

The Ministry of the Pew

By Colin Marshall

The 'Pew Prayer'

Some years ago a 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 tutelage. 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 parking lot [or the 110-degree heat]. But of all the things to pray about, why should I be concerned with seating position? After all, I sit in my chair 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. All believers are involved in building the church, not just clergy or preachers. The New Testament consistently teaches that in the growth of the body of Christ each part must do its work (see Eph 4; 1 Cor 12-14). Because of this, we aren't to see ourselves merely as part of an organization called [Second Mile Church], but as servants of God's people, eager to meet the needs of others even if it means sacrificing our own.

Ray's view of church was spot on. With this perspective, his advice to pray about my choice of pew makes perfect sense. If at church we are working to strengthen our fellow believers, where we sit becomes important since part of our work will be talking to our neighbor in the pew, welcoming people, helping each other understand God's word and praying with each other.

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. But our purpose in gathering with God's people is to strengthen them and build the body of Christ. We look for opportunities to assist the growth of the church in practical ways, and there are numerous ways in which we can carry out the ministry of the pew.

Bring others to your meetings

One of the obvious ways we can build the church is to invite others. The minister or the evangelism committee only has limited opportunities to attract others in to your church meetings. The members in the pew, however, are in touch with hundreds of people in the community.

Thinking through ‘people work’

However, the ministry of the pew goes far beyond advertising and inviting people to hear the gospel. Once we make the attitude shift from being 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 of the suggestions below are of the informal type—things we can do at our own initiative. They are the *types of involvement that every congregation member can have*. The key to people work is to observe what happens around you and respond to people’s needs. Think through your church meetings chronologically. What can we do before, during and after the meeting?

Before

Preparation

One of our great contributions is our preparation. The preacher 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 maximize this learning opportunity by being sensitized to the issues and questions in the passages being taught. Such preparation also has other benefits. We are better equipped to enter into discussion with others if we have looked at the passage beforehand. It is also a great encouragement to the preacher to know that the congregation is eager to understand the Bible and willing to put in some effort. Preaching is hard work, both for the preacher and the listeners. An intelligent question, comment or observation upon the sermon is an enormous motivating factor for the preacher who, week by week, has to try and engage the congregation’s minds and hearts in the word of God. Those who sit in the pew can make a great contribution to those teaching from the pulpit.

Meeting visitors and newcomers

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-Christian 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 or late, but early. *That may be the greatest miracle of all*.

During

Active listening

People in the pews have an enormous impact on those who are teaching and leading. Communication is always a two way process. Energetic listening through taking notes, making eye contact with the preacher, sitting at the front, laughing at jokes (even old ones), will spur on the preacher. 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 them. Unbelievers will also pick up that these ideas are worth listening to if they see rows of regulars eagerly soaking up the Bible.

Singing

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. Our enthusiasm and gusto in singing the great anthems of the faith 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 meeting. 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 on without being heard.

Newcomers

Keep attending to newcomers' needs. If they can't find their way around the Bible or the service outline, or they don't have a Bible, or they need to find the nursery, help them yourself. *It is your meeting, not the minister's.* It's all about being observant and outward-looking.

After

Discuss God's word

We have just heard the word of God and we spend all of Sunday lunch talking about the movie we saw the night before. 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 will 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 neighbor into a coma, but making a specific comment like "I didn't know Abel was a prophet. What makes someone a prophet?" 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.*

Pray with others

Use the supper time to meet others and find out their concerns and pray quietly with them. This will look a bit weird to newcomers with pairs of bowed heads all around the building, 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 the service ends. It's all very purposeful: make sure they are welcomed properly by you and your friends, maybe introduce them to the minister and help them see how they can fit in to the congregation. *You may have to postpone catching your friends until after the newcomers have been cared for.*

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. Gone are the days of fitting church in between breakfast and brunch. *Ministry of the pew takes time.* Sorry to have ruined your 'day of rest'. Church requires a lot of effort, if we are to build the body of Christ. Don't worry: you have Monday to Saturday to rest so that you'll be fit for next week's work at church.

Discussion outline

This outline can be used to discuss “Ministry of the Pew” in a small group to work out how to implement these ideas in your church.

1. Why think about where to sit in church?
2. How would you express your reasons for attending church?
3. How do these reasons affect what you do in a church gathering?
4. How do you feel about bringing others to church?
5. Who often gets ‘left out’ at the church gatherings? What can you do about it?
6. What obstacles do you face in effectively doing ministry from the pew?
7. What are your plans for your ministry from the pew?