

5 CULTURAL TRENDS KILLING THE CHURCH'S MISSION

“There are forces and trends at work in our society that are killing local churches.”

You've heard people say stuff like that before, right?

You know what comes next too, don't you? Usually, it's condemnations of the insidious effects of secularization — or sexularization as one Christian commentator calls it — descriptions of hostility toward religion, and warnings about persecution, the limiting of religious freedoms, and fraying family values. Oh, and great angst about people using the greeting, “Happy holidays,” instead of “Merry Christmas.”

But while some, albeit loud, voices are telling you to look over there, you might be missing some everyday cultural shifts occurring that are having a greater and unnoticed effect on the church.

In fact, it is now becoming clear that these trends are killing the mission of the church far more effectively than the hot-button issues that get all the attention.

Here are five that come to mind:

1. THE DEATH OF CIVIL DISCOURSE

We live in a time of extreme polarization, where it seems we can't discuss anything – especially theology and politics – without it devolving into conflict and name-calling. Church people aren't immune to this. It seems we too have lost the capacity for civil discourse.

Sadly, this results in a rapid slide toward uniformity of thought. Because we can't even imagine what creative, respectful disagreement looks like, we feel we must eject anyone who expresses a dissenting opinion lest they threaten the harmony of the church.

This isn't how it's always been.

I became a Christian in a church that included both Calvinists and Arminians, dispensationalists and ammillennialists, complementarians and egalitarians. Sure, there were disagreements, but no one was ejected. In days gone by, churches that predominantly voted conservative could accommodate left-leaning voters in their midst, but no longer.

Now, if anyone differs on theology, politics, gender roles or sexuality, they are outed and expelled.

Today, I hear churches are creating statements or covenants that require their members to agree on a whole range of non-essential doctrines. We are sorting ourselves into increasingly strict congregations of like-minded people. This is the way cults behave, demanding unanimous allegiance to every jot and tittle of the group's beliefs, but now it's becoming churches as well.

And it happens on both sides of the debate. Jonathan Martin recently tweeted, ***“I thought nothing could be less interesting to me than conservative fundamentalism until I tasted progressive fundamentalism. I’m an equal opportunity hater of purity codes. Ideological purity tests are never life-giving no matter who administers them.”***

How is this killing the mission of the church? Firstly, it means people are driving great distances to attend their preferred church, uprooting them from their neighbourhood and nixing their capacity for local mission.

But secondly, the ideological homogeneity of individual local churches is contrary to the biblical teaching that sees the church as a herald, foretaste, and witness to the world, showing the world its transformed and liberated condition in submission to the gospel and kingdom of Christ.

This isn't to say the church doesn't have core doctrines to which all members must ascribe. But the church has long recognized that while some doctrines are essential, others remain in dispute and a difference of opinion doesn't require one party to withdraw. The old saying, ***“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity”*** needs to be heeded again.

Christians will disagree. But in a time of unparalleled polarization, we need the church to be an example to society of what it looks like to follow a process of confrontation, conversation, ethical and moral discernment, forgiveness and reconciliation. When done well it has the potential to enhance pastoral care, discipline, decision-making, and witness, and to serve as a model for society.

At the moment the church looks no different to congress, parliament, or the media, and people are rejecting it all.

2. THE COST OF HEALTHCARE

Another cultural trend killing the mission of the church is America's dependence on employer-based health insurance. One pastor, Morgan Guyton recently revealed his health insurance premium is almost half the size of his salary for a plan that has a \$6000 deductible. That's simply unsustainable, and if premiums continue to rise, churches will have to close under the financial strain that places on them.

The solution we're often told by those promoting bivocational or convocational ministry is for pastors to work part-time for the church and part-time in the neighborhood, which at first sounds pretty missional.

But that would mean them letting go of their employer-based insurance plans. Guyton says, ***"I would love to have the freedom to be an entrepreneur, but I have a chronic illness that will kill me without meds, so I cannot leave the institution."***

In other words, pastors are locked into uncreative, non-missional institutionalism *by their health plans!!*

3. THE DEMAND FOR EXCELLENCE

Who told us excellence should be our core value?

It's not found in New Testament teaching on the church. But just as society has yielded to a reliance on experts, so has the church. Our parents don't teach us to prepare meals, Google does.

We turn to YouTube to teach us how to do basic home repairs. We call in experts at the drop of a hat.

We enjoy Hillsong United on Spotify and listen to our favorite preachers' podcasts. We won't put up with anything half-baked or amateurish.

When we combine this with the kind of screwy ecclesiology that expects the paid church staff to do pretty much everything, we end up with a situation where local ministers are required to be Bible teachers, accountants, strategists, visionaries, computer techs, counselors, public speakers, worship directors, prayer warriors, mentors, leadership trainers and fundraisers.

But more than that, we expect them to be *exceptional* at it.

As churches have declined in size, and demands placed on paid staff have increased, we are seeing clergy burnout rates go through the roof. According to Barna Research, ninety percent of pastors say ministry is completely different to what they thought it would be. Seventy percent say they have a lower self-image now than when they first started.

Christians are turning into connoisseurs, demanding greater and greater excellence, and finding it elsewhere if their local church can't supply it.

But once you outsource your need for exceptional preaching and worship to Podbean or Stitcher, and your need for connection is met using social media, you're not interested in the messy, chaotic, uncontrollable nature of serving the poor and being a good neighbour to those in need.

4. THE END OF VOLUNTEERISM

Related to the obsession with excellence is the surprisingly quick death of volunteerism. Since volunteers are, by their very nature, not professionals they are considered second-rate.

Churches started employing non-members to play in the church band, or perform admin tasks because either no one in the church would volunteer for these roles or they weren't up to the required standard of excellence.

This has shifted the culture of the church further toward paying professionals to run our outreach programs like preschoolers groups, feeding centers, crisis accommodation units, youth programs, etc. The quality of the program might have gone up, but engagement by congregations has dropped off completely. Today, many churches' outreach activities are semi-professional parachurch agencies.

Instead of employing people to run programs, we need to recover our sense of what it means to be missional.

David Fitch wrote, ***“Instead, lead people so as to commit to a place, regular (weekly) presence in a place, praying for this place, its people, so as to discern what God is doing by His Spirit, so as, when the time is ripe, to announce Jesus is Lord here, doing great things. Let us join him! This is ‘opening space for God to work’ in our neighbourhoods, towns and villages.”***

5. THE BURDEN OF REGULATION

Society has shifted in a way that requires education providers, community groups and businesses to have much stricter regulations on things like the occupational health and safety of staff, grievance processes, sexual harassment policies, child protection, disabled access, and so on.

These are all good and necessary things.

But the administrative burden is killing small churches, where the leadership teams are snowed by red tape as they fill in myriad forms, satisfy externally regulated processes, and try to marshal a largely voluntary organization to undertake required training.

I know of one church with around 50 members, all elderly, who are preparing to close down because no one can manage the administrative burden they're under.

Recently, I planned a wine appreciation night for my church, an opportunity for church people to invite their friends to a low-key social event. I was told I needed to contact the local police to register the event, I needed council approval, and I needed to complete an authorized "responsible service of alcohol" course.

But not only is the burden administrative, it has implications for mission. A recent Australian government enquiry into child sexual assault by clergy recommended that there be tighter regulations around who can be called a "pastor" and what minimum training is required for such a role.

I understand why those recommendations were made but they make it very difficult for those churches that want to encourage all members to see themselves as missionaries (or *sent ones*) in their own neighbourhoods.

One of the fathers of the missional movement, Lesslie Newbigin was well known for talking about the declericalizing of the church. That is, the blurring of the line between clergy and lay people, and "ordaining" all people to mirror the work of God in the world.

I reiterate that I see why these regulations are in place and I'm not suggesting churches shirk them. But, together with the other trends I've

outlined, they are conspiring to keep churches institutional and clergy-led.

The gay lobby or the atheist society or whoever else they're telling you is attacking the church aren't impeding the church's mission as much as these societal trends.

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