

## THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER OF PASTORAL ENVY – IS IT JUST ME?

BY CHRIS GREEN

**I admit to becoming increasingly aware of envy, and it is ugly. And I've started to notice a pattern, which you might recognise, and maybe a way through.**

Back in the day – ooh, about a couple of years ago – there was a great levelling of churches and pastors.

Here in the UK, as the churches closed and people stayed at home, putting on any kind of service, and running any kind of ministry, had us all scrabbling for the solutions, comparing notes, and doing the best we could. The handful of large churches which had been filming and streaming for a while had some recorded material they could use, and some tech knowledge they could access, but even they were reduced to the same level of live experience.

I've watched well known pastors doing the 'iPhone from the kitchen' thing, because that's the best we could all achieve.

And make no mistake: most churches made heroic efforts and achieved far more than they could widely have dreamt, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. And it has been humbling for some of our best known churches around the world to be reduced to holding significant training events on Zoom.

Only this week I watched the team at Saddleback struggling with the 'Can you hear me?' battle.

They're a generous and chilled bunch, and they looked like it was all Ok in the family, really. But a bit of me smiled in sympathy,

recognition and relief. A tiny sliver of schadenfreude. Just a bit. Between friends.

Leave aside the failure.

As the dust clears, and we see what the current experiences of church is like, how are you coping?

How are you coping with the comparisons? No-one else is doing them on you – I'm talking about the ones you run in your own head.

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It kicks off as I become aware of what someone else is doing that I'm not. Forget the mega-church, or the church which is in a different culture and hasn't had the



lockdown profile you've just known – I'm talking about churches very similar to the one I serve.

And in a conversation, or online, I discover that Pastor X is doing Y – and we're not. They're forging ahead with evangelism, or small groups, or one-to-one, or an innovative teaching series – and I do a comparison (in my heart, not my head – this isn't a rational response, but a gut one), and I find envy right beside me.

Actually, don't forget the mega-church. I curate my social media feed quite carefully, so that I get lots of positives, and good examples. Negativity gets unfollowed. The unintended consequence, though, is that I am faced with a constant stream of pastors and churches who are doing way better than me. Even when we're careful, social media can be deadly for our soul's quiet.

Going with the envy, though – and this is frequent but new, as a symptom – is a tiredness. I experience a feeling of; 'another thing I ought to do/have done', 'another project I haven't got round to/should have thought of', 'another area of ministry where I'll have to give an account for my failure and absenteeism.'

And the hands drop and the knees go weak.

Am I hearing an Amen?

So let's look in the mirror, side by side.

## INNOVATION FATIGUE

The first thing we both have to admit, is that there is a bit of flatness. I don't want to call it 'tired' or 'weary', because those are too general. And (for me) I don't need to say 'depressed'. That's never been my battle.

I will, though, call it 'depleted'. In normal times I write a short encouraging email that goes out each week to the church family; for the 18 months of lockdown, we increased that to twice a week (to fight isolation), one of which was on video (a 'Weekly Refill'), both of which really focussed on encouragement.

That's double the material, two formats (one of which was new), and a requirement to be fresh but focused each time.

Then there was the preaching challenge. Our sermons became shorter, crisper, and more direct, and I expect yours did too. So you know that those are a different challenge to write, and it was a fresh one. You were forced to move away from your friendly manuscript or notes to speak straight to the camera. And so on. This was never one challenge, but a sequence.

Small groups, business meetings, prayer gatherings, pastoral calls – they all were reformatted on the hoof and then continually tweaked to improve them.

Now over time, we might have made any or all of those changes. But we made a ton, simultaneously, without



training, and with no certainty that we were getting it right.

It's not surprising that we feel depleted – I've started to call it 'innovation fatigue'. And while I don't want to hold a Pastor's Pity Party, I do think there's a place to say that what we have done has had its unique stresses.

Yes, I know it was hard for everyone. Teachers, health workers, small business owners – massively hard.

I'm not saying Pastors were *more* stressed. I'm saying our combination of stresses was unique.

### STALE ENVY

And here's the reason for that stale residue of envy.

I feel I've innovated quite a lot, thank you. The journey isn't over yet, but there is a bit of space now to pause, breathe, and take stock. I have time to prep a sermon without worrying if the format is going to have to change. To run a newcomers meeting, onsite, like old times. Not to backtrack, but to stop the breakneck speed.

And that's the moment that the envy+tiredness hits me, because I experience Pastor P's news as yet another innovation needed, requiring the energy and imagination I don't yet have, to create something new which I can't yet see.

I forget all the ways we have innovated, and focus on the area where I feel we haven't, and ought to.

### FIVE STEPS

Instead, here are five steps to tackle spiritual envy in this area.

1. Thank God for his loving attention and pastoring of the church you're in. Every member has been known, watched, and cared for, every day. That includes you. Your church has had the perfect pastor. It still does.
2. Thank God for all the ways you and your church have innovated in the last two years. Yep, not all of them worked, and not all of them have lasted. Some were flops or fads. But you all made some grand strides out of great love for God and neighbour. List them so you don't lose them.
3. Thank God for the result of that. For example, and at the risk of triggering innovation fatigue in you, we've just launched a podcast. Now although that sounds grand, actually it's just an upgrade. Just like moving from duplicating cassettes to having a website with recordings was an upgrade. Although I think it's a real enhancement of the experience – people don't have to find our website each week, because the podcast is just uploaded on their phones automatically, and we can generate new material specially. So, memo to self,

thank God for the results of the innovations, whether they were temporary or permanent.

4. Thank God for that other pastor's innovation. Maybe it is something you need to tackle – put that wherever you keep ideas to incubate, and then you can face it when you feel ready. Maybe it's something you need never worry about, for a dozen different reasons. But look at it, decide, and then put it aside.
5. And then, keep reminding yourself to stop the comparisons. Everything you know is true, is true: you don't see that other pastor's blind spots (and don't start looking!); you don't see where they envy you; you're looking at a version of the finished and polished result, not the broken and embarrassing prototypes, failures, misses and messes.



### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where do you see signs of pastoral envy in your own life and leadership?
2. How are you doing on the 'depleted' front? Honestly?
3. Which of the five steps resonated with you, and what might you do about it?



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