

Pastoral Care That Fuels Pastoral Leadership?

(The Consequences of Caring too Much)

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Many congregations (districts, judicatories, associations) and pastoral leaders are crying for clear, focused pastoral leadership amidst rapid change in our cultureand most are primarily getting/giving pastoral care. What's that about? What are the consequences of minimal leadership in our churches, judicatories, districts and denominations?

The Roots of Pastoral Care Model in Church

Pastoral care is rooted in showing care through nurturing conversations, listening, attention during times of loss, stress or crisis. This nurturing soft side of pastoral ministry is highly expected and highly valued by most. In fact, the care is valued more, by those in the pew, than leadership and forward movement through challenge and change that most churches face today.

Such high expectation is one reason many clergy give most of their time and energy to care-giving than leadership. If the clergy is not attentive in times of stress and crisis persons feel ignored, devalued or disliked and this hurts relationships and congregational culture and inhibits leadership.

Another root of pastoral care is that many, if not most pastors, are far more skilled and comfortable with their care-giving skills than their leadership skills. For most seminary trained prior to 1990, pastoral care was highlighted as the epitome of a good pastor. Those trained most recently, at least, are introduced to the value of leadership but, unfortunately in far too many cases, the introduction is so elementary that those pastors face first churches with fear and limited training.

*Most churches and other denominational organizations get 'stuck', 'become irrelevant and out of touch' when pastoral care concerns and skills override leadership concerns and skills. Caring is a needed and important function. However, when overdone, and over expected, a church becomes ingrown, maintenance minded and often sacrifices the biblical mandate/mission for 'being a loving/nurturing church'. I am certainly not advocating that pastors/churches should stop caring. I am **pleading** for a reallocation of time/energy/resources and expectations to give a new, more forward looking, balance than an inward looking/caring focus.*

Self Assessment for Plateaued Churches

About 92 to 95% of the churches in North America are plateaued or declining in attendance. My observation, as a local church staff member, denominational employee and church & clergy coach, for the past 30 years is that most of these churches are plateaued and 'stuck' because the expectation and focus is primarily on care-giving for the membership rather than leading the church to move forward in a more effective

ministry. Many pastors want to vision and lead the church forward, but the expectations of the membership is that they care more than they lead. In fact, many in the congregation do not want them to vision or lead because those in the pew might have to change and they do not want that! So pastors, and other leaders, find themselves in a real pinch and no win scenario. (I discuss this challenge at length in Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60 chapter on 'pastor bashing') In churches with an average attendance of more than 100 the pastor realizes if they do not care (visit hospitals, nursing homes, home visits, funeral homes etc.) they are criticized. If they do all that is expected in caring they have little or no time or energy left to vision, pray, preach well or take care of themselves and their family, much less lead the church to penetrate the community with the Gospel of Christ. The truth is that most churches with average attendance of 100 or less are small because they do not make needed shifts in expectations or skills of their pastor and leaders. They stay small because they design it that way – intentionally or unintentionally. What's a pastor and church to do?

A church that is plateaued numerically, stuck spiritually or find themselves irrelevant to many need to ask: –

- “are we expecting our pastors/staff (and lay leaders) to care to such a degree that we limit time and energy that pastor/staff and leaders have to vision, lead and move us forward?”
- “what would happen if we freed pastor/staff up from so much care-giving and blessed them to vision, lead and move us forward?”
- “how can we realign our expectations for care-giving to free up our leaders?”
- “what's the possibility of shifting the percentage of time/week/month, of pastors/staff from care-giving to leading” (i.e. shifting from visitation three or four times a week to once a week – and other visits are made by members of the church on behalf of the pastor/staff)
- “what will happen to our church when members assume more of the care-giving and pastor/staff are freed to vision, pray, innovate and lead?”
- “what will it take – from members and pastor/staff – to move our church to the next level?”
- “are we willing to pay this price and make these shifts?”
- “what are the consequences if we do not make these shifts?”

My hope is that this short article might stimulate some thinking and dialogue around these issues. A church I recently spoke at did not like my message, related to this theme, but they started talking about these critical issues for the first time in decades. One of the members called me and said, 'we really did not like what you said, but it helped us move from denial and begin to struggle with tough issues we know we must address if our church is to have a vital future.'

I encourage you to read, pray and talk together and look for some help from within your denomination or through some other venues. The mission of the church is critical. What are you doing to move it forward in your community?