

'THESE TWO CHURCHES ARE STUCK IN A TIME WARP, SHOULD I START SOMETHING ELSE?'

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Declining numbers, ageing profile, power bases, reluctance to change. A few of the realities that many a minister faces. And it may not be long until they ask, 'Should I love them and keep things ticking over, but start something else?'

There are sharper versions of the question, but however it is phrased, it speaks of frustration, and also contains a vital question for every church leader. In fact, similar feelings and questions can be applied to the leadership of business, sports teams, social and community groups. Any organisation that has been functioning for 30-40 years has a high probability of stagnation. In his book, *What Have We Learned? The Best Thinking on Congregational Life* (Abingdon Press, 2001), Lyle Schaller writes:

'While exceptions do exist, the general pattern is that congregations that have been meeting at the same address for more than forty years tend to give a higher priority to:

- a. perpetuating the past rather than creating the new,
- b. taking care of today's members rather than seeking to reach the unchurched,
- c. maintaining the real estate rather than launching new ministries to reach new generations.'

Being no stranger to frustration, I have had to learn as a leader to stand back and look at the situations in which I minister from some critical distance; to look very slowly; and to look in three ways:

1. To look at myself.
2. To look at the people I am serving alongside.
3. To look at God.

1. LOOKING AT MYSELF

Observing myself in terms of health, spiritual vitality and how I lead alongside others is vital. What is driving my frustration? As I reflect on these things I discern what might need to be done to adjust my leadership style, or to regain a sense of perspective, or to recover from a particularly demanding season of leadership. If I don't lead myself, I won't be in a good place to lead others.

2. LOOKING AT THE PEOPLE

Those who make up our churches and ministry contexts come next. Are they tired, stuck, anxious, obstinate or fearful? Do they need encouragement and



another pair of eyes (apart from yours) to help them see what is possible and to recognise in themselves why they may resist or fear change? Are some of their concerns not only understandable, but wise?

It is essential to realise that not everyone in a congregation is in the same place. Some may long for change and growth. Others may resist, perhaps because they are saturated in the patterns of response that Schaller identifies above.

Among the congregation it helps to find those who can, with God's grace and your leadership, create a new vision for the future and have the opportunity and resilience to make it a reality. At the same time it helps to know the context in which we are ministering. Ministry does not happen in a vacuum and we need to understand those living around us who will shape our mission, how the whole community interacts, and how the church is engaged in the community.

This can be complex and needs care and courage. There is no setting beyond the reach of the gospel, yet how receptive individuals are to ministry and mission may vary widely. Prayer and practical engagement are crucial. Without prayer, resistance can remain or even grow; without engagement with real people, there is no platform to show and tell the good news of God's love in Christ.

3. LOOKING TO GOD

This is vital for everyone's spiritual recovery, both leaders and congregation, because God can and does change lives. This is not a cliché but an essential reality which undergirds who God is, what his Church is for, and the foundation for all change and transformation. All ministry calls for a growing relationship with God, resilience, courage, discernment and

God inspired imagination. This needs to be evident in all who, together, lead God's Church. Failure to address this area can result in ministry initiatives which flounder and leaders who burn out.

So, an in-depth look at oneself, the churches we lead and God himself, probably with the addition of an outside pair of eyes to help see through any fog, is essential to addressing both frustration and the future. Having done this, we can more meaningfully address the pressing question in the title.

SOMETHING NEW?

The person posing this question may well have considered moving on. Such a decision needs time, prayer and a process of discernment. I have never relocated without seeking wise counsel over a period of time. CPAS has staff members who may be available to you in considering your future ministry. I am one of them.

In this instance, I take it that the leader posing the question, although very frustrated, is longing – and open – to starting something new in the present context. Schaller's three comments about inertia in a congregation look beyond the church recognising that, in a fast changing, post-Christian culture, new ministries and new ways of reaching the unchurched are essential. If sections of a church are resistant to change then, even if older patterns continue to take place, new ministries, new congregations and new forms of outreach are essential – not in order to keep the church going but to reach those outside who are strangers to the love of God in Christ.

Equally, this is not a mandate for activism, a call to 'pedal faster', but an invitation to be restored to our central calling –



that of sharing in God's mission. Tim Dearborn offers a helpful perspective:

'God's Church falters from exhaustion because Christians erroneously think that God has given them a mission to perform in the world. Rather, the God of mission has given his church to the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world. The church's involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of the triune God.'

Beyond Duty; A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission (Dearborn, p. 2).

Starting 'something else' is best regarded, and undertaken, from this perspective.

Established models of a church in mission include church planting, fresh expressions and pioneer ministry. I offer the following summaries to simply open up some of the possibilities from which it is possible to develop a local mission initiative.

Church planting comes in many forms and I am delighted that, across the country, church planting is happening, admittedly with mixed results. However, it is increasingly recognised as a vital way of reaching the unreached, rejuvenating and reshaping churches and diversifying models of mission and evangelism. I would go so far as to suggest that every church or parish should seek to offer a multi-congregational model and I have seen this happen in a variety of rural, urban, suburban and estates settings.

Fresh Expressions should reach folk for whom church style, culture and practice erect an unnecessary barrier. In essence, a fresh expression is not a novelty for bored Christians but sets out to form an outreach which relates to, and gathers, those for whom 'church' is impenetrable. They may develop and exist only for a few years, yet in that time fulfil their purpose.

Pioneer Ministry may include church planting and fresh expressions, but extends beyond both in relating to those for whom faith in God, worship and church are currently a foreign land. I have been involved in training and appointing pioneers and, whilst some argue we should all be pioneers, I have to say that having seen the work of some pioneers, I am convinced that their gifting is special. Ministry and mission somehow 'forms around them and through them' in ways that many Christians simply do not imagine or understand. We need more such pioneers.

So if, like the questioner above, you sense that the churches you lead really are stuck in a time warp, do use that experience to look objectively at yourself and your context, and to God himself. Even if the current status quo improves, you almost certainly should be developing new ways of mission and new ways of forming churches to meet the opportunities of your context. When you do so, we would love to hear how it goes.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Who can or who is helping you at present to consider your own spiritual well-being to ensure you make good decisions about your own ministry and its direction? What sort of mentoring support would work for you?
2. Looking at the quotation from Schaller above, in what ways do the churches you lead not reflect the inertia he describes and in what ways are they vulnerable?
3. Which people group or demographic are you currently reaching out to? Who is missing and what resourcing would help you to start something new to reach them?

