

## **ENCOURAGE YOUR MINISTER**

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In *Double Cream* (Monarch 1988), an anthology of Christian witticism collected by Stephen Gaukroger and Nick Mercer, there is a wonderful piece on the results of encouraging one's minister:-

It may be that you don't like your church's minister. Well here is a tested prescription by which you can get rid of him (or her)

1. Look at him straight in the eye when he's preaching, and maybe say 'Amen' occasionally. He'll preach himself to death in a short time
2. Start paying him whatever he's worth. Having been on starvation wages for years, he'll promptly eat himself to death
3. Shake hands with him and tell him he's doing a good job. He'll work himself to death
4. Rededicate your own life to God and ask the minister to give you some church work to do.
5. If all else fails, this one is certain to succeed: get your congregation to unite in prayer for him. He'll soon be so effective that some larger church will take him off your hands.

I smiled when I read this piece – and yet there is an 'edge' to it as well. The reality is that, in a British setting at least, encouragement of ministers is often sorely lacking. Unlike our American cousins, who seem always quick to affirm and praise, our default position as Brits is to tend to major on negative criticism.

I say this in a context where I am blessed with much kindness. A month or so ago I was quite unwell with the result that the doctor signed me off for a week – people are still asking me how I am. My fellow leaders are incredibly supportive – and church meetings are positive occasions. I am in a very good place: to quote the Psalmist "the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Ps 16.6). I almost feel guilty that life is so good. And yet the truth is that my people could improve their game as far as encouraging their ministers is concerned.

Just yesterday in our ministers' meeting one of our number commented that when we preach 'at home' – as distinct from being a guest preacher elsewhere – words of appreciation are far and few between. Last Sunday morning, for instance, only one person thanked me for my sermon – and she is one of those people who always thank me, Sunday by Sunday.

So how can churches better encourage their ministers? Thom Rainer, the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, offered the following six suggestions:

1. Let your pastor know specifically how you learned something from his sermon
2. Help your pastor have a date night with his wife ... Give him a gift certificate to a favourite restaurant
3. Confront one of the pastor's perpetual critics... It's not the critics who bother him as do the members who are unwilling and fearful of standing up to the critics
4. Give him a book he would love to have
5. Speak publicly on behalf of the pastor

6. Pray for your pastor... In one of the churches I served, someone organized an intercessory prayer team on my behalf. Each member of the nearly 100 church members committed to pray for me at a specific time of day for five minutes

A slightly different set of suggestions was offered by the so-called 'Jolly Blogger', who drew up the following list after consulting with some 50 other blogging pastors:

1. Take your own spiritual growth seriously. 'Nice sermon pastor' and 'you're a good pastor' are wonderful to hear but what we really want to hear is that you are growing in your walk with Christ
2. Give your best to the church, not your left overs... Many of us pastors notice that when push comes to shove, it is almost always the church that gets the shove.
3. Remind him that you are for him... There are really very few people out there who are out to get the pastor. But unfortunately one negative person often carries more weight than ten positive people
4. Find out his 'love language'... For some it may be words of encouragement. Someone else may be encouraged if you subscribe to a magazine for him... or take him on a fishing trip
5. Allow the pastor to have a life outside of church... Respect your pastor's day off... Encourage your pastor to take all of his vacation... Keep social situations social
6. Take good care of your pastor's wife and kids
7. Pay him a fair salary... It is reasonable to do all you can to make sure he has the same opportunities that you have in terms of housing, retirement and health benefits
8. Pray for him

The fact is that ministers are human beings like anybody else. They have feelings.... And they need encouragement!