

Stripping Back the Layers

Models of Ministry

The decline of the western church during the 20th and 21st centuries (spiritually, numerically, and financially), has forced many congregations to review their models of ministry. As a consequence, some churches which employed a minister or pastor to lead their people, have now be forced to consider a different model in order to keep the doors open.

In the Anglican Church in Tasmania, one of the features has been the adoption of ordaining local people to act as non-stipendiary clergy. But, while in some cases, this approach has helped stem the decline, there is little evidence to suggest that this change has actually helped any of the churches grow.

But perhaps that's not surprising. New models of ministry are often hampered by the restraints of a church's traditions, and fiddling at the edges—or only being half-hearted in the quest for reform—is hardly likely to produce any great result. Indeed, in many case it may simply make the situation worse.

As a consequence, it would seem that the solution to the problem is not just to tinker with a model within the restraints of a denomination or tradition, but rather to go back to basics. In other words, to put aside tradition and community expectations and to look at the problem from a biblical perspective. And if our struggling churches did that, I would expect they would come to look very different indeed.

New Testament Models

Because one of the things about the structure of the early (New Testament) church was that it varied from place to place. In general, there were overseers, elders and deacons, but the model of ministry was not the same in every place. Indeed, the model for churches tended to be based on the needs and abilities of the local congregation, rather than on the demands of a particular denomination or the expectations of the wider community.

So, for example, when the Apostles had a conflict between needing time for teaching and providing pastoral care to widows within the church, they appointed seven deacons to look after the widows (Acts 6:1-7). In other words, they adapted the structure to meet the local need, and in this way they maintained as a priority the needs of the local church community.

And if that principle was applied to the modern church, we could well have a number of different styles of ministry practiced in our churches, even within the same denomination today.

Where Do We Start?

But if that's the case, and if that's how our churches should be, they how do we start? How do we even begin to make models of ministry appropriate to our churches?

Well, the first thing we need to do is to be willing to put aside the traditions and denominational baggage that is currently holding our churches back and stopping them from growing. We also need to be prepared to ditch our willingness to conform to the expectations of the community. And neither of those two things will be easy. But only when we've done those two things can we possibly begin to answer the question: 'What kind of ministry would be suitable for our church?'

And I say this, because current thinking often assumes that there needs to be a minister, and that he (or she) needs to lead worship services, to administer communion, to provide pastoral care, to conduct weddings, funerals, baptism, etc. etc. And yet, not all of those things are biblical, and not all of these may be appropriate for our congregation. And indeed, some of those things—like weddings and funerals—may well represent tradition and the expectations of the wider community, and may not be fitting for any congregation at all.

Furthermore, we need to be very careful when giving our leaders titles. Because when we appoint leaders (through ordination or whatever), there are often expectations that go with the titles. And those expectations may go well beyond the reason for them being commissioned for the particular task. As a consequence, the current titles that are commonly used may also have to be dropped too.

Then, only when we have removed all the baggage, are we left free to deal with the issue of 'What model of ministry is appropriate for our particular church?'

The Need to Have God at the Centre

Now I can hear the outcry already. We're Anglicans! We're Baptists! We're Catholics! etc. etc. But surely the point is that it is God's church that is in decline and, as Christians, it is incumbent upon us to be actively involved in the growth of his church. We are to be a people who believe in a God that looks after our needs, but not necessarily all our wants. And church growth will only happen if God is at the centre of our enterprise. Because things only go wrong when we leave God out of the loop, and put our traditions and expectations first.

Stripping back the layers, so we can get the model of ministry and our expectations of our leaders right, then, is very important.

The Need to be Willing to Support Those Who Minister

But then so too is the need to support the model of ministry that is suitable for our particular church. And that includes the responsibility of looking after those who have been appointed over us. And that, currently, doesn't always happen.

Indeed, in my own ministry I have been physically threatened, verbally abused, sexually assaulted, stalked, etc. etc. I have also been required to live in sub-standard housing and have not been paid my full entitlement (or on time). And I would not be an isolated case.

Now, if you're reading this, you may be thinking that being a Christian worker is not an easy job. And you would be quite right, because there are many obstacles placed in a minister's way from doing their job—including tradition and the expectations of their congregations,

denomination, and local community. And yet, any minister worth their salt has gone into ministry because they want to share Jesus Christ and the message of salvation to the world. It's just that in the current climate, that is not always possible, and the message often gets lost in the process.

Conclusion

The decline of the church in the 20th and 21st centuries, then, is an issue that desperately needs to be addressed. But it requires people to have courage, and it requires people to look beyond tradition and denominational structures and the expectations of the local community. In short, it needs people to look at the ministry of their congregation, but from a biblical perspective.

In short, we need to go back to basics. And we need to base our ministries on the New Testament example of models which varied dependent upon the local need.

As a church, we need to have a change of heart. We need to come up with models of ministry appropriate for each congregation. And we need to commit ourselves to those models of ministry and care for those who lead. But we can only do that if we are prepared to let our traditions and the expectations of the community go.

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