
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

10,000 Hours

In his delightful book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell introduced the concept of the 10,000-Hour Rule.

As he reports on several studies from different fields, Gladwell weaves the stories of prominent individuals into his book to answer the question: “Is there such a thing as innate talent?”

The short answer is yes, there is such a thing. Some people in all fields of endeavor have innate talent that positions them for success. However, the surprising insight is innate talent is not as important as preparation — especially the amount of time a person practices.

He notes, “The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.”

The conclusion? “Ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert — in anything.”

What About Pastoring?

Assuming Gladwell’s report is accurate, how does it relate to pastoring a church?

It’s an intriguing question that few have thought about. It’s widely recognized, of course, that few pastors fresh out of seminary or Bible school are considered excellent pastors. For most new pastors, it takes time to learn, develop, and mature.

Some church historians may argue that a few pastors excelled immediately, for example, someone like Charles H. Spurgeon. It’s true that Spurgeon was highly successful right from the beginning of his public ministry. But, a close look at his life reveals he had spent hours talking with his father and others about theology and church ministry. By the time he took his first pastorate, he had at least 2,500 hours of formal and informal study of the Scriptures. Add to that his four years of ministry experience in his first church, which provided a minimum of 4,000 hours to practice preaching and teaching (a conservative estimate), and together he had at least 6,000 hours of practice prior to becoming the pastor of Metropolitan Chapel. Thus, even Spurgeon spent hours practicing.

Practice, Practice, Practice

An old joke tells of a tourist who stopped a New Yorker on the street and asked, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" To which the New Yorker replied, "Practice. Practice. Practice."

There's truth in the joke, of course. It takes practice to become excellent at most things in life.

Gladwell writes, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good."

Thus, Pastors may find it helpful to ask: "How many hours does it take to become an excellent pastor?"

Reaching 10,000 hours of practice is a huge number. Think about it this way.

Let's assume a pastor today spends 15 hours in preparation and actually preaching on a typical Sunday morning. If the pastor speaks 40 Sundays a year, that's 600 hours a year. At that rate it'd take 16 years to reach 10,000 hours of study and practice. Thus, if an average seminary graduate starts preaching at, say, age 25, it'd take them until age 41 to reach 10,000 hours, which is a reasonable estimate of how long it takes for a pastor to be deemed excellent (Spurgeon started preaching at age 15!).

With the rise of shared preaching in numerous churches today, however, some pastors preach only 20-25 times a year, which would then take over 30 years to reach 10,000 hours!

Generally, 4,000 hours of practice makes a person adequate at what they do, 8,000 hours of practice makes one good, and 10,000 hours of practice makes one excellent.

The bottom line? If you want to be an excellent pastor (preacher, teacher, leader, mentor, etc.), you need to practice. And, you most likely need to practice more than you currently do.

If you wish to be a better preacher, then you need to preach more. If you wish to be a better counselor, you need to counsel more. If you wish to be a better leader, you need to lead more.

Looking back over your ministry life, how many hours have you given to preaching or teaching or leading or caregiving or [you name the ministry]?

How close are you to reaching 10,000 hours?

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