

### The 'Pew Prayer'

Some years ago a pastor, Ray Ewers, instructed me in the finer art of how to walk into church. To most people, this might appear to be a rather basic accomplishment requiring little or no tutelage. Perhaps a family with five toddlers would appreciate some advice, but most of us would never give it a thought. Ray's instruction was very brief: "Pray about where you sit".

Praying seemed like a great way to walk into church, better than grumbling about the full car park or feeling annoyed that the first hymn, Tell Out My soul, was sung to Tidings and not Woodlands. But most of all the things to pray about, why should I be concerned with seating position? After all, I sit in my pew every week.

Ray's advice was based on a particular view of church. He saw church as a place where Christians go to work. Church is a gathering of God's people to hear his word and respond in faith and obedience. In this gathering, we are in fellowship with each other, through the blood of Jesus, and, because of our fellowship, we seek to serve each other. We use our gifts and abilities to strengthen one another and build Christ's church – 'edification' is the word often used to describe what goes on in church. All believers are involved in building the church. Because of this, we aren't to see ourselves merely as part of an organisation called 'St Hubert's Church', but as servants of God's people, eager to meet the needs of others even if it means sacrificing our own.

Ray's view of church was spot on. With this perspective, his advice to pray about my choice of pew makes perfect sense. If at church we are working to strengthen our fellow believers, where we sit becomes important since part of our work will be talking to our neighbour in the pew, welcoming people, helping each other understand God's word and praying with each other.

The 'Pew Prayer' was a significant turning point in my understanding of what church is all about. It changed my reasons for going to church. The shift was made from being the 'helpee' to the helper, the served to the servant. Church is where we seek spiritual food and encouragement in order to become more godly; but church is also where we go in order to feed other people and encourage them. In God's mercy, we become more Christ-like in the process, as like him we deny ourselves for the sake of others. But our purpose in gathering with God's people is to strengthen them and build the body of Christ. We look for opportunities to assist the growth of the church in practical ways. There are numerous ways in which we can carry out the ministry of the pew. In this paper, we'll look at some of them.

### Bring Others to your Meetings

One of the obvious ways we can build the church is to invite others. The minister or the evangelism committee only has limited opportunities to attract others in to your church meetings. The members in the pew, however, are in touch with hundreds of people in the community.

There are several reasons we balk at inviting people to church:

## 1. We think church is for Christians not unbelievers

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Our understanding of church as a gathering of God's people to hear His Word tends to make church inward-looking and create a ghetto-like mentality which excludes people. We can easily think that church is only for the faithful. However, church is about growing in godliness and the God whom we serve is outward looking and concerned for the salvation of all humanity. The Word, which we meet to hear, is a message of salvation for all people and so we must seek out others as God has found us. Paul expected unbelievers would be in the church (see 1 Corinthians 14:22f).

This gives us the happy dilemma of making church work for Christians and unbelievers. Over the years many churches have run separate services for believers and outsiders – a 'regular service' and an 'evangelistic service'. However, this solution is often based on the false premise, that preaching to Christians is fundamentally different to evangelising non-Christians.

But all Biblical preaching should be gospel preaching. Any and every part of the Word of God is ultimately instructing us in the gospel of Jesus. It is a too limited view of the gospel to think that it is only preached in a sermonette from John 3:16. To preach the Bible without being Christ-centred is to mis-preach the Bible. To preach the Bible in a Christ-centred fashion is to evangelise as you teach. If we preach the Word of God, the gospel of our salvation, the church will be edified in both the conversion of sinners and the godliness of believers. So church is always a scene of evangelism.

Our personal evangelism with friends and contacts is strengthened by this church-based evangelism. It is easier for new converts to commit themselves to church if they have already attended. The preacher can be more direct and confronting than in personal relationships. Through expository preaching they learn how to read the Bible and see the grand sweep of God's purposes in Christ. They see the unity and historicity of the Scriptures, which are impressive evidences for authenticity. They see the lives of other Christians, reassuring them that you are not a freak and removing prejudices against Christians and church, thus enhancing gospel communication. They also see, in concrete terms, how being a Christian will affect them. We can also capitalise on the teamwork of our church. Some are good at making friends with non-Christians, others at explaining the gospel, others at following-up new Christians.

## 2. We are embarrassed by our church meetings

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We will only invite our friends to church if we are enthusiastic about what happens there. If the gospel is not being preached, there is no point bringing outsiders. We have to do all in our power to make sure our church preaches the gospel, or find one that already does. There are too many churches in our land that are not preaching the gospel and there is no reason for a Christian ever to be supporting one.

If our church is preaching the gospel but doing it poorly, in a way that is inaccessible to non-Christians, the members in the pew can often provide the motivation for improving things by their commitment to bring other along. Those who are gospel-minded will want to re-examine traditional service styles, if they see that these are a hindrance to newcomers. But sometimes they won't recognise the problem until unbelievers are actually sitting in the pews. Only then do we start to see our meetings through the eyes of outsiders and we feel the healthy pressure to

change what is alienating to newcomers.

When we find church dull, boring and irrelevant, there is no way we will invite friends. If they do happen to turn up, we are desperately embarrassed, cringing over every fault and flaw in the meeting. On the other hand, if we find church challenging, exciting, enjoyable, meaty and worthwhile, we will want to invite our friends and neighbours to share with us.

### 3. We assume people won't come to church

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As I write this, a Telstra technician is doing some work in our house. I should invite him to church to hear the gospel, but I can't imagine him coming. He wouldn't fit in; he probably lives too far away; he'll be suspicious of my motives; he's so frustrated with the job he would probably hit me – I've just talked myself out of making the invitation. I'm a pessimist.

Actually, Australians are far more willing to go to church than Christians are willing to invite them. It's harder for strangers like my Telecom man to accept, but those who share in other social events with us – our friends, colleagues, neighbours and relatives – will often come to church.

But we have to be optimists, not pessimists. Seligman, author of *Learned Optimism*, produces evidence that successful salespeople are optimists. However, the reason for their success is not that optimists have better skills in selling, but that they don't give up. Unlike pessimists, they keep knocking on doors and making phone calls because they believe in the product and that people should have it. If we are optimistic about people joining us in church, we will keep making invitations on the assumption that some will come. If we invite people often enough we are sure to get some along. My problem is that I become a pessimist after a few knock-backs.

## Thinking Through 'People Work'

However, the ministry of the pew goes far beyond advertising and inviting people to hear the gospel. Once we make the attitude shift from passive pew sitters and receivers to active workers and givers, there is no end to the difference we can make to others and to the running of the meeting. All the suggestions below are of the informal type – things we can do at our own initiative. They are types of involvement that every congregation member can have. The key to people work is to observe what happens around you and respond to people's needs.

Think through your church meetings chronologically. What can we do before, during and after the meeting?

## Before

### Preparation

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One of the great contributions is in our preparation. The minister should not be the only one preparing for church. We prepare by praying for the preacher, the musicians, the service leader, the Bible readers and the newcomers. We prepare by studying the Bible passages so that we maximise this learning opportunity by being sensitised to the issues and questions in the passages being taught. Such preparation has other benefits. We are better equipped to enter into discussion with others if we have looked at the passage beforehand. It is also a great encouragement to the preacher to know that the congregation is eager to understand the Bible and willing to put in some effort. Preaching is hard work, both for the preacher and the listeners.

An intelligent question, comment or observation upon the sermon is an enormous motivating factor for the preacher who, week by week, has to try and engage the congregation's minds and hearts in the Word of God. Those who sit in the pew can make a great contribution to those teaching from the pulpit.

#### Meeting visitors and newcomers

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We enjoy meeting our friends at church, but we need to develop a nose for new people. We need to sit with them and help them feel comfortable in this strange place by introducing ourselves and explaining what is going on. We should greet the non-Christian friends of other members and introduce our friends to others. It's all about genuine hospitality. The way we welcome and look after people when they visit our homes should be a model for the household of God. And genuine, relaxed hospitality will slowly evaporate some of the prejudices held by outsiders.

#### Arriving early

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All of this requires that we arrive not on time, but early. That may be the greatest miracle of all.

### During

#### Active listening

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People in the pews have an enormous impact on those who are teaching and leading. Communication is always a two way process. Energetic listening through taking notes, making eye contact with the preacher, sitting at the front, laughing at jokes (even old ones) will spur on the preacher. It is very hard to preach enthusiastically to a sleepy, distracted, fidgety group. Our active listening will also infect others with enthusiasm for learning, just as our fidgeting will discourage them. Unbelievers will also pick up that these ideas are worth listening to if they see rows of regulars eagerly soaking up the Bible.

#### Singing

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Similarly, those in the pew can be a great help to the singing and leading of music. It is everyone's responsibility to share in the corporate singing of the congregation. The music may be well chosen and played but if it is poorly sung it is disheartening. Our enthusiasm and gusto in singing the great anthems of the faith is of great help to those around us and those leading the music, even if we can barely hold a tune. Just pretend you're under the shower.

#### Logistics

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Each member in the pew also has an important part to play in the smooth running of the meeting. The devil will use anything to distract people from hearing the Word of God. We mustn't rely on ushers to fix things. If the window needs to be opened, get up and do it. If the microphones are not right, signal to the speaker so the problem can be fixed before they continue without being heard.

#### Newcomers

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Keep attending to newcomers' needs. If they can't find their way around the Bible or the service outline, or they don't have a Bible, or they need to find the crèche, help them yourself. It is your meeting, not the minister's. It's all about being observant and outward looking.

## After

### Discuss God's Word

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We have just heard the Word of God and we spend all of morning tea talking about last night's video. It isn't right and we know it, but many of us are just uncomfortable starting up 'spiritual' conversations. If you get the ball rolling, others pick it up. During your preparation and the sermon, think up some comments or issues to raise with others. Asking "What did you think of the sermon?" will usually put your neighbour into a coma, but making a specific comment like "I didn't know Abel was a prophet. What makes someone a prophet?" may generate a fruitful conversation. Even if the conversations don't always get off the ground, your enthusiasm for learning the Bible will be contagious and non-Christians will see that church is not dull and boring but fascinating and life shattering.

### Pray with others

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Use the suppertime to meet others and find out their concerns and pray quietly with them. This will look a bit weird to newcomers with pairs of bowed heads all around the building, but they will know that we love each other and trust God's providence.

### Newcomers

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Newcomers tend to leave fairly quickly so we have to move fast by identifying the visitor in our pew and offering them conversation immediately as the service ends. It's all very purposeful: making sure they are welcomed properly by meeting you and your friends, maybe introduce them to the minister and help them see how they can fit in the congregation. You may have to postpone catching your friends until after the newcomers have been cared for.

### Stay late

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Once you catch this vision of church you are always the last to leave because the opportunities to minister don't end until the last person leaves. Gone are the days of fitting church in between breakfast and brunch. Ministry of the pew takes time.

## Training outline

This outline can be used to discuss Ministry of the Pew in a small group to work out how to implement these ideas in your church.

1. Why think about where to sit in church?
2. How would your church members express their reasons for attending church?
3. How do these reasons affect what they do in church?
4. Who in your church is actively engaged in the ministry of the pew? How can you encourage and support them?
5. What is the attitude of your members toward bringing others to church?
6. What practices in your church meeting last Sunday would have alienated non-Christians?
7. Next Sunday carefully observe who in church is 'left out' in some way.
8. What are your plans for your ministry from the pew?