

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Evaluating effectiveness

Both clergy and laity talk a lot about whether certain pastors are effective, but what do we mean by effectiveness? Is it measurable? How does God define it?



If we're lay we may consider an effective pastor to be one who provides the kind of worship we prefer or the pastoral care we want, or who confirms our beliefs. If we're clergy we may measure effectiveness by what our own skills happen to be, or by what our favorite seminary professors or clergy colleagues tell us. But these methods don't necessarily measure effectiveness. They measure what keeps us comfortable.



Looking for God's list

I'm offering my tentative list of what I consider to be characteristics of effective pastors, hoping that it will help you come up with your own list and talk about it with church members. Maybe doing this will help us all to see what might be on God's list, which is the list that really counts.

▪ Faithfulness to the Bible's message

This needs to be evident not only in a pastor's preaching but also in what he or she does and says in other parts of the church's life, in the local community, and often in the wider world. It includes speaking out about how the gospel might apply to current issues, locally and beyond. It's risky but important.



It's hard to measure, too, because Christians don't all agree on what's faithful and what isn't. Many of us want our pastors to be faithful to the parts of the Bible that confirm our own views but to ignore those that challenge them. Some church members who are outspoken about wanting pastors to be faithful to the Bible want them to say, for

What is spirituality?

I recently heard a church member say, "We have a wonderful pastor now. He's so spiritual." The "now" apparently meant he thought his previous pastors hadn't been spiritual.



His comment surprised me for two reasons. First, I hear other members of his congregation say that their current pastor often makes statements that they (and I) find to be in conflict with Jesus' teachings and example. To me that means he's far from wonderful as a pastor.

Besides, I happen to know the two previous pastors of that congregation, and they don't seem the least bit unspiritual to me. In fact, I recently heard one of them expressing her discouragement at the congregation's unwillingness to make use of her training and experience in spiritual guidance when she was its pastor.



What's wrong here? What do we mean when we say someone is or isn't spiritual?

Spirituality isn't sweetness

We tend to confuse spirituality with other characteristics—using certain religious words or gestures, for example, or wearing a sweet facial expression and speaking in honeyed tones. I cringe at the hymn "Sweet, Sweet, Spirit," because it mistakenly equates sweetness with spirituality.

"There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, and I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord. There are sweet expressions on each face, and I know they feel the presence of the Lord."

—#334, The United Methodist Hymnal.
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Some Christians confuse spirituality with a goody-goody manner that shuns secular entertainments and sensual pleasures. Some confuse spirituality with being anti-intellectual. However, being spiritual comes from having God's Spirit at work in us, and the Spirit's action is often fierce, not sweet. It often leads people to get angry at current conditions, and to work for change, not to smile. It spurs people to get involved in the world, not to shun it. The Spirit inspires emotional expression in some, but rigorous intellectual efforts in others.



If we ask our pastors to be spiritual, we'd better be ready for some serious challenges.

example, that women should be submissive, which contradicts Jesus' teaching and example, but they don't want the pastors to say anything about our use of money, which the Bible says a lot about.



Proclaim the message. Be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. Convince, rebuke, and encourage.
—2 Timothy 4:2

Unfortunately, many church members try to get rid of the pastors who most faithfully proclaim the Bible's real message. Members who see the importance of such faithful-

ness therefore need to be especially diligent in supporting the pastors who are willing to risk being faithful, and bishops and others who appoint and supervise them need to support and reward them.

▪ **Faithfulness to the pastor's calling from God**

God gives each of us a unique assortment of spiritual gifts, natural talents, and other resources, and God calls each of us to particular ministries in which those gifts will be most useful. I suspect that a pastor's faithfulness in pursuing his or her particular calling and using his or her particular gifts is therefore very high on God's list of what constitutes effectiveness for that pastor.



Unfortunately our organizational systems sometimes make it hard for pastors to pursue their main callings and to use their main gifts. We put gifted preachers in administrative positions instead of having them preach regularly and preach to many different congregations. We send most new clergy to rural churches, even though the main gifts and skills of some don't fit that setting at all.

Church members sometimes make it hard for a pastor to pursue his or her calling, too. Many demand that their pastor conform to their wishes even if they conflict with his or her calling. A pastor may be called to a much-needed role in the local community or the wider church, and may be obviously effective there, yet some lay members complain if the pastor isn't constantly available for all local-church meetings and other routine activities.



▪ **Preaching skill**

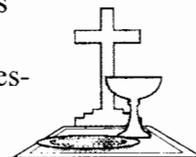
This is usually high on the list when lay church members evaluate clergy effectiveness, and I believe that's justified. Especially in large congregations, many members' only contact with the pastor is at Sunday morning worship services. He or she may be wonderful at counseling, administration, care-giving in crises, and any number of other roles, but in those functions the pastor reaches only a limited number of church members compared to those he or she reaches through sermons.



If a pastor's sermon composition, delivery, and selection of topics and illustrations don't hook hearers' interest, therefore, little else makes up for this lack. If his or her sermons don't make attenders aware of how God acts in lives like theirs and in the wider world, and of how being a Christian makes a difference that matters, he or she is not effective.

▪ **Skill in designing and leading worship**

Worship services provide the main contact that most members have with the church, and the only one that some have. Besides, worship rightly done is the basis for every other part of the church's life. Thus one of the most important parts of the pastor's job is to see that the worship services hold attenders' interest, make them aware of God's reality and God's presence, and motivate and help them to express their praise to God.



Besides, other jobs in the church can be done by lay members, but most churches allow only clergy to preach and lead worship regularly. Thus it's especially important for pastors to have the skills necessary for doing these jobs well.



▪ **Reaching new people**

Spreading the gospel and helping lay members spread it are essential parts of a pastor's role. This means not only following up on church visitors but also going out into the community to reach others.

▪ **Motivating and helping laity to do ministry**

Unfortunately we've nearly lost track of the fact that ministry isn't supposed to be just something we hire professionals to do for us. An effective pastor is one who motivates and helps lay people to do the

ministries that are needed in the local community and the wider world. He or she makes members aware of the need for the ministries, of their God-

The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be... pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry ...
—Ephesians 4:11-12



given calling to do the ministries, of the resources they have for doing them, and of how to go about getting the ministries done.

Sometimes church rules, policies, and job descriptions make it hard for lay members to do what they find God calling them to do. A layman's calling may be to run the children's Sunday School or the food pantry, but if the job is scheduled to have only a one-year term, he's out when his year is up, even if that work is still what God is calling him to do. An effective pastor finds ways to help lay people follow their real callings.



▪ **Giving needed pastoral care**

Many lay Christians give this role very high priority when they evaluate pastors. To some extent that's justified, but sometimes we overdo it. We forget that when we receive a hospital visit or a sympathetic ear from a fellow church member at a time of crisis, that care is coming from the church.



Although pastors have important roles to play when specialized help is needed, Christian caregiving doesn't all have to be done by pastors.

We tend to forget, too, that effectiveness doesn't require the pastor to be on call 24 hours a day and 7 days a week for whatever kind and amount of care church members happen to want. There's a limit to how much attention is reasonable to expect from the pastor, yet some members continually demand more than that, and then berate the pastor for not giving them enough pastoral care.

▪ **Capable administration**

This includes locating, enlisting, and supervising employees and volunteers for church jobs, and removing them when they're not getting the job done. Also pastors usually must be able to do some of the management of church money and property.

Some can and maybe should be done by laity, but an effective pastor at least knows how to recognize what needs doing and whether it is being done well enough.



▪ The list undoubtedly also includes teaching, modeling Christian behavior (though Christians don't all agree on what that includes), and being knowledgeable about the Bible, theology, and history, plus other things I haven't even mentioned.



With only open-ended, vague, and subjective lists like this to measure by, can we say whether any pastor is or isn't effective?

We're responsible for evaluating

I believe we can and we must. As in every other aspect of being Christians, God gives us the responsibility for seeking guidance, using our skills and experience, and then making the best decisions we can, even when the issues are gray rather than black and white. God calls us to act on our decisions, too, even though we know that some of them will turn out to be wrong.

If we really look, we can find enough evidence to evaluate pastors' effectiveness. For example, unless faithfulness to the gospel and willingness to speak about controversial issues are keeping people away, worship attendance (as seen from direct observation, not just from official reports) tells a lot about whether a pastor's preaching and worship leadership are effective. We need to require immediate retraining for pastors when poor attendance reveals their lack of skill in these areas.



Other evidence for measuring effectiveness can be found, too, if we really look and ask the right people the right questions.

Qualities that affect all the others

Two qualities that I've left til last affect all the others. The second of them grows out of the first.

▪ **Personal spiritual growth**

This comes mainly through prayer, worship, reading, reflection, and conversation with others who are actively looking for God's will. It comes also from having people to help us look realistically at

ourselves and at what God is currently calling us to do. For a pastor, these helpers need to be people who won't treat him or her as the expert and who won't be likely to use what they hear against him or her in the appointment system. Unfortunately such people are nearly impossible for many pastors to find. I believe laity and clergy urgently need to work at finding remedies for this problem.

▪ **Spiritual leadership**

An effective pastor reveals his or her real self, real beliefs, real feelings, and personal spiritual experience to church members, in



sermons, meetings, and conversations. He or she demonstrates the love and justice that reveal him or her as a disciple of Jesus Christ. An effective pastor challenges and helps church members to live that kind of life also. That's spiritual leadership, and it's essential for being an effective pastor.

Barbara

Next month . . .

Following the party line



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Evaluating effectiveness

Clergy killers

I've just read *Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack*, by G. Lloyd Rediger (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). It reminds us that some criticism of pastors by church members is unjustified and cruel. Fierce attacks, Rediger finds, are often made by members who are uninformed, mentally disordered, manipulative, or evil. When this happens, church members and supervisory clergy need to stand up for the pastor and confront the member who is attacking. As one pastor wrote me, "Some of the clergy who are sent to one sick church after another become sick themselves as they lose touch with what is healthy."



Speaking up about ineffectiveness is important, but so is protecting our pastors from this kind of sickness.

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