

First Baptist Church, Asheville, NC

A church committed to well-being and excellence in ministry



Throughout its 180-year history, First Baptist Church of Asheville, North Carolina, has been on the cutting edge of Baptist life.

They have been involved in denominational and ecumenical leadership both locally and internationally. Over the years, they

have participated in founding and nurturing at least a dozen churches in the Asheville area. In recent years, their commitment to sharing the love of Christ with the world around them has led to congregational involvement in missions in Asheville and beyond. Focusing on their part in God's mission to the world has influenced the internal practices of the church as well. Their commitment to congregational health prompted the church to intentionally address the health and well-being of their leaders. Their policies and practices offer an innovative example of how their church seeks to encourage and sustain her ministers.

Dr. Guy Sayles has been in ministry for 31 years, over eight of those as pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville. Throughout those years, he has learned much about the kinds of resources ministers need to thrive. He has learned, for instance, the incredible benefits of a congregation's providing time and space for a minister's rest and general enjoyment of life as well as time for spiritual renewal and professional growth.



First Baptist, Asheville, perhaps partially influenced by the 70 plus vocational ministers in the congregation, has long affirmed these benefits through a variety of practices and policies. While some of their policies are typical, like providing paid vacation, others are innovative. For example, all full-time ministerial staff members are eligible for a study leave of four to six weeks every five years of

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their tenure. These study leaves can be used for a variety of experiences and are intended to be times of professional and spiritual rejuvenation.

Ministers need not wait five years for professional development however. Each year, in addition to vacation time, full-time ministers receive four weeks for professional leave. This includes time for continuing education, conferences, vocational retreats, and other professional development. Professional leaves are financed using individual ministerial budgets, which can be adjusted from year-to-year. A less formal practice of the church is encouraging ministers to adhere to a five-day workweek. With Sunday as a workday, ministers have one weekday off each week.

Even with church policies promoting ministerial health, the church has learned that informal practices also go a long way in providing encouragement to the ministers. “There is a noticeable culture of gratitude and affirmation in the church,” Dr. Sayles notes. This attitude manifests itself in a variety of ways and demonstrates the commitment of the congregation to embody the love of Christ in all they do.

Another characteristic of First Baptist, Asheville, is their congregational commitment to excellence. They have a high expectation that ministry be done well. It is part of their heritage as a church. These clear ministry expectations, along with committed congregational involvement, encourage ministers in their work. Instead of each minister being on a solo mission with unclear expectations, ministers and laity work together as partners on God’s mission. Dr. Sayles points out that one of the great things about First Baptist, Asheville, is that they believe they can make a difference in the world around them. This belief inspires their ministers and lay leaders to have a clear sense of mission and shared ministry. One key element of this partnership, the pastor points out, is the congregation’s embodiment of Ephesians 4:15. They effectively “speak the truth in love,” providing honest feedback even when it is difficult. This truth-speaking goes far in strengthening each minister and minister-congregation fellowship as they serve together.

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Even with all the church does well in its promotion of ministerial health, Dr. Sayles points out that much of the responsibility falls on the individual minister. In other words, although there is power in innovative programs and policies, a minister cannot rely on others for personal health and self-care. A healthy minister must have a clear sense of personal Christian identity outside an identity as a minister and must be intentional about growing spiritually and professionally.

Members realize they are on mission with their leaders.

In a multistaff church, ministers also need clear expectations and communication with one another as well as with the laity. At First Baptist, Asheville, one way this is encouraged is through the ministerial staff covenant that directs how ministers relate to one another. The covenant, which is accessible to the congregation, encourages ministers in their partnership with one another as well as with the church.

First Baptist Church of Asheville is a historic congregation in its third century of ministry. Its building is one of the most recognizable architectural structures in Asheville, but the church is also known for its ministerial innovation and cultural relevance. The members' commitment to ministerial and congregational health, however, is about more than innovation. Members realize they are on mission with their leaders. Quantitatively, this has translated into a number of long ministerial tenures. In the past 60 years they have had only five pastors, two of them with tenures of over 20 years. Several of their current ministers have nearly 10 years of service with one having been on staff at First Baptist for over 25 years. The health of the ministers and congregation is measured in more than longevity, however; it is measured in the quality of its ministry. First Baptist Church, Asheville, ultimately hopes that their healthy ministers and congregation will make a difference together in their world for Christ.

The First Baptist Church of Asheville, North Carolina, like a host of Fellowship churches has done a good job being and doing church. This community of faith

has empowered its ministers by providing each of them with the agency and resources which he or she needs — not only to accomplish his or her ministry assignment but also to nurture well-being each day of the week. A minister must know these things. The story of the staff team at First Baptist Church, Asheville, is an important story upon which to reflect. It illustrates the value of clarity and shared responsibility for the missional journey.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does your congregation understand its mission in your city and neighborhood and beyond? How might your congregation better focus on its role in God's mission to the world?
2. What do you believe are the kinds of resources a minister needs to thrive?
3. Does your congregation provide study leave time (or a sabbatical) for your ministers? How often does each minister qualify for a study leave?
4. What is the day-off policy and practice of your church for its staff?
5. How does your congregation express gratitude and show affirmation for your minister(s)?
6. Would you say that your church has a high expectation that ministry be done well? Has your ministerial staff been given the agency to accomplish this expectation?
7. How clear are the expectations that your church makes of its minister(s)? How might you better join your minister(s) to ensure that each minister is not on a solo mission?
8. One facet of good health is longevity of tenure. What is the tenure track of each ministry position in your church? What factors contribute to this longevity or lack of longevity?
9. Another facet of good health is measured by the quality of ministry, not just the quantity. How does your fellowship ensure the quality of its ministry?