

The 'Pew Prayer'

Some years ago 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 instruction. 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 they've sung that song again you so dislike. But 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. Because of this, we aren't to see ourselves merely as members of the 'audience', but as servants of God's people, eager to meet the needs of others even if it means sacrificing our own.

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.

There are numerous ways in which we can carry out the ministry of the pew. 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.

Questions for Discussion

Do you agree with what you have just read?

What bible passages support (or otherwise) these ideas?

If we surveyed people on a typical Sunday, what different reasons for going to church might you encounter?

Is there a danger in seeing church simply as a place where I come to serve others?

Before

Preparation

The Bible indicates that our encouragement of others as we gather together is not something that will just happen, but requires careful consideration, planning and reflection (Heb 10:26). 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 can maximise this learning opportunity by being sensitised to the issues and questions in the passages being taught. Such preparation will not just benefit us. We are better equipped to enter into discussion with others if we have looked at the passage beforehand. An intelligent question, comment or observation upon the sermon is an enormous motivating factor for the preacher whom, week by week has to try and engage the congregation's minds and hearts in the Word of God.

New Comers

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-Christians 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

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

During

Be Involved

People in the pews have an enormous impact on those whom are teaching and leading by energetic listening. 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, the newcomers will also pick up that these ideas are worth listening to if they see rows of regulars eagerly soaking up the bible.

Look up the bible, help those around you – if they don't have a bible, or they need to find the crèche, help them yourself. It is your meeting, not the ministers. It's all about being observant and outward looking.

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. Out enthusiasm and gusto in singing 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

Each member in the pew also has an important part to play in the smooth running of the meetings. 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.

Questions for discussion

Think back to the last time you were a stranger at a church meeting. How did it feel? What things did people do that helped or hindered?

Apart from the content of the bible talk, what will newcomers learn about Christians by attending our meetings?

After

Discuss God's Word

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 specific comment 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.

Give feedback

Especially when you have been encouraged, let the person who has read the bible, sung etc. know that their ministry has been effective. You might be the only one to say anything!

Pray with others

Use the supertime to meet others and find out their concerns and pray quietly with them. This will look a bit weird to newcomers but they will know that we love each other and trust God's providence.

Newcomers

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 might need to be more familiar with what ages are cared for in the crèche etc... in

order to be helpful with the newcomer. You may have to postpone catching your friends until after the newcomers have been cared for.

Plan to stay late

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. Ministry of the pew takes time.

Questions for Discussion

Who in your church is actively engaged in the ministry of the pew? What do they do that has encouraged you? How can you encourage and support them to continue to do it?

Should our different gifts strengths and personalities affect the role we have in 'the ministry of the pew'?

Give some examples of 'support' or behind the scene' roles?

What are the implications for the role you play?

Should we aim to make church comfortable for all that come, especially newcomers?

What are some helpful ways of turning our morning tea conversations around to talk about the message we have just heard?

In the light of this paper, what practical improvements could we make to the way church runs?