



# THE PASTORAL CRISIS & GREENER GRASS

**Most people love green grass**, and doesn't it seem as though the grass is always greener at the house down the road? Sometimes the grass across the road really is greener. How did it get that way? A nice lawn doesn't just happen. Green grass is usually the result of hard work (fertilizing, weed control, aerating), and it takes time to cultivate.

I think "greener grass" is linked to our pastoral crisis. How do we get greener grass in our churches? It takes time. Many years ago, I talked with Gordon Sebastian about his life and ministry (<https://edwardmoody.podbean.com/e/rev-gordon-sebastian-tells-his-story/>).<sup>1</sup> He had a 40-year pastorate at Peace Church in Wilson, North Carolina, but his ministry did not begin that way. He measured his first pastorates in terms of months. He pastored the first church for six months, then 24 months, 15 months, 28 months, and then five years at Mount Calvary Church in Hookerton, North Carolina. He noticed that some of the more effective pastors he knew had long pastorates, what he termed "a lifetime work." He committed to go to a church and stay in a ministry, which led him to the 40-year pastorate in Wilson, North Carolina. Initially, the grass was not that green. He faced many challenges, especially in the early years of the ministry. But he kept ministering, and he intentionally poured his life into his people and later the staff that God gave him.

Recently, I spoke with Dr. Rusty Russell, the pastor who succeeded Pastor Sebastian (<https://youtu.be/ze1UBz9B6Vk>). He described the activities Pastor Sebastian engaged in as he worked with people.<sup>2</sup> It was a slow and gradual process. But, slowly and gradually the church became stronger and became a "greener grass" church.

In a recent Better Together Podcast ([https://youtu.be/G8\\_da9V7xy8](https://youtu.be/G8_da9V7xy8)), Chris Moix described the discipleship activities his church is engaged in. When we recorded the podcast, I could not help but notice the similarities with what happened at Peace Church, and what is described in Scripture (<https://nafwb.org/graphics>). Chris described how he and

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others at this church were pouring themselves into the lives of others, walking together to follow Christ. As a result, people are better equipped to fulfill their purpose, to utilize their spiritual gifts. Some may hear a call from the Lord to pastor churches. All of this fertilizing and tending is leading to greener grass.

Sometimes, the sins of yesterday result in the problems we face today. For example, have we spent so much time looking for greener grass that we failed to cultivate our own? Some of the research on a “consumer” marriage versus a committed marriage may help us here.<sup>3</sup> In a marriage, when someone is always wondering if they could get a better spouse, they tend not to work on their marriage as hard as they would if they were committed to making their marriage work. Their “wondering” distracts them from doing what they need to do for their marriage to succeed.<sup>4</sup>

In our case, pastors might spend a lot of time looking for a greener grass church and, as a result, fail to cultivate our own grass (or shepherd our own flock).

**This “greener grass” problem works both ways.** Sometimes, members of the congregation are looking for greener grass and therefore leave their church for what they think are better programs, activities, and people rather than staying and helping build their own church by utilizing the spiritual gifts God has given them.

**Sometimes, the leadership of a church does not allow a pastor to stay long term.** Pastor Sebastian was right about his assumptions regarding long-term pastorates. In Dr. Thom Rainer’s research on pastors, he found the average pastoral tenure was 3.6 years. However, churches that seemed most effective (see *First Aid for Your Ministry* for more details)<sup>5</sup> had longer tenures (11.2 to 21.6 years).

**Some church leaders believe they can trade up and get a better pastor.** The data indicate it takes time (fertilizing, tending) for a pastor to become effective at a church. Some churches have failed to give pastors time to lay down roots and grow their church. As a result, they have burned through pastors, and some have left the ministry leading to our problem of 124 churches without pastors.<sup>6</sup>

There are many reasons 124 Free Will Baptist churches do not have a pastor (<https://nafwb.org/blogs>). When we see a greener grass church or pastor, let’s remember that beautiful situation did not happen easily. If I buy my neighbor’s home with the greener grass and fail to cultivate that lawn, soon it will not be green and lush anymore. Let’s intentionally focus on fertilizing and cultivating our own grass. This will result in strong churches, more pastors, and green grass churches!

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Sebastian Tells His Story, August 8, 2011: <https://edwardmoody.podbean.com/e/rev-gordon-sebastian-tells-his-story/>

<sup>2</sup> Chris Moix, March 8, 2021. *Making Disciples who Make Disciples*, Better Together Podcast: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8\\_da9V7xy8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8_da9V7xy8)

<sup>3</sup> Edward E. Moody, Jr., Ph.D. (2018). *First Aid for Your Emotional Hurts: Marriage*. Nashville, TN: Randall House.

<sup>4</sup> L.J. Waite, D. Browning, W. J. Doherty, M. Gallagher, Y. Luo, & S. M. Stanley. (2002). *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*. New York: NY. Institute of American Values.

<sup>5</sup> Edward E. Moody, Jr., Ph.D. (2019). *First Aid for Your Ministry: Supporting Those Who Minister*. Nashville, TN: Randall House.

<sup>6</sup> E. Moody. *Everyone’s Problem: We Need More Laborers*: <https://nafwb.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Everyones-Problem.pdf>

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