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## Church leaders ponder, 'Who's calling out the called?'

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Baptist churches are often like mules. "They are strong, but they don't reproduce," says theology professor Curtis Freeman.

Freeman, who heads the Baptist House of Studies at Duke University, is among a growing number of religious leaders who say churches are doing too little to encourage young people to enter the ministry.

That deficit could result in a shortage of pastors and other church leaders nationwide.

Nearly 30 percent of Southern Baptist ministers are older than 55, while only 10 percent are younger than 35, Freeman pointed out during a seminar on vocational ministry this summer in Fort Worth, Texas.

That means that for each person entering the ministry, three are preparing to retire.

Compounding the problem is a trend in which only one-third of today's seminarians say they expect to serve in a local church. Many are opting instead for non-pastoral roles in parachurch ministries, missions, social ministry and chaplaincy.

Ministerial scandals of recent years, two decades of bickering among Baptists, low pay and diminishing status for ministers in society all contribute to dulling the call to local-church ministry, Freeman said.

"So why would you want a job that can't support a family, won't get respect, makes unrealistic demands and goes against the basic beliefs of society?" he asked. "I can't think of a good reason unless the Almighty Master of the universe calls you by name and leads you there."

Freeman faults churches and pastors failure to help students amplify and interpret their calling to the ministry. "I don't think God ever stopped calling men and women," he said. "We just stopped nurturing and cultivating it."

Seminaries and theology schools are acutely aware of this problem, but experts say academia alone can't solve the problem.

Seminaries can educate students the churches send to them, but they aren't effective at recruiting people for ministry, said Dan Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. "They're very good at educating people who have experienced a call," he said. "They're not very good at helping people on the street discern whether they have a call."

Aleshire said the recruiting of future ministers begins with the local church. "The church has got to help them with thinking about seminary and choosing vocational ministry."

One way to do that is mentoring. Men and women who have been called into vocational ministry almost uniformly point to certain individuals who helped them hear and interpret that call.

New research conducted by the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Baylor University examined this question of influence by asking pastors in Texas, "Who was the single most influential person used by God in (your) call experience?"

More than 80 percent could name a specific individual who played that role, while about one in five said they were influenced most by personal devotions and not any one person.

The most frequently cited influence was a pastor. Nearly 40 percent of those surveyed cited their own pastor was the single most influential person in helping them hear and understand God's call.

Fifteen percent cited family members as the primary influence. Other individuals -- such as youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, church staff members, friends, missionaries and campus ministers -- also were named.

Asked to describe other people who had been helpful to them in discerning a call to ministry, 78 percent cited a pastor as a positive influence.

Experts say such church relationships can't be overestimated in nurturing the ministerial call.

Aleshire said research shows that certain congregations account for a disproportional number of candidates for ministry. "Those congregations tend to be vital, effective environments with longer-term pastorates," he said. In effect, they provide healthy role models for ministry.

That point isn't lost on David Ivie, a student at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. The ministry is a second career for Ivie, who spent seven years working for Brinker International, including three years as manager of a Chili's restaurant. He said lessons he learned in business also apply to churches.

"When I was a restaurant manager, I noticed that the stores that were led by fun, challenging and positive leadership were also the ones that had the largest number of staff trying to get into management," he said. "The most important thing pastors can do to raise awareness is to provide a positive example for others to follow."

Ivie found that same kind of influence in his pastor, George Mason, at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

Mason has embraced a personal conviction in recent years that healthy churches should be more intentional in calling out and preparing future ministers. In addition to regularly inviting youth and young adults to consider whether they are called, he has led the Dallas church to launch a pastoral-residency program.

Mason believes the two-year program could be to ministers what hospital residencies are to physicians. Residents receive intensive mentoring, opportunities to preach and teach and are fully engaged in the ministries of the church.

Jay Hogewood is the first pastoral resident to take part in the program. Hogewood was in the first graduating class of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary and is now working toward a doctorate at Brite Divinity School.

The Wilshire program also includes internship options for college students and seminarians. The church employed four college interns this summer. Some used the opportunity to "try out" ministry as a vocation in their process of testing what they perceive to be a calling from God.

Royce Rose, director of theological education for the BGCT, said that approach is precisely what is needed to restore the appeal a career in the ministry.

Rose said churches must engage in "a more specific mentoring and encouraging approach one-on-one."

"Pastors and other ministers must be with people of all ages as they struggle with vocational calling," Rose said. "Ministers need to involve potential ministry candidates in an intentional mentoring process. There need to be opportunities for people to try out their gifts in ministry situations where there is little risk and no long-term commitment that will 'guilt' them into service."

Rose said a side benefit of such a holistic, congregational emphasis is that it helps other church members sort out their own calling, even if it isn't to vocational ministry.

"Some people enter a ministry vocation because God is calling them to commitment and they don't know how to define that call in any way but to enter vocational ministry," he said.

But getting a student enrolled in seminary is just a first step that does not guarantee he or she will end up on a local church staff. By various accounts, only 30 percent to 50 percent of seminary graduates wind up ministering in a local church.

Bill Tillman is a professor at Hardin-Simmons University's Logdson School of Theology and previously taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Tillman has been tracking this trend for 15 years. Each year, he asks his students about their career plans after graduation. Of the several hundred who have passed through his classes, roughly half said they preferred to serve in a local church.

And even that 50 percent won't all be pastors. The number also includes non-pastoral roles, such as ministers of education and other church staff.

A related but largely unexplored factor in this mix is the fact that increasing numbers of women are entering seminaries, despite a reluctance by many congregations to call females as ministers and particularly as pastors.

In a survey two years ago of students on 11 university campuses, about 70 percent of undergraduates who said they were called to vocational ministry planned to go on to a seminary. About the same amount said they want to work in ministry full-time, rather than part-time or in a bivocational setting.

Topping the list of how they hoped to minister, 20 percent said they planned to be missionaries, followed by 18 percent who were looking toward youth ministry. Pastor came in third, at 15 percent.

Some use such data to sound an alarm about an impending shortage of pastors, but Tillman said he is encouraged that so many young people are at least choosing some form of ministry as a career.

"Trends regarding calling reflect the definite movement of God among us," Tillman said. "In other words, there is a need for both more preacher-pastors and for more who will do other kinds of vocational ministry."

Aleshire said simply comparing the percentage of seminarians now preparing for local-church ministries with statistics from 30 years ago is misleading because there are many more opportunities today.

"Ministry is so much more widely distributed today," Aleshire said. "Think of all the parachurch organizations that 35 years ago weren't there for ministerial employment."

Many people today view ministries that aren't parish-oriented as "a normal part of ministry in communities," Aleshire said. "If you look at the data 50 years ago, virtually all were going to local-church ministry of one kind or another. Now the program options have diversified and ministry opportunities have diversified."

Another bright spot for churches is an increase over the last two decades in the number of people choosing ministry as a second career. Statistics show that older students are more likely to go on to minister in a local church.

The Auburn Seminary study found that just one in five seminarian today came there straight out of college. The average entering theology student has been out of college 10 years.

A downside to the trend, however, is that older students as a group don't fare as well academically and in ministry experience as those fresh out of college.

The Auburn study said those who commit to a career in ministry early in life often are more involved in church leadership as young people and gear their undergraduate studies to help prepare them for seminary.

But older students also bring strengths that balance those disadvantages. "Older students, for instance, bring with them to theological study much stronger commitment to ordained ministry and much more interest in serving congregations," according to the Auburn study.

Two-thirds of older students plan to be ordained, compared to just over half the younger ones, the study found. Four in 10 second-career seminarians say congregational ministry is their first choice, compared to 30 percent of younger students.

While second-career seminarians might be an answer to prayer for some congregations, some schools are reporting a slight reversal in the trend. More young adults are going to seminary as a first-career choice, although second-career students still account for more than half of seminary enrollment nationwide.

It's too early to tell why the trend is changing or if it will last, but observers have begun to speculate.

One explanation, Aleshire suggested, is economic. "We know that when the job market tightens, graduate enrollments tend to increase. If you can't get a job out of college, going on to do more school is an acceptable thing."

Another possibility, he added, could be that the increased emphasis on ministry as a desirable vocation is starting to pay off. "What's been happening is sort of a recovery of a sense of mission and recovery of a sense that this is important work," he said.

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-- With additional reporting by John Hall

## **Pastor fulfills passion for calling out ministers**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Parents often encourage their children to consider respected professions such as law, medicine and business.

George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, believes they should give equal emphasis to the ministry as a vocational choice.

"If the kingdom of God is the most important thing in time and eternity, when you're talking to your children about vocation, why not talk to them about ministry?" asked Mason, who in recent years has become an advocate for helping youth and young adults consider the call to ministry.

"Don't neglect to help a child with the question, 'What does God want you to do?'" he suggested.

Mason insists that vocational choice should be a matter of spiritual discernment more than one driven by economics or perceived prestige. "I'm convinced many times our kids are gifted for ministry, but they haven't been schooled to think about that," he said.

Mason suggests pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth workers and others who have contact with youth and young adults should view themselves as encouragers toward vocational ministry.

"As you're watching kids grow up around you, ask them, 'Have you ever thought about ministry as a vocation?'" he recently urged the church's deacons.

That's precisely how Mason first became open to considering ministry as a profession. While a sophomore and football quarterback at the University of Miami, his pastor called him in for a visit and asked him if he ever had considered that God might be calling him to vocational ministry.

"I had no thoughts of the ministry," he said. "I planned to become an NFL player."

But between his pastor's probing and a series of other events, Mason opened his eyes to a new life path that has since brought him fulfillment and joy.

The impact of that one question has lasted a lifetime. "I remember that day as clearly as if it were yesterday," Mason recalled.

Now well established in his career, Mason has turned his attention to trying to help others in the same situation. Both from the pulpit and through private conversation, he makes efforts to raise the profile of ministry as a holy, yet pleasant, calling.

On Feb. 4, 2001, Mason preached a sermon from Isaiah 6 in which he urged members of the congregation to consider that God might be calling them to service. "If God is calling you, God will make you fit to serve," Mason said that day. "The issue is your willingness."

David Ivie remembers that sermon clearly. As he sat behind Mason in the choir, he clearly sensed God was calling him to vocational ministry.

"George ended the sermon by reminding us that we are all called to the ministry, some to full-time vocational ministry," said Ivie, now a student at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. "When he said that, I felt like I was the only one in the sanctuary. It was a very special service that left me convinced God was speaking to me."

Ivie said in hindsight he realized that "God was working with me all along, even though I was not aware of it." That particular sermon just brought his calling to the surface.

Ivie, 34, resigned his management job with Brinker International and became a full-time student.

Today, he is both invigorated by his studies and exhilarated by the thought of becoming a pastor. He's also thankful Mason made the call to ministry plain and bold.

"It is important for the leadership in the church to spell it out just like George did in the sermon that day," he said.

He suggested that ministers challenge young people by saying things like, "Did you know you can go into ministry yourself?" or "You seem to me someone who has a heart for the church; have you ever considered becoming a minister?"

In his quest to call out the called, Mason also had to set an example at home. His oldest daughter entered Furman University as a freshman this fall, and he's felt a burden to help her examine ministry as a career choice as well.

Asked by a church member if there might be a danger of him "calling" his child into ministry rather than God calling, he responded that youth and young adults hear plenty of calls from parents to other professional roles. Besides, he reasoned, if a child is not being called by God to ministry, a parent's suggestion is likely to roll off easily.

"It's not that they have to please us," he said. "But a lot of times God calls through human voices."

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## **Second-career ministers bring experience of a different kind**

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Before entering Howard Payne University, Matthew Winn struggled between pursuing a business career or becoming a minister.

He chose the business route and achieved success as an accountant, chief financial officer, vice president of operations and senior consultant at a succession of companies in Georgia.

Within the last year, however, Winn, now 34, experienced what he considers a distinct call to vocational ministry. In answer to that call, he and his family have begun freeing themselves of previous commitments and preparing to move wherever God leads.

Winn continues to work for PricewaterhouseCoopers in Atlanta, but he's already begun studies toward the master of divinity degree at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

Did he misread God's will before college?

Not at all, he believes.

"I felt clear guidance to pursue the business route," he explained. "Even now that I have felt called to the ministry later in life, I believe I heard the first call correctly."

Like many other second-career ministers, Winn believes his business experience will be a plus in his new vocation.

"I see God's clear hand moving me into unique opportunities, and my rapid advance was certainly his doing rather than my own skill," he said. "Now it is obvious that each of those opportunities taught me specific lessons and skills that will directly impact my ability to be an effective minister."

That doesn't mean responding to the call was easy, however.

"I felt my clear call while along on a one-week business trip," Winn recalled. "While sitting in one of the training sessions, I thought, 'I've heard all this before, and who cares?' I walked out, found a quiet place to pray and let all my frustrations pour out to God."

"But one more thing was required. I had to let go of my own plan for the rest of my life, because I had life all figured out. I knew when I would retire, how much money would be in the bank. I had to let go of all these plans before I could see God's plans."

"That," he said, "was the scariest day of my life."

Even after acknowledging what he believed to be God's clear direction, Winn suffered panic attacks.

"These weren't really times of doubt about the existence of my call; they were times of doubt about how God was going to make it work," he said. "I just couldn't make all the pieces fit, and it was scary."

Now, however, Winn said he finds peace in his calling and affirmation around every new corner. Things appear to be falling into place, although not on a timetable he can control.

The biggest recent struggle has been identifying where he's headed in ministry. Some want to pigeonhole him as a pastor or youth minister. Yet he feels a strong calling not to abandon his business experience but rather to build upon it for the sake of ministry.

Because he has experienced a highly successful business career, he's not content with suggestions of some that he must "pay his dues" to learn the ropes in ministry. Some well-meaning advisers, for example, have said he ought to start off in a youth ministry position and "move up" to another ministerial role from there.

"The real issue," Winn suggested, "is to find roles that challenge mid-life professionals, allow them to use the skills they have already developed and encourage them to reach out to the world in new and creative ways while also providing very experienced ministerial mentors as appropriate."

David Ivie, a Baylor University graduate who recently left his secular job in Dallas to enter seminary, shares that sentiment. As the former manager of a Chili's restaurant, he doesn't feel the need to get his youth-ministry card punched as a stepping stone to the pastorate.

"If being a Chili's manager isn't youth ministry, then I don't know what it is," he quipped.

What that really means, he added, is that "I have learned ways to build teams, to motivate and encourage young people and to present a model of leadership that builds on young people's energies, needs and desires."

On another front, Ivie said, his secular work experience will help him provide better pastoral counseling. "I know what it is like to go to a job that is demeaning and exhausting. I know from personal experience how hard it is to be a Christian in the business world. ... And I know how hard it is just to get to church every Sunday with your children after a long, busy week."

Both Winn and Ivie acknowledge that second-career ministers may bring an accelerated sense of mission to churches.

"As churches begin to see a pending shortage of ministers, I think God is calling many of us out of previous careers to meet the needs of his church," Winn said. "We will bring a different perspective on ministry but will continue to need the guidance of experienced ministers in our lives.

"We are going to expect churches and ministry to move faster than they have in the past and to try new approaches to spreading the gospel."

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