

## Leader's Insight: Pastoral Ambition

*All this "success" is working against God's purposes, and chipping away at our souls.*

by Kent Carlson, guest columnist

**I** want to talk about pastoral ambition. I do so with some apprehension.

A few years ago, our church was "successful" enough for me to be invited to a small, elite group of pastors of large churches who were being mentored by one of the more successful and talented pastors in the country. It was a heady few days for me. I got to mix it up with some of the biggest names and up and coming stars in the large church subculture. I felt very important.

At the end of the conference, I rode back to the airport with the pastor who was at the bottom of the food chain in this little group of successful pastors. He was a bundle of insecurity and authentic enough to admit it to me. He was three years into his church plant and he only had 750 people coming to his church. He didn't feel he had the right to play with the big boys yet. Even back then, in the midst of my most ambitious days, I remember thinking that something is very wrong with a church culture that would make someone like this pastor feel insecure.

Something has happened in the past thirty or so years that has shifted our pastoral ethic from one of faithfulness to one of productivity and success. I believe this has stirred the fires of ambition. Given the nature of our American culture, this doesn't surprise me. It also doesn't surprise me that the battle with ambition will be a ferocious one, for the tendency toward self-absorption plagues every one of us. I just wonder why this is not a front burner item that is being addressed with greater passion in the popular Christian media. It would be so refreshing to hear Christian leaders in some panel discussion copping to the fact that they struggle with it and it often drives their ministry. We all know it's there. If only we could start being honest about it.

Pastoral ambition is not new. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians told us, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others."

Christian spiritual giants down through the centuries have pounded away aggressively on this theme. For example, that Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, said it this way: "Take heed lest, under the pretense of diligence in your calling, you be drawn to earthly-mindedness, and excessive cares or covetous designs for rising in the world."

I walk into this issue with loads of apprehension. There is no way to talk about pastoral ambition without sounding (and, I suspect, being) judgmental. After all, who am I to know the thoughts and intents of another person's heart? The inner motivations that drive all of us are a tangled web of sincerity and self-absorption, nobility and narcissism. This topic is, therefore, a land of cheap shots, often entered into by those intellectually lazy and simplistic souls who enjoy building straw men of those with whom they disagree and then tear them down.

In addition, I would like to make it clear, that I would rather follow an ambitious pastor than a lazy one. I would rather follow someone who wants to change the world than one who simply wishes to throw stones. And while many pastors who are

leading thriving ministries are passionate, sincere, hungry for God, and brimming with integrity, I must raise the question. Is our ambition godly?

For more than twenty years I have attended church conferences. I have observed as we sized each other up to see how quickly we could find out who had the highest attendance, the largest staff, the biggest budget, the most property. The secret that hardly anyone talks about is that most of us want to win the "largest church game." Or at least make a good showing. I am convinced from first hand experience, as well as from paying close attention to the darkness of my own heart, that if all-of-the-sudden thought bubbles appeared over all our heads, we would all fall to the ground in repentance.

I am convinced that personal pastoral ambition, and a pastoral ethic centered around productivity and success is brutal to our souls and destructive to the souls of the people we lead. I believe there is a better way. But it requires us to walk right into the messiness of our own ambitious hearts, ready to die to those ambitions. We must become skilled at detecting the odor of personal ambition, then flee from it as if the church's future depends on it. For I believe it does.

*Kent Carlson is co-senior pastor of Oak Hills Church in Folsom, California.*