

The Church that Thrives Without a Pastor

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One major interest of mine is to understand why some churches are strong, growing, and, in other words, have a successful ministry. A few months ago, I taught Sunday school at the Christian Fellowship Church in Holland, Ohio. As my GPS directed me to the church on Pilliod Road, I was sure I put in the wrong address. I was in a residential part of the city with several large, stately houses when the GPS announced, "You have now arrived at your destination."

I was about an hour early because I sometimes experience traffic problems. As I pulled up to the church, a staff member greeted me and helped me carry my books into the church. We then arranged them on the literature table.

When I asked to meet with the pastor, it was explained that they did not have a pastor. Rather, six elders and two deacons ran the church. They were selected, not based on some secular academic criteria, or denominational manual, but according to the scriptural qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1-6. Being curious about this unusual arrangement, it was explained that the elders take turns fulfilling the various church obligations. These obligations include giving the sermon and covering the many other roles required to achieve an effective church ministry.

As I thought about my own experience, I realized the last minister in my church only lasted about two years, and several other pastors not much longer. It is rare for one person to excel in preaching, visitation, counseling, and the many other obligations involved in running a church. With a board of elders, each can focus on the areas that he does best. There is a tendency for the pastor to, as they say, "give the same sermon over and over," or to over focus on his areas of specialty or interest, such as prophecy, apologetics, church history, Christian character, or Bible accounts in harmony with Ephesians 4:1.

With five elders, the church members can experience a variety of sermon topics, delivery styles, and interests. They also frequently had guest speakers, as I was when I visited them. When the Sunday School service began, about 175 persons filled the seats. My time as guest speaker did not feel like a burdensome hour lecture, but more like I was teaching an interactive college class of attentive learners. Having spent a year using the Answers in Genesis curriculum, the congregation was eager and prepared for my creation-apologetics presentation. Questions were asked, which always helps to liven up the presentation. Comments on the material I covered by the congregation always assists in attracting the students attention. The result was it was a genuine learning experience, both for me and the congregation. I sometimes feel uncomfortable talking for an hour while the congregation quietly sits and listens. All too often, we let our minds drift (at least mine does, even during interesting sermons). My impression from reading the sermons recorded in the Bible is that they were dialogue-dominated, and this is where real learning takes place (as any teacher knows!).

In contrast to so many churches, a very relaxed atmosphere dominated both services. The service, especially in the mainline dominations, is often ritual-dominated which reminds me of a funeral. After the service, I was able to spend close to an hour fellowshiping, often discussing the topic of my sermon, and enjoying encounters with the congregation members. At least two persons mentioned that my writing had changed their life; compliments which are very rewarding. I also enjoyed meeting several medical doctors who were affiliated with the Medical College of Ohio where I was once employed. In the end, I felt like I was part of the congregation spending time with old friends (and, in a few cases, I was).

Several things the church had in common with other growing churches were a relaxed, accepting atmosphere, almost no ritual, and a variety of excellent music. When I asked if the church had a book of discipline, as is common in the Methodist

and Lutheran churches, I was informed that “Our book of discipline is the Bible. We don't need any extra-Biblical books. On the issue of sexual behavior, the Bible is very clear, so we follow the Bible very closely and have avoided problems such as the United Methodists have recently experienced causing hundreds of churches to leave the domination.”

After presenting messages in over 400 churches during the last several decades, I am confident that I have gained some experience in assessing churches. In short, this was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had in several years, and I look forward to another opportunity to present apologetic sermons there again.

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