

Why So Many Pastors Are Leaving the Ministry—and How to Stop It

Mark Brewer is a motivated **pastor** to say the least. He's founded and led multiple congregations—some starting in a living room and growing into the thousands each week. But something in the distance kept calling him, and after dealing with numerous church leaders who left the ministry in frustration—some even committing **suicide**—he realized his ultimate calling: the Ministry Lab. It's a bold new effort to help both novice and experienced leaders in the practical aspects of ministry leadership, which is something they rarely learn in Bible college or seminary. Recently, Phil Cooke sat down with Mark to find out what this new outreach is all about.

Phil Cooke: You come from a **Presbyterian** background. Today when we describe churches as “innovative,” “contemporary,” or “megachurch,” not a lot of Presbyterian churches come to mind. And yet the Presbyterian denomination has powerful roots. What's happened in that denomination, and what's the future look like for Presbyterians?

Mark Brewer: You're right about my roots being within the Reformed tradition of Presbyterians. I'm a third-generation Presbyterian minister and yet have had the experience of leading a large interracial nondenominational church during the 1990s. I also started a network of churches in Denver that were primarily large **charismatic** and **Baptist** churches, so I feel I have a rare view of both worlds.

I think most mainline churches have been held back by their polity and their perspective. Ironically, they were the great innovators a few centuries back, doing things that were so

unheard of they were called heretical. But what they unintentionally exchanged was focus on process versus end product. Like most of us, we'll choose stability over growth every time. People usually don't change unless it's too painful not to change.

But ironically, the shrinking mainline **denominations** happen to be positioned to meet the hunger of the 20- to 30-something generation remarkably well. Millennials say they don't want "big box" Christianity, they don't want "big program, big show" churches. Those are the fruit of my generation of boomers. They say they want small, organic, neighborhood, relational-sized worshipping communities with low emphasis on doctrine. Is that the average mainline church on the corner or what? Yet time will tell if we in the mainline can effectively connect with the next generation.

Cooke: Your most recent assignment was senior pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. That was Ronald Reagan's church. Tell me about that church's heritage and impact in LA.

Brewer: Leading Bel Air Presbyterian was a wonderful and humbling experience. Yes, it was President Reagan's church. When I first got there in 2001, the president had not yet died, so I had to meet with the Secret Service my second month to prepare for his funeral. (Did you know every president has their funeral planned out by the Army the second month in office? Talk about a statement of a risky job.)

When President Reagan died, it was his desire to have his service at his home church of Bel Air. He was a very devout **Christian** in his private life. But because 9/11 had just happened, the Secret Service vetoed the venue because providing security for the estimated 50,000 who would come by and pay their respects—it was just too unmanageable at our site. There was a three-fold memorial of the main service in the National Cathedral in D.C., a service at the Presidential

Library in California, and I did the service for the congregation and others at Bel Air. Very moving.

Bel Air was a grand mission. Over half of the people attending worked in some way with the entertainment industry. I was always impressed how the members never asked any of the celebrities for autographs or bothered them on Sundays. We had our challenges with the paparazzi and exposure, but I can say there are some wonderful Christians making deep impact in **Hollywood**. We would lay hands on people once a year and commission our missionaries to the “foreign field” of the entertainment industry who were the writers, producers, actors, set directors and the rest to be salt and light.

Cooke: Bel Air was one of the most visible pulpits in America. What made you leave to start a new church plant in the Denver area?

Brewer: I get asked that a lot. [Laughs.] Even though I’m basically wired to be a builder and not a manager, things were going fabulous at Bel Air. We had doubled in attendance and tripled in budget the 12 years I was there. We had launched Bel Air’s first two mission churches. We had established six global church networks of large churches on five continents helping each other.

The tipping point was talking to a friend at his daughter’s wedding. He said, “Hey, Brewer, how come so many pastors quit the ministry, and why do so many pastors stink at their jobs?” I’ve always had a love for pastors and the gut-wrenching jobs they have. I watched the **ministry** tear my family of origin apart as my dad left the church and our family with the church secretary. I buried my younger brother, who committed suicide from the pressures of trying to be a pastor. A friend I was ordained with committed suicide after shooting his wife. I know how brutal it can be. But how could I help some people who are going into this arena to thrive and not be a statistic?

I totally believe in Bible schools and seminaries. Not only have I never doubted the investment I made in earning three degrees, but my understanding of the **gospel** exploded in seminary. What they are lacking is the methodology and opportunity to teach the basics of the “how to” of ministry today.

I’ve had way too many gifted and talented friends quit the **ministry** the past 30 years of serving Christ. And attracting the top talent and hearts to full-time clergy? Forget it—it is almost impossible. It’s not a crises of faith and good theology. It’s a crisis in the fundamentals of how to lead, manage and oversee the basics of good business and good ministry. Few are being taught that.

If I can have at the end of my life a few hundred pastors say, “That was the most practical and effective thing I ever experienced—those insights and methods saved my ministry career,” I will stand before the risen Christ a happy servant.

Cooke: Tell me about the Ministry Lab. What does it do, and why is it necessary?

Brewer: The Ministry Lab Network is a school of practical theology that lets current and future clergy experience the hands-on training they can’t get in the rigors of a three-year graduate seminary. Graduate schools are just not designed for that. The Ministry Lab is designed to not just inspire and motivate like the typical weekend **conferences** out there, but to actually give a chance to learn from the best and then test drive the application themselves. The lab part is a unique chance to create fresh new ways of impacting people. It’s an opportunity to discover the unique spiritual DNA the Spirit of God has placed in each of us rather than mimic someone else’s style.

There are basically five training offerings in the network:

1. Weeklong executive immersions where you learn from the

- best, meeting in regional venues around the country
2. Two-day tune-ups for people who are already in place leading but just need a new retooling and refining with outside coaches and experts
 3. Seminary partners who help design their own curriculum needs and requirements for training their students
 4. Residency churches who take on people in a real-time setting of discipleship for leaders
 5. The training center in Denver for feedback from qualified and gifted congregational members in giving helpful and insightful guidance in communicating, management and worship leading

Cooke: Who's the perfect candidate for the Ministry Lab?

Brewer: The perfect candidate is anyone who is in the position of **leading** ministry. The only requirement is a teachable spirit and the faith that God can use them. People heading into ministry are great candidates.

The challenge with seminarians is the old adage "They don't know what they don't know." But as we partner with seminaries, we're conscious of the great men and women the Lord is calling who can learn skills even before they realize how desperately they need them.

The ideal candidate would be someone in the midst of their first years of ministry who is conscious of their own strengths and weaknesses. But even veteran pastors who are thrust into this "brave new world" of ministry can be trained with new tools to supplement their ministry toolkit.

Cooke: Why do you have a worshipping community in a local church alongside what's essentially a teaching experience for pastors?

Brewer: The only feedback I get are from my fans or my critics. An actual community [that is] trained as well as feels called to help communicators or worship **leaders** is an

invaluable tool for the kingdom. Professional coaches are good, but it's the everyday people we need to get input from—just like the ones we're endeavoring to pastor back home. More than an *American Idol* sort of “I like them” or “I don't like them,” it's a living community who has learned to move beyond their own personal style preference to create a safe, encouraging, honest environment to aid in self-discovery of those up front.

Cooke: What's the greatest need you see among pastors today?

Brewer: The last year has been quite an eye-opener. I've found, from being with over a hundred pastors from every flavor church, there are common themes. I bunch them into the “big five”:

1. The lack of training in overseeing lay and paid staff
2. The pressures of finances and budgeting in tough financial times
3. Conflict resolution and leading a church into new uncharted waters
4. Shepherding the brave new world of online and social media
5. The **exhaustion** personally alongside the family dynamics of living in the relentless world of ministry.

Cooke: What's in the future for the Ministry Lab?

Brewer: God knows. This is all brand new. We're all on a steep learning curve in equipping the current and future leaders of Christ's church. It's a new way of training, as yet as old as Jesus and His disciples.

Since I believe the greatest church the world has ever seen was not the first one but the last one before Christ returns, these are incredible days! As the “wheat and the tares” grow together and the world simultaneously gets better as it gets worse, I think the greatest music, the greatest novels, the greatest works of art, the greatest inventions and the

greatest fellowships are right in front of us. It our call to let the Holy Spirit create the greatest pastors the world has seen yet.

Cooke: If I was a pastor or ministry leader who was struggling in ministry, what's the best way to contact the leadership team at the Ministry Lab?

Brewer: Contact us at our website at .

Phil Cooke is a filmmaker and media consultant and author of Unique: Telling Your Story in the Age of Brands and Social Media. Learn more at .