

William:

Hey, everybody. I'm so glad you're here for this podcast. And let me just tell you, I'm learning. I never know where the conversation is going to go until we have the conversation. And this conversation with Gordon MacDonald and a young pastor out in Tacoma is gold. If you're wondering, "What do I need to know now that someone else has already learned?" this is the conversation for you. We talk about succession, and we talk about relationships, and we talk about priestly gifts being more important than ever. I'd love it if you'd join us. Hang on until the very end because this live Q & A with a young pastor and an older pastor is just one of my favorite conversations I've had in a long time. Thanks for joining us.

Well, hey, everybody. You're in for a treat today. Just one of, frankly, the Yodas of the Christendom that I've come up in, and American Christendom, is with us today. Gordon MacDonald is here and going to share some really great wisdom. A little bit of background, I grew in the days of becoming a ... I did a very good job of being a prodigal in college. I knew exactly what my daughters better not bring home. And then became a Christian and just went through a wrestling match with God. I went to Princeton to do PhD work through the seminary and while I was there wrestled with God. He won and I [inaudible 00:01:25], and I went into the ministry but had no real perspective of what that was like.

Then went through a bit of a mini-conversion at Willow Creek, where it was like, "Oh, wow. We don't have to just keep the aquarium. We can actually go fishing for women and men." One of the voices that was really speaking into that world at that time was Gordon MacDonald. I've watched him and his ministry for a long time, but about two years ago I was at a very small gathering of, I don't know how you say this, Gordon. I think they said the largest executive pastors in the Southern Baptist world. But I think what they meant to say was executive pastors of the largest Southern Baptist churches in the world.

Gordon MacDonald:

That means other things.

William:

That's right. And I heard Gordon give a talk. I guess you were approaching, or had just turned 80, is that right?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. I was awfully close if I wasn't there.

William:

Yeah. Yeah. I couldn't take notes fast enough, like things I wish I had known before I was 80, or however you want to frame it up. And I thought today we would have a conversation, and then we've invited a few guests who actually helped us with our book, Next. Some of you have heard of Next, our pastoral succession book. The second edition, which is not just an update, but like updated, expanded, 150 new pages of research. We decided to have a release date of the third week of March in 2020.

Let me tell you what week not to release a book, the first week of the pandemic shutdown. So this six weeks we're doing a push to sort of re-launch the book. In it, we ask 40 pastors of megachurches who are under 40 to comment about what they are doing for their succession. A few of those are able to gather with us today. We're going to have some private Q & A time at the end.

But, Gordon, I thought for starters maybe could you just give people a little bit of your background and your story so they might have an understanding of where you've been?

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah. I'll make this very quick, William. I was the son of a pastor. My earliest days in life, my single digit years, were spent in Long Island, in New York City. My father was a pastor there of a Baptist church, and all of the accoutrements of what it means to be a Baptist back in the 1940s. Ultimately, we ended up in Colorado, where I went to the University at Boulder, and then to Denver Seminary.

Then the last 55, 58 years, I've been in ministry. Most of that time I was the pastor of one of four churches. The first church was sitting on the borderline between Colorado and Kansas, 25 miles from the nearest town, seven miles from the nearest paved road. Everybody was a rancher-farmer, miles apart in their homes. For me a pastoral call was riding horseback herding cattle all day. So I learned how to pastor from being with 60 people. Gail, my wife was very much a part of it.

Then we went to Southern Illinois, where for seven year I was the pastor of a church that was all made up all of laboring people who were working the big manufacturing plants in the St. Louis area. So now I was working with union blue collar people.

Then I was called to be a pastor in Lexington, Massachusetts, where I spent an accumulation of about 20 years. Now you had people who had PhDs, and were working in the sciences and the Defense Department, very tactical, engineering type of people.

And then my last ministry was in New York City among financial people. All young men and women who were trading stocks and bonds, doing mergers and acquisitions.

I mention all four churches because every one of them was a distinctly different culture than the other three. So as you preached to these people you had to know which group you were with. It changed your illustrations. It changed the points you made, the challenges that they were facing. So I've had a pretty diverse spread across the years in that.

Beyond my pastoring, I've been a seminary president, interim president, let's put it that way. And I've been an author. I've had the privilege of doing a few speeches here and there around the world. So that's my life for 80 years.

William:

Every college president is an interim college president, Gordon.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I'm glad you corrected me, because that's the truth I discovered.

William:

It's all interim work. That's what we say about succession in pastorates. Either you run your church in the ground and close it, or you're the pastor the day Jesus returns, or you're an interim.

Gordon MacDonald:

One of those. I'll take number three.

William:

That's great. So, I know we've got a few guests on, but I thought before we did Q & A, I would love for you, and maybe there's some newer thoughts that you have as well. But kind of share with me what you've learned at 80 that you wish you'd known earlier. I'm forever wondering, how do I save myself the stupid tax? How do I learn from somebody who's been around the barn more than I have? So, dive right in if you would.

Gordon MacDonald:

There are some things that you can't learn any earlier. They grow on you as the years go by.

One of my theories of life development has been that about every 10 years new issues, new questions come to the top. And you don't have a whole lot of warning unless you have mentors who are willing to let you in on the secrets ahead of time.

Now for example, in my 20s the great question was, what am I going to do with my life and who am I going to do it with? Where in my 40s the question was, how well am I doing, and can I keep this up indefinitely. In my 60s the question might have been, how long can I keep doing the things that I'm identified with?

My 70s were the decade of loss. I began to lose friends, loved ones. Every time you opened the mail you learned that somebody you had known and loved was gone.

Now I'm in my 80s, and the big question has to do with, well, how am I going to die? What's heaven going to be like, and what am I going to do when I get there?

So I just sampled a few. There are questions for every decade. But when you reach 80, you suddenly realize that there are some principles of life that you've learned the hard way, or God somehow has chosen other ways to reveal to you.

I decided to limit myself when I wrote these down to 15. So what I'm reading to you, and I'll do this very quickly, is 15 single second sentence principles that make a lot of sense to me, but might not make so much to a 35-year-old.

For example, my first one: Put the most significant people in your life, namely your spouse, your family, your close friends, and your mentors, into the calendar first. I can tell you a story about how I came about that.

My second principle: Never, ever stop growing. Stay open to fresh ways and ideas that will sustain your physical and mental health, sharpen your working skills, increase your knowledge, and enrich your wisdom and spiritual life.

Thirdly, a lot of people raise their eyebrows when I say this one: Be more of a priest and less a preacher to people. Bless them with powers of hope, grace, courage, and love.

Number four: Always keep in mind that the time will come when you have to relinquish your titles and your privileges, and you end up slipping slowly into obscurity. Ultimately, the obscurity is death. How does that make you feel?

Five: Prepare yourself for those occasions when you, like most people, will suffer, fail, fall into doubt, or face conflict, or experience loss. They are all coming sooner or later to virtually every one of us.

Six: Be trustworthy and dependable. Be a person who keeps his or her word. Don't make promises you can't keep. When I was a young man I did a lot of that, and I can thank my wife who called me on it every time.

Number seven: Be a spiritual father and mother to teachable people who someday may inherit your responsibilities.

Eight, this is important: Live modestly. Stay free of debt. Be generous. Develop a financial strategy for your future, and always be very wary of those who try to buy your favors.

Number nine: Expect to reorganize your spiritual life at least every seven to 10 years.

10: Receive compliments, criticism, and counsel with humility and appreciation. Avoid whining, complaining, and self-pity. Assume that there is at least a grain of truth in every thing your critics say about you and your work.

Number 11: Stay alert for evils and the confusions that come in organizational life.

Number 12: Be quick to say with sincerity these five things: Thank you. Well done. I'm sorry. I forgive you. And how can I help?

Number 13: Always maintain a relationship with one or two mentors who can aid you in hearing God's voice. I said good-bye to my last mentor about four years ago, who died at the age of 96.

Number 14: Master the art of asking penetrative questions that open someone's heart, then listen carefully to what's revealed with respect and discernment.

And the final one: Retreat to the cross regularly. Express the things that you're thankful for. Name your sins. Pray for the world, and listen for God's call to do things that are bigger than you are.

Those things make very much sense to me at my age. I look back over the years, and I can give you stories about how I learned each one the hard way, where God gave me his favor and I learned things maybe a little bit more easily.

But I'll say just one more thing, William. If you review these 15, you're probably going to discover 90% of the reasons why leaders fail or succeed.

William:

Oh, wow. Talk more about that.

Gordon MacDonald:

The issues are here on the page. You can't be an organizational leader, whether it's a pastor or some kind of other organization, without recognizing that leaders are coming and going regularly. Often they reach a point of failure, or they just run out of gas.

If you ask why that's happened, you're probably going to find that two or three of these principles have not been worked as strongly as they could. That's just my experience as I watch and I listen, as I've looked at my own life, where my failures come from. They always came because one of these principles was violated.

William:

So Tyler is on with us as well, and I think has a question for you. Tyler, do you want to ask away?

Tyler:

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for taking time to invest. I love just that perspective, that statement you just said. Of the 15, you'll see 90% of why leaders fail. When it comes to longevity, I'm somewhat new in my assignment. I took over a church that started in 1918 following a couple of long-term, somewhat legacy pastors.

It's a large, multi-site church with a K-12 school, two retirement communities. So we're a unique blend of CEO and Senior Pastor. And you said something important, Gordon, about the dynamic of don't just be a preacher, but really the role of a priest.

What encouragement, what recommendation, would you give in that space where you have to kind of wear dual hats? You're leading a large organization, but you also feel the call to be a shepherd, to be a pastor? What are some things to be aware of, or maybe pitfalls to avoid in that area?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, Tyler, I don't know where you went to school, but I expect that most of the schools that you and I would have gone to emphasized the role of the preacher as the most important function in the life of a pastor.

As I have gone through the years... Let me put it this way. No one would love to preach more than I do. I enjoy it every time I get the opportunity. But what I realized over the years with the people who would come up to me and say, "Gordon, God used you to change my life."

That was not something you heard as much about preaching as it was in one-on-one or one-on-small-group contact. I realized these people, when they would say something like that, were recalling a personal encounter where I had gotten out of the pulpit. I'd sat with them. I'd listened. I'd asked questions. I worked out of my own accumulative wisdom. It was the one-on-one, one-on-small-group where changes were really occurring.

Particularly after this pandemic, we're going to have to reshape churches all over again. These people have been gone for a year and a half. So there's going to be a lot of re-learning, and it's not the kind of learning that goes with filling an auditorium with hundreds of thousands of people and just giving 30 minutes of advice.

It's going to be done by men and women in pastoral ministry who take the time to go one-on-one with people. Being a priest is where one really brings a person, helps a person come into intimacy with God. It's listening to them and recognizing their hurts and their wounds, siphoning off their anger. It's laying hands on a person in the most powerful way so that they feel the anointing of God's spirit.

What I learned over the last 10 years that I was an active pastor was that people craved a priest. Gail and I spent about nine days at Ground Zero when the planes flew into the Trade Towers. Most of that time I walked the mess where all the firefighters and the policemen were, and I walked with Trappist monk. The two of us would encounter workers the scores. He wore a nice brown robe with a white rope. I wore a Salvation Army jacket.

What was fascinating to me is that people would come towards us, and they would always veer off at the last minute to him. They would go to their knees and they would say, "Father, would you bless me? Would you hear my confession? Father, would you assure me of God's presence?"

Then he would pray a little prayer, and he would take his finger and he would make the sign of the cross on the forehead of this kneeling person. He would say something like this. "May the blessings of God Almighty be upon you, and with this symbol of the cross I sign you. Go in Jesus' name."

I asked him one of those days, "What do you say to people when you do this?" He told me. I said, "When was the last time anybody blessed you?" He said, "It's been a long time." I said, "May I?" He immediately sank to his knees, right there. We're literally just a few yards away from where the Trade Towers have come down. There's mess and smell and noise all around us.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who will bless you. And with this sign I sign you with the cross. Go in Peace." And we both wept. And I thought, I've been raised in a Protestant tradition that has no appreciation for what I just did.

And so for the last many years, I decided a part of the element of my pastoral ministry would be blessing people, being a priest rather than just a preacher. You know, it's been one of the most exciting things I've ever done.

William:

I think the part of my job that I have now. We help churches, school, non-profits find their key leaders. But my favorite part of the job, and we constantly are saying around here, "If the search things falls apart, we're going to open a counseling firm for pastors." Because pastors let us in. They have no reason to be nice to us. I mean, why in the world? We're just a consultant, right?

But, man oh man, the phone calls we get entrusted with, and the need for the shepherd to have someone to listen and reciprocate blessing and care. Unbelievably high need. It's interesting. Gordon, you wouldn't know this. But Tyler is asking a question about how to be personal and pastoral, and he lives in Tacoma. Like nobody's personal in Tacoma. Everybody's a rough individualist and they live on their own.

But even up there, there's this need. I don't know, Tyler, I've put you on the spot. Have you sensed an increase in that need in the last 12 months?

Tyler:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're seeing right now kind of this unique collision, right? Because our largest audience is still online and I think as people have been physically distanced, there's this longing, this hunger, specifically for those who are on the journey with Jesus.

They want to show up. They want to serve. So we've done a few different serve opportunities, and man, the amount of people that have shown up. I think to be in the space together, to do things in community while you're still navigating this unique space of everybody trying to be healthy and all of that.

Yeah. There's a hunger for that personal touch. I think that's going to be a great opportunity for us as we continue to navigate through the remainder of whatever the pandemic is, and how we're going to build the church moving forward.

Gordon MacDonald:

One of the most frequently used words is one you just used. People are beginning to realize that there's something more to hugging than hugging. That human beings desperately need to be touched. And we're going to have to figure out what that all means, and what has this last year and a half cost people that they've had to live such isolated lives.

William:

Absolutely.

Tyler:

I was just going to say the point here about being a priest and touching and blessing people. You know, the restrictions in Washington have been pretty tight, as I'm sure you guys are aware. The whole West Coast has navigated the pandemic a little bit different than other pockets of the nation.

A couple of weeks ago we just opened up at the conclusion of some of our gatherings, just time for prayer, for people to come forward and be prayed over by a pastor. I had a lady come up during our first gathering of the week, which is on Thursday night. She walked forward, and I mean, just touching her arm while I was praying for her, just tears dropping. You just wonder, when was the last time that somebody...?

And many of our people have had that type of interaction, because, let's be honest. People can look up any podcast. The greatest preachers, the greatest teachers. Like there's no lack of content, but there is a void of connection. I think that's something that we just have to continue to lean into that space and figure out how we move forward through that.

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I'll tell you a secret. My wife, Gail, found some research recently that says that people need to be touched or hugged seven times a day. So in our home we try to hit the seven times a day before the middle of the afternoon. It sounds a little bit amusing, but it's good research. That people, children need to be touched. Adults need to be touched.

And I'll tell you who needs it more than anybody are the elderly people. So often in our new, modern churches we ignore the elderly people. They go untouched, unlistened to, unconsulted. As a result we're watching more and more older people drop out of church across the country because these needs are not being met.

William:

It took me well into my adulthood to realize that the Fifth Commandment, the first one directed toward person-to-person relationships, is "Honor your father and mother so that your days can be long upon the land the Lord your God is giving you." And that the audience was not children. The audience was adult people, and how you care for people a generation before you which would be, particularly given life expectancy then, the older generation.

Tyler, I'd just say thank you. I will send you a Starbucks gift card or something for pointing out that everyone can listen to any sermon they want now. It's always been the case. I have my standing podcasts that I listen to. Tim Keller is on my list. It rotates around. I've been doing that for years on a morning run. But now, with Covid, boy the acceleration of people getting used to that is so much stronger.

I have pastors call me, quite frankly, that are depressed. It's like, "I don't know if anybody's going to come back to my church." Well, why? "Well, because now they can just dial in Steve Furtick or Pat Chandler," or fill in the blank with whatever your theological bent is. I just look at them and I say things like, "Tyler, you know what you have that none of those guys have? You have a calling to your zip code. You have a calling to your people."

It's amazing to me. I'm a Presbyterian, not a charismatic, so this is me worshiping, right? This is a charismatic moment for Presbyterians. That's it. But the Lord gives me over the years, particularly in the last decade or so, a word for the year. Last year he just kept saying to me early in the year, "Build." I thought, oh, this is going to be an awesome year. Growers are going to build, build, build.

And what I found was the pandemic, every one of our clients shut down which, by the way, is really bad for a business. So I didn't know what this "build" was. But it was build systems, because this year is the year of giant turnover and massive need.

We're amazed at what's going on right now. But the word that he gave me for this year, early in the year, was the word "reach". And I just kept reading these stories about people coming to Jesus. They didn't say, "Tell me something new." They reached out for him. They wanted to touch him. They wanted to touch the hem of his garment. They just wanted to reach.

I think this is the year where pastors... I mean, obviously we live in a day of new norms where you have to be careful about how and when and what you're hugging, and whether everybody's cool with that. That's a needed shift, but man, this reach out and touch thing is, I think, what will delineate effective churches that connect from churches that people just quit coming back to.

It's going to be, can you preach to your zip code? And can you reach out? Tyler, I'd just share with you. I came to First Presbyterian Houston, which was where Sam Houston went to church. I mean, it's been around a long time. I was 31 years old as the senior minister, very similar size to Life Center there in Tacoma. We didn't have K-12 but we through 8th grade.

The advantage of going there at 31 was I knew everything, right? It was really cool but that didn't last. But when I got there, I thought, "How in the world?" I'd been at this small church in Alabama where you really do go to the hospital every single time somebody's in the hospital, right?

So I asked the chair of the committee that brought me there. I said, "What's the expectation around me getting around people, touching them, reaching out to them?" He said, "I don't think," and this is such good advice. If you can figure this out, you win. He said, "William, I don't think people expect you to be at the hospital when they're there. But I think they really want to believe that you wished you could be there."

I thought, "Wow. That's just gold." I think as we move into this ubiquitous preaching everywhere, the priestly gifts will outweigh the prophet and kingly gifts by a long shot.

Gordon MacDonald:

Let me volunteer a little thing there. I told that story about the Trade Towers to a group of about 300 Germans about a year ago this time. When I got through I said, so I have given myself in these years to having a priestly ministry whenever God will allow me.

Suddenly a man in the audience raised his hand. He said, "Mr. MacDonald, would you be willing to bless me?" I said, "Sure. At the end of this service anybody who wants to be blessed I'll be glad to do it." Well, the service ended, and suddenly I looked up the center aisle and there were over 250 people waiting in line, each one expecting to have hands laid upon him or her, and to receive a blessing.

What I came to realize is that these people were starved for any kind of connection and affirmation that began with that kind of affection. So it's a great thing to do, and it really makes a difference when you learn how to touch people in a way that makes them feel valuable and affirmed.

William:

That's great. Hey, one thing that really helped me, Gordon, early on was finding mentors. It was easy as a Presbyterian. Like everybody at Princeton, the seminary, their dad, their granddad. Like you said, son of a preacher. I had nobody in the family business. When I said I was going to seminary my grandmother said, "Oh, good. Now we've got one to get us all in." That's my pastoral heritage, right?

So I got there. I went and found three pastors of a very large Presbyterian churches. I just literally made appointments with them. Drove across the country all night one time to meet with one. Figured out where the good golf courses were, and got tee times there. I pulled every string I could. That worked fine. In one year, two of them died and the other one lost his church.

So then I go to First Pres Houston, and I'm 31. Yes, I knew everything. But I also knew I needed a mentor. So I got fortunate and went up to Bill Hybels. Gordon, you've known Bill a long, long time. He said, "How did you end up at First Pres?" I told him. He said, "How's the youth ministry?" I'm like, "I guess you'd have to ask the high school pastor." He said, "You're the senior?" I said, "Yeah." "How'd you get there?" "I listened to you. I got good mentors. Two of them died."

He said, "What are you going to do now?" And this is how arrogant I was. I stood there and put my finger on Bill's chest, and if you know Bill you know he's not real fond of that. I said, "I want you to be one of them." He just kind of like looked at me, and then pointed and said, "You go up those stairs to the third floor. Find a woman named Jean. Tell her we've talked, and we'll work something out."

He put me in touch with John Maxwell and a couple of other guys. So I just sort of fell into this out of providence, through arrogance, let's call it. But if you're a younger pastor listening right now, and you're like, "I want to get some good mentors," what should you do to discern the right kind of mentor?

And then how would you, as a guy sitting in his 80s, appreciate being approached by a younger pastor to say, "Hey I really need some help." Probably not finger on the chest right after you've given a talk, but how do you discern who's going to help you to that next level? And then, how should you approach them?

Gordon MacDonald:

I wrote a paper not long ago about the nine major mentors in my life over 80 years. What drove me into the mentoring relationship was that I had a very poor relationship with my own father. So I needed to know that there was some people on my horizon who looked at me like a son.

Interestingly enough, the first two of them were women. My first mentor was a woman who had a passion for telling Bible stories. When I was four, five, six, seven years of age, I went to her house almost every Wednesday afternoon after school with a bunch of other kids, and we listened to Bible stories. I learned more about the Bible in terms of its narratives from her than I ever learned in any other source. She was a mentor in those earliest days that shaped my view of the Bible and how God speaks to people.

My second mentor was my grandmother. She taught me to love the world, among other things. She took me into New York City and taught me about the skyscrapers, the parks, the art museums. She would say to me every time, "Son, always look for the glory of God in the city."

So I came to have a love and affection for the world when so many of my peers were being told, "Run away from the world. The world is an immoral, desperate place." I learned how to love the world from my second mentor.

Then I had a track coach. Then I had a couple that taught me about marriage. Then I had a couple who mentored me in my intellectual and spiritual development. Each one came along at a particular point in life when I had a need for what they had to offer. I couldn't have mixed them up in the order and gotten the same benefit.

It was interesting to always be asking the question, "What sort of a person, or persons, do I have to tuck up under for this point in my life?" I think I said a little while ago, my last mentor died at the age of 96 just a few years ago.

Now I'm too old to get any new mentors. But I think God sends these people into our lives if we go looking for them. I did not find a whole lot of mentorship that was valuable from people in Christian work. I found them out in the larger world, people who were dealing with street life rather than church life.

So when I look back across my mentors, they introduced me, opened the doors to various kinds of life that I would not have learned otherwise. When I found somebody that I thought might serve in that capacity, I realized that it would take probably a year or two to develop the relationship. So as I say sometimes to me about mentoring, "You try dating for a little while and see if the dates work and you fall in love."

That's what I do with each of the mentors. I would invite them to breakfast or lunch. I'd ask questions. I'd watch how they answered, try to observe how much interest they had in giving me some insight. And four out of five, you know, just didn't make the cut. But every once in a while there was this special person who came along and fit where you were in life at that very particular moment.

I would say, by the way, it's not just mentors. Mentors have a very short shelf life in most cases. But I would also call it we have a need for special friends, three or four people who fit our own gender, who are going to be around for a long, long time, and who we let into our hearts. We may have these kind of relationships for 40 years.

When you and Tyler and I finish this conversation, I'll be on the zoom with a friend I've had for 45 years who lives in Montreal, Canada. Normally we would meet for a whole day several days of the year. We can't cross the border right now, so we have to have nice long zoom talks.

We'll talk about books that we have been reading, about our journals and what God has been saying, places where we're frustrated. There's nothing I wouldn't say to this man or have him say to me. So I'm looking forward late in the afternoon to that kind of a conversation.

Mentors and special friends do not come easily. You have to be patients. As I said a moment ago, it takes two to three years to cement those relationships into place. But when they work, they make all the difference in the world.

William:

So, Gordon, I would be negligent not to highlight the fact that you had some clairvoyance as a pastor. Correct me if I'm wrong. But I think somewhere in your ministry you said, "When I hit 60, I'm done pastoring and I'm going to have to find a new thing." If I've got that wrong, correct me, but if not I'd love to hear that story because people like Tyler are sitting in their early seats now.

I remember talking to John Maxwell on the golf course one day, saying, "John, I'm," at the time 33 I guess. "I'm 33 years old. What do I need to do now to prepare for later in life?" He said, "Strong young leaders spend their early years creating option for their later years." John talks in bumper stickers. I mean, it's amazing how he does that.

But it's just stuck with me, and I thought, tell us what you knew about when you needed to be done, and how you prepared. Because it's been a long time since you were 60. So walk me through how did that conversation start? What did you actually do? And what could people like Tyler be doing now to prepare for that day themselves?

Gordon MacDonald:

Well, I feel very strongly about this seven to 10 year period. That if you divide your life up into seven to 10 year blocks, and then you schedule some time at the end of that block to really do a full-scale

examination of your entire life. That means, who's Gordon as a man? Who is he as a husband? A father? A friend? A pastor? A Christian man in the community?

It's going to take some time to really run a script of all of those things, but every seven to 10 years the questions of life change and the issues change. When Gail and I were about 55, we had moved through what I call the turbulent time at age 47, 48. The kids are now gone. College tuition payments are over.

We're looking at the second half of life, and one of the most important decisions we made was, "Let's set a goal to get out of organizational life at the age of 60." The value of that is I've got 20 more potential years of good, healthy, vigorous activity. If I wait till I'm 68 or 69 I'm going to get more and more nervous about making changes. I'll want to stay with those things I do best and not take any risks.

But at 60 there's enough risk in me to try to do something different. So I told the elders of our church when I was about 59 and a half, "Six months from now, Gail and I are going to be gone. So if you want to start your search committee, this would be a good time to do it. But we will probably be gone by 60."

I was fairly confident I could make a living as I needed to do by writing books, by speaking enough times. We had planned our lives financially from the very beginning. We never lived beyond our means. We kept saving, saving, saving. So we were confident money would not be an issue.

So where have I been? I'm 82 now. Since I've been 60 I've never gotten out of the bed in the morning bored or worried about looking for something to do. Every day has been right on with my gifts, my sense of call.

When I was about 64, I had what I felt was a very personal encounter with God in which I said, "Lord, do you have a fresh call for a 64-year-old man." Because I'd never heard of men and women in their 60s talking about a new call. That's a young person's conversation.

So I kept praying. And here's Germany again. I went off to Germany sometime during that period of time, and spoke at about eight different pastors' conferences over a week or 10 days. These young German pastors kept coming up at the end of these days. They would say, "Pastor MacDonald, you talked to us today like a father. Thank you."

I would say, "Well, what do you mean by that?" "Well, the old German men only scold us and lecture us, and talk about theology and philosophy. But we need to hear your story. Where you've failed, where you've hurt, what God has said to you, where you've grown. And you did that today."

So I heard this several times. I came back to the US and went out to California for another such conference. At the end of the two days, the MC of the conference stood up to thank me. He said to the crowd, "Gordon's been talking to us for these two days, and every time he's talked to us, I've found tears in my eyes."

Then he said, "That's not because he's such a bad speaker. But it's because what I thought I was hearing was a father's voice." When he said that, William, Tyler, my mind was blown. My heart just swelled. It was like the Holy Spirit said, "You asked for a fresh call, you've got it. Spend the rest of your life being a father to young men and women in leadership."

That's been the great call of my life ever since. That's always got the priority. Now, let me add one more thing because you asked this and I didn't answer it.

I do have some kind of criteria in mentoring. It would be nice to say yes to everybody who approaches. But I say to young men, "Where do you live?" "Well, I live in Las Vegas, Nevada." "Well, that's 2000 miles away. How would you expect me to know what's going on in your life each day so that

I could affirm you or rebuke you? I like to have people I mentor who are right in my face, so I'd suggest you go back to Las Vegas and find someone who fits this situation because my territory is New England."

So the men and women that I really pay careful attention to are all within spitting distance of where I live. I think that's an important criteria.

William:

That's good. That's really good. Well, I can't thank you enough, Gordon. When you made that tour of Germany, did you go to Oberhausen?

Gordon MacDonald:

I've been there a couple of times.

William:

I didn't know if you spoke at a conference there.

Gordon MacDonald:

Yeah.

William:

I was there.

Gordon MacDonald:

What year was that?

William:

Oh, it would have been about 18 years ago. Yeah. I went over with Jimmy [Miato 00:42:38], and several others. We toured the Life of Luther and then ended at the leadership conference in Oberhausen.

Gordon MacDonald:

Was that the year that we gave the invitation?

William:

Yes. I won't forget it.

Gordon MacDonald:

One of the most sacred moments of my life to think back to that.

William:

Wow.

Gordon MacDonald:

We all started with the notion, it won't work.

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William:

And it did.

Gordon MacDonald:

And it did. To this day when I go to Germany, I have particularly men who will approach me. "I'm so-and-so. I was there the year of the invitation." Everybody calls it the invitation.

William:

Yeah. The only bad memory I have of that trip was somehow I had the gall to ask Jimmy Miato to go running with me. So mistakes not to make. Don't ask a former Olympic decathlete to go run with you. You will die. That was not a good move. But the conference was awesome.

Gordon, I can't thank you enough for making time for us today. We're going to close the recorded part and let some private conversations go on. But I'm looking forward to hearing how this blesses others.

Announcer:

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