



CNI

Comment - Five pastoral errors that can kill a ministry

Ministers are called, trained and equipped for ministry. That goes without saying, but though the calling might be there, the training and equipping sometimes fall short, writes Mark Woods

That's not always the fault of the college or the mentor: sometimes it's because of personal flaws like pride, over-confidence or a poor understanding of what pastoral ministry is all about.

Of course, ministry's different in different places. But I think there are some surefire ways of harming your ministry, whatever the context. Here are five:

1. Not visiting people

I was mentored by an old minister whose working pattern was mornings in the study and afternoons out visiting the flock. For most ministers, those days are gone because the world's changed so much. But personal contact

with people outside Sundays is vital. It's easy to let the "public" side of ministry – the preaching and leading of worship, house groups and Bible studies – dominate the working week. However, time spent sitting in people's armchairs drinking tea, chatting about ordinary things as well as spiritual things, getting to know how they think and what's going on in their lives, is just as important. It isn't glamorous, but it's what we do. A minister who has a string of theological degrees from leading universities, or who's come from a high-flying career in commerce or industry, but can't sit companionably with someone with a completely different background, is probably in the wrong job. My college principal used to say: "Your congregation will forgive any number of bad sermons, but they'll never forgive you if you don't visit them when they're ill."

2. Talking to people as though they're idiots

If you're a pastor, you probably went to theological college or university – maybe both. You might know a bit of Greek.

That sermon you just preached might have taken you hours to prepare and involved intensive research through half a dozen commentaries. Depending on your church brand, you might

have been ordained and have particular views on a pastor's authority.

None of that will cut much ice with your congregation. In your church there will be people older than you, with far more life experience, maybe with more responsible jobs, who've seen and done everything already. They value you for the 'extras' you can bring – that sermon preparation time, the whole sitting-in-armchairs thing, the odd brilliant idea for outreach you come up with – but they read the Bible too. And if you're middle-aged or younger, the chances are that a lot of them will have heard everything you've got to say in your sermons before.

So be very careful to distinguish between "what I think" and "what the Bible says". You might have more theology than they do, but their opinion is as good as yours.

3. Not listening to ideas

It's easy for ministers to buy into the idea that church leadership involves coming up with all the good ideas first. So you're threatened when someone thinks of something before you do, and you resist it because you didn't think of it. Or you've been around for a while and you just know it's not going to work, so you politely discourage someone to save them from

themselves. (I was genuinely in a meeting once when a new idea was greeted with "We tried it 20 years ago and it didn't work.") Either of those negatives can lead to trouble.

Ministers should thank God for those are more creative and visionary than they are. It means that they can get on with what they've been called to – the ministry of word and sacrament – while acting as a permission-giver and advocate for all the other stuff that makes churches work.

That way, when you have a proposal you really want to get through and that is potentially a hard one to sell, you've built up enough capital to get people on your side. And those new ideas that you know are never going to work? Guess what: sometimes they will. And even if they don't, it's important that people find out for themselves rather than just have you saying no.

4. Believing you're essential

Here's a revolutionary idea. Most church work has nothing to do with the minister at all. As one myself, I'm the last person to downplay the pastor's role. But in my congregations I've had people who were better at leading worship than me, better preachers and better pastorally. I learned not to let it bother me.

Early in my ministry, I had a diary clash which meant that I couldn't take a Christmas service for our mothers and toddlers groups. So I assumed the service wouldn't happen – until I was informed otherwise by the women who ran the groups, who said that they were quite capable of doing it themselves, thank you very much.

But more than that: a lot of Christian fellowship happens through people's non-church interactions. People become friends, go out for meals, stop to chat in the street, babysit for each other's children, share each other's lives. Pastors, they need you to be there when they need you, but most of the time they don't need you.

5. Letting the congregation think you're busy

There's nothing more damaging to ministry than business. I'm not saying that pastors should think they can get out of bed at 10 o'clock and waste half the day before making a few phone calls or starting a sermon. That's just laziness. But most ministers aren't paid a salary for doing a job. They are paid a stipend to set them free to minister. So time that looks unproductive on the face of it can actually be very rich and fruitful. Thinking, reading, listening, praying – there's not much going on, as far as anyone can see, but

you're becoming a better and more perceptive pastor because of it.

And it's a good example to your congregation. I sometimes think we're getting busier all the time, with less and less time unaccounted for, and that's not healthy.

I remember in one of my churches how I got sucked into a round of endless committee meetings, congratulating myself that I was being useful. Then someone spoke to me after the service wanting to see me, but terribly apologetically: "I know how very busy you are," she said.

It was a painful moment: busy, yes, but if someone thought I was too busy for them, I was busy about the wrong things.

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