

1-1-1998

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Recommended Citation

White, Donald W. (1998) ""Stepping-Stone Churches,"" *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Iss. 4, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss4/10>

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STEPPING STONE CHURCHES

By Donald W. White

Paul, a man in his seventies, visited the tiny rural church where I was the new minister. Two years earlier I had been a youth minister at the church he attended in Washington state; he had been one of my strongest supporters. After our church service, I overheard him talking to one of our longtime members. "I hope you lose him!" he said enthusiastically. "I hope he goes right to the top!"

I'm not sure what "the top" meant to my dear friend, but I have a feeling it included preaching for a large, influential church in a major city. It is interesting that, though Christians claim to be countercultural within a religiously apathetic country, the American idea of success infiltrates even the standards we use to measure Christian ministry. Many of us have grand expectations of our work at the beginning of our ministerial careers, most of which can be measured quantitatively. The size of our congregations, church facilities, and paychecks are all fundamental to our visions for our ministries. But what do we do with Crystal Cathedral dreams when God gives us a church of twenty in Small Town, USA?

Larry Copeland and the Cottonwood Church

When Larry Copeland was hired by the Cottonwood Church of Christ in West Texas, he had four years' experience in a Montana church of just over one hundred. Ministry was not his first occupation. With a master's degree in electronics, Larry already had a successful career when he felt the call to preach. When he graduated in 1977 from

a preaching school in Texas, his goal was simply to find a church that would financially support his family and that he could "fall in love with."

He was working for a utilities company in Abilene, Texas, when he heard about the Cottonwood Church of Christ. It was an older congregation of less than thirty in a fading farm community over an hour away. They were looking for a part-time minister to come out on Sundays to preach, lead worship, and teach the adult Bible class.

The Cottonwood post office and school had closed their doors in the '60s. The few children left in the area are taken to schools in Cross Plains, about ten miles southeast. People, businesses, and peanut farms had begun trickling out of Cottonwood to Cross Plains when the railway was built there in the '30s. The Cottonwood church no longer had a children's Bible class. The last family with children had moved away years before.

Larry had left the church in Montana the previous year because of the church's dwindling finances. With a longing to preach again and the need for extra income for house payments, Larry took a drive out to Cottonwood. The church hired him in the fall of 1982—the beginning of a warm, twelve-year partnership. "Before they found out how bad I was, they fell in love with me," Larry said, laughing. "So they put up with me and I put up with them, and it was a wonderful relationship."

I wanted to hear more about Larry's work at Cottonwood, so I invited him over for pie and coffee in my home

in Abilene. As we sat in the kitchen talking about family, ministry, and the Dallas Cowboys (which all blend together in Texas), it was a transition time for both of us. My family was living amidst boxes, readying for a return to the Pacific Northwest. And because of a change in his responsibilities at the utilities company, Larry was adjusting to the idea that, after over twelve years, he could no longer make the Sunday morning drives to Cottonwood and to the church he dearly loved.

Cottonwood is not the kind of church college students dream about as they sit in ministry classes. This kind of church is usually seen as a stepping-stone—a place to preach until “something better” comes along.

In the last several decades of this century-old church, the average tenure for ministers had been about two to three years. Since the 1950s nearly all of their ministers had been students from Abilene Christian University who would make the long drive each Sunday for school money and practice in preaching. Larry, a family man with a few years’ experience, was a refreshing change for the church.

Beyond the Numbers

When Larry began working with the church, over twenty-five people were showing up on Sunday mornings, and about fifteen were returning for evening worship. Larry would spend Sunday afternoons with families in Bible study or listening to stories of peanut and cotton farming. “That’s how I got to know the families,” Larry said, “because you don’t get to know them until you get in their houses.” A few years later, the church discontinued the evening worship when attendance dropped to around six or seven. The few remaining working families eventually moved west to Abilene. But Larry continued his weekly drive over country back roads lined with mesquite trees to this tiny church of West Texas retirees.

The first goal for many ministers is numerical growth. And when that growth doesn’t come according to our projected figures and timetable, we get fidgety. We reevaluate our ministry. We lovingly remind church members of their role in church growth: “Remember—we are all ministers of Christ.” One more book. One more workshop. One more evangelism class. Prayer and pleading. Blame and cynicism. Expectation turns to frustration. Then we hear God “calling us” to another work, our egos consoled by an inventory of the congregation’s obstacles to growth.

But much numerical growth is unlikely for a church that resides in a community of a few hundred. Larry

Copeland’s goals had more to do with opening minds, deepening faith, and broadening the knowledge of God’s Word—all difficult tasks for a church nourished for decades on the same novice sermons from young preaching students. But Larry earned the trust of the Cottonwood church and began to stretch them bit by bit. He confesses that his ministry may not have been what he planned, but his primary concern was “to be the vessel that God uses to fill their needs.” He wasn’t able to spend the time he wished preparing his sermons, but he felt his knowledge of the people gave his messages a personal touch that made the difference.

Several months before Larry resigned, he asked me to fill in for him for two Sundays. His instructions were detailed. “Now, when you first get there, you need to write these announcements on the board,” he said, handing me a paper. Then he began telling me who would likely show up, which couples would probably ask us to dinner, and to not be offended if so-and-so nods off, because “he’s got this problem, and he just does that sometimes.” Larry handed me another paper with a diagram of who would be sitting where in the pews. Then he went on to describe the layout of the church house, with his eyes shut and hands moving about, painting his mental picture of the sixty-year-old cinder block building with the hand-me-down pews from a sister church in Baird. I understood then that Larry didn’t just preach for this church. With all his heart, he loved this gathering of less than twenty retired peanut farmers and a grandson or two.

Larry’s View of His Cottonwood Ministry

I wondered what Larry felt he had accomplished after more than a dozen years in a church that many outsiders would say was drying up. In addition to a greater understanding of God’s Word, Larry said he witnessed a blossoming of spiritual vitality and deepening humility. He remembered the prayers of one man who would offer thanks for Larry’s preaching and would frequently tell the Lord that he only wished so-and-so had been here for that sermon. Larry recalled the simple prayer, offered five or six years later, that showed the same man’s awareness of his own spiritual need: “Lord, I’m thankful that we were here and that we got to hear your Word today.”

Many ministers had been unable to witness a renewal of spirit at the Cottonwood church. Until Larry, no one in the last half century had been with the church long enough to see that kind of difference. He took no credit for their

spiritual growth, but he enjoyed pointing it out like a proud father. "They are stronger than they were before," he said. "They have more spiritual muscles. They are more missionary minded." The Cottonwood church was not an interim ministry for Larry. It was not a place for him to await a better opportunity. This was a strong, Spirit-blessed relationship between a minister and a small, yet important, outpost of the body of Christ.

In his twelve years there, Larry never preached the same sermon twice. Though he used some biblical texts over again, he approached them in different ways and with new interpretations that came with his own growing knowledge of the Word. His Sunday morning Bible classes were text based—systematically going through various books of the Bible. Sermons were planned in series. Often one series led naturally into another. His was a well-planned, Bible-directed, serious ministry for the small group who usually came. For Larry, smallness was no reason to see this ministry as any less significant than another.

When Larry thinks of ministry, he pictures Jesus taking off his cloak and stooping with a towel and a basin of water to wash the disciples' feet. "The word *ministry* I'm not sure about," he said. "But the word *servant* I'm pretty comfortable with." He believes it is essential for the minister to depend upon prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God. Although he understands the desire of many ministers to attend retreats and seminars to "get their batteries recharged," Larry said, he found more than enough spiritual refreshment in his relationship with the people of the Cottonwood church.

Searching for the Pearl

A friend in ministry came to stay with us years ago in Washington state. "What are the demographics?" he asked, when I told him the size of our small town. "I wouldn't work in a place like this," he said. "There's not any chance for growth."

I didn't want to hear that. But my colleague in ministry, who studied at the feet of one of the most notable church growth experts in the country, had the undeniable statistics in his head. He knew well what little chance we had for numerical growth as a small, predominantly older church in our rural northwestern town of about four thousand. "I wouldn't work in a town of less than ten thousand

people," he said. And for the rest of the afternoon, my wife and I politely listened to stories of his valiant evangelistic exploits and the dramatic conversions in his ministry at a major university. After my friend left the next morning, it took a few days before I regained my sense of validity for the small-town ministry I had chosen.

I don't know of anyone whose career goals include serving a church of under fifty with a salary to match, but that is the reality for countless ministers. We need a church that we can work with, one that will sufficiently provide for our family's needs—but how many churches do we toss aside as barren oysters while searching for the pearl that suits all our ministerial dreams? All the marriage counseling we may give to a restless spouse who is convinced of greener pastures elsewhere often goes out the window as we ourselves become frustrated with the churches with which God has joined us together.

Perhaps Larry Copeland's ministry situation was less than ideal for those of us who are not seeking bivocational ministry. But his compassionate work for over a dozen years with the tiny Cottonwood church was certainly befitting a minister far more concerned with stooping to serve than with climbing career ladders.

Naturally, experience is a key criterion of pulpit search committees for larger congregations. And small churches will of necessity be the stepping-stones to those opportunities. What we fail to realize, however, is that those small churches do not see themselves as stepping-stones, but as primary destinations. And there are many members of good churches who are weary of being stepped on as part of the career pathway of countless idealistic ministers on their way to larger, ideal churches that do not exist.

Most churches are small churches. And they are filled with dear people of God who need the kind of pastoral care that can be given only with the expertise of one who has lived with them for several years.

In a shoe box on my dresser I still have the diagram that Larry drew for me of who would be sitting where in the Cottonwood church during worship. It's a reminder to me of the heart of a shepherd—one who truly cares for the church no matter the size of the congregation he serves.

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