

[A Broken Church In A Broken World \(June 2017\)](#)

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By Rev Paul Graham

There are a number of perks to full-time pastoral ministry. I'm not talking about the joy of spending time with people, which some would probably rather run many miles in tight shoes to escape, but I count as a real privilege. I'm also not talking about the relative flexibility in my working day that means I can occasionally trade off the evening meeting against some time exploring the Suffolk countryside with Vicky.

What I'm talking about is the "Holy Grail" of ministry: the Conference/Retreat. This infrequent occurrence usually takes place in a fairly up-market hotel, in lovely surroundings, among people who also appreciate the novelty of such an adventure. Sure enough, my conference/retreat was in the very nice De Vere hotel on the Horwood Estate some 11 miles outside Milton Keynes (far enough away to be free of the roundabouts).

There was, however, a problem with this arrangement. The Conference/Retreat was held by Open Doors, the Christian charity with who we are a partner church, who support and work alongside persecuted Christians around the world. The juxtaposition of hearing stories about war-torn Syria, with many photos of rubble-strewn streets and extreme poverty, while sitting in the luxurious surroundings of a former country house took some getting used to. I'm still not sure that I have...

Be that as it may, amidst the fine food, spa facilities and reminders of the horrors of injustice, intolerance and inhumanity, it was also brought home that persecution isn't just something "over there". For as much as we are committed to standing in prayer and solidarity with those risking their lives to proclaim the name of Jesus, we would do well to remember that "persecution" has many faces and sometimes can even be found in the mirror.

One of the sessions delivered by Dr Ron Boyd-MacMillan, given the inspiring title "The four best ways to kill your church without you knowing it," impressed upon us the need to consider the following which I believe should challenge us all, not just in what others do, but also how we act and speak.

The four ways Dr Boyd-MacMillan gave aren't in any sort of hierarchical order, nor are they to be treated as definitive; I'm sure that you could add your own from bitter experience. However, these are what he offered:

1. "Mess with the message" - one of the ways to kill the church community is to deflect people from Christ. Create debate and provoke division with topics that keep Christ out of focus.
2. "Compromise the community" - make a divided church by gossiping and spreading bad news (particularly lies and exaggerations). Do all that you can to make the church as unattractive as possible.
3. "Promote paralysing people" - make sure that anyone in authority says "no" before they even consider an idea. This is not the same as discernment; these are people who suck the life out of ideas before they can even be prayed through.
4. "Support a suffocating structure" - build barriers to effective mission and discipleship by creating a bureaucracy, rather than a theocracy. "On the eighth day, God created committees" is the mantra here.

With all of these, there is an amount of nuancing required: not all debate is wrong, not all ideas are God-given and not all committees are evil. However, if we allow ourselves to become sidetracked from the message of the Gospel and the mission of God by running down any of these cul-de-sacs (or all of them!) then the church will suffer and ultimately we will be killing God's church here far more effectively than Boko Haram or IS.

The warning from this session is stark: "We do it to ourselves."

But there is good news in the midst of all this. Just as Pastor Edward, a Syrian minister living in Damascus, reassured us, there is hope amidst the rubble. The good news for us is that we can anticipate the dangers and counter them. For example:

1. "The answer isn't a squirrel*" – hold onto the central tenets of the Good News as seen through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation from sin; love, mercy, forgiveness and grace; justice and neighbourliness that drives us to act and judgement that belongs to God alone; ongoing discipleship that draws us closer to God and to each other in worship, prayer, study, mission and service. These are the ties that bind us together, greater than those that cause us to fall out.
2. "Build the community" – be prepared to be honest with each other. Take the task of Pastoral Care seriously. Really mean it when you ask "how are you?" and be prepared for anything other than "fine" to be the answer. The church is a hospital for the broken to meet the Healer, not just for the healed.
3. "Godly risk-taking allowed" – our church is a blessing because we are willing to give things a go. But we must also be honest and let go of that which God isn't in. Ask this simple question to help refine whether we should be doing it: "is this enabling us to 'follow and worship Jesus and make Him known'?" (as our mission statement reminds us).
4. "Try streamlining" – there are times when having a sub-committee is important, but they need to be trusted to make decisions; be honest about control and influence. We're not bound by a business-type model for working; Jesus' interview technique wouldn't stand up to scrutiny in many employment tribunals. Use what is good and will benefit us, but discard what is stifling.

I'm delighted that we are not as dysfunctional as many other churches, but this doesn't mean that we are perfect. We are a long way from being the epitome of God's church for all to marvel at, but we can do our best. And as we do our best, we will be persecuted by those who want to see God's kingdom destroyed. But at least the persecution will come from outside; we won't be doing it to ourselves.

* This is from the oft-told joke about the Sunday School class who were asked what is grey, eats nuts and has a bushy tail. One child replied "it sounds like a squirrel, but it's always Jesus."