

Youth pastor shortage leaves churches scrambling to fill key role

By David Roach

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Pastors in general are in short supply these days, and the data proves it. But some youth ministry experts suspect the student pastor shortage is even more severe.

“We tell churches when they call looking for recommendations on student pastors that it could be a year or two to find a good candidate for your church – especially if you’re looking for a full-time student pastor,” said Larry Hyche, an associate in the office of global missions with a focus on men’s spiritual development for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

The Southern Baptist Convention has acknowledged an overall shortage of pastors, seeking to address it with a 2021 initiative to “call out the called” for vocational ministry. Yet hard data on the youth pastor shortage is difficult to come by.

“I don’t have any data or even a guess” on whether the lack is more severe than the overall pastor shortage, admitted Len Kageler, chair of the youth ministry department at Nyack (NY) College who has written more than 10 books in the field.

An increasing chorus of experts suggests research is in order.

Several factors at play

First Baptist Church Hendersonville, Tennessee, illustrates why. The suburban Nashville congregation averages 3,250 in worship and is thriving by numerous metrics. But it has sought

a high school minister unsuccessfully for two years.

“Several factors have impacted the search,” said senior associate pastor Bruce Raley, including the pandemic, an overall lack of pastors and the proliferation of new staff positions that attract the type of young ministers formerly drawn to youth ministry – family, NextGen, campus or executive pastor, to name a few.

FBC Hendersonville isn't alone in suspecting a youth pastor shortage. Baptist Press reported on the apparent lack in March, as did the UK's *Premier Christianity* magazine last year. At least four experts voiced their suspicions of a shortage to The Baptist Paper.

Raley sees a convergence of factors at work, including the fact that youth are facing more intense challenges at younger ages, precipitated by the smartphone.

“Struggles with gender identity, same sex attraction and issues like these were never discussed just a few years ago,” he noted.

Those new challenges often demand a youth pastor “with a little more life under their belt” than the 22- and 23-year-olds churches hired in previous generations, Raley added. But economic challenges have made it difficult for older ministers to relocate their families for the modest income of youth pastorates. Plus, the overall pastor shortage has led some potential youth ministers to move directly into lead pastorates without first utilizing student ministry as a training ground.

A reduction in programs focused on youth ministry has perpetuated the shortage, added Richard Ross, senior professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

“Those who lead SBC agencies need to ask: How does the number

of student ministry employees we have today compare with the number we had a decade ago?" he suggested. "Those who lead state conventions need to ask the same question.

"In every case the answer will point to a major reduction in leaders who train and support student pastors. Adding rather than reducing professors and leaders will lead to more and better trained student pastors."

Growing pornography problem

The proliferation of pornography also may fuel the shortage.

According to the ministry Covenant Eyes, 57% of teenagers search out pornography at least monthly. One in five youth pastors – and one in seven senior pastors – use porn on a regular basis. Those who recruit young adults to student ministry say porn addictions make many feel unworthy to answer the call to ministry.

Remedying the shortage of youth pastors will require work by churches, leaders say.

Ben Trueblood, director of student ministry for Lifeway Christian Resources, said the solution includes "investment by local churches in the role of student pastor."

That means larger salaries for youth pastors and more involvement "in the greater strategic planning and vision for the overall church."

Senior pastors must refocus on developing student pastors, Trueblood said.

"Many student pastors are not sought out for development by those who lead them," he noted, "which results in them leaving for other churches, to pastor their own church or leaving ministry entirely."

Prayer is another key to raising up more student pastors, said

Allen Jackson, senior pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church in Georgia and former professor of youth ministry at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Prayer should be supplemented by frequent talk of “the wonderful opportunity of being called to full-time ministry,” he encouraged leaders.

Investing in the next generation

A hefty investment in “next generation” ministries also is helpful.

“If the culture of a church does not place priority on preschool, children and youth, calling a youth or children’s pastor will not solve the problem,” Jackson asserted.

“A culture that supports the next generation supports them financially, allows participation in meaningful ways, facilitates interaction with other generations and enlists top quality leaders to ‘next gen’ areas.”

Back at First Baptist Henderson they’re not giving up on the search for a high school minister.

“We are looking for one who feels called to student ministry,” Raley said. “We know the Lord has the right leader for us.”