

Report from Director of Church Health—March 2022
Rev. Larry Austin

A friend that serves as a church consultant recently made this observation about where the church finds itself two years into a pandemic. He said churches fall into three camps: those already retooling for the future, those waiting for the pandemic to end so things can get back to normal, and the rest caught in the chaos between the future and the past. We have served churches and their leaders in all three camps in 2021. Here is how:

Pastoral health remains a concern and a priority. Serving as a local church pastor remains challenging. Post-lockdown church engagement is less than March 2020 and hard to accurately measure. Gatherings and ministries have returned but a full complement of volunteers have not. Expectations—if they are clearly articulated at all—remain shaped more by pre-pandemic measures of “health.” Many pastors are tired and weary. A November 16 article in Christianity Today observed that in “in 2016, 85 percent of pastors rated their mental wellbeing as good or excellent, according to a previous Barna poll. In an October 2021 poll, it was down to 60 percent (Kate Schellnut, (2021, 11/16) Pastors Aren’t Alright, *Christianity Today*).” That same October Barna survey indicated that 38% of pastors are considering leaving the ministry. That was up from 29% in January 2021. Pastors are not immune to the same mental health challenges their people are facing.

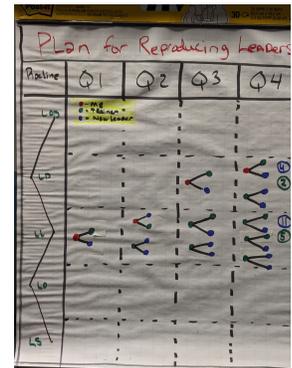


In 2021, there were four encouraging developments in our ministry to pastors. First, we continued to fund counseling resources for pastors and wives through an arrangement with a professional counselor that resulted in very low-cost professional care. Dozens of pastors and couples were helped by this initiative. Second, Paul Bauman, Todd Brook and I partnered with existing regional ministerial group leaders to revision and reset how these groups meet. Large groups have been multiplied and “right sized.” New groups have been formed in areas where men were not connected. A simple agenda focusing on peer support and prayer is uniform among all groups. Reports from fall gatherings have been very encouraging. Third, our spring affinity retreats returned in 2021. We gathered men by church size or region for the purpose of peer learning and care. Mike Shields did a great job of facilitating these groups. I am grateful for the partnership of our host churches and pastors for these retreats. Finally, every man on our team has been vigilant about the individual pursuit of pastors. Gathering men is good but it is not shepherding. Shepherding involves follow-up (pursuit), presence and prayer. I regularly populated my calendar with coffees and lunches to check-in on pastors.

Most of our churches are doing a great job of encouraging and caring for their staff. Even so, many pastors serve without clear role expectations and regular feedback. Some of our churches have been extraordinarily generous in granting their pastor an emergency sabbatical or time in an intensive counseling setting. Yet more is needed. Giving a pastor a break is good. Inviting him back into a better ministry environment is better. I hope to work with more both pastors and local church leaders to create service for Jesus with better pace, clearer expectations and boundaries, and new metrics for gospel fruitfulness. In 2022, I will be forming a Live Well, Lead Well learning community to help pastors balance soul care with strategic leadership.

Equipping and coaching are my most essential contribution. Equipping is not just teaching or training. It involves more than gathering people for a workshop or seminar. I still find Dann Spader’s observation about the ministry of Jesus helpful: “Jesus **taught** for understanding, **coached** for implementation, and **mentored** for multiplication.” Equipping involves teaching AND coaching AND mentoring in relationships over time. In 2021, I made equipping investments in three key areas:

- **Multiplying disciple making leaders.** In 2021, we continued to **teach and train** the model and methods of Jesus through 4 Chair Discipling workshops. A February 2020 survey commissioned by Exponential and Discipleship.org revealed that less than 5% of churches nationally have a functional strategy for reproducing disciple makers. That same study revealed that churches overstate the effectiveness of their disciple making efforts. Using Jesus’ life and ministry as a definitive reference point, 4 Chair offers a simple framework to objectively talk and evaluate the disciple making ministry of a local church. In 2021, we continued to utilize peer **coaching** cohorts where pastors design and implement a simple, reproducible pathway for multiplying disciple makers. The early participants in the cohorts are seeing fruit and multiplication. Teaching, coaching and mentoring in disciple making will remain a major emphasis in 2022. Simply put, our churches must be more fruitful in multiplying disciple makers. If I can help, please reach out (laustin@efccentral.org)!
- **Equipping workers that can equip workers.** In January, we completed our fourth Auxano Leadership Pipeline co::Lab in St. Louis. After four co::Labs, we are seeing about half of the co::Lab churches successfully implement a leadership pipeline in all or part of their ministry. In leadership development, pipeline is the harder path. For some, the pain of leading and recruiting into an oversized department org chart is less than the pain of changing to a system where everyone in the ministry invests and develops others. I am firmly committed to the principles of leadership pipeline as an extension of Jesus’ call to disciple others. I am also committed to lowering the entry point and simplifying the process. In 2022, I want to leverage the learning and leaders from our Pipeline co::Labs to offer Pipeline Simple (not light), a scalable and simple approach to leadership development.
- **Sharpening others in the ministry of the word.** The November 3-5 Preaching Hebrews Workshop at Westchester EFC in Des Moines was our twelfth workshop in partnership with the Charles Simeon Trust. This annual workshop serves as a “spring training” event for preachers and teachers, refreshing them in principles of exposition, sharpening their ability to preach the gospel from any text, and working on the use of persuasion in preaching. 2021 was once again a sell-out. I am grateful for the great workshop team and deep bench of small group leaders. Circle November 2-4 in your calendars for the 2022 workshop. Registration opens this spring, so register early! I am also excited that Stonebridge Church in Cedar Rapids will be hosting a Women’s Workshop in early 2023. Both these workshops and the great online courses offered by CST are ways local churches can deepen and multiply the ministry of the word.



Gratitude for this calling, and changes coming. As our staff gathered in December for a time of reflecting on God’s work in and through us in 2021, I shared two things. First, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the calling and life I have experienced not just in 2021 but from the moment I said yes to Jesus. Even with the challenges and cost of gospel ministry, I am blessed by family, friends and vocations that have been part of the journey. I am humbled and grateful for a life of walking with and serving Jesus. Second, I am at peace with who am and what I

have to offer Jesus going forward. There is nothing to prove nor a reputation to curate. As such, I will shift to three quarter time status with the EFCA Central team in 2022. Jesus' approach to ministry was *intentional, relational and missional*. I am called to redeploy 25% of my life for an intentional, relational and missional investment with my wife, children, my grandchildren, a local church, and my aging father. This shift will require me to be even more focused in my calling to EFCA Central. While the church must not turn a blind eye to the future, I believe that in this season we are too obsessed with the future. This is a season where wisdom is needed more than strategies. The church needs leaders that are skilled at living and leading in the present. Our people need a strong, non-anxious presence. We need to embrace the present moment with Jesus and live a day at a time with confidence and courage in him. Jesus did not leave the church with a ten-year plan. He gave them the Holy Spirit, the word of God, the body of Christ and simple (not easy) mission—make disciples. My grandfather used to say, "It is later than you think!" It was his way of saying do not presume on the future but do the important things now. Pray with me in 2022 as we attempt one day at a time the simple, essential work of Jesus.



For the glory of Christ alone,
Larry Austin