



Are we Shooting Ourselves in the Foot?

By Simon Manchester

I'm retired, and I know I'm getting grumpy, but I've visited lots of churches this year (in person or online) and too many of our church services are just too terrible to be helping the gospel cause.

Some of course do a great job, but many seem lost and hardly prepared.

Bear with my grumpiness for a moment.

Would it shock you to know that I've been to services this year where the welcome is dull and tedious, the message to children is long and embarrassing, song leaders are out of tune, service leaders are clichéd and random, Bible readers are unengaged and sermons are unrelated to text or life? I am amazed by the loyalty of the laypeople who put up with this. I am staggered that they might ever bring a friend – but I cannot imagine a visitor saying, "This was helpful – I must come again".

So, now I've said it. I know things are difficult, we need all the help we can get, and I should be encouraging, encouraging and encouraging – but the stuff that many are doing is just too bad and the issues are just too great to pretend it's all fine. At the very time when the secular world is contemptuous of Christianity, why give it fuel for its contempt?

Just days ago, we heard the news of J.I. Packer's death and I found these words on the dust jacket of *Knowing God* – written in 1973 but permanently relevant, and never more than to us today: "Ignorance of God... of His ways and... communion with Him lies at the root of much of the church's weakness today... Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit... that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for small thoughts... of God."

How true this is. One would think today in many gatherings that we people are the centre of the universe and God is some small friend we met somewhere whose job is to run errands.

Packer goes on: "Christians preoccupied with maintaining religious practices in an irreligious world have... allowed God to become remote. Clear-sighted persons [i.e. unbelievers] seeing this are tempted to withdraw from the churches in something like disgust to pursue a quest for God [or life] on their own. Nor can one wholly blame them for Christians who look... through the wrong end of the telescope... cannot hope to end up as more than pygmy Christians and clear-sighted people want something better."

So, I give you these challenges.

1. Do you know why you are meeting? It is not to keep people happy (that will never work in the long term) but because God calls his people to meet and

(a) hear his word well;

(b) respond in thanks and godliness;

(c) build one another up in light of the past (his words and deeds) present (ministry and mission) and future (meeting him).

You can test your planning of the gathering by how much you understand why you are meeting. If you think it's for lightweight things it will look like it – and vice versa.

2. Do you know that the gathering has a "conversational" or "relational" or "logical" flow to it? Do you know that the Covenant God relates to his people in the gathering? Please

know that what I set out here are not details to follow but the principle of gathering before our relational God. Those who lead must have some logic to their leading.

- (a) The first thing might be a (downward) reminder of God's greatness or goodness from the Scriptures as we begin;
 - (b) then comes our (upward and outward) response of praise – song or psalm as allowed;
 - (c) we hear (downward) our condition – sin – expressed freshly and thoughtfully;
 - (d) then we [upward] ask forgiveness and [down] hear his mercy (again in a fresh way) –
- incidentally, how many people would be helped by truly grasping the concepts of sin and mercy?
- (e) after this, perhaps the Creed – or a word to children [outward];
 - (f) then prayers [up];
 - (g) a song [up and out];
 - (h) Readings and sermon [down];
 - (i) song [up and out];
 - (j) then a final word to go in his strength and service [out].

Again, please get the principle. Does the service plan make sense? Is it well thought through and purposeful?

3. Now, a few (desperate) words to various people who take part.

Leaders

- have you prayed privately and with others for the gathering?
- have you planned what you will say and do?
- can you use notes or script without reading them in a strange voice?
- can you avoid clichés and overworked words?
- can you keep believer and unbeliever in mind?
- can you be brief not tedious?

Singers and musicians

- can you help us focus on God?
- can you get (and take) feedback on your helpfulness?

Speakers to children

- can you be quick, and mindful of all?
- can you “gospel” us, not just “moralise” us?

Pray-ers

- Can you model what it is to speak to the great God and Father?
- Can you balance the gratitude and petition?
- Can you make us glad we had you lead our prayers?
- Can you think out of the ruts of congregational prayers?

Readers

- have you read and grasped your passage?
- Can you help us get “on board” with a word of introduction?

Preachers

- Preachers can you get your passage right – and across?
- Can you help us begin, stay and finish with you?
- Can you say true and interesting things (because the word is interesting)?
- Can you preach what is meaningful to you?
- Can you stay within your gifts when it comes to sermon length?
- Can you lift up the Saviour, so we know and love him more?
- Can you say, “Let us pray” and not, “Let me pray”?

Somewhere, someone started saying “Let me pray” and, like lemmings, everyone is doing it. First, it's unnecessary – no one is going to stop you. Second, it's aggressive – as if you are being held back from your wish. Third it's forgetful, when you want everyone to be part of your prayer. And fourthly it sounds defensive – borrowed by someone and now baptised into our Diocese. But don't think I'm annoyed by it!

Finally, leaders

- Can you do notices quickly, freshly and interestingly?
- Can you take baptisms and communion in a fresh and helpful way (i.e. not boring)?
- Can you send us out with truth and joy?

If we were to work on our gatherings with a serious (and prayerful) eye to God's glory, our people's growth and the visitors' benefit, things might look very different.

To those who work hard at these things and prepare well and help us hugely, God bless you. If you have seen decline, you must ask yourselves whether the blame for our decline lies at the feet not of the Lord, nor of the members, nor of the naughty world but ourselves who have been set aside to do things well and are

– for whatever reason – doing things poorly.

To those who can heed a challenge and are willing to do things so that people are lifted up and not slumped down – so the Lord is seen to be great and gracious not distant and unhelpful – he is faithful and he will help you.

Simon Manchester is a well-known evangelical Anglican minister. This article first appeared in the August edition of the Southern Cross.