

Praise for the 'bog standard' church leader: why average and unfashionable can be good for ministry

Heather Tomlinson | 18 June 2023 | 7:11 AM



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There are, broadly, two kinds of churches. There are the modern kind, full of lights, excellent graphic design, well-dressed people, lively music, passionate sermons, and large, growing congregations. The pastors are often young, charismatic, trendy, maybe even displaying the odd tattoo. People in the congregation often talk exuberantly about the church: it's 'alive', 'relevant', not like the 'dead religion' they experienced as a child, and so on.

At the other end of the spectrum are our more old-fashioned churches, often built in the Victorian period, owned by more traditional denominations such as Methodism or the Church of England. Typically their services are more structured, there are traditional hymns, and much smaller congregations. The pastors of these churches are, well... a lot less trendy than the other kind. They can vary in their social skills, sermon-writing abilities, and fashion taste. The people in these older churches might not seem as enthusiastic as those in the modern churches. And in theology, they are very variable.

But I think they have a lot to offer, especially in an era when suspicion about glitzy 'megachurches' and 'celebrity pastors' is on the rise, as research group Barna found in a [survey late last year](#).

These results are astonishing. Whereas Jesus, and even Christianity, gets the thumbs up from the majority of the population in the US, famous worship bands and celebrities who are Christians get just a 26% approval rating, while celebrity pastors and megachurches get 17% and 16% respectively.

The reasons aren't spelled out, but there have been a succession of awful scandals coming from celebrity Christianity lately, so it's perhaps not surprising that their rep isn't great. Contrast these poor ratings with the stats for "churches in your community" – their overall approval rating is 47%, although admittedly this is boosted by Christians, and people of other faiths and none are less enthusiastic. But there's a lot more positivity directed at the "bog standard" church down the road than the heaving megachurch and its charismatic, charming pastors.

The bog standard vicar was celebrated in the 2010-2014 BBC TV series 'Rev', with Tom Hollander playing a very average Anglican vicar in an inner-city parish. He was portrayed as a man full of doubt and moral indecision, his prayer life apparently mostly taking place while on the toilet, his congregation very eclectic and very small.

Despite these challenges, he was endearing, and his compassion and care for the difficult people of his parish shone through. I suspect that this kind of leadership is going to become more respected and sought out by Christians going forward, as people seek authenticity and community bonding more than they do the dopamine-enhancing activities of trendier churches.

Obviously, the well-created short videos, drums-and-guitar-based worship and fashionable clothes of the more modern church have not created the scandals. And there are many brilliant modern churches that do amazing work in the community, and many amazing pastors who preach in them.

But I fear that the popularity and "success" of the modern church has a negative side effect: it can attract some people who want to be at the front for the wrong reasons. The lure of the adulation of a large crowd, the lack of structure and accountability that a lot of more trendy churches outside of traditional denominations have, and the attractiveness of being "cool" – leading such a church has a number of benefits for the ego that aren't about serving Christ.

Of course, there are many brilliant, genuine, loving and self-sacrificial leaders in trendy churches. There have also been horrendous, abusive and selfish ministers in old-fashioned churches, too.

I do believe there are a number of ways that the old-fashioned model of church avoids some of the pitfalls of celebrity Christianity:

- There is not much 'street cred' to being in a bog-standard church – for the congregation or for its leader. This means that there are fewer ulterior motives to both attending and leading it.
- The services might be less exciting, with liturgy and music from a bygone era. But, the words of goodness and truth are still there. Without the excitement and lights of a more fashionable church, the real Word and its own light can sometimes be seen more clearly.
- Smaller congregations mean that the individual can be seen and served. As in Rev, those who attend can be genuinely appreciated and loved by their vicar – and in return, the leader can be genuinely appreciated, along with all their faults, as they become genuinely known. In larger churches, authentic relationship is impossible for a pastor with most of the congregation, because there are just too many people to get to know. It's therefore a lot easier for the congregation to put leaders on a pedestal and impose impossible standards on them. And pedestals can also attract people for the wrong reasons.
- There is a willingness to serve difficult communities and be a presence there. Large churches tend to locate themselves where they can be easily accessed, have enough space for the thousand-strong congregation, and can attract the mass market. Older churches were built at a time before everyone had a car, and so had to be walking distance for their communities. This means there are buildings in every community, rich and poor.
- Pedestals provide a high place to fall from. The bog standard vicar has fewer temptations because there is less of an image to cultivate. Yes, they are a pillar of the community, but the standards expected are more realistic than those imposed on modern pastors of being exciting, crowd-pulling, modern, full of the spirit, etc.

Great music and attractive visuals are likely to attract the modern consumer, it's true. In a world where we're bombarded by the aesthetic, beautiful and airbrushed, some people will feel more at home in a trendy church. Perhaps that's needed for seeds to be sown and faith to begin.

But for anyone with the privilege of an existing faith, there's a lot to be said for our collection of average parish vicars, ministers and pastors, who are faithfully serving their communities, without much fanfare, attention or praise.

Let's stop our local church from becoming the next development of flats or local heritage anomaly, and give some support to all our bog standard ministers.