



## Editor's Note

Every issue since the beginning of ESN back in 1999, has included an article written by a Christian sister geared for women, especially for elders' wives. By all accounts, this section has been well received, so we have no intention of discontinuing it.

Nevertheless, from time to time I have thought it might be nice to hear from younger women, too. And so I have asked one of the young ladies in our fellowship to write her thoughts about what her "church home" means to her. Sydney has taken up the chal-

lenge and written this month's article in Wives Corner. If it seems focused on serving and opportunities to serve, it may be because Sydney comes from a family that is well characterized by Paul's description of a family at Corinth; "They have addicted themselves to the work of the ministry." (I Cor. 16:15)

Hope you enjoy her thoughts! We'll publish other articles by young sisters in the future.

## Problem Solving

### Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (part 2) *by Jack Spender*

In the preceding article, we began a study of what I call "alive-ness" in the church, for lack of a better word. Lifting this subject from a purely intellectual discussion into the realm of practical outworking can happen only through the costly willingness to be honest - painfully honest if necessary, about our present condition, and then the willingness to accept changes if such should become necessary. We started there.

Next we began to consider the spiritual climate or atmosphere of the place where we fellowship, and we asked if it provides an environment where new and young believers can grow and change as the Lord directs, as part of a healthy, ongoing process. The answer to this may bring us to see our need. The people may be saved; the doctrines and practices orthodox, but there is still something missing.

#### Two Barriers to Moving Forward

At this point, we must anticipate two frequently asked questions: Since we are not dealing with objective truth, like Bible doctrines, but something subjective like how people perceive us, on what basis should we evaluate our local work to see what changes might be needed? Secondly, does it really matter how people feel if we're doing the right things? These are good questions!

As to the second one, does it matter, I would suggest meditating on John chapter 4. Why did the Lord Jesus not simply say to the woman at the well, "Madam, you are a sinner, and you need to be born again?" This would have been true, and we know that He could begin conversations on this subject because He did it in chapter 3 with Nicodemus.

Apparently, the situation called for a very different approach. How do you reach out to a hurting person who has already decided you feel superior and would probably shun them? How do you convince such a one that you are not like that? Jesus did an

amazing thing. He placed Himself in her debt! He needed her! This touched her heart and eventually won the town. To Him, it mattered what she thought.

Do you know the hymn: "Wonderful grace of Jesus, reaching the most defiled?" If we want to win the hurting people of today's world, we must do as He did. And how does a local church fellowship do that? The answer brings us to the first question about the basis for honestly evaluating things, and even being willing to change. Once again I want to underscore what we said earlier. The answer does **not** lie in surrendering or compromising biblical teachings and practices.

#### Where To Begin?

Very often when this subject comes up, all attention turns immediately to what are called "Assembly Principles" or "New Testament Principles." By these expressions we refer to those points of order that will be practiced by churches seeking to follow the NT pattern for local church gatherings. Now, when there is a need to know this information, such as in the founding of a new work, these truths can be very profitable. Hearts are warm to the Lord and among the believers, and the people are waiting to learn how to express their love for the Lord in orderly outward forms.

However, in many cases, especially in older, established groups, this can be a dangerous presupposition! Rarely is the problem that the outward forms have been neglected; in fact in many places they have become hardened like cement. Rather, the problem lies in a deterioration of the inner life of the people, their personal relationship with the Lord, and with one another. The resulting spiritual deadness is sensed by young believers and visitors, causing them to quietly withdraw.

This should not surprise us! The Lord

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Teaching gift and leadership ability are qualities easily recognized because of their obvious blessing to the local assembly. However, identifying those men with shepherding hearts requires more scrutiny. The fact is that many male teachers, exhorters, counselors, and administrators are not called to shepherding roles or to the more specific office of eldership. Just because a brother can wonderfully expound God's Word does not mean that he is an elder. Likewise, a successful businessman may have no shepherding wherewithal whatsoever. If skill and success are not criteria, how can a local assembly be sure to appoint a man that God has called to be an elder?

The Bible records many spectacular and specific calls of God's people into various ministries, some by the Lord Himself. Should believers expect a voice from heaven, a vision, or a prophetic utterance to confirm God's calling for their lives? During the early days of the Church Age prophets were given to the Church as a check against false teachers – they confirmed the oral transmission of the Word of God by the apostles before it was written down. Since believers have a divine anointing to understand truth (1 Jn. 2:20, 27) and the Word of God is now complete (Jude 3; 1 Cor. 13:9-10), we should not expect prophetic confirmations of ministry today, at least in the normative sense. God may reveal Himself directly, but it should not be expected of Him to do so.

Furthermore, the book of Acts reveals a clear transition from "apostles" to "apostles and elders" to just "elders" (speaking of local church leaders) through its record of early Church history. All of this is to say that today we should not expect specific revelation to confirm God's calling for us in ministry. Practically speaking, how would you know a supernatural sign or a prophetic utterance was from God anyway? It might be from the devil to lead you astray. Moreover, we tend to read into situations that which we want to be true.

### David - A Great Leader of God's People

Rather than waiting for some supernatural sign to divinely confirm

church elders it seems wise to be guided by the scriptural pattern that God uses to recognize leadership. In the life of David for example, three distinct stages of affirmation of his call as the leader of Israel are recorded in 2 Samuel 5:1-3.

The southern kingdom (Judah) had recognized David as their king seven years earlier, thus David had been reigning over them in Hebron. Now the northern kingdom of Israel had decided to anoint David as their king also. What led them to this decision? First, they recognized that David had a divine calling; he had been personally selected by God for the purpose of ruling over them. Second, they recognized that it was David who led them in the practical affairs of the nation even when Saul was king. Given this understanding, they prudently recognized David as their king. David had a **divine call, an internal call** (i.e. he had an internal compulsion to do the work of leading), and then he was **recognized by all**.

### The Process of God's Calling

When God plants a divine call into a person, with time and with proper spiritual maturity this calling becomes actively lived out in his or her life and others take notice. A believer often gains a sense of where he or she is going in ministry long before it happens – in some respects this can be a bit unsettling and may result in anxiety. In time, others will recognize what God is doing and validate the believer's call to service.

This three-stage process of calling is the same for church elders: the Holy Spirit calls (appoints) them (Acts 20:28), the internal call is shown by active selfless service (1 Tim. 3:1), and eventually the serving shepherd will be morally and spiritually scrutinized according to the requirements of Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 and then be publicly recognized as an elder. If a brother with a blameless testimony just cannot keep from doing shepherding work in the assembly, and is marked by faithfulness despite the personal cost to himself, he is likely God's man. The man who cries, "pick me" is most assuredly not God's choice. Rather, God's man respects the

office and is often leery of the responsibility because he can already identify with the work and the cost of doing it.

### Practical Qualities to Watch For

Besides the moral and character qualities of Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3, here are some practical aspects of shepherding to observe in a brother that might be called to be a church elder:

1. He carefully handles and understands the Word of God, such that he is able to both spot and refute false doctrine with humble maturity (Tit. 1:9). He is not to be *"a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil"* (1 Tim. 3:6-7). Good shepherding requires more than knowing the truth; meekness and wisdom must guide every action.
2. He speaks tenderly and often of the Lord Jesus. The only motivation to faithfully serve God's sheep (who are often abstinent and troublesome) is genuine love and appreciation for the Lord Jesus (John 21:15-17).
3. He is spiritually alert to spot danger and has the courage to fend off evil foes (John 10:11-12). Fervent pleas to those in his care to steer clear of corrupting activities, music, friends, or teachings would be a modern day example of this quality.
4. He shepherds well those in his care (e.g., young people's study group). Sheep need food, water, rest, correction, protection, etc. to flourish – how are the sheep doing in his care? Are they becoming more Christ-like? Are they committed to the meetings of the church? Are they participating in body life? Do they respect God's leadership and authority in the meeting?
5. He is diligent in work. There is no example in the Bible of God calling a lazy or irresponsible person into ministry. Rather, He uses those who have first been proven faithful in what they have

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## Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (continued from page 1)

warned that toward the end of the age: "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall grow cold." (Matt. 24:12). Thus the true need of the church is rarely a slight adjustment of outward forms and patterns, but a major change or revival of inward life. One would not send a dead man to a chiropractor hoping that a realignment of his spine might solve his problems! Principles about how we gather can never compensate for the spiritual condition of who is gathering!

### Starting Where God Starts

This problem of group deadness usually springs from individual deadness. Volumes have been written about revival, renewal, the inner life, sanctification and so forth, and it is not within the purpose of these articles to review that material. But it is critically important for those who are concerned about dwindling numbers in the church to at least consider this as a possible cause.

After all, both the Old and New Testaments are filled with appeals to the people of God on this very subject. "Rend your heart and not your garment," cries the prophet (Joel 2:13). "You pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith," (Matt. 23:23) says the Lord Jesus to the religious people of His day.

It is a most encouraging thought that the Lord is not waiting for lengthy displays of self condemnation (penance) or

great emotion to set all this right! "If we confess our sins . . ." (1 John 1:9) is as simple as humbling ourselves before the Lord, confessing that we have grown cold and calloused, admitting that there are many effects of this among us, and then accepting the promised forgiveness, joyfully expecting the Lord to meet us where we are, and starting afresh with us!

What can be more exciting than on a single occasion, where saints gather to "draw near to God" in this regard, we may experience His promise, "and He will draw near to you." (James 4:7). We may return to our homes with the confidence that change will indeed come, and the biggest step is already behind us!

The answer, then, is clear. We must begin any evaluation of our local work by looking honestly at the warmth of our own hearts toward the Lord and toward one another, and only then can we scrutinize our meetings, our programs, and our possessions. We reject the ground of self defense, and take the ground of deep humility. We have become more like an insiders' club than a hospital. We have told the Lord about it, and we now wait upon Him to do His work in us and through us. It is in that spirit that we can proceed.

### An Honest Look at "Doing Church"

Because of autonomy, (each lampstand standing on its own base

with the Lord in the midst; Rev. 1 - 3), assemblies are blessed with great diversity and variety in their functions. Each in its own way lives out the basic principles of church life. Because of this, it would be impossible to examine the details of meeting schedules, order and so forth. We must take a broader look.

Many have come to understand Acts 2:42 as a blueprint for the activities of a healthy church as to its meetings and priorities. With that as a guide, we can assume that any Bible-based congregation will incorporate those four key functions of the church into its life and meetings: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Any marks of "alive-ness" will be evident like a golden thread running throughout all the gatherings. But to be edifying, everything must pass the simple yet profound test: "Faithful to God, Relevant to people."

And as we look over things, we must not lose sight of our quest: Can we discern how well we're doing on the 'relevance side,' that is, being sensitive to what sort of environment is conducive to discipleship and edification *as perceived by the people?* We should not be thinking so much of, "Is what we are doing meeting our needs?" but, "Is it meeting their needs," i.e., the new believers, children, young families, people from other cultures, etc.

Next issue, this will be our focus.



## Recognizing Those That God Has Called (continued from page 2)

been given to do. David, a young man, was attending his father's sheep when he was anointed king over Israel.

6. He respects authority and does not push boundaries. Elisha requested of Elijah that he be allowed to first go home and inform his parents of God's calling for his life and to kiss them goodbye. Apparently, he was an unmarried man, still living under his father's authority. It is a mark of a false teacher to despise authority and to speak evil of dignitaries (2 Pet. 2:10).
7. He assists the elders as requested and encourages them in their work. Elisha assisted Elijah in the Lord's work (1 Kgs. 19:21).

After two years of working together, it would be Elisha, on behalf of Elijah, who would anoint Jehu and Hazael, the tasks given Elijah at Mount Horeb. Long after Elijah departed heavenward in a whirlwind, Elisha was still known as "*Elisha ... who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah*" (2 Kings 3:11).

Those who are elders and those who may be recognized as elders are not perfect men, but they should be blameless and brothers of high moral character. A prospective elder exhibiting such qualities and demonstrating the above behavior is mostly likely the man that God has raised up from

among His sheep to shepherd His sheep (Acts 20:28). Recognizing in haste a man whom God has not chosen, will be one of the most painful mistakes an assembly can make. However, engaging in prayer and careful observation while waiting on the Lord to make it obvious to everyone will be the safe approach in recognizing those He has called to shepherd.



## Wives' Corner

# My Local Church

by Sydney Niele

When some people hear the word "church" they think of four walls, pews and a podium, but when I think of church I think about the people, the Bride of Christ. Waterbury Christian Fellowship (WCF) is a family tied together by love for one another and Christ, forming a continuous circle of adoration for our Savior. If you dig into the meanings of the messages spoken on Sundays, you find the foundations on which we Christians build our lives as the body of Christ...and the hope for our future.

Now, of course the love and adoration for Christ reaches far beyond the doors of our building. It's not hidden within the walls of the building, it's hidden within the hearts of the saints, and when the saints gather together it overflows into an abundance of admiration for Jesus Christ. Recently a man shared that he looked forward, all week long, to meeting together to remember Christ's sacrifice. Isn't that how we all should feel?

The church is a place where you have the opportunity to serve those around you. WCF offers many areas in which to serve, including: the leadership (elders and deacons), and ministries, such as VBS, Girls for God, Act Like Men, and the Christian school.

The leadership of the church is very crucial, for if the leadership is weak, the saints will be. I am so thank-

ful that WCF has leaders who care so much about the physical and spiritual health of the church, leaders who love Christ with all their heart and strive to help each member of His Body become more like Him.

Another area in which to serve is VBS (Vacation Bible School): a whole week dedicated to serving the Lord by ministering to children and their parents. It's truly amazing to watch as young children are led to Christ through many different demonstrations of the salvation message. All week long we have people of the church praying daily for the salvation of those children (and their parents). It's very encouraging to know that our work and prayers are not in vain.

Girls for God and Act Like Men are children's ministries in which one can serve. Meeting on Friday nights for a time of fellowship after a long week is very uplifting (not to mention fun!) Act Like Men is dedicated to the training of boys as they learn many different physical and spiritual crafts; Girls for God is dedicated to teaching girls about true, inward beauty and how to become a woman after God's own heart, a woman such as the one mentioned in Proverbs 31.

The biggest ministry of WCF is the Christian school, Waterbury Christian Academy. For almost 20 years, many lives have been dedicated to the

building and betterment of our school. Their serving has definitely not been in vain! With biblical principles tied into every aspect of the school, each student has the privilege of learning more of our Savior through the workbooks and also through the conduct of the men and women in authority.

Overall, WCF follows the principles mentioned in Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." As we meet each Sunday morning, we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice as we partake of the bread and cup. As we have witnessed through ministries like Girls for God, Act Like Men, VBS, and WCA, our prayers surely don't go unheard to the ears of our Heavenly Father.



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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

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"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ..." 1 Peter 5:2a NIV