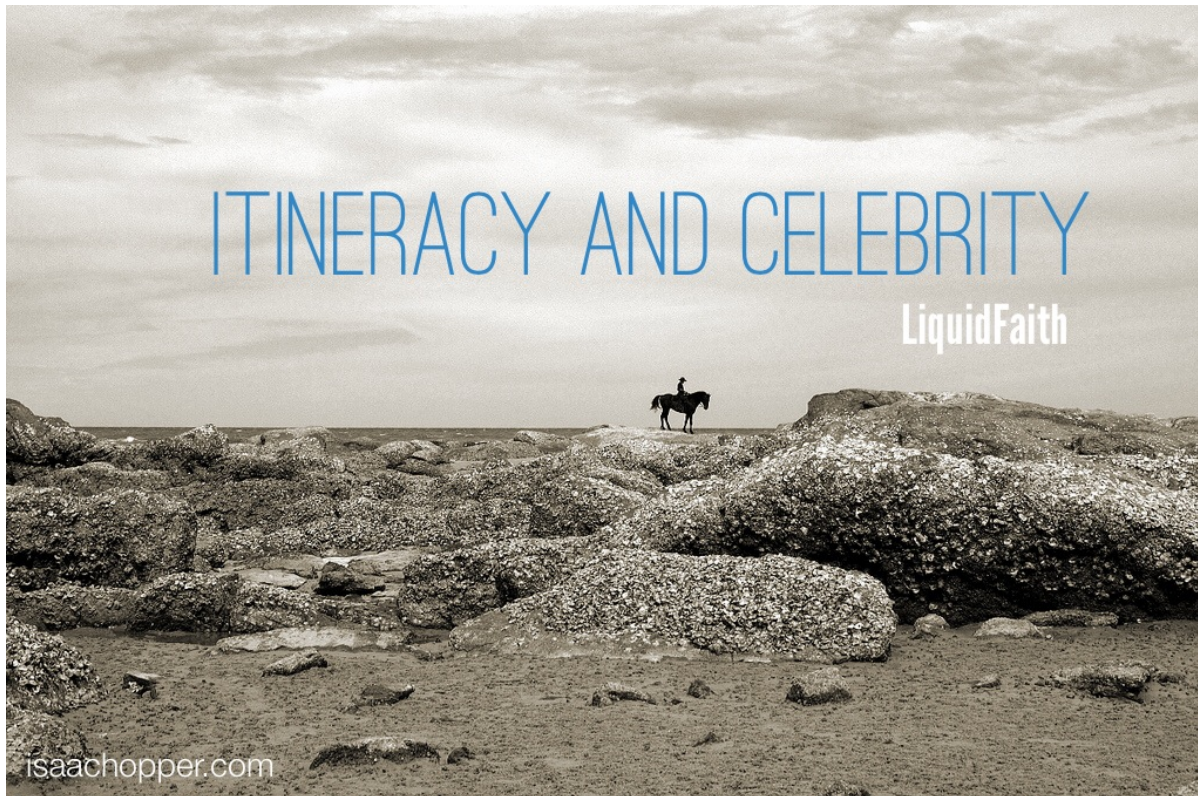


Is Itineracy an Answer to Celebrity Pastors?



I was not really surprised to see that Mark Driscoll decided to step down from his position as lead pastor of Mars Hill Church. There has been so much controversy over his leadership for so long that it was an inevitability, unless something drastic changed. His responses to criticism demonstrated either a lack of ability or desire to affect that change, and so it was only a matter of time.

The loss of Driscoll's leadership was, no doubt, very difficult for the 15,000 or so congregants under his pastoral care, but Mars Hill is a mega church in every sense of the title, with multiple locations and a plethora of staff pastors to carry the load of care and leadership.

Or so I thought. Just this morning I read in [Relevant Magazine](#) that Mars Hill will be dissolving in the wake of Driscoll's

fall.

Now, not all of the churches will close their doors. Those that remain open, though, will do so under entirely new leadership. All Mars Hill staff are being terminated, according to the article. Some Mars Hill campuses will merge with other existing churches, some campuses will find new leadership and become independent churches, and the remaining campuses will close their doors. But the end result is the same: Mars Hill church will cease to exist, because of a single pastor stepping down.

A Cult of Celebrity

The church in America has been plagued by a cult of celebrity in recent decades. Churches deemed “successful” are those that reach mega-size and multi-site, most often under the leadership of charismatic young-ish pastors.

And there is no denying their success, when measured by the standards employed. They see thousands of pilgrims come through their doors, they utilize their vast financial resources to engage with culture, and they plant dozens of church campuses as part of their networks.

Despite criticisms of shallowness, there are many faithful, Spirit led people attending mega churches, just as there are in small churches. And just like small churches, there are those who attend who are growing, those who are stagnant, and those who have not yet met our risen Lord in a life-changing way.

Mega churches have tended to cultivate something that is less apparent in their smaller counterparts. I am talking about celebrity pastors. We all know how celebrity pastors rise to fame. The church grows under their leadership, people begin to equate success with the individual, they begin publishing books and leading conferences or workshops, and before long

the name of the church and the name of the pastor are intricately linked. At this point, the church ceases to be the church of Jesus Christ in name and becomes the church of Mega-Pastor-X, even though there may be real and faithful change happening in the pews.

This cult of celebrity is not less apparent in small churches because the people are different, but because the resources and reach of small churches are more limited. Yet, even so, you find celebrity on a smaller scale in many churches, where the lead pastor develops a fan following due to successes (or perceived successes) under their direction. This often leads to autocratic decision-making, which is just another form of celebrity.

Unfortunately, we have seen too often the devastation that comes when celebrity pastors fail in some way, as humans are prone to do. Whether their context is a mega church or a small church, the end result is the same. It is very difficult for churches of any size to recover their sense of identity and purpose when there has been a celebrity pastor in charge, who suddenly leaves.

Itineracy and the Pastoral Charge

My own denomination, the [United Methodist Church](#), is imperfect. We have our problems, and some of those relate to our polity. We certainly have our share of celebrity pastors, too, but these are few and far between, and haven't typically resulted in the negative dynamics we see in large non-connectional churches. But why is that?

Some might cite the average size of UMC churches as the reason for fewer instances of celebrity cult, but evidence shows there are many UMC churches which meet the statistics of mega churches, and as noted above, the problem is not limited to churches of a particular size anyway.

I think the answer lies in our practice of itineracy. This practice has its roots in our history, and reduces the potential for the cult of celebrity to develop in churches, by very simply limiting the amount of time a single pastor can lead a single church.

Now, I don't want to get into a discussion about the drawbacks of itineracy. I know there are aspects, which are a real turn off to a lot of potential clergy. But my family has signed up for the itinerant life, because we see its benefits and because it is where God has led us to serve. And one of the positive aspects of itineracy is that, in most cases, a pastor does not stay in a single charge so long that this cult of personalities can develop.

I say in most cases, because there are some notable exceptions to this, which I think ought to be addressed. When a UMC church grows quickly, we still see a tendency to leave the pastor(s) under whom the growth occurred in those churches longer, as though growth is solely the responsibility or result of those leaders.

I don't mean to suggest that a long tenure is always detrimental to a church either. There are many pastors who have faithfully served for decades in a single charge, and their churches have flourished spiritually, as well as numerically. And yet, how will their churches respond when they are gone? With any long pastoral tenure, this question must eventually be answered.

My point is that we have an alternate option that has worked well for our denomination. In most cases in the UMC pastors are moved every 3-5 years with the following positive results in churches that are healthy:

1. Churches become more lay driven. They can continue in ministry without the lead pastor for a time. While visionary leadership is still essential, local churches do not dissolve

when there is a leadership vacuum.

2. The pastoral vocation promotes humility. While there are certainly a boatload of arrogant clergy in positions of leadership, itineracy promotes humility by reminding clergy that they have been entrusted with the care of a congregation for a specific time, but that the long-term success of any church lies in their faithfulness to Jesus Christ, not their faithfulness to a specific pastor.

3. Churches become more mission-minded. When a church knows that their leadership will be changing on a regular basis, they cannot build their identities around that leadership. Identity must instead come from an understanding of who they are in Christ, and what mission he is directing them to follow. Churches who fail to follow that mission will ultimately close their doors, because they lack the consistent charismatic draw that celebrity pastors create.

This leads me to wonder, in an age where we see more and more negative consequences to celebrity leadership in churches, if the age-old practice of pastoral placement and itineracy might not be part of a viable solution to what ails the Church and her pastoral leaders?