the highest standard of excellence in our church leaders** – morally, ethically, and spiritually. It begins with those we employ as our vocational pastoral and ministerial leaders, extending to those we select as our deacons. The Bible is very specific and explicit of the qualifications for pastors vocationally and deacons voluntarily. But we also must hold to the highest standard of excellence, morally, ethically, and spiritually, of those who we select and appoint to any position of congregational leadership. This is not a time to lower our standards – we must raise our standards to the highest level of spiritual, moral and ethical excellence. You have a right to demand that those who serve you here at First Baptist Lafayette, either vocationally or voluntarily, demonstrate the highest standard of spiritual leadership.

2. Shared Leadership. This church crisis forced the congregation to consider shared leadership:

- ***“It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables....select from among you seven men....whom we can appoint to this duty....But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”*** (Acts 6:3-4) The essential tasks of the Apostles involved prayer and proclamation – prayer to discern God’s will and direction for the church and preaching to evangelize the lost and disciple the saved. It was not right or

expedient for the congregation to expect the Apostles to neglect their calling and responsibilities in order to engage and be consumed with ministry responsibilities. A shared ministry strategy surfaced as the best solution, whereby additional leaders would be selected from among congregation, and ministry responsibilities delegated and entrusted to them.

- **The church's greatest tension = pastoral leaders releasing ministry responsibility to the members and the members releasing leadership responsibility to the pastoral leaders.** I mentioned in a recent sermon my fear that in the 21st century American church, we've created the curse of Ministry Professionalism – employing seminary-trained professionals to fulfill all the ministry functions of the church. All six of our seminaries, including my place of employment and calling, New Orleans Baptist Seminary, exist for the purpose of theological education and leadership skill development. My vocation is teaching the next generation of vocational pastors, church staff, missionaries, chaplains, and church planters. While their training does include ministry skill development, we send them out to be leaders according to the Ephesians 4 mandate – leaders “*equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.*” (Ephesians 4:12) The implication is that leaders lead and delegate ministry responsibility within the giftedness and passions of the church members – the body of Christ. In my first sermon as your Interim Pastor – 8 months ago next Sunday – I challenged all of you to carry your own bags during this time of pastoral transition – to do more, serve more, minister more. And I encourage you to keep carrying your own bags when a new pastor comes! I challenged the deacons in my first meeting with them to be “first responders” during the pastoral transition, and I encourage you men to continue to be first responders, even after the arrival of your new pastor.

But another congregational issue, one which did not exist in the first century, threatens the success of shared leadership – the curse of Inactive Members. You've heard the statistic that 20% of the members of a church do 80% of the work of the church. It's actually worse than that. According to the most recent stats, 50% of all Americans are classified as “infrequent churchgoers” and 1 in 5 Americans have no religious affiliation. Even more disturbing – only 10% of American church members are active in ministry. What we've done in the last 50 years in the American church is to designate “*active members*” as those who regularly attend and who give some money to support the church. Not much more is expected. Attending worship and giving money are not spiritual gifts. God has far greater expectations for every Christian. He expects every Christian to use their spiritual

gifts and talents in ministry. If we can ever awaken and unleash the massive talent, resources, creativity and energy found in the typical local church, Christianity will explode with growth at an unprecedented rate! A healthy church is defined by shared ministry, where the pastoral leaders release ministry to the people and people release leadership to the pastoral leaders. No church can hire enough pastoral leaders to do all of the ministry and no church can survive or thrive if more than half of the members are inactive!

Spiritual Leadership + Shared Leadership = A Satisfied Congregation.

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Let's make a new commitment to Spiritual Leadership and Shared Leadership at First Baptist Lafayette, so that a crisis of leadership never happens here!