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The Best Tool in the Box

During my days with the American Baptist Ministers Council, I had the honor of administering a grant from the Lily Endowment that was given for the purpose of enhancing clergy health both vocationally and personally. One of Lily's stipulations was the administrators would participate annually in a conference in Indianapolis where we would share our learning with other groups who were doing similar things.

Of the many insights, I found this one both particularly disturbing and very hopeful. (I warn you now that my data is a bit dated, but I suspect that things have not gotten any better.) What we learned is that of all men who enter ministry, 50% will drop out within the first five years; and of all women who enter ministry, 50% will drop out in the first 3 years.

I have often tried to imagine the pain in this process for both pastor and church. Pastor John completes his seminary degree and accepts a call to his first church. It doesn't work out; and he has to wonder, "What went wrong? How did I so completely misunderstand my call from God? What kind of failure must I be?"

And the church's questions, did we fail our new pastor? When we called him, we were certain of God's call both for him and for our congregation. How in the world did we miss it so completely?"

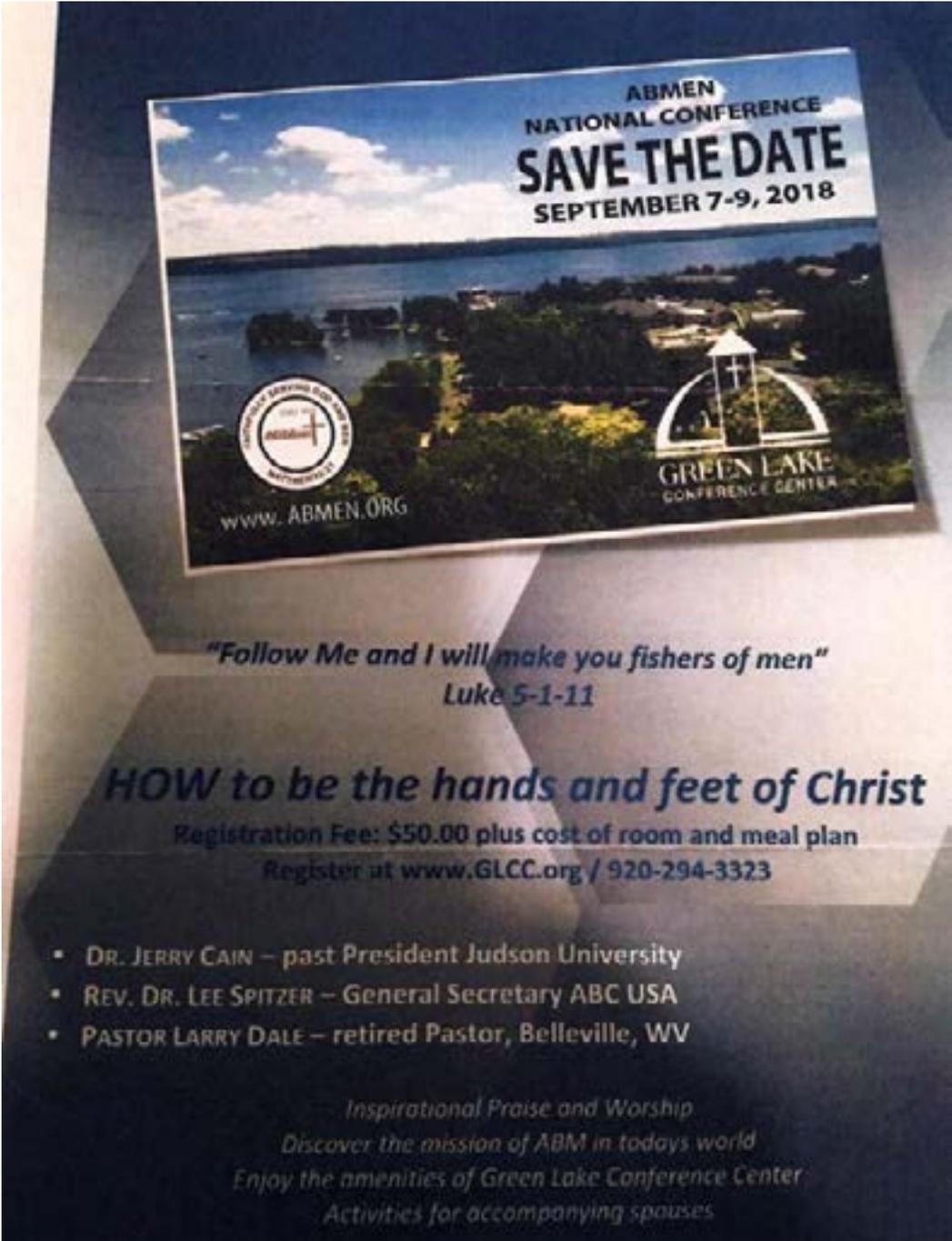
There are reasons that are commonly given for the attrition. 1. Debt. Coming through college and seminary, young pastors sometimes accrue significant debt that the salaries of the churches simply do not allow them to pay. To make ends meet, they find other employment. 2. Church conflict. Pastors new to ministry neither expect nor are they well equipped to deal with the normal "give and take" of congregational life. Every disagreement and every divided vote feels like a failure, and they are all too often ill prepared to handle it. And when a real fight comes along, the young pastor may leave. 3. Not the job they expected. In school, they learn to teach and preach, to interpret scripture and visit the ill, to marry and bury. Then they arrive in the real church and find themselves managing decision making processes, administrating a complex volunteer organization, recruiting Sunday School Teachers and mowing the lawn on Saturday. It's not what they signed up for and they leave.

Now, in the midst of this difficulty, where is the hope. A United Church of Christ group in Massachusetts created a process through which all new pastors in their area were assigned to covenantal clergy colleague groups. They were grouped with peers and mentors, and they met monthly to talk over the issues of ministry and particularly their issues as men and women new to the pastorate.

The results? Instead of a 50% attrition rate, the retention rate was between 90% and 95%! The difference was having peers and mentors walk along side.

Remembering my entrance into ministry, I was not assigned a group. But, in the community where I first served as a solo pastor, there was a strong ecumenical group of pastors who made me welcome and then walked along side of me for several years as I learned the crafts of ministry. That collegial community of shared programs, shared worship, shared meals and lots of shared conversation became the nurturing group that mentored me into ministry, and I shall be forever grateful.

This is what I learned from the Lily Endowment — intentional and disciplined collegiality is probably the best tool in the box for our personal and vocational enhancement.



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