

Church Growth and Worship Issues

A prevalent attitude today is “whatever works, and what works on Sunday is what fills the pews. It does not matter so much who fills those pews (although many like to imagine they are filling them with the lost). In the end, all that really matters is that someone is warming the bench.

Martin Marty describes this phenomenon:

- *“No God or religion or spirituality, no issue of Truth or beauty or goodness, no faith or hope or love, no justice or mercy; only winning and losing in the churching game matters.”*

This may be called “doing worship,” a phenomenon that is played out week after week in progressive evangelical churches across the country. It is an attempt at worship relevance that has gone way beyond the original intent of market application to market servitude. And when worship becomes a pawn of marketing, it ceases to have much to do with the expression and experience of a living, intimate relationship with the true God. In reality, it ceases to have much to do with God at all. **Rather, it degenerates into a colossal Monopoly game: Warm bodies substitute for real estate, and the net worth of the pastor rises or falls with the final attendance tally.**

Many prominent figures decry this success-equals-numbers mentality and view it as a gross distortion of the Church growth movement’s intent. George Barna, well known for his marketing research, reiterates the importance of quality over quantity:

- *“We are more impressed by a church of 4,000 people who have no clue about God’s character and His expectations, than by a church of 100 deeply committed saints who are serving humankind in quiet but significant ways”. I don’t think numbers and numerical growth are most important. **What I see the Scriptures telling us is that a successful church is where people’s lives are being transformed and becoming more Christ-like. You will never get a quality ministry by focusing on quantity first. Quality must precede quantity.***

Most people want to cut to the chase and take a pragmatic approach to Worship and Church Growth by finding a “model that pragmatically works”

Elmer Towns summarizes the view of the so called experts on what the modern consumer is looking for:

- *“America’s protestants choose churches on the basis of what affirms us, entertains us, satisfies us or makes us feel good about God and ourselves. If we recognize church worshippers as **Consumers**, we will recognize church programs as **menus**, and types of worship as the **main entrees** in the restaurant. ... Consumers go where menus fit their taste... the church menus Americans seek are not filled with doctrinal options but with a variety of worship options. Americans go where they feel comfortable with the style of worship that best reflects their inclinations and intentions.”*

In other words, the “experts” are telling us that, those who want to play the church game are going to have to play it with style not substance. But here is the discrepancy. Barna tells us that the **number one piece of information that interests an unchurched person when he or she looks for a church is NOT the worship style that is offered.**

Rather it is a church's specific beliefs and doctrines! "If we really want to shape the church to address the needs of the unchurched", Barna says, " the CORE BELIEFS of the church would be one of the critical elements to communicate clearly." This is also supported by George Gallup. When he asked, "What do Americans want from their churches?" part of what he learned was that "Americans have a strong desire for information about the Bible and its meaning".

Unfortunately, we who struggle to do local ministries, have become dependent on a handful of people to interpret reality for us. So, regardless of whether these "experts" have been on target the damage has been done. Many of traditional oriented parishes have come to view the typical American consumer as basically narcissistic and disinterested in the core issues of faith. Consequently the attitude is either, do nothing and look down your nose at them, or get on board and reshape your worship to appeal to society's self-oriented tastes in order to garner your market share of attendees. Of course all this does is confuse even more people about what worship is, and whom it is for, and why they should do it.

George Barna tells us:

- *When we asked the same church attendees to define the meaning of worship for us, we learned that 36% provided a reasonable assessment of what worship means; 25% provided answers that were too generic to evaluate; and 39% offered explanations that were clearly erroneous. This a substantial proportion of the worship populations – perhaps even a majority of it- appears to be unclear about what it is they venture to the church to accomplish each weekend. This ambiguity, in turn, calls into question the value or validity of having satisfied people's expectations regarding a worship experience.*

IT'S TIME FOR A REALITY CHECK

Church attendance has become increasingly erratic. 50% of the people who attend church now do so only once a month or less. The attendance of adults in church has steadily gone down since 1991 in spite of all the innovative efforts of the Church Growth movement to alter worship styles in order to raise those numbers. The first half of the 1990's the percentage dropped 7%. During the second half of the '90's it has dropped another 5%.

Reaching the seeker has been the evangelical battle cry for the last 15-20 years. Yet Church attendance before the emphasis of the 1990's was a stagnant 45% of all Americans (It's lower now than ever before Latest statistics tell us the real number is 20%).

What about the MegaChurch? They seem to be really doing the "job".

Sally Morgenthaller writes:

- *How can we explain the phenomenon of the megachurch? Simple; musical chairs – church hopping growth. And it represents more than 80% of the people who have come in our doors in the past decade. That is scary"*

Scarier still is this future scenario painted by Bill Hull in his *Power Religion, The selling out of the American Church*:

- *The megachurch's feeder system is the smaller church and disgruntled believers who have quit their churches. What is going to happen when that feeder system dries up?*

What does Christian America look like as we begin this new decade?

Barna tells us:

- *We have 325,000 Protestant Churches, 1200 Christian Radio Stations, 300 Christian TV stations, 300 Christian Colleges. During the 1990's we spent in excess of 250 billion dollars in domestic ministry and have seen 0% increase in the proportion of born again adult Christians in this country.*

You can add an additional 150 billion dollars to that figure since those statistics were compiled. What is the result of Christianity in America? The percentage of Christians in the US has dropped to under 35%. A drop of over 10%. In the same period of time the U.S. Center for world mission tells us that the number of bible believing Christians has risen from 6.2% of the total world's population to 9.9% since 1980. In the same time period evangelical churches in Latin America grew from 18.6 million to more than 59 million people.

CLEARLY SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT HERE AND THE SO CALLED "EXPERTS" HAVEN'T REALLY DONE MUCH TO HELP THE SITUATION BY USING WORSHIP AS THE VEHICLE FOR MARKETING THE CHURCH.

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

- Worship is the corporate celebration BY THE PEOPLE OF GOD of God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ.
- Corporate Worship has always been regulated by God – It is liturgical in practice.
- Corporate Worship includes the offering of the worshiper's bodies as living sacrifices in response to Christ's redemptive giving of Himself.

Robert Webber in his book *Worship is a Verb* said:

- *"Worship calls for the involvement of our mind, body, and soul. Worship demands nothing less than the complete, conscious, and deliberate participation of the worshipper"*

The worship expression offered to us in the Book of Common Prayer is just as real and valid today as it has been throughout the centuries. In the debate between Confessional Lutherans and Church Growth Lutherans the Confessional (Liturgical) Lutherans have rightly responded by saying:

- *The barriers that Church Growth advocates target for removal includes pews, sermons,... male only clergy and the liturgy and hymns. The desire is to strip away anything that gets in the way of people hearing the Gospel, whether they are unchurched people hearing it for the first time, or Christians who need to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The church's life cuts across all cultures. Christ calls sinners out of the world's culture to His kingdom , the Church. Christ would have the secular culture conform to His church. Indeed, by the year AD 400, the church had conformed the Roman Empire to the principles of Christ. The kingdom of Grace is called, led, and sustained by His Word, not any human needs or wants or desires or traditions. This Word alone is to be the determiner of Christian culture as developed in the Church. The Church has historic roots, catholic and apostolic. This means that its traditions of worship transcend cultures. They have existed for centuries, not as the worship of individuals or congregations, but rather as what Christians over time have accepted as the norm for Worship. "Testing the Claims of Church Growth by Rodney Zwonitzer . Page 46.*

Prayer Book Worship provides a very essential ingredient in Worship. It focuses on the people of God encountering the Living God.

- It is in Prayer Book Worship where Christ presides at His Table.
- It is in Prayer Book Worship where the redemptive activity of God is rehearsed each time the people of God meet.
- It is in Prayer Book Worship where the people of God find forgiveness of sins and the Means of Grace in both Word and Sacrament.

Chuck Smith , Pastor of Capistrano Beach Calvary Chapel relates:

- *"The one expectation the majority of people shared was for some kind of encounter with God. Beyond the program, the social interaction, the music and the message, they wanted to touch God."*

R.C. Sproul writes:

- *"How in the world can we worship God in a way that is exciting and passionate and moving if we do not know anything about Him?... How can the heart really respond to that which it does not know?... There is content to the revelation that God has given us.... The more we understand the revelation God has given us about Himself, the more we ought to be moved to worship and praise Him in response."*

A.W. Tozer wrote in 1948:

- *The world is perishing for lack of the knowledge of God and the church is famishing for want of His presence"*

The Language and Theology of the Prayer Book provides the substance necessary to understand the God whom people must worship.

- Liturgical Churches should never compromise their Worship

- Liturgical Churches should not be afraid of presenting what they are doing to outsiders
- Liturgical Churches should never feel like second class citizens simply because of societal demands to entertain and scintillate.

CONCLUSIONS

- Our whole culture, saved and unsaved, is starving for an extraordinary glimpse of God. Worship is not the only place such an encounter can happen, but it is where one should expect it to happen.
- The purpose or intent of worship is NOT evangelism. Glorifying God in spirit and truth – responding to God for who He is, and what He has done for us, especially in Jesus Christ – is the purpose of Christian Worship
- **Therefore, what we do in worship should not be governed by what non-churched people might want, but by what will present the Living God to them in a powerful, transcendent way.**

WHAT ABOUT SEEKERS?

A valid concern about inviting seekers into worship is that somehow the seeker's presence in worship may identify him or her as a worshipper. But can a seeker actually worship? Scripture infers that an unbeliever cannot worship God until he or she has a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, no man can come to the Father but by Me"*.

Nevertheless, by the Spirit of God who is drawing him or her, the things of God are being revealed. The unbeliever in whom God is working is, therefore, capable of at least some spiritual understanding and discernment. For example, before his "conversions" Pharisee Nicodemus was able to discernment that Jesus had come from God (John 3:21). We may call this prevenient grace. Basically that means that before anyone can seek God, God first seeks him or her.

Tozer describes it in this way:

- *"Before a sinful man can think a right thought of God, there must have been a work of enlightenment done within him... the secret cause of all desiring and seeking and praying which may follow. We pursue God because, and only because, he has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit."*

Seekers can gain much from observing and hearing Worship. They may very well be brought to the point in their lives of encountering the God with whom they have to do.

This concept is also brought out in Church History. Hippolytus, tells us that that was a formal two-to- three year period designated by many New Testament congregations in which the unbeliever (Seeker) attended worship merely as an observer, or "catechumenate". If the early church saw the need to provide such opportunities for God to work in the unbeliever's heart through worship, surely we should do likewise.

SO LET THE SEEKERS IN AS OBSERVERS.

ONCE THEY DO COME, THE CRITICAL ISSUE IS:

HOW TO WE PROCESS THEM?

Church Growth proponents tell us that first impressions are everything, so we only have one chance to convince the seeker that what we have is what he or she needs.

There is some very real validity to that observation.

It speaks to HOW we PROCESS the Visitor not how we Worship.

A few weeks ago, we had some visitors here at Holy Trinity, who walked in the door just moments before the service started. That particular Sunday the assigned ushers and greeters did not show up. There was no one to help them enter into the beginning of our Worship. Since it was a Confirmation Service, We started with the *Lorica*, 'I bind Unto Myself' – Clearly an unfamiliar Hymn to anyone who is not an Anglican. The Hymn was unannounced. The procession began on the second verse and by the time that the fourth verse started, I watched the man lean over to the woman and whisper something

in her ear and they left. We obviously failed to help these new visitors become accustomed to “Worship”. We had our one opportunity with them.

Too often, we do not process our visitors well. We should expect God to send us visitors and we should prepare for them to attend each Sunday. But before we process them, we should take a good hard look at ourselves.

The first step in planning your reception strategy is to look at your congregation. Ask these questions:

- What will new people find when they visit our church?
- Are we experiencing conflict?
- Do we have healthy self-esteem?
- Do we have a clear vision of where we are going?
- Are we a warm and welcoming community of Christ?
- What would our community miss most if our church ceased to exist?
- What’s needed for church growth?

The second step is to prepare the field for growth. This is the time to look at making your leadership more effective. Leadership (Clerical and Lay) responsibilities include sharing God’s vision for your congregation, to plan how this vision will be achieved, and to set high and achievable expectations for you and your church.

What are the challenges facing us?

- Are we in maintenance or a mission mode? The congregation must move beyond a survival mentality to the openness of ministry and community outreach.
- Developing a vision for the future
- Resolving power conflicts, whether between individuals or cliques.
- Increasing money and resources and improving stewardship of those already committed to the church.
- Overcoming poor self esteem and apathy.
- Expanding our circle of concern and friendship to include outsiders.

What bring people to Church?

- Obviously, God may be moving them. They want to know more of the Christian Faith.
- Newly located in an unfamiliar town or neighborhood.
- Switching affiliations because of religious climate.
- Want to become responsible parents
- Want their Children to be Baptized
- Want to be married and a place to celebrate it.
- Afflicted by the stress of troubles which are too heavy to bear.
- Lonely

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Long before visitors show up on Sunday Morning, your parish should be hard at work putting out the welcome mat. Nothing should be left to “chance”.

Ushers should know the importance of their ministry. A few of the more extroverted members of the congregation should be designated as greeters
Plans for follow-up home visits and/or telephone calls are made.

Note: Every newcomer visits with a heart full of expectant hope, and that demands an energetic welcome in response.

Maintenance minded parishes tend to meet visitors with disinterest. Then, quickly thrust into their hands a tightly printed bulletin with the page numbers of the Prayer Book. Finally, once the Liturgy begins there is seldom a moment of respite as worship plunges toward its completion.

If we do not care OR if we do not show the care that we do feel, the enthusiasm of newcomers is often dealt a blow from which it can't recover. Worse, at that moment, the ministry of God to their lives is destroyed.

When Visitors do come, you should have:

- Greeters to help them become comfortable with the environment and to explain our Worship service.
- Pre-Tabbed Prayer Books to ease the discomfort of using the Book of Common Prayer.
- Literature succinctly describing the ministry of the parish should be inside the Prayer Book for their reading.
- Individuals who sit in the back with the express intent of observing the visitors and helping them if they get lost.
- Pastoral direction in the service to keep the people on track.
- Our Members should be encouraged to look for visitors and to initiate a greeting, and to introduce them to at least one other member of the congregation and make sure the visitor is introduced to the Rector.
- They should be encouraged to express how wonderful it is to worship and fellowship at _____ Church.
- They should invite them to come back after making sure that they signed the guest register or filled out a visitor's card.
- A lay person should initiate a first contact with that family as early in the week as possible. If they come back for a second visit, the Rector or Vicar should schedule a visit with them.

- If they return a third week, an initiation “Discovery” Class should be offered for them to attend. This class should cover various aspects and ministries of the Parish along with the doctrinal beliefs and expectations of members. This of course might be structured differently for unchurched visitors.