

### **The Changing Church: *Leadership in the Local Congregation***

There was a day when the local church pastor led a fairly quiet life. His workplace was called a “study.” That’s what he went there to do. He preached weekly to a congregation that had a fairly high degree of biblical literacy. He was held in high esteem both in the church and in the community. Local officials naturally saw him as a partner, not an opponent. His presence at a community event gave a notable sense of dignity to the gathering. He visited parishioners and shepherded them through their major life events (conversion, baptism, births, deaths, sicknesses, weddings, etc.). The church, through various committees, mostly ran itself. The pastor was a man of prayer and the word. That’s the life to which most of us preachers felt called.

A funny thing happened one day on the way to the study. The world changed. Pastors are no longer held in the same high esteem in their communities or even in their own churches. They no longer preach to a biblically literate congregation. They are having to learn new skill sets just to survive in their calling. More and more of them are having to supplement their income with bivocational careers. Because of cost and other factors, many are taking non-traditional training tracks in order to prepare for ministry leadership. They are trying to figure out how to have a personal and family life in the world of 24/7 electronic accessibility (and electronic criticism). Quite a few are burning out and opting out, tired of trying to be expert fundraisers and amazing communicators and high-achieving management executives and Dale Carnegie-esque people influencers. They’re tired of Facebook attacks and negative comparisons to various ministry superstars. This is not the life they signed up for. *#’mNotJoelOsteen!*

I doubt ministry leadership has ever been more challenging than it is now. How, then, does leadership happen today in healthy churches? Here are some common themes I see in congregations that are experiencing vitality.

1. *A recognition that the pastor and ministerial staff are key assets in the health of the church.* Pastoral tenure correlates strongly with church health. It is in a church’s best interest to do everything they can to help their ministers stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on their call. To that end, healthy churches are sensitive to the issues of stress and burnout in the ministry. For instance, more and more churches are establishing sabbatical policies for their ministerial staff.

2. *The expectation of leadership from the pastor.* Healthy churches don’t want chaplain pastors. They want “lead” pastors. In fact, Thom Rainer notes the decreased use of the title Senior Pastor and the increased use of Lead Pastor. “The change is not merely semantics. It reflects an expectation of pastors to provide clear and ongoing leadership” (thomrainer.com, 1.18.14, “Seven Paradigm Shifts in American Churches”). The challenge is that these are not the skills in which pastors traditionally have been trained. Leadership is a new skill set and a learning challenge for many of us.

3. *Structures that allow pastors to lead through streamlined decision-making processes.* Healthy churches are not doing away with governing structures and shared decision-making. They don’t just

depend on the pastor for everything. They do, however, reform their structures for efficiency and effectiveness. They are not saddled with large numbers of committees and cumbersome processes for getting things done. They have typically placed authority in a small number of teams under the leadership of the pastor with the congregation voting on just a few major items.

4. *Biblical deacon ministry.* In an unhealthy Baptist church it is not unusual to find the deacons functioning as a governing board. This is not a biblical model of deacon ministry. The desire to control is a problem, but an even bigger problem is that vital deacon ministries are going undone. Based on the Acts 6 prototype, deacons should be servant leaders who meet needs in the church, protect the fellowship of the church, and assist the pastors of the church. Healthy churches typically have this kind of pastor/deacon ministry partnership whether or not they use the term deacon.

5. *Emphasis on growing leadership from within.* Healthy churches don't sit around hoping that high-quality, leadership caliber people will join the church and fix the leadership deficit that so often exists in congregations. Healthy churches grow their own leaders. They understand that the pastor and staff should spend significant portions of their work time mentoring leaders in order to "give the ministry away," to quote the person who mentored me (Dr. J.K. Minton). This means pastors have to stop doing some of the things they have done in the past in order to free up time to grow new leaders. It means church members understand that and accept it.

6. *The role of the Executive Pastor.* This staff role is working its way down from megachurches to medium and even small sized churches. "If current trends continue, the executive pastor will become the second full time pastor...in a majority of churches" (thomrainer.com, 9.11.13, "Trends in American Churches"). The Executive Pastor's role (implementer and manager) is complementary to the Lead Pastor's role (vision and direction). They are a team in leading the church to accomplish her mission.

7. *Shared pulpit ministry.* Preaching and teaching teams are becoming a reality in all sizes of churches. This makes sense. It is grueling to preach week in and week out (see no. 1 above), plus the church benefits from multiple teachers and teaching styles. There is always back-up and the church is not as vulnerable to the loss of one key individual. Teams foster creativity; iron sharpens iron.

8. *Planned succession.* This is not yet widespread, but is gaining acceptance in more churches. They are thinking ahead and planning for pastoral succession rather than going through the typical interim pastor and search committee process. This requires the pastor to face reality, share the limelight, and progressively give over more and more of his duties to the successor. It means blessing the successor and overcoming the desire to hang on to power. Bonus: Planned succession dovetails nicely with growing leadership from within and shared pulpit ministry.

Yes, local church leadership is a different ballgame today. I encourage you to examine your church's leadership philosophy, structure, and practices. Does something need to change?