

Christ Church Communiqué



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Healthy Congregational Life

It's a curious thing, to be sure. And in the grand sweep of church history, a very recent thing as well. Indeed, the scriptures are silent on the matter, and one would search in vain for evidence of such a practice prior to the 1950's. However, despite all of this, it is a practice that has gained enough traction in many North American churches over the past 50 years that it is almost assumed today to be "the way things are done."

I'm referring to the practice of churches without senior ministers today to produce what is often referred to as a "Pastor Profile." The "pastor profile" is a document that spells out those character qualities, personality characteristics, and other factors that congregations deem desirable in their next senior pastor. Usually, the "profile" will contain language that tips its hat to the scriptural character qualities required of those who would serve as elders or overseers (i.e., 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1). However, most "pastor profiles" go well beyond the biblical requirements for the office of elder.

Education, training, experience, and a host of personality features are also regularly included in the "profile." Less often, one will read that a church prefers to consider candidates of a certain marital or family status (with a few even spelling out the preferred age range of the candidate and/or children). Over the decades, "pastor profiles" have grown in both size and specificity, as congregations become more particular regarding the kind of pastor that they want or (more accurately) don't want.

Often, this specificity has to do with articulating desirable personality features that were perceived as absent in the previous pastor. For example, if the previous pastor was seen as "cold," the congregation now wants one who is "warm." If the previous pastor was perceived as being "too friendly," the congregation wants the next pastor to be "appropriate in interpersonal relationships." If the previous pastor was "visionary," they typically want the next one to be "practical." If the previous pastor was seen as "too intellectual," the next one must be "highly relational."

In the short, the "pastor profile" tends to represent somewhat of a pendulum swing in church life as congregations exchange rigor for approachableness, focus for warmth, Type A for Type B, and so on, and then eventually discover that they miss those

qualities possessed by the previous pastor once the new one (who is usually quite different from his predecessor) arrives. Then the pendulum swings back the other way: “Yeah, he was sure a nice guy, but I didn’t learn a thing! Our next pastor needs to be more informed and deep, and much better teacher.” And so it goes.

At root, the “pastor profile” signals a dramatic shift from the biblical understanding of God’s call. In contrast to “profiling” desired candidates, the scriptures present church leaders as men “called of God,” not “hired by man.” Indeed, throughout the Bible we read that God raised up *His* man at *His* time to pursue *His* vision for *His* people; never the reverse. Interestingly, had God’s people been able to craft their own “pastor profiles” during biblical times, surely no one would have even interviewed Abraham (liar), Moses (murderer), David (adulterer and murderer), Paul (complicit in murder, angry confrontational style, physical weakness, difficult to understand), Peter (deceptive, disloyal, impulse control problems), or any other biblical figure that readily comes to mind.

Perhaps most striking is the fact that Jesus would be eliminated from consideration at most contemporary churches for His lack of experience, outbursts of anger, name-calling, sarcasm, confrontational interpersonal style, ineffectiveness in personal evangelism, indifference toward societal norms and structures, and obtuse and challenging preaching style (to name but a few perceived “weaknesses”). No, the Bible never presents God’s people as being led by those of man’s choosing, but of God’s choosing, and seldom would those being led have selected God’s man as the candidate of their own choosing.

But there is something more than a lack of understanding concerning the nature of God’s call that is signaled by this shift to generating “pastor profiles.” This practice also serves to reinforce the nearly ubiquitous belief in churches today that expectations are to be placed only on leaders and not on those who are led. In other words, while churches expend a considerable amount of time and energy generating “pastor profiles,” they tend not to give any thought at all to generating “congregation profiles.” No, the emphasis today is on “who will you be for *us*?” rather than on “who should we be for *God and you*?”

What makes this most curious is that, in contrast to its complete silence regarding “pastor profiles,” the Scriptures have much to say concerning healthy congregational life. It is to some of those qualities and factors that make for a healthy church congregation that we wish to turn our attention in this issue of the Communiqué.

God-Centered and Saturated

A healthy congregation is one in which the people recognize to Whom they belong and for Whom they assemble and serve. Healthy church congregants regard the church, not as their own, but as belonging to God. It is His church. He thought of it, established

it, and set out the theology, priorities, and activities that identify and direct it. The church exists for His purposes; chief among them, to worship Him.

Practically, this means that healthy church congregants do not ask, “What’s in it for me?” but rather, “What’s in it for God?” A healthy church is one that is constantly asking, “What does God require and expect?” Often the answer to this question is quite different from what we would choose for ourselves, but the healthy church is the one that sets aside its own desires and preferences, and pursues God’s design for His own church.

As a result of its emphasis on truly worshipping God, healthy congregations are marked by the tangible sense of His presence in their midst. Healthy congregations exhibit a reverential awe, wonder, and joy in gathering together for corporate worship.

Gospel-Driven

Properly understood, healthy church congregations are not “purpose-driven,” but “gospel-driven.” Healthy churches are comprised of people who long to hear the good news preached and to see the transformative power of the gospel lived out in the lives of people. Healthy congregations embrace a biblical understanding of the gospel—they recognize that conversion requires *both* repentance and faith, and they wish for no watered-down or half-gospel to be peddled from its pulpit or lived out in its pews. They care not for numbers, or buildings, or cash, but for lives thoroughly converted and fully surrendered to God, and His purposes.

Bible-Teaching

Healthy church congregations want to know the Word—not in passing, but in depth. They realize that their ability to worship, love, and serve God are dependent upon, and proportionate to, the extent to which they know God in Christ Jesus in and through His Word. As such, no sermon is too deep; no teaching is too difficult; no exhortation is too hard. Healthy congregants have taken to heart Peter’s encouragement concerning Paul’s ministry:

“And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You, therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:15-18, ESV)

Participation

A healthy congregation is one in which there is a high level of member participation. All too often, churches are populated with “consumers of spiritual services” who are content to come, watch, and donate some money to the ministry events that are put on offer. Indeed, national statistics reveal that the majority of people attending church are not involved in active ministry. Rather, in most churches, the various ministries are performed by the “professional” ministerial staff and a small number of “highly involved” people who care deeply about a particular ministry or activity.

In healthy congregations, the leadership and congregants create a culture that makes it difficult to remain in the church without being involved. Though this represents a shift from the prevailing attitude in most North American churches, guests who attend a healthy church quickly discover that active ministry participation is a core expectation of everyone in the church. A healthy church congregation is one that has aggressively and successfully combated the spectator mentality among those who attend.

Discipleship and Growth

Healthy congregations are distinguished from mere “Christianly social clubs” by their emphasis and participation in discipleship. Healthy congregations understand that discipleship is not an option in the Christian life, but, rather, the way of the Christian life. Healthy congregations understand that spiritual growth requires more than the passive listening to a weekly sermon. Rather, they understand that spiritual growth comes from instruction that is reinforced through modeling by spiritual leaders, application through discipleship, and accountability in mentoring relationships. As such, high numbers of those in healthy congregations are involved in discipleship and accountability relationships, and spiritual growth is evident in their lives.

Personal Evangelism

Healthy congregations realize that the biblical, normative, and most effective means of evangelism is through the personal, one-on-one sharing of Christian testimony. Healthy congregants assume personal responsibility for evangelism and do not rely upon the church to supplant this personal responsibility through various programs, events, or “seeker-focused” services. As a result, healthy congregations experience conversational growth, over and against transfer growth, and a significant proportion of the church is comprised of new and young believers who, likewise, have a passion for personal evangelism.

Church Membership

Healthy congregations are marked by a biblical understanding of church membership. Congregants willingly and joyfully commit to a church in order to enjoy assurance of conversion, to bear witness to unbelievers as to the transformational power of the gospel, to be held accountable in teaching and living truth, and to build one another up in the faith. Inasmuch as church membership signals commitment, the membership of a healthy church will not exceed its average weekly attendance.

High Expectations

It is the common wisdom in churches today that pastors are to cater to the wishes and proclivities of their congregants and keep them happy in order to retain them. This includes not only providing people with what it is that they want, but not asking them to do things that they rather not. In other words, the church marketing gurus suggest that church leaders minimize (if not, eliminate) the expectations that they place upon their congregants.

However, in healthy congregations, expectations for involvement are clearly and consistently stated, and “spectator Christians” feel out of place and uncomfortable. Typically, healthy churches are staffed by fewer full-time employees than their attendance would seem to suggest, which helps to set the responsibility for ministry squarely on the shoulders of the congregants.

Laity Controlled Ministry

In healthy congregations, the pastor provides the vision and sets the tenor, tempo, and trajectory of the ministry. The pastor also provides the motivation, direction, and resources to the congregation. However, the laity senses ownership for the ministries and takes responsibility for planning, staffing, and implementing them.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt but that the evangelical church is facing serious challenges to her health and holiness these days. And while many flagging congregations are quick to blame their pastor for their sorry state, healthy churches understand that this is an incomplete view of the biblical nature and functioning of the church. This is not to say that there are not poor leaders in the church today. No doubt, there are...and we have highlighted some of the qualities of godly and faithful leaders in a previous issue of the Communiqué. But congregants also shoulder significant responsibilities that serve to establish and nurture a church that reflects God's purposes, theology, and priorities.

May we continue to press forward in a spirit of humility, grace, and joy—ever mindful of our responsibilities and blessings—and always and only serve the cause of Christ in His church—Christ Church. May we be preoccupied with the thought: “Are we being the people of God who are making a difference in the lives of others through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the cause of God’s glory?” And as we selflessly and sacrificially worship, serve, give, and love, let us continue to give Him the glory for the great things that He will continue to do with, in, and through us.

Grace and peace,

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January Issue: Healthy Relationships



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