

# Novelty and Fanatics

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## THE HUGE LETTERS

The Chairperson  
Head Office

Dear Mr Martins,

It's always nice to hear from you, after all these years of church work, crossing paths now and then. Your letter causes me some concern, however, since several others like it have crossed my desk in recent months.

It seems there are quite a few of these new ideas going round, and I agree we must act carefully to protect the church from the invasion of novelties. But do not be dismayed, for there are things you can do. Allow me to make some comments in perspective.

If they are in the first stage, they will be talking a lot about mission and wanting to make some plans for future growth. You have three options to choose from.

One is to ask a few people to make sure that planning is done properly, with all details sewn up leaving nothing to chance. We don't want any surprises half way down the track, do we?

The second is to remind a few of the elders that God is sovereign and that this planning is a worldly endeavour. Better to leave the decisions to those ordained of God for leadership of the church, rather than to surrender to some new management methodology.

The third is to insist to those leading the planning project that we aim to minister to the whole region and to leave no one out. Fill in the gaps that are missing in the church's life, the ones we have the least ability to reach at the moment. They should be the main object of our attention. That should tie them up in nearly impossible feats of change, and put an end to this planning heresy.

If they have escaped you there, and they reach the second stage, there is nothing for it but to wait your time. In the second stage they have new leaders emerging who are discovering with excitement and newness (or should I say fanaticism and novelty) that their plans are working moderately well. The novelties around the church, particularly in worship, will alarm and irritate you, but your moment is coming. No need to step in front of the steamroller of excitement till it runs out of steam.

This then is your best opportunity, the third stage is exhaustion. When these new leaders run out of steam, you have at least five courses of action open to you, depending on the seriousness of the situation.

One is to point out the failings of what has, after all let us be honest, only worked tolerably well, has shown weakness at the seams, unforeseen problems, etc. They will think they are resting before the

next stage of development, but you can call the whole thing into question and keep them too tired to resume.

Another option is to complain to the minister or elders that they are focusing too much on the outsiders and neglecting those within the church. Pay the rent, I say. Pastoral care is suffering because of the focus on outsiders and change. Worship is unsatisfying to all - why we ever thought to swap something that was tried and true for generations in favour of these flash-in-the-pan experiments I do not know. As you know, ministers and elders are particularly sensitive to the charge of neglect of pastoral care, and they will certainly return their attention to the flock, where it used to be.

The third option, if these are not sufficient, is to write to their church office expressing your grave concern about the state of worship, pastoral care, the poor quality of leadership and the things that people are saying about the future prospects of their church. No doubt you will be able to get the signatures of others on the letter, even some who originally voted for the proposal and who now find it costing more than they thought.

The fourth option is to point out that if they keep on going like this, a property acquisition is soon going to be in order, and they should get down to it right away. These things take years, so to make the way smooth, some attention should be given to the new developments. As you know, this will require the time of a major sector of key leaders and decision makers, and bring everything back into the councils of the church, where they can be handled properly.

The fifth option is to foster the complaints of both the tired leaders and the former leaders. Keep it alive by agreeing with everyone in private conversations but keeping the discussion out of the public forum. If it does get to open discussion, raise the matter of lack of loyalty to the leaders and denomination. That will pull their heads in. But if it doesn't, suggest very kindly and invitationally that they would be happier, as a matter of integrity, in one of those growing churches in the other denominations. Hopefully before that, though, everyone will agree that a strong leader is needed to step in, and that will put an end to this idea that the lay people want to run the show.

Going further on this, the disarray will come if they cannot settle on what the issues are. Some will say it is spiritual warfare, and go off to pray. Some will say it is emotional blackmail, and keep getting angry. Some will say it is politics, and they will either try a few political manoeuvres of which I am sure you will have the measure, or else they will just give up in their naivety. Watch carefully for others who will talk of the grief reaction - "the changes taking place are bringing up before us the cherished memories of a church which we can never be again" - for they will seek to allow time so that this can be named, and so that the several layers of memory can be honoured and dealt with. What we need is something to keep people active and busy, not this "good grief - we're growing" business.

There are many things to think about here, but I am sure many of them have come naturally to you already. Bless you for your concern for the church's traditions, and your desire to protect the flock from the wolves of novelty and fanaticism.

Yours sincerely,

Rev Richard Huges.