



# THE PASTOR'S PEN

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## Is Being “Normal” a Good Thing for the Church?

I recently heard someone make the comment in Bogan Hall that we are a “fairly normal church.” When it comes to our practices and worship style, I would have to agree. This is indeed a true statement about us. However, the question must be asked: is it a good thing? Is it good to be a “normal” church in America today? If normal means average, then what are we saying about our church and our commitment to God and the Body of Christ as a whole? Of course, it’s hard to know what “normal” means if we do not know what the average church in our country is really like.

To give you an idea of what a “normal” church in America is like, I would like to share with you a question that was raised in clergy group I am a part of on line. The group consists of over four thousand ministers and seminary students from mixed denominations across the country. From the questions and responses that come from the group members, it appears that they deal with the same common, everyday, average issues and concerns that we are dealing with as well. So, based on their concerns and practices, here is what it means to be a “normal” or average church in America today and deal with the issues of congregational leadership/church workers.

**QUESTION: This time of year is when our church's Nominating Committee works to match members' gifts with places of service for the 2013-2014 Church Year which begins September 1. Each year the task gets more frustrating as members are less willing to commit to serve in any capacity that takes more than a nominal commitment. There are exceptions, of course. Thanks be to God! But there is not one Sunday School class that has just one teacher, instead one class requires about four teachers since the teachers only want to teach once a month, or one month per quarter.**

**And in regard to ministering to and with the children, so many say, "I'll help, but I don't want to be in charge, or have to prepare anything." Or "I'll rock the babies but I don't want to minister to any children older than that." Our childcare during worship (for birth - Kindergarten) is called "Extended Session" and is an extension of the Sunday School lesson. The way we have it set up, volunteers work in teams of two and serve 6 Sundays per year, i.e. odd months, first Sunday, etc. And we can't get enough volunteers to staff it. It's only 6 Sundays a year!**

Anyone else dealing with similar situations? Similarly frustrated? Ideas?

1. Your concerns are common. A couple of suggestions. Ask non-typical people. Grandpas, uncles, childless 20-somethings, teen boys. Also, if you have too many people serving on boards, reduce those. free meeting-sitters up to do ministry.

2. Yank the rug out. If they won't do it, they don't want it. It'll take 1-3 families leaving, but they'll either step up or you'll see that they really don't care.
3. I've been preaching and teaching and advocating and encouraging for five years now on exactly this issue. Yet we've never had a commitment for a youth Sunday school teacher or for any adult SS class for people under age fifty. And we've not had a late elementary school teacher for two years. The younger classes are taught by four teachers who commit one Sunday a month. Yet the most common complaint is that we don't have many young families at church and...supposedly...that should be our top priority. (Which I don't necessarily agree with, by the way. I believe we should be outward focused on ministry, not inward focused comparing and complaining about our demographics.) So yes, I comprehend your frustration and know it well.
4. We are having exact same problem. Church just isn't the priority it used to be. Young families who should be helping are burned out. Older folks have "done their time". It isn't working. So why do we continue the same model year after year? We're like Charlie Brown with the football. We keep hoping. Duh. Time to shake it up, turn it on its head.
5. If no one wants to do it, then it doesn't need to be done. If that means no Sunday school, then so be it. Find out what people are willing to give and do that.
6. Yes, I am currently trying to recruit new people to the teacher roster and it very difficult! We have very dedicated senior ladies doing this work and have been for many years. I just don't know how I can impress in the parents of our kids they need to be involved too. I want to give the seniors a break but the parents of these children do not want to help. A few of them seem to give their kids to us if we are suppose to teach them everything instead of faith being brought up in the home not just Sunday...Just frustrated me so much right now!
7. I agree with XXXXX. If people don't want to do it then don't do it. When they want it badly enough they will step forward and volunteer. A volunteer is someone who wants to do something, not someone you have to talk into it.
8. Our church does a children's rotation on a Thurs night with dinner. It is like a mini VBS but during school schedule. It gets the parents involved as well as kids.
9. Hire someone. Many people are looking for a few more hours per week and having a paid position means direct supervision and accountability is possible. (Wish I had the challenge of that many small kids.)
10. XXXXX, I agree...but there you touch on my deepest frustration. My people are highly resistant to trying anything new. The "that's what we've always fine", "we've never done it that way before", "it's sure to fail" monsters are there in force. And I've tried to emphasize that a) if we want different results we need to try different methods, and b) that means being willing to experiment and learn from things "failing." But I've not been able to get through to them, and after five years of trying to earn their trust I'm thinking it's time to shake the dust off my feet.

\*"that's what we've always done". And specifically the frustration is the combination of attitudes. A) getting young families is the top priority, B) we refuse to volunteer in any of the traditional ministries to young families, C) we complain constantly about the lack of growth in those ministries (and with constant mutter from a constant few that if the minister worked harder it'd be different), and D) we're resistant to non-traditional ministries and don't volunteer for them either, but E) we desperately need young families and what are you doing about it, pastor?

This is the first ten out of over forty responses to the question. The rest were pretty much of the same in content or suggestions. In my opinion, if this is what it means to a “normal” or average church in America, then we have fallen short and we have a long way to go in being what Jesus has called us to be. That means that being “normal” **is not** an acceptable choice if we truly want to live up to what Paul refers to as “the high calling of God in Jesus Christ.” So, what are **we** going to do about it? The issues that exist are not because of one person or one leader in a congregation. No, it is because of the collective attitude of the church in America today that the average church is in this kind of shape. We have to make a choice about what we want to be: a “normal” church in America **or** the kind of church that Jesus has called us to be in America. How we respond when asked to serve, to visit, to evangelize, and to lead makes that decision. If you want to know what we can do and what God expects of us, then read the next *Pastor’s Pen*. Until then, pray and seek God’s guidance as you read your bible over the next couple of weeks.

Trying hard not be so average,

*James*

