

Part 4

Interviews with Pastors

After the general data from the surveys was analyzed thirty pastors were selected for in-depth interviews. The percentage of pastors chosen for the interviews was kept in consistent with the theological backgrounds of the respondents of the general survey (cf. Table 4.10).

Table 4.10
Interview Ratios

Background	Survey %	Interviewed f.	Interview %
Pentecostal	73	20	66
Bible	11	4	12
Methodist	7	2	7
Baptist	1	1	3
Other	8	4	12
Total	100%	30	100%
Urban	20%	6	20%
Rural	80%	24	80%
	100%	30	100%

The format for the interviews followed the outline given in Appendix D which sought to gather more information on research questions 5, 6, 9 & 10 which were as follows:

RQ5 What do pastors identify as their greatest areas of need?

RQ6 What obstacles does the pastor face in trying to achieve church growth in terms of the believers, his ministry vision and the community?

RQ 9 How would the pastor describe his community and is there a community profile that dominates the viewpoint of the pastors?

RQ10 What is the impact of the evangelical church in the lives of its members, and outsiders?

The structure of this part of Chapter IV will follow the sequence presented in the research questions. The information presented represents a compilation of opinions and attitudes expressed by the pastors. The points highlighted in this section are some of the common themes heard in the course of the interviews. In some cases, when a particular argument was presented by several pastors (three or four), the interviewer would consult other pastors as to whether the weight of the argument was valid or not.

Pastor's Needs

The first interview question (RQ5) sought more detailed information about the needs of the pastors. From the general survey data the two areas of needs most frequently marked by the pastors were finances and academics. Comments by the pastors indicated that the subject of finances is a key issue in the development of a healthy relationship with their congregations or denominations. Many pastors have informal agreements with their churches regarding their salaries, and many do not have any social security benefits with the salary arrangements. It was also mentioned in the interviews that the issue of negotiating a salary with their churches is often a point of conflict where the pastor does not feel he has much control or say.

Independent pastors (those who do not belong to an denomination) feel they have more control over their salaries since they are the ones who control the policies of the church. In interviewing these pastors, many recognize the potential problem of abuses in the handling of church funds and the need for a separate entity to oversee church finances, but few, in fact, have these safeguards. According to the pastors interviewed, the best

remedy to avoid problems and resolve disputes is a board of elders that is committed to the well-being of the church and the pastors.

Pastor's Education

The second area of need mentioned was in the field of academics. Pastors admitted that, at least for Costa Rica, there were abundant and inexpensive means to get good theological training, whether they were serving in rural or urban churches. The attitude of the pastors toward theological institutions is generally good, and many of the pastors interviewed had either taken courses or are planning to do so (f.= 21). It was found that family and work pressures kept many pastors from completing their study programs. Almost all of them said that it was their intention someday to earn a degree, whether it be through a formal seminary or a Bible institute operated by their church denominations (f.=25). In several larger church denominations, attendance and completion of an established curriculum is a requirement for continued good-standing. In the cases of the pastors interviewed from these denominations, there was a positive attitude toward these requirements.

There were four reasons pastors felt positively toward their denomination's educational institutions. First, they felt that the classes were designed to meet their needs within the context of their ministry in the churches and offered practical information that they could use to disciple their congregations. Secondly, they appreciated that other pastors from the denomination were their professors. This gave them the feeling that the teachings from these veteran pastors included more practical instructions as to what worked and what did not work, an important difference than their perception of formal

theological courses offered in many seminaries. Third, the denomination's curriculum revolved around courses which lasted only one or two weeks. Usually the pastors were brought together in a common setting, once a year, and attended classes throughout the day for one or two weeks. This provided pastors the opportunity to have fellowship with one another and to advance in their own understanding of the scriptures while experiencing minimum disruption on their work in the churches.

In contrast to the positive attitudes held to Bible institutes, seminaries, were thought to be too theoretical and academically inclined to meet the real needs of pastors. Those interviewed said that there was a perception that much of the material was too complex to be shared or taught to their congregations. Another negative factor was the length of time the pastors had to dedicate to completing course work. A pastor who has work and family obligations finds it hard to dedicate three to four months of traveling back and forth to a seminary three or four times a week in order to complete a degree as required by formal institutions. On the positive side, all those interviewed appreciated the education that a seminary offered and recognized that a degree from a seminary was more valuable to them and to members of their congregations than was a degree or diploma from a Bible institute.

The pastors interviewed expressed the need to upgrade their educational status for two reasons. First, the pastors have recognized that there is a growing proportion of their congregations that are "professionals" in their careers with the result that many pastors, for lack of further education, are not viewed as "professionals" by their congregations. A common scenario expressed was that the current pastor had started a Bible study group perhaps fifteen to twenty years ago. The Bible study group grew into a church and elected

their Bible study leader as its pastor. Over the last fifteen to twenty years many people in the congregation have had to go back to school and obtain more formal education in order to continue to maintain their standard of living in a constantly changing society. The fact that many pastors have not been back to school to upgrade their own level of education becomes evident.

A second factor as to why pastors feel the need to upgrade their education is the recognition that, increasingly, the Gospel is impacting the upper class structures of Costa Rican society. Currently there are many doctors and lawyers in the churches and the pastors are conscious of their lack of ability to minister to people from this level of society. Not only have the pastors noticed that the adults have had to upgrade their education, but an increasing number of their members' children have gone on to university and are becoming professionals. In the face of these changes in their congregations and society, a pastor who does not continue to educate himself alienates himself from many of the adults and young professionals coming to his church. One pastor's comment was especially poignant when he indicated that he had noticed among his church members that "the rigors of formal studies in pursuit of a professional or secular degree have made the people think more critically and that this also impacts the way people receive and process theological information." He went on to say that "because more church members have been taught how to think critically about issues in their secular jobs, any attempt to manipulate the scriptures on the part of pastors is more easily perceived and rejected." For these reasons, pastors recognize the need to pursue more education for themselves. In the absence of being able to attend a formal institution, most pastors receive their ideas and instruction through books, the radio or television.

Obstacles to Church Growth

In the interviews pastors were asked about the obstacles to church growth (RQ 6). In response the pastors pointed to six reasons. First, the problem of one family controlling the church was mentioned several times (f.= 6) as a hindrance to pastors who desire to implement changes in their churches.

Second, mention was made of the impact on the church when a conflict erupts between two family groups (f.= 16). Instead of focusing the energies of the church outward, the pastor and other members have to try to reconcile the disputing parties. This is a problem especially in smaller churches and/or where the pastors are assigned by an denomination to lead a church.

A third deterrent to church growth was the bad testimony of church members in the community (f.= 8). This can occur when the pastor is trying to bring healing to dysfunctional families and individuals. During this time, the profile of the church is elevated in the eyes of the community. When the process fails, or a member misbehaves, the resulting community reaction can also damage the testimony of the church for years to come, since many of these communities are small and have close family ties.

Doctrinal obstacles constituted a fourth area of hindrances to church growth. Several pastors (f.= 12) made reference to dogmas that some churches were currently teaching that have a negative impact on church growth. The most prominent complaint was the teaching of what is commonly called the Prosperity gospel. The chief characteristic of this teaching that perturbs many pastors is the reduction of the work of Christ in salvation to His being a type of Santa Claus, providing for the material needs of His children. Such teaching is expounded at the expense of developing the believer's

spiritual relationship with God. This reduces the believers' prayer life down to an ask-and-receive relationship, the health of which depends on the faith of the believer and not on the sovereignty of God. One pastor compared this doctrine as reducing God to a witch whom you visit to manipulate the spirits to get what one wants. One pastor put it bluntly, "This doctrine promises things that it cannot deliver, and when things do not work out it is blamed on the believer's lack of faith." Reaction to this teaching was strong because guilt is placed on the believers themselves when they feel that their prayers are not answered. When the theological paradox hits them (that of a loving God who will not/cannot meet their needs) they become discouraged and leave the church feeling that something is wrong with themselves. Other teachings that pastors noted as damaging were: the practice of permitting Christians to marry two or three times, the view that demons were everywhere and controlled everything, and sermons on the importance of tithing that seem to be for the benefit of the pastor himself.

Fifth, pastoral failure affects church growth, especially when the pastor's offense is a moral failure involving another member of the church (f.= 6). This can lead to serious social and legal consequences. If the national press reports the incident, the reputation of all evangelical churches and pastors is called into question. This has been a serious and on-going problem for the Costa Rican evangelical church for many years.

Finally, there was only one interview where problems with the government or a priest were mentioned. This fact reinforces the concept that most problems that pastors face in the area of church growth come from within the churches themselves and that at this time relatively little outside opposition to the evangelical churches exists in Costa Rica.

Table 4:11
Obstacles to Church Growth
(n = 30)

Area	f.
Family controlling church	6
Conflicts between families	16
Bad testimony	8
Dogmas	12
Pastoral failure	6
Problems with officials	1

Relationship with Communities

Another area explored in the interview questions was how pastors described their communities (RQ 9). Most pastors said that they felt that their communities were very open to the presence and participation of the church in community affairs. Several pastors (f.= 10) commented that their churches had recently begun to engage in social service projects for their communities with good results. Family problems, drug addiction, and alcoholism were the main problems about which the communities were anxious to see the churches help. There was widespread agreement, by the pastors, that although many people in the communities were not evangelicals, there was still a strong sense by the pastors that their churches were perceived as positive influences and welcomed both by the citizens and government officials. Several pastors interviewed (f.= 4) either were, or had been, members of a community civic committee.

The analysis of the general data presented earlier in this chapter indicated that the principal interaction of the churches with their communities was through evangelistic events. Cooperation in such events between pastors is high in Costa Rican. The only exception that was found was when a church split had taken place and people had left one

church to join another. It was found that pastors from an area usually know each other, either through common friends or from pastoral fraternity meetings, and are open to the possibility of cooperating with each other in neighborhood evangelism events. Rarely, however, do the pastors meet inter-denominationally to discuss ways that they might work together toward the evangelization of their cities or towns. In the past, the FAEC has been the most commonly accepted organization in bringing the pastors together to promote city-wide or province-wide events, usually with an international evangelistic organization such as the Billy Graham Association.

Outreach to other communities is a high priority. Many churches have one or more daughter churches. These new churches are not always in the vicinity of the mother church. Sometimes they are located in other areas of the country. Two methods were mentioned regarding how these daughter churches are planted. One is that of a person who has already begun a small church (and becomes the pastor) asking to join the denomination of his former church. This takes place when there is some sort of prior friendship or relationship with the pastor of the former church. In this case the former church adopts the new church and is responsible for overseeing it.

The second way these churches come into existence occurs when someone from the mother church moves to an area that has no church. The member contacts his former church which then will help a family cell group to begin. Oversight is provided by an elder or deacon from the mother church until the family cell group grows to the size that it can sustain a part-time or full-time pastor. If the person who started the group shows leadership potential, the mother church is likely to name that person as an interim pastor until he can meet the denomination's requirements to be formally named as pastor.

Overall, the pastors interviewed exhibited good vision, flexibility and enthusiasm in terms of shepherding new congregations into existence. At times, the interviews revealed a note of competition with other pastors or denominations, but not in a hostile sense. The pastors also expressed deep concerns for the spiritual well-being of their communities; hence, evangelism and church planting claim high priority in their work.

Importance of the Church in the Lives of Members and Outsiders

This study also sought the opinion of the pastors in terms of the importance of the church in the lives of its members and outsiders (RQ10). While there was widespread agreement that large evangelistic campaigns are no longer very fruitful, pastors gave three reasons as why they are still doing them. First, it was agreed that campaigns are useful as publicity to demonstrate the power and presence of the evangelical churches. Second, from the pastor's perspective campaigns are useful to reinforce in the minds of the parishioners the importance of evangelism in the life of the church. Third, the campaigns were said to validate the role of the church in the community and justify the people attending the church in the eyes of their neighbors.

While campaigns are still being used as a form of evangelism. One of the most notable resources the churches are using to penetrate their communities with the gospel is the use of family-based cell groups. Many pastors are currently focusing more attention on preparing leaders to form and lead family groups (cell groups based around families and their friends). Some pastors (f.= 8) lamented the lack of imaginative evangelistic models in the evangelical culture. Several pointed out that there are many ways to evangelize and that the churches continually need to be seeking new ways to present the

gospel. Children and adolescent evangelistic models need to be urgently adopted by the church in order to continue to bring in the next generation. “If there is not a vision of reaching outside the church, then there will be problems inside the church” said one leader. In such outreach, the pastor plays a key role as a visionary-leader for the church.

Several pastors (f.= 4) mentioned that there is a great deal of spiritual hunger among the people of their communities. Problems in the families of church members, especially marital problems, incline many people to seek God’s in help to live through the hard times they are experiencing. Music and Bible teaching provide the people with an anchor of hope and comfort to guide them through difficult daily situations. According to the pastors, music in the churches is an important vehicle to keep the minds of the people focused on God, and modify their behavior to conform to God’s will for their lives. Also, music is evangelistic. Costa Ricans love music and when an evangelistic group begins to play in a local park, people are attracted to come out and hear the message of the gospel. In general, the pastors are aware of the role music plays in bringing people closer to God. Finding good musicians is important to the success of any Costa Rican church, large or small.

The one area where pastors felt there was a deficiency in the role of the church in the lives of people was in the area of discipleship. Many pastors (f.= 28) expressed regret at the level of commitment that their people show toward studying the scriptures. Even those who have been pastoring for years expressed their frustrations about the level of discipleship they were able to accomplish in their congregations. In addition to the problem of motivating people, the next biggest problem pastors faced was the lack of materials for teaching their people. Here again, the positive role that Bible Institutes play

in helping pastors was evident in the interviews. The International Institute of Evangelism In-Depth (IINDEF) merits special mention since many pastors expressed their appreciation for the emphasis this organization has given over the years to the importance of discipling people and producing materials that help pastors in their discipling responsibilities.

Another complaint was there were some pastors who, instead of seeking to truly disciple people, resort to teaching legalistic practices rather than focus on a relationship with God. These pastors were characterized by their peers as being manipulative and controlling toward their people instead of providing a caring environment where discipleship can flourish.

Positive themes that pastors felt were being taught in the church included: the love of God, grace, God as Father, the life of Christ, prayer, forgiveness, the second coming, assurance of salvation (people are afraid of falling into sin and losing their salvation), spiritual warfare, spiritual gifts, and the freedom we have in Christ.

The pastor, as a member of the church, is also subject to ups and downs. Almost all of the pastors interviewed (f.= 25) knew of another pastor who had left the pastorate. The most common reason cited was a moral failure on the part of the pastor himself. When pressed to analyze why, comments pointed to three reasons. First, the almost priest-like role the people assigned to evangelical pastors. In some churches the pastor's counsel is thought to be nearly infallible by the parishioners. This is attributed to the cultural influence of the Roman Catholic church where in the eyes of the parishioners the role of the priest is elevated to a mystical level as the interpreter of the word of God for his people. A second area of pastoral failure revolved around female parishioners going

through marital difficulties. For the pastor, temptations occurred through becoming emotionally attached to these women while counseling them through a crisis in their lives. Sadly, once there has been a moral failure on the part of a pastor, restoration was said to be very difficult with the result that the pastor usually ends up leaving the church and the pastorate for good. Supervisors interviewed admitted that although they have tried to restore pastors who have experienced moral failure, they have not been very successful in even keeping such men in the churches, much less in the pastorate.

A third cause of pastoral downfall is due to family pressures. Often, it was said, this was related to the pastor's salary. One pastor put it concisely, "A pastor with a family of three or four children cannot support himself on what many small churches pay." Also, many denominations do not allow their pastors to hold secular jobs to help make ends meet. In these cases the financial pressures build to the point that the family must make a decision. In the best of situations the pastor is able to get a part-time job (if allowed) that will give him the flexibility to continue to minister to his congregation. Sometimes this is not possible, and he has to leave the pastorate. In most cases the former pastor and his family will continue to attend the church. Rarely, it was said, does an ex-pastor return to the pastorate at a later time.

Summary

Through the interviews with the thirty pastors a fuller perspective has been gained regarding the worldview of pastors in regards to their personal and professional lives. Information on the needs of pastors, their views on the role of education in their lives, obstacles to church growth, relationships with their communities, and the role of the

church in the lives of members and outsiders has been presented to describe the ministry realities the pastors face. Noteworthy is the sacrifice that many of these pastors have made in order to start, grow, and maintain their churches. Many of the pastors interviewed (and their wives), both rural and urban, from small churches and large churches, showed a high degree of commitment to doing the right things to help their people have a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God.

Now that the opinions of the pastors concerning research questions 5, 6, 9 & 10 have been presented, a summary of the principle findings of this study and recommendations will be given in Chapter V.