

Illawarra Pastors' Network Helpful Article:

How to tell if your church is sick

(while it still looks healthy)

By Gil Cann

There is a sure and simple way to tell if your church is in poor health. It is 'better' than the more common methods because it can indicate trouble ahead, while the church still appears to be thriving. It is an 'early warning system'. If taken seriously and acted upon, it can be used to save your church from continued decline and fatal illness.

The traditional 'signs of decline' - falling numbers, ageing membership, missing young people, diminishing incomes - are merely symptoms, not the cause of a church's sickness. And by the time they are evident it is almost too late to restore the church to health. At best, it will be a difficult and painful road to recovery.

What is the most accurate indicator to your church's life expectancy? It is the extent to which your church is dependent on its minister. If your minister's or pastor's presence and involvement are virtually essential to its worship, teaching, leadership and administration your church's days are numbered. This is the primary cause of sickness and even death in twenty first century churches. All over this country such churches are dying. And the tragedy is this - most of these churches are dying at their own hands.

All over Australia churches are being killed by 'good ministers'. How could this be? Because what church members mean by 'good ministers' is a world away from what the Scriptures say about 'good ministers'. Essentially, this situation is not the fault of our ministers themselves. For many of them, their understanding of their role, and their day to day practice, has been deeply shaped by church members' wishes, preferences, expectations, and quite often, demands.

Within Protestant churches this process has been at work for over 400 years, since the Reformation. That landmark event, brought immense benefits, especially access to the Scriptures for 'ordinary people'. But unfortunately, it did not bring much more than lip-service to the Biblical truth of the 'priesthood of all believers' i.e. that all Christians are gifted for ministries which God intends them to fulfil.

Consequently, in today's typical church the members assist the minister to conduct the church, instead of ministers assisting members to be the church.

A typical church may have 100 members and one minister. Biblically understood, it should have 100 ministers and one 'enabler', or several enablers.

The reason why minister-dependency is fatal for a church is that it means, in effect, that the church is in 'maintenance mode'. This should never have been acceptable, but in the past the serious consequences of being in maintenance mode were not so obvious.

During post-reformation Christendom, churches in the western world were generally regarded as part of the community furniture - essential institutions, like schools, hospitals, courthouses and banks. Every respectable community should have one! Most members of

those communities wanted to be christened, married and buried by a church. In such a climate it was easy to believe that in the church the role of the minister was the role of primary importance.

But that era is gone. Not just going, but gone. Gone thirty years ago, gone last century! Most of our churches today are products of an era that is well and truly past! This is very sobering, and it is crucial that we ponder carefully what that means. But even more deadly is the fact that many churches continue, in this new era, to function as though the best thing that can happen to them under such circumstances to a church is to have a 'good minister'. Such churches are writing their own death warrants!

Unprecedented social change, and much more vigorous competition from other faiths and philosophies mean that if a church is in maintenance mode it is terminally ill. The end, as in all such cases, is only a matter of time. To thrive and to grow and, much more importantly, to fulfil God's purposes for us, we must no longer be chaplains to Christendom but missionaries to paganism. And by the way, paganism is not necessarily savagery or witchcraft. The essence of paganism is idolatry. By this definition Australia is a pagan country.

But to be minister-dependent, or to see the minister's role as more important than the members' lives and giftedness, is not to be in missionary mode at all. For a church to be in missionary mode means that the crucial agenda is to discover, develop, and fully employ the gifts of every member, both within and outside the organised life of the church.

It means understanding that the ministry of a church is not primarily what the minister does but what the members do and say in every situation in which they find themselves on every day of every week. It means recognising the significance of our members' daily lives and equipping them to honour God and share His love in their everyday situations. It means commissioning them, in our services, to their spheres of daily involvement and influence, just as we would commission missionaries going overseas.

And it means recognising that potentially, (but so often unrecognised), there are already within our congregations the evangelists, church planters, prophets, teachers, disciple-makers, intercessors and helpers of all kinds crucial to a church being in missionary mode. To believe in the face of all this, and in view of the world in which we now live, that the role of the minister is the only role we should take seriously is to ensure the quick demise of our churches.

Churches in missionary-mode must make the utmost use of every gift and ministry of every member God has given them. To do this, a major change of thinking and practice will be necessary on the part of members and ministers alike.

It is not possible, within this article, to consider all that this would mean; but a few recent practical observations highlight the need. For example, forty per cent of the one third of the population who believe in God, Jesus and the Bible but don't go to church, are former church members.

Traditionally (and still) we have felt that if people did not attend church it was because they were not believers. But the reality today is that a significant proportion of non-attenders who are spiritually minded were once with us. Are these people hard to please, rebellious, fickle, disobeying God? Some perhaps. But increasingly faced with a church on Sunday that has nothing to do with life on Monday they are quietly withdrawing.

Forty years ago such a response, which is a protest, would have been unthinkable. But faced with the daily pressures of attempting to honour the Lord in pagan workplaces and neighbourhoods they are realising that 'going to church', per se, is not enough. Whether it is enough depends not on whether they go but on what happens when they get there.

God has not asked us simply to 'hold services' or to 'go to church'. He wants us to meet frequently in order to please him, share our news, encourage one another, lean on him together, develop friendships, play and perhaps eat together, pray for one another, ask questions of our preachers, share our experiences, and anything else that will better enable each of us to honour the Lord day by day for another week (see Hebrews 10:23-25).

God intends us not to be actively involved in 'attending church' but in furthering His Kingdom. Our gatherings are to be to that end. We who have been attending church all our lives must ask ourselves the question 'what does God intend His people to do when they meet?'

God is not very interested, I believe, in our 'service of worship' but in our 'worship of service', ie, the way we honour him in our daily lives. If we do not meet to equip each other for this, and those who attend are little more than passive observers, we have not achieved much more than to hold sacred concert.

Being overly dependent on our minister includes wanting him or her to be our teacher, worship leader, celebrant, convenor, conductor and religious official. This is a major cause of the failure of our services and meetings to meet the needs or to develop the gifts of Christians who genuinely want to further God's Kingdom. Eventually, in quiet desperation, they leave us, and our church takes another step closer to its grave.

Meanwhile these people look, often in vain, for a church that takes them, their gifts, ministries and their desire to serve the Kingdom seriously. They look for a church that won't just 'use' them but will support and enable them in pursuing the causes and concerns God has placed in their hearts. Some attempt to create such churches themselves. Others just give up, and join the growing number of ex-church refugees. What a tragedy all this is when we consider that well established churches are in a better position than any others, in terms of resources, to invest, even to risk some of their money, property and people-power to launch new, alternative, unconventional forms of church which today are so desperately needed.

No superficial innovation will prevent the decline of a minister-dependent church. No new liturgy, different music, new songs, decor, venue or order of service will suffice. If church members continue to place unbiblical expectations on their minister, and if the minister takes such a role upon him or herself, such ministry will be a fatal distortion of what church is all about, and today, more quickly than ever, will lead to that church's death.

Many Christians today are realising they are not simply spectators, supporters or preacher fodder. They see that in God's economy, they are in fact his ministers. Consequently, even in large churches regarded as successful, the number of people going out the back door often almost equals the number coming in the front.

Don't wait for all the symptoms of sickness to appear. You can tell if your church is dying, even while it appears to be well. Better to take its pulse now, and if necessary, trust God to help you and your fellow members take life-saving action.

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