

9 Traits of 'Mean' Churches

"My church is a mean church!"

I received two emails this week from church members who made that very statement. The members are from two different churches in two different states.

One of the churches belongs to a denomination; the other is nondenominational. In both cases the church members made the decision to drop out of local church life altogether.

Yes, I tried to reason with the two members. I told them that no church is perfect. If they had any doubt, I wrote, look at the two letters the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. I failed in convincing them to stay in their churches. I pray they will become active in other churches later.

I love local churches. But I have to admit, I am hearing more from long-term members who are quitting church life completely. One member wrote me, "The non-Christians I associate with are much nicer people than the members of my church."

Ouch. That really hurt.

So, after receiving the second email, I began to assimilate all the information I could find where church members had written me about their "mean" churches. They may not have used the word "mean" specifically, but the intent was the same.

I then collected characteristics of these churches, and I found nine that were common. I call these the "nine traits of mean churches."

1. Too many decisions are made in the cloak of darkness. Only a select few members really know what's going on. The attitude of those elitists is that the typical member doesn't really

need to know.

2. The pastor and/or staff are treated poorly. Decisions are made about them without a fair process. Complaints are often numerous and veiled. Many of these churches are known for firing pastors and/or staff with little apparent cause.

3. Power groups tenaciously hold on to their power. The power group may be a formal group such as a committee, elders or deacons. But the group can also be informal—no official role but great informal authority. Power groups avoid and detest accountability, which leads to the next point.

4. There is lack of clear accountability for major decisions and/or expenditures. The church has no clear system in place to make certain that a few outlier members cannot accumulate great power and authority.

5. Leaders of the power groups have an acrimonious spirit. Though they may make first impressions of kindness and gentleness, the mean streak emerges if you try to cross them.

6. A number of the members see those outside of the church as “them” or “those people.” Thus the church is at odds with many in the community instead of embracing them with the love of Christ.

7. Many members have an inward focus; they view the church as a place to get their own preferences and wants fulfilled. They are the opposite of the description of church members in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul describes them as functioning members for the greater good of the body of Christ.

8. Many people in the community view these churches negatively. Those on the outside often refer to these churches as “fighting and firing churches.” The community members detect no love for them from these churches.

9. Most of the members are silent when power plays and bad

decisions take place. They don't want to stand up to the power group. They are afraid to ask questions. Their silence allows the power abuses to continue.

Are mean churches really increasing in number? My anecdotal information would indicate they are.

What can we do to become a more unified body? How can churches demonstrate more positive impressions to the community? What can we do to hold on to good members who are giving up on local churches altogether? What is your input on these issues? Let me hear from you.

Thom Rainer *is the president of LifeWay Christian Resources. For the original article, visit .*