

Absenteeism: Time to “Kick the Habit”

by Bob Young

Do not let the phrase “kick the habit” lead you astray. This is not an article about smoking; I am writing about getting rid of the “absentee habit.”

Across 40+ years of ministry, I have come to understand that absenteeism in the church is a habit. What minister has not agonized over those Christians whose names appear in the church directory but who are continually absent from the assemblies of the church? Some of those Christians may show up a few times a year—others have not attended for many years. Such persons get in the habit of not attending.

This article is not about those Christians who are perpetually absent. Nor is it about those Christians who are “Sunday morning only” Christians. I want to address the fact that many Christians who are considered active and faithful miss a significant percentage of the assemblies of their local congregation. It is not unusual in today’s mobile society for a Christian to be absent 30-40% of the time. One church leader bemoaned the fact that a fellow-elder was absent over 25% of the time during the previous year—by actually count. In contrast, many Christians, with sacrifice and planning, commit to being present, with the result that they are very seldom absent. One eldership I worked with committed to one another that they would be present as much as possible with the result that their average number of absences each year was less than three. They held one another accountable and worked together to make certain that a majority of the church leaders were always present.

I ask you to think about and pray about how often you are absent from the assemblies of the local church. Too often we are lax, even sloppy, in the frequency of our attendance in the local congregation. The church expects the preacher to be present—most churches will not let their minister be gone more than a few times each year. Yet church leaders who are absent 25% of the time or more try to lead and shepherd the flock. I realize that 25% is only one Sunday per month, and I realize that many Christians attend worship elsewhere when they are absent locally, but the impact on the local church is real. When I am not present, I do not know who is absent. I also miss the opportunity to encourage those who are present, including infrequent attenders, the bereaved, visitors, newcomers, and those who have been ill.

Severe absenteeism is not accepted in most areas of life. Absenteeism on the job will eliminate one’s employment. Absenteeism in the classroom will cause one to fail. Absentees do not play on the sports team or contribute much to the service club. Absenteeism is not acceptable—except down at the church house.

I heard it again this week: “We just don’t get much out of church. It’s not enjoyable.” Of course! You don’t know the songs we learned when you were absent. You aren’t prepared for the Bible class—you probably do not know what next Sunday’s topic or text will be. You missed the first third of the sermon series on Revelation and were “lost” when you finally tried to join

the study. You don't know the new families and you don't know the challenges and prayer requests of the long-standing members.

I ask you to think and pray about this matter. One of my mother's favorite phrases is sufficient: "If the shoe fits, wear it."