

It's not all about me

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One afternoon when I was completely stressed out about some criticism I received from my congregation, another minister took me to lunch. She asked me about the history of the congregation and helped me sort out some of their past traumas. Then she drew a clear line between their painful stories, the distrust that formed in the community, and the complaints about me.

After her analysis, she gave me an assignment. She told me to look in the mirror every morning before work and say, "This is not about me."

It was true that the criticisms seemed have a direct tie to things that happened in the past. But I couldn't quite practice the exercise--partly because I'm too quick to accept blame, and partly because I want to have the humility to acknowledge when I'm wrong. But, there was another reason I didn't want to relinquish the responsibility. I also knew that if the criticisms weren't "about me," then I wouldn't have as much power to change the situation and make it better.

Right now, there are a lot of pastors who ought to be looking in the mirror and chanting "it's not all about me." For many mainline congregations, our church

cultures flourished in the early 1960s. They were often formed by and geared toward the “greatest generation” or the “builders.” We were often white and upper-middle class.

Now, a great deal has shifted, as a diverse generation emerges who is not as well-off as their parents. Emerging generations have moved away from rural areas, in search of education and jobs. We don’t “settle down” like we have in the past. We may not acquire marriage certificates and mortgages on the mainline culture’s acceptable timeline.

As a result, congregations, which may have been faithful and loving for decades, are closing. They’re coming to the end of their life cycles. In my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), we close 9-10 churches each month. Most mainline denominations have similar statistics. Non-denominational, Evangelical churches don’t count the same ways that we do, but it’s impossible to ignore their decline.

We can blame a lot of things. Conservatives blame the Liberals for not being biblical enough. Progressives blame Conservatives for not being welcoming to LGBTQs. Activists blame the Spiritual for being too individualistic. The Spiritual blame the Activists for not cultivating their inner prayer life. Evangelicals blame the country club culture of the Protestant Elite. The Protestant Elite blame Evangelicals for dumbing everything down. Republicans blame the Democrats for not opposing abortion and gay marriage. Democrats blame Republicans for not caring about the poor and the environment. The hipsters blame the older generations for not being authentic and relevant. Older generations blame younger generations for their lack of duty and denominational loyalty.

In all of it, there seems to be this lingering idea that pastors were somehow way more awesome fifty years ago than they are now. And many pastors go to church growth and vitality conferences (I speak at a lot of them) to learn how they can be more biblical, spiritual, missional, evangelistic, social justice-oriented, authentic and relevant. We come back with a head full of ideas and an aching feeling that we’re just not good enough.

And often, when a church is looking at its attendance numbers or the budget, and they don’t like what they see, they also think the pastor is not good enough. They want to fire the pastor because they think that if they could get someone in there who is biblical, spiritual, missional, evangelical, social justice-oriented, authentic or

relevant, then the church budget wouldn't be in the red, the pews would be full, and the young families would be flocking to our sanctuaries. They imagine that if they only had their beloved pastor from the 1960s, when the church was adding on an educational wing, then all would be well again.

Yet, sometimes, it's not all about the pastor. We're part of a larger history and a larger culture. There are shifts occurring that have nothing to do with the abilities of a particular leader.

I meet a lot of stressed-out ministers. They're weary. They're working as hard as they can. They're trying to juggle a bunch of new stuff to reach out to a new generation, while taking care of an increasingly older congregation that needs more pastoral care. They are taking on more student loan debt, while they watch their salaries freeze. They live on food stamps while their members wonder why they're not members of the yacht club. They go through panic attacks before each congregational meeting because they're so worried about the budget.

It can be really difficult right now. So isn't it time to just stop and acknowledge that it's not all about the pastor? And pastors, I know that it's hard to let go of the responsibility. So many of us have that annoying savior complex. But, it just might be time to look in the mirror and say, "It's not all about me."