

## **Pastoral Ministry Requires Propinquity**

A church planter recently catalogued the 'problems' he was confronting in his fellowship of about 70 people. And he knows there must be more - this is just what he's been told so far! Some are the direct consequences of sinful thinking and behaviour and others reflect the death and decay of our world under judgment.

In the area of relationships: singleness, dating non-Christians, fiancé or spouse not Christian, divorce, single mum, widow, marriage tensions, adultery, children with autism, ADD and Asperger syndrome, sole carers of sick parent or spouse, foster child, disowned by parents.

In the area of sexuality: porn addiction, sex addiction, victims of sexual assault and molestation, infertility, same sex attraction.

Other addictions: pot, alcohol, smoking.

Health problems: stroke sufferer, dead leg, cancer, bipolar disorder and depression.

Issues with money and work: problems with public housing, unemployed, overworked, retiring, retired, on disability pension, decision to rent or buy house and the joys of renovating.

Others have a criminal record or a family member in jail.

Maybe it's always been so, but some of this seems to be getting worse as the society I live in, Australia, increasingly drifts – or races headlong - from its Christian moorings. For many, even the basic role of parenting has been lost with disastrous consequences.

We know that since the Fall we live in a broken world with broken lives. Humans retain the dignity of the image of God but experience the depravity of our fallen state, the judgment of God who gives us over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done (Rom 1:28-32).

And we know that pastoral ministry is not essentially about helping people through their life problems. But it is about applying the gospel to the totality of life including our deepest struggles. As we preach the gospel, God will draw to himself and the church people who suffer in every conceivable way. The church should be home for broken people. And the reason Christ died and we preach is to re-create a new, liberated humanity in Christ (2 Cor 5:16-21).

The depth of brokenness and suffering in people's lives is a challenge for a church planter (or any pastor) who rejoices with the angels in heaven over every soul saved and every life being slowly healed. But can he shepherd

more than 70 sheep effectively? Maybe not even 70 unless he wants to burn out quickly.

Typically the first 70 or so members in the plant are in a close relationship with the planting couple and receive lots of personal instruction and care. After that, the planter is too stretched and this personal care grows progressively weaker.

We labor as pastors is to present everyone mature in Christ (Col 1:28-29). And the means of grace are the Word, prayer and fellowship. So all the contexts of fellowship where God's people listen to his Word, pray and exhort one another will be used by God to grow broken people to maturity.

Our expository preaching ministries, sometimes to hundreds or even thousands, play a huge role in this maturing process, especially if we work hard to connect the doctrines of grace to daily suffering. We also need to explore the kinds of counseling ministries that uphold the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation and sanctification.

### **What about propinquity?**

However, my proposition is that our fellowships should be characterized by propinquity.

So what is propinquity and why is it important? According to the Oxford Dictionary, propinquity is 'the state of being close to someone or something; proximity.' (*He kept his distance as though afraid propinquity might lead him into temptation*).

What would it look like if each member had a personal pastor to help them grow, no matter how big the church becomes? Realistically our members will vary in how much they learn and apply from sermons. And most will benefit greatly from someone getting alongside them, listening and understanding, speaking the word of truth in love, praying and being open about his or her own struggles. For some they need the parent they never had, just to learn some basic wisdom in how to live.

There is biblical warrant for thinking of pastoral ministry in this personal way. Paul was a father to the Thessalonians, dealing with each of them as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging them to live lives worthy of God (1Thess 2:11-12). He writes to the Corinthians as his dear children, since he had become their father through the gospel and they are to imitate him (1 Cor 4:14-17). The overseers are to be known by the church as blameless in life and doctrine (1 Tim 3:1-7). Timothy was to set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Tim 4:12). Peter exhorts the elders as shepherds, to be examples to God's flock under their care (1 Pet 5:1-4). Pastoral ministry requires propinquity.

## **A different mental image**

So as the body of believers grows, how do we maintain this closeness of pastoral relationship? We need a different mental image of church.

If you had to draw a diagram that represented the ministry in your church, what would it look like? An organisational tree? A mind-map of different ministries and programs? A tangle of spaghetti?

What if our mental image was not of an organisation or a structure but of the people God had brought together in our church? And what if the key question we asked was: Who is getting alongside each person to invest in their lives and help them grow towards maturity in Christ?

This is a different vision of church—not as an organisation, but as a community of disciple-making disciples. It's the vision of ministry Tony Payne and I wrote about in *The Trellis and the Vine* — a ministry where we focus more on people than programs.

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