Happy Pastors and Flourishing Churches

The Issue

Preparing, selecting, and training lead pastors for established churches in the United States is a growing challenge as 84% of churches are in attendance decline or are failing to keep up with population growth in their communities. Interest in how leadership qualities influence the turnaround from a declining church to a growing church served as the impetus to explore the conceptual topics of turnaround churches and emotional intelligence (EI) competencies of lead pastors. EI research has demonstrated a significant influence of leaders’ EI on organizational performance.

The purpose of this study was to compare the EI of lead pastors of Foursquare churches in the United States using the 15 competencies of the Bar-On EQ-i assessment to determine whether certain competencies were significantly different based on the church attendance pattern. Two subgroups were compared—pastors whose congregations are considered to be in decline and those considered to have a congregation with a turnaround or growth pattern. An EI profile of pastors in turnaround churches was identified and can inform pastoral selection and training decisions.

Conceptual Support

Emotional intelligence is the study of “an array of noncognitive (emotional and social) capabilities, competencies and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures”. The Bar-On EI model and the related self-assessment tool, the EQ-i, have been used to identify relationships between EI traits and leadership. Frequently, these traits combine into a profile that is related to effectiveness in a specific role. Emotional intelligence, particularly as measured by the
Bar-On EQ-i, is positively related with effective leadership.

Declining churches in the United States can experience a turnaround and grow, but few do so and the process is a difficult one. The emerging field of turnaround churches uses attendance as a major criterion. Churches demonstrate a turnaround, at least in part, by reversing attendance from decline to growth.

The limited research that has been conducted about the contribution of lead pastors to growing churches has affirmed the primary role of senior leadership. Little research has been done to discover specific leadership qualities of lead pastors that may be related to turnaround churches. This study addressed this gap by comparing the EI of two groups of pastors (growing churches and declining churches) in established churches to determine if EI is a measure of pastoral leadership in turnaround church situations.

**Key Findings**

Pastors of growing churches scored higher on 14 of the 15 EI competencies studied. Significant differences, and stronger influence, were seen between the EI for pastors of growing churches and those of declining churches on one-third (5) of the 15 factors - emotional self-awareness, independence, and flexibility, assertiveness and optimism.

The EI aggregate mean score for all 15 competencies for pastors of growing churches was 105 and the EI aggregate mean score for pastors of churches in decline was 94. The EQ-i uses a score of 100 to represent the national mean. Therefore, pastors of growing churches scored 5 points higher and pastors of churches in decline scored 6 points lower than the national mean.
Both groups of pastors had the lowest mean scores for their respective group in the same three competencies: problem solving, happiness, and self-regard. Problem solving is the ability to effectively solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature. This competency is expressed by the ability to know that there is a problem, accurately label it, create multiple solutions, choose the best solution, and execute the solution. Lower problem-solving scores maybe influenced by pastors’ tendencies to perceive answers to problems subjectively as part of their practice of spirituality, and in doing so, not creating multiple options before choosing a solution. Happiness is the ability to feel content with oneself, others, and life in general. Happiness is one of three competencies generally associated with effective leadership, and it is difficult for leaders to experience a healthy and sustainable life in an unhappy state. Self-regard is to accurately perceive, understand, and accept oneself. The public role of pastors includes constant critiquing by those they lead. Low self-regard may exacerbate the negative feelings that criticism by others can evoke.

Conclusions and Implications

**Conclusion 1.** EI is a helpful construct in understanding how the pastor can lead and influence a congregation, and the EQ-i is a useful resource to assess the EI of pastors. This study supports the findings of a relationship between leaders’ EI and organizational performance. EI can inform pastor selection and training for turnaround churches. The EQ-i can be used to assess these competencies in pastors for both selection and development.

**Conclusion 2.** Five competencies—indepence, flexibility, optimism, emotional self-awareness, and assertiveness—are more closely associated with
changing the attendance of a church and could be helpful in turnaround churches.

This study supports Bar-On’s findings that EQ-i scores are able to fairly accurately identify high and low performers demonstrating that the relationship between EI and occupational performance is high as well as his recommendation for organizations to add EQ-i screening to the pre-employment process. The EQ-i can be used to identify pastoral candidates with higher scores in these five competencies, and the EQ-i can be administered to pastors to help identify specific competencies for development.

**Conclusion 3. The EQ-i profile and these five influential competencies (independence, flexibility, optimism, emotional self-awareness, and assertiveness) could be used to guide pastoral screening, selection, and development.** This study supports Bar-On’s results from multiple studies, which show that EQ-i is helpful in relating leaders’ EI with organizational performance and supports findings that people can identify and then develop specific EI competencies. Pastoral selection processes for churches with declining attendance could include EQ-i screening. Training and coaching resources for these five competencies can be created for pre-service training and continuing development.

**Recommendations for Pastors**

Pastors can use EI as a construct in pastoral training, selection, and development and can provide helpful EI resources for all pastors. Leaders can use the EQ-i to assess these five competencies in pastors for selection and development: independence, flexibility, optimism, emotional self-awareness and assertiveness. Adding the EQ-i in the screening process for pastoral candidates for churches with declining attendance could
enhance the present recruitment process.

Leaders can create and provide training and coaching resources in the five influential competencies for both pre-service and continuing development, add EI training at colleges and seminaries, and develop EI programs for presentation at conferences. Peer mentoring resources can be developed and distributed for use in monthly divisional pastor meetings. Leaders could provide EQ-i initial assessment for all pastors followed with retests every two years. Pastors who choose to focus development in their lower competency areas should see significant growth within a two-year period, and knowing that a retest is available may help motivate their continuing growth efforts. The costs associated with the EQ-i can be budgeted across a two-year period by staggering testing for pastors over twenty-four months. Individualized coaching is an effective means to accelerate personal development, and leaders can provide one-on-one coaching for individuals whose enhanced leadership in a declining church may have significant results.

Leaders can create and provide self-development resources for pastors in each of the five influential competencies and provide training to enhance social responsibility, the ability to identify with one’s social group and cooperate with others. Training can also address responsibilities including business administration, staff management, fund raising, facilities development and team building, areas for which pastors may be inadequately equipped to effectively perform.

**Additional Recommendations**

EI training should be provided for all pastors. The EI aggregate score for all 15 competencies for pastors of growing churches was 105 and the EI aggregate score for
pastors of churches in decline was 94. Pastors of growing churches scored 11 points higher (11.7%) than pastors of churches in decline. General growth in EI, as well as specific growth in the five most influential competencies, will help pastors in their leadership roles and in other life domains.

Both groups of pastors had the lowest mean scores for their respective group in the same three competencies: problem solving, happiness, and self-regard. Training should focus on these three competencies, in addition to the five most influential competencies. Problem solving is the ability to effectively solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature. This competency is expressed by the ability to know that there is a problem, accurately label it, create multiple solutions, choose the best solution, and execute the solution. Pastors should specifically develop the practice of creating multiple options before choosing a solution. Happiness, the ability to feel content with oneself, others, and life in general, is one of three competencies generally associated with effective leadership. Growth in happiness is critical for pastors to experience a healthy and sustainable life. Self-regard involves accurately perceiving, understanding, and accepting oneself. Low self-regard may exacerbate the negative feelings criticism by others can evoke, and development of higher self-regard will help pastors more effectively deal with the pressures of their public role.

Concluding Remarks

As churches experience pastoral transition, especially those that are plateaued or in decline, leaders strive to select pastors who can help renew the vitality of the church. Attendance growth is a common metric used to identify turnaround churches. This study identified five EI competencies that are positively associated with the lead pastors of
growing churches: flexibility, independence, emotional self-awareness, optimism, and assertiveness. The EQ-i assessment can be used as an additional measure to inform pastor selection processes. Professional development for pastors in these five competencies, in both pre-service and in-service training, can increase pastoral effectiveness. EI may prove to be helpful to leaders who are responsible for selecting pastors to lead established churches that wish to grow.