

## **Second Pastor Study**

### **Findings about Pastors Who Follow Founding Pastors**

**A Research Project Commissioned by the North Texas Conference,  
United Methodist Church**

**Lewis Center for Church Leadership  
Wesley Theological Seminary  
Washington, DC  
[www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com)**

Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Project Director  
Joe Arnold, Research Manager  
Donald R. House, Consultant



## Some Highlights from the Study

- Second pastors are not typically transitional pastors; they stay as long on average as founding pastors.
- Second pastors overwhelmingly describe their relationship with the founding pastor as good.
- There are not wholesale staff changes when the second pastor arrives. Over 75 percent of clergy and lay staff are still in place one year later.
- Second pastors give most of their time in the first year to worship and sermon preparation, leadership development, getting to know people, and evangelism.
- A majority of the churches receiving a second pastor experienced significant conflict in the year before the pastoral change.
- Second pastors see themselves as different from their predecessors in personality and approach to ministry, but attendance is greater if the two pastors are more similar.
- Second pastors report a strong match between their personal characteristics and the culture of their new congregations, and attendance is greater if the second pastor better matches the church's DNA.
- They report being similar to the predominant population the church is seeking to reach in terms of age, race, education, family, and background.
- Second pastors need patience, self-confidence, listening skills, thick skin, and flexibility.
- Pastors become second pastors around age 40 on average. Attendance is greater the older the second pastor is upon arrival—up to age 42. This indicates the ideal age of a second pastor is somewhat older than the ideal age of new church planters, where growth is more associated with very young clergy.
- Attendance grows with time during the tenure of the second pastor but at a decreasing rate, a common pattern for this phase of a new church no matter who is pastor.

## Report Summary

### Background

While many studies report on the work of church planters, few studies exist on the experience of “second pastors,” those who follow founding pastors of new congregations. The North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, hoping to address the vacuum, commissioned the Lewis Center for Church Leadership to study United Methodist second pastors from recent decades.

Conference congregational development staff persons identified just over 100 second pastors. Of this number, 56 completed an extensive survey. This information and statistical analysis of various factors and their connections, if any, with attendance change during the second pastor’s tenure provide the basis for the findings reported. Don House, Ph.D., of RRC, Inc., was engaged to do the regression analysis.

The 56 survey respondents serve in 15 different annual conferences: Central Texas, Dakotas, Florida, Greater New Jersey, Kansas East, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Alabama, North Carolina, North Georgia, North Texas, Southwest Texas, Texas, Virginia, and Western North Carolina

### What We Learned

In terms of gender and age, **second pastors on average tend to be men around age 40**, although about 10 percent of those surveyed are women and the age range extends from 28 to 58.

By and large **second pastors are not interim or transitional pastors**. The founding pastors they follow had served on average 7 years. Second pastors who have already moved to another appointment stayed on average 6 years with about 10 percent staying 10 or more years. Almost 50 percent of second pastors responding to the survey have not yet moved since becoming a second pastor.

About **60 percent of the churches receiving a second pastor had experienced significant conflict** in the church (where either people left the church or a special meeting had to be held to deal with the conflict) in the year before the pastoral change.

**By the time second pastors arrive, churches tend to be worshipping in their own space** (68 percent) rather than in rented space. Whatever their worship meeting place, congregations on average have been worshipping in that same space for 3 years. But just over 20 percent of churches receiving a second pastor have been in their current worship space one year or less.

**Virtually all of the second pastors said they were good or very good in making sure systems are in place and working well** – such as systems for outreach, hospitality, incorporation of new people, worship, etc. That is fortunate since 70 percent report that such

*First pastors tend to be charismatic people who paint wonderful pictures of the Promised Land. Second pastors lead them through the wilderness to get there. This is not the time to say we have a new Promised Land.*

... a survey respondent

systems were only “adequate” or were “poor to nonexistent” when they arrived. This may be a combination of second pastors having a different set of skills from what it takes to start a church and the tendency to judge ourselves a bit less harshly than we do our predecessors.

To what extent does the appointment of a second pastor lead to staff conflict or turnover? Surely that happens, but not so much as might be expected. By and large, **over three-fourths of people on staff when the second pastor arrived (clergy and lay, full and part time) were still on staff one year later.** And when there were staff transitions in the first year, over 60 percent report those changes going smoothly or relatively smoothly. But in almost 40 percent of the cases where there was staff change (although not involving many staff), the transitions were reported as somewhat or very contentious.

**Second pastors give most of their time in the first year to worship and sermon preparation, leadership development, getting to know people, and evangelism.**

When comparing second pastors and founding pastors, **male second pastors tend to follow male founding pastor in 80 percent of the cases studied.** But about ten percent have male second pastors following female founding pastors or female second pastors following male founding pastors. Appointments in recent years indicate that future surveys will show more diverse patterns.

When asked how similar or different they are from their predecessors in personality, approach to ministry, theology, and priorities, **75 percent of second pastors said they are somewhat or very different from their predecessor.** Despite these differences, **second pastors overwhelmingly describe their relationship with the founding pastor as very good or cordial and professional.**

*Out brag parishioners about your predecessor's strengths. If they say he was good, you say he was very good.*

... a survey respondent

Advice from second pastors to new second pastors about relating to the founding pastor focused on: **ask and listen, respect what they have done, affirm them, and never criticize them.**

Every congregation has a personality or “DNA.” When asked how closely their personal characteristics matched the culture of the congregations where they were sent, **65 percent of second pastors reported their characteristics were similar to the culture of the congregation,** with the largest response being

very similar.

When asked about similarities or differences upon arrival with the predominant population the church was seeking to reach (age, race, education, family, background), **over 70 percent of second pastors said they were similar to the population the church is seeking to reach,** with the largest response being very similar.

According to those surveyed, the **characteristics needed by second pastors are patience, self-confidence, listener, thick skin, vision, and flexible.**

The second pastors surveyed said there will always be **comparisons to the founder** so take them in stride and keep moving forward. Realize that you are not the founding pastor, and your credibility will take time to establish. Build on your strengths, and focus on public moments when you make first impressions. Make sure your preaching is passionate and creative and be yourself.

When asked what new second pastors should and should not do when they begin as second pastors, those surveyed said **second pastors should listen; affirm the founding pastor; get to know the leaders, staff, and members; and understand the history and DNA of the congregation.** They caution against changing things quickly and criticizing the founding pastor.

### What Matters Most to Growth in Attendance

The Lewis Center engaged Donald R. House, Ph.D., to do an analysis of survey results in relationship to worship attendance trends before and after the arrival of the second pastor to see if there were statistically significant factors that help or hinder attendance growth during the second pastor's tenure.

The longer the founding pastor stayed, the greater the attendance reported by the second pastor. This is not surprising if attendance continues to grow during the years of the founding pastor. Great attendance before the arrival of the second pastor merely places the second pastor on a higher plane.

Attendance is greater the older the second pastor—up to age 42. After age 42, attendance declines. Since earlier research has shown attendance growth in new church starts associated with young clergy (under 35 when they begin), this may mean that a greater degree of experience and maturity may be needed to face the challenges of being a second pastor, including following a charismatic, maybe younger, founding pastor.

Attendance grows with time during the tenure of the second pastor. As expected, it grows at a decreasing rate. Our data stop at 13 years in the appointment, and over the range of 1 to 13 years, it never turns downward, but it begins to flatten somewhat.

Interestingly, the second pastor's attendance is greater if there was a conflict in the church toward the end of the founding pastor's tenure. Perhaps this makes it easier for the church to welcome the second pastor.

Attendance for the second pastor is greater if the two pastors are more similar. Perhaps the founding pastor attracted a congregation with an affinity for the founding pastor's characteristics. If the second pastor has similar characteristics, the congregation seems to respond positively.

The second pastor's attendance is greater if the second pastor better matches the church's DNA—perhaps not surprising at all. We did not find a significant relationship between the second pastor's attendance and similarity between the second pastor and the people the church is trying to reach. We believe the wording of this question may have been somewhat confusing, thus skewing the results.

## Possible Implications for Selecting Second Pastors

Do not look for transitional pastors unless extraordinary circumstances call for that. Recognize that the second pastor is going to be there for a while, and the church will continue to grow.

Look for someone a bit older than most new church planters, but not too old. An age in the range of 38 to 42 seems to be ideal.

The second pastor needs demonstrated emotional and professional maturity with self-confidence and a clarity of call. The second pastor will need utmost patience. Avoid negative personalities and those who make a habit of criticizing their predecessors.

The skills needed for the second pastor are similar to and different from those needed by the founding pastor. Both require energy, vision, and a passion for people experiencing new life in Christ. Second pastors need to be good at ensuring that ministry systems are in place and are built around teams and not just the pastor.

*Being a second pastor is perhaps as challenging as planting a church. Done well, the church will thrive; done poorly and there's likely no third pastor coming.*

... a survey respondent

There is always a debate about whether the second pastor should be similar to or different from the founding pastor. Most second pastors feel they are different from their predecessors, but attendance grows better the more similar the pastors are. Perhaps the second pastor needs to be somewhat different but not radically different. However, sending a second pastor whose approach to ministry is in sync with the culture of the new congregation is essential.

Be careful not to make the change too soon. The presence of significant conflict in 60 percent of churches in the year before the founding pastor left may indicate that the time for the change of pastors was right. Since the conflict did not hamper the church's attendance growth once the second pastor arrived (actually helped), one conclusion may be that those without the conflict may have done better with the founding pastor staying a bit longer.

If there are other ordained staff at the church, there is no need to think that the other clergy must move when the founding pastor moves. Most second pastors work well with inherited staff. However, if there is strong reason to believe that the clergy staff will not be supportive of the new pastor, then that is a different situation. While there is not much staff transition in the first year, when it does occur, often it does not go well.

## Survey Findings

### Characteristics of Second Pastors

**Gender:** Second pastors tend to be men (51 men, 5 women).

**Age:** The average age of entering second pastors is 40. The median age is 39. The age range was from 28 to 58.

**How long do second pastors stay?** Of the 56 second pastors in this study, 26 are still at the church where they followed the founding pastor. Of the 30 who already moved, they stayed 6 years on average (median = 5.25 years). The range of second pastor tenures was from one year to seventeen years. Here is the breakdown of tenures for these 30 second pastors:

1 – 2 years: 6 pastors  
3 – 5 years: 10 pastors  
6 – 9 years: 9 pastors  
10+ years: 5 pastors

### Characteristics of the Setting When They Entered

**How long had the founding pastor served?** The second pastors tended to follow founding pastors who had been there about seven years (average = 6.75 years; median = 7 years). The shortest tenure of a founding pastor in this study was three months and the longest was sixteen years.

**Presence of conflict:** When asked if there was significant conflict in the church (where either people left the church or a special meeting had to be held to deal with the conflict) in the year before their arrival, second pastors reported:

57% - Yes  
43% - No

**What do second pastors find upon arrival?** When second pastors arrived, 68 percent of the churches were worshiping in space owned by the church while 32 percent were in rented space. Churches had been in their current worship space about 3 years when the second pastor arrived (average = 3.24 years; median = 3 years). Those churches in their current worship space one year or less when the second pastor arrived constituted 21 percent.

When asked to describe the quality of various systems (outreach, hospitality, incorporation of new people, worship, etc.) upon their arrival, they responded:

2 - Very good  
15 - Good  
19 - Adequate  
19 - Poor or nonexistent

## What Changes Occurred in the Second Pastor's Ministry?

### What happens to the staff the second pastor inherited?

- 76 % of full-time clergy were still there one year later (12 of 17)
- 83% of part-time clergy were still there one year later (10 of 12)
- 77 % of full-time lay staff were still there one year later (61 of 79)
- 82% of part-time lay staff were still there one year later (143 of 174)

**Where there were staff transitions, how did they go?** In the minority of cases where there were staff changes in the first year, second pastors described how the transition went as:

- 29% - Smooth
- 33% - Relatively smooth
- 24% - Somewhat contentious
- 14% - Very contentious

### How do second pastors spend their time in the first year?

1. Worship preparation (including sermon planning) – 1.19 (see scale below)
2. Leadership development – 1.68
3. “Listening posts” or gatherings to get to know people – 1.87
4. Evangelism visits or contacts – 1.92
5. Teaching or leading Bible study – 2.00
6. Small group development – 2.13
7. Meeting with groups in the community – 2.19
8. Hospital calls and counseling – 2.32

(scale: 1 = a great deal, 2 = some, 3 = very little, 4 = none)

## How Do Second Pastors Compare with the Founding Pastors?

### Gender:

Male second pastor following male founding pastor: 46  
Male second pastor following female founding pastor: 5  
Female second pastor following male founding pastor: 5  
Female second pastor following female founding pastor: 0

**Similarities or differences with the founding pastor:** When asked how similar or different they are from their predecessors in personality, approach to ministry, theology, and priorities, second pastors answered:

- 2 - Very similar
- 7 - Somewhat similar
- 6 - Similar
- 22 - Somewhat different
- 19 - Very different

**Relationship with the founding pastor:** When asked to describe their relationship with the founding pastors, second pastors reported the relationship as:

- 11 - Very good
- 30 - Cordial and professional
- 8 - Neither good nor bad
- 3 - Strained
- 2 - Hostile



## **How Well-Matched Did Second Pastors Feel to Their New Context?**

**Similarities or differences with the congregation:** Every congregation has a personality or “DNA.” When asked how closely their personal characteristics matched the culture of the congregations where they were sent, the second pastors reported:

- 19 - Very similar
- 11 - Somewhat similar
- 6 - Similar
- 14 - Somewhat different
- 5 - Very different

**Similarities or differences with the people in the new church community:** When asked similarities or differences upon arrival with the predominant population the church was seeking to reach (age, race, education, family, background), second pastors said they were:

- 21 - Very similar
- 12 - Somewhat similar
- 7 - Similar
- 15 - Somewhat different
- 0 - Very different

## **What Advice would Second Pastors Offer to New Second Pastors?**

### **How to relate to the founding pastor:**

- Ask and listen
- Respect what they have done
- Affirm them
- Never criticize them

### **Characteristics most needed by someone becoming a second pastor:**

- Patience
- Self-confidence
- Listener
- Thick skin
- Vision
- Flexible

### **Things a second pastor needs to know:**

- There will always be comparisons to the founder – take them in stride and keep moving forward.
- Realize that you are not the founding pastor, and your credibility will take time to establish.
- Build on your strengths.
- Focus on public moments when you make first impressions.
- Make sure your preaching is passionate and creative.
- Be yourself.

### **What things might you advise new second pastors to do or not do as they begin?**

- Do
  - Listen
  - Affirm the founding pastor
  - Get to know the leaders, staff, and members
  - Understand the history and DNA of the congregation
- Don't
  - Change things quickly
  - Criticize the founding pastor

## About the Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Established by Wesley Theological Seminary in 2003, the Lewis Center for Church Leadership helps the United Methodist Church address its current challenges. The Center is building a vision for church leadership grounded in faith, informed by knowledge, and exercised in effective action. It seeks a holistic understanding of Christian leadership that brings together theology and management, scholarship and practice, research and application.

Committed to the broad goal of helping the church reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people, the Center focuses on improving leadership effectiveness and providing actionable strategic insights to promote fruitful ministry. The Center seeks to be a trusted resource for congregations and denominations seeking to serve, thrive, and grow. The Center staff, along with other consultants who assist with special projects, also draws on the expertise of the entire Wesley faculty and a wide array of gifted practitioners.

### *Leading Ideas Online Newsletter*

*Leading Ideas* is a free bi-weekly online newsletter of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership. Thousands of clergy and lay leaders from across the U.S. and around the world make use of this important leadership resource.

Subscribe at [www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com).



Lewis Center  
for Church Leadership

*Building a New Vision for Church Leadership*

**Wesley Theological Seminary  
4500 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
202-885-8757**

**[www.churchleadership.com](http://www.churchleadership.com)  
[lewiscenter@wesleyseminary.edu](mailto:lewiscenter@wesleyseminary.edu)**