

The Southern Baptist National Convention, in association with the Christian pollster, Barna, has recently provided some very interesting statistics.

While I understand that “statistics” can be made to prove anything, it is worth while to contemplate some of their findings.

The average church in America, in most Protestant denominations, faces a major upheaval among its members every 3½ to 4 years. This includes fall-outs, splits, removals of leadership and even closures.

The average length of service for a pastor in an American church is 29 – 33 months.

A growing majority of pastors regard their ministerial tasks as a “job” just like any other “regular” job, and are demanding that the church treat it as such. Regulated hours (i.e. 8.00 am to 5.00pm), job descriptions and career advancement with the accompanying sliding pay scale, vacations, including benefits and perks are the way of the future.

Some denominations are currently debating the possibility of “unionizing” the ministry.

An increasing number of deacons relinquish their positions after only two years of service.

The average Christian in America will change church membership 4 times in their lifetime, for reasons other than relocation or job change.

Over 90% of so-called “church growth” is not church growth at all but simply the demonstration of the itinerant nature of Christians today as they hop from church to church.

Church members “questioning” Biblical authority and subsequent rebellion against church authority is one of today's major issues, even within the Catholic denomination.

The “social” nature of the Church has long overtaken the Biblical concept of it being a place for Christian fellowship, teaching, admonition and discipleship.

With such information at our fingertips, we here at Fowler Baptist Church can be grateful and thankful for the way the Lord has blessed and guided us.

We are now into our eighth year of stability and growth; we are enjoying generally increasing numbers with visitors attending regularly and the church's acceptance in the community, including through the Food Pantry, is positive.

Yet, I believe we are on the verge of a very important and potentially dangerous time in our church life.

I see all evangelical churches in general today, standing as it were, close to a great precipice on our left with a challenging mountain to our right.

How we as a church behave over the next 12 -18 months will decide whether we climb to higher peaks of spiritual growth and development, or fall into the abyss of devastating upheavals and destruction.

This is the time when EVERY church needs to be on its toes and guard against the encroachments of the enemy.

There can appear in all churches, suddenly and without warning, what is akin to an underground volcano, bubbling away, somewhat out of sight and yet at times it can be felt or sensed as a threatening potential for disruption and damage.

Sometimes it can be a “politicizing” process which begins to develop among God's people. The idea of touting for votes and building a political base may be fine for the world of government and the local councils, but it has no place among the people of God nor within the church that claims His name and authority.

Too often, we as Christians, lose sight of the truth that we have a Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us and political processes are NOT the embodiment of a Godly walk.

While Paul reminds us that “all things should be done decently and in order”, yet we have to remind ourselves often, that the paradox of the church is that the Holy Spirit leads the church in ways that are not acceptable in “normal” business life, and yet the church, through submission and obedience to His guidance will succeed.

This brings up several issues that need to be clearly understood by all churches irrespective of denomination or church polity.

Firstly, the Holy Spirit appoints a Pastor to the church and requires him to accept the Biblical authority and responsibility that goes with the calling.

Similarly, the Deacons are called by the same Spirit to be the Pastor's helps and the church's servants.

Not everyone within the church is called to the Pastorate or Diaconate. In other words, not everyone in the church is THE pastor or THE deacon and outside of that calling, no-one should attempt to usurp or claim that authority or responsibility.

This does not deny the truth that we are ALL servants within the church, but even within the framework of congregational voting, each member cannot be a “law unto themselves”.

In the past, mature Christians have discovered that while irritations can occur between Christians with our failings and idiosyncrasies, the best thing a believer can do is to demonstrate more of the love of Christ to those around us and leave those irritations in the hands of the One who can deal with them in a more beneficial and blessed way than we can.

Simply put, more often than not, the best way for us to behave within the church family at difficult times, is to say nothing at all or -- if we wish to vent --- do so to the Lord and then leave it at His feet.

Secondly, while the church is based on congregational voting processes, there are certain issues that cannot be part of a “general populace vote.”

What the Pastor teaches and preaches must always remain between him and the Holy Spirit. Certainly a church has the authority to remove a pastor or deacon via the appropriate church constitutional guidelines, but the idea of the congregation controlling the spiritual level of the church (by deciding what is to be preached and taught and how) is outside the realm of Biblical teachings.

There is a clearly defined line of authority decreed within the Scriptures that must be obeyed if a church is to be spiritual and successful.

Submission to that line of authority is the first step in all of our lives towards spiritual maturity.

Thirdly, none of us is perfect. The curse of sin within each of us still exists “inside the camp”.

For any church to be a blessing to members and visitors, it must be a place of fellowship where grace, long-suffering and forgiveness are the hallmarks of its existence.

Yet, it would seem that today many churches and church members are too forgetful of the truth that “whatsoever a man soweth, that also shall he reap.”

Each church member and corporate congregation should be involved in regular SELF examination as follows:

Am I sowing discord among the brethren and yet wanting to reap harmony in my own life?

Am I sowing anger and bitterness and wanting to reap forgiveness and acceptance?

Am I sowing gossip and yet demanding my own privacy?

Am I emphasizing the sins and failures of others and minimizing my own stubbornness, selfishness, pride and “the sin that so easily besets” me?

We all need to remember:

The issues that bother and annoy some of us today, will be insignificant and minimal in the future.

The complaints that I feel are my “right to voice” today may well be shown to be nothing in comparison to the burdens I will be asked to carry tomorrow.

Fourthly, the spiritual tone of any church service will always be determined by those in attendance.

I cannot expect to receive the Lord's blessing if I bring selfishness and intolerance into church with me.

Our music is a time of praise and worship and each of us needs to be aware that individual participation is either a “sweet incense” to the Lord or an offering that is “lame and maimed and the worst of the flock”.

A joyful rendition in song is an important aspect of our service and is a necessary precursor to prepare us for the Word that God is sending to us at that particular time.

Then, my concentration on the preaching and teaching will minimize the distractions going on around me.

Fifthly, the growth of MY church is MY business. It is never solely the work of the pastor and the deacons. Again, we need a time of self-examination. Again, we need a time of self-examination.

Whom have I brought to church this year?

Whom have I invited?

Whom have I prayed for quietly and asked the Lord to give ME the opportunity to talk to that person about the claims of Christ? Perhaps, most important of all----- what sort of witness do I have that would make people who know me want to come to church with me?

The future ahead of us as Christians harbingers dark and difficult days. Our refuge and security in these times is the work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, the solace and strength we may all need will be found only in a Godly and Holy Spirit led church.

Now is the time for each of us to remove our facades and masks of 'super spirituality" and in all honesty and humility ask again that age-old and timeless question:

“What sort of church would my church be,
If everyone in my church was just like me?”

May The Lord give Christians everywhere the strength of character to look at themselves in the mirror and answer this question honestly and forcefully. Maybe then, the power that permeated the early N.T. Church and which is so glaringly absent today, might be returned to the Church for the glory of God.