

6 Symptoms of a Dysfunctional Church

If you want to hear about really sick churches, then stick with me on this post. If you are tired about many of us writing about the sordid state of congregations, I understand. Skip this article and I will return with more good news in the near future.

So what is a dysfunctional church? By definition, it is a congregation that no longer carries out essential biblical purposes. In other words, the church does not function properly; it is thus dysfunctional.

Unfortunately, I did not have to look far to find over 20 current examples of dysfunctional churches. In my quest, I found six recurring themes. In every one of the congregations, the church manifested at least three of these symptoms.

1. Severe theological errors are pervasive in the church. I'm not referring to differences over minute matters of eschatology. These errors to which I refer were denials of the essential truths of the Christian faith. In some cases, leadership no longer held to the exclusivity of salvation through Christ.

2. The church is known as a "pastor-eater." The congregation often terminated pastors on a regular basis. At the very least, pastors felt the pressure to leave. Short pastoral tenure was thus normative.

3. The congregation experiences severe conflict. Any group will eventually have some level of conflict: families; fellow employees; students; and churches. But dysfunctional churches take conflicts to a new level, often resulting in emotional outbursts by members and leaders.

4. Hardly anyone in the community knows the church exists. One of the simple steps I take in many consultations is to visit businesses within about a mile radius of the church. I ask them for directions to the church. If no one has ever heard of the church in that close proximity, I know something is wrong.

5. The church is declining while the community is growing. An example works better here. Suppose your church has declined in worship attendance by 3 percent the past two years. Now suppose the community in which the church is located has grown by 4 percent the past two years. The contrast between the two growth rates is stark, a symptom of a dysfunctional church.

6. The church is “family owned and family operated.” One particular family, even if it’s an extended family, makes all the decisions in the church. Nothing gets done without the nod of typically the patriarch or matriarch of the family. The church exists largely to meet the needs of one family.

Of course, when I write articles about the negative state of many congregations, I am rightly asked about potential solutions. We are putting together an entire video series on revitalization this fall. Stay tuned.

In the meantime, let me hear from you. What do you think of these six symptoms? What would you add?

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