

The Church of the Future

Administrator

By Matt Smay

One thing is certain as we contemplate all the changes the church is facing. Tomorrow's church won't look like the church we remember from days gone by.

I try to keep things as simple as possible. When we overcomplicate things, we extend the time it takes to learn and become proficient at something new. It might explain why I've become enamored by one-room churches and schoolhouses that were established in small towns as people moved west across America, in a time when everything seemed so much simpler. (My ancestors helped establish one of those towns: Browns, Illinois.)

I often imagine those days when I drive across the country or run across one of those small towns that has been absorbed by one of our many metropolises. I imagine it might have been easier to tend a flock back in the 1800s when church was often the heart of a community.

Comfortable

In those days, it seemed like everyone went to church, even if they didn't believe, because it would be hard to explain to your family and friends why you weren't at church last Sunday. Then, in the early 1900s the industrial revolution came along and shook things up. Trains, automobiles, factories . . . it was a new world, and communities became more spread out. No longer were churches the pulse of the small town. The world became larger and more complex.

After the upheaval of a couple of World Wars, workers started finding jobs they wanted closer to the cities. This is how my grandparents ended up settling down in a small Southern California suburb in the 1950s. They were invited to a small church that had been established to serve the growing population of people new to town. It's in that church where three generations of my family came to faith, and I had the privilege of experiencing a church that loved, served, and blessed others well in a tight-knit community. It was the kind of church community where every person was known by name.

And then came the post-1960s. A time of throwing out nearly everything previous generations held dear, including organized religion. Church was becoming less influential in culture. The church, being aware of the change in the culture, tried to adjust to meet the needs by adding guitars and drums to morning worship and singing worship songs instead of hymns. Choirs were on their way out, making room for larger stages as pastors expanded their worship teams. Gone was the idea of dressing up for church, replaced by a “come as you are” mantra.

Some churches found success, but people didn’t come en masse, at least not for most churches. For some reason, we just couldn’t seem to reach those who most needed to hear of God’s love. It just wasn’t as easy as it had been in previous generations.

Church leaders had the best of intentions during this transition, but accidentally created a culture of Christian “church shoppers” bouncing from one church building to another looking for the latest and greatest ministry experience. In too many instances, Christians have become a group of people who overemphasize big, entertaining experiences with lots of programs and a “feel good” atmosphere, over true relationship and mission. Churches have become a place where we wave and smile to the same faces each week while staying in our comfortable bubble of anonymity.

Did we unintentionally make Christians so comfortable that we neglected to make them mature?

Broken

Something is broken. As a church that is supposed to be the body of Christ in every segment of society, we are not making the kind of difference we would expect. We can spend time arguing “why?” and pointing fingers, but it has all been done before. There is no shortage of books written on this topic. The best number crunchers have given us helpful, but sometimes conflicting, data.

One of the best articles on the subject was “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America” by Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, which reported on a study of the annual attendance

of more than 200,000 individual Orthodox Christian churches. That study found that 17.7 percent of the population attended an Orthodox Christian church (Catholic, mainline, and Evangelical) in 2004. That was down from 20.4 percent in the 1990s. If that trend continues, experts estimate only 11.7 of America's population will be attending church in 2050.

Those are not the only discouraging numbers. Statistics from the Southern Baptists, the largest Protestant denomination in America, don't look good; membership declines are accelerating.

In his Lifeway Research Blog of June 13, 2012, Ed Stetzer wrote: *For five years in a row, the Southern Baptist Convention's membership has declined. Total membership has decreased 2 percent since 2007 including a near 1 percent drop this year—an acceleration of decline. But, the more disconcerting trend is the percent change from year to year. That trend is going exactly where we expected it—and not where we want it to be. This trend points to a future of more and faster decline—and it is a 60-year trend. So, membership in the SBC is now on a multi-year decline. Our "growth" trend is now negative and our membership is decreasing . . . Currently, there are other denominations and movements that are merely managing their decline. However, I for one would like for our leaders, pastors, and members to stare reality in the face and fight for our future. Facts are our friends even if these facts are not so friendly.* The Barna Group's work through the years has highlighted the rarity of lasting spiritual transformation in people's lives. Among those who believe they are Christians, only one-fifth say they live in a way that makes them completely dependent on God. About the same number claim the single most important decision they ever made was to invite Jesus Christ to forgive them and become their Savior. And just one-sixth of Christians say they are totally committed to engaging in personal spiritual development.

Engaging

Reading this can be pretty discouraging, but the church, Christ's bride, is capable of making the shifts necessary to connect with a changing culture. However, change rarely comes easy. The challenge is greater than it has ever been in America, and it will require more people to take seriously the Great Commission to "go

and make disciples.” We can no longer wait for people in culture to come to us so we can make disciples from within the church. The values of church and culture have diverged too much, and now we must begin to GO.

It’s going to take a movement of men and women engaging culture together, being the church seven days a week. We can still participate in meaningful church gatherings, but we can’t expect that to be the only answer we have for people who are spiritually disoriented and in need of the good news of the kingdom. Christians, not our church gatherings, are perfectly positioned to move further into culture, to bridge the gap between church and culture.

Of course, change is hard and we’ve had it pretty easy in the past, which could be why fewer than 20 percent of Christians are actively engaging in spiritual development. Could it be our comfortable and extremely well-done church gatherings are actually stunting spiritual growth? Are we making disciples who no longer know how to go or make another disciple? Have we been so busy tying everyone’s shoes for them that we’ve forgotten to teach them how to tie their own? Worse yet, have we given up the hard work of tying and switched to Velcro, because it is easier? Have we spoiled Christians with the best the church has to offer without an opportunity and challenge to live it out?

Christianity is a journey, not a destination; the church travels together on a path of growth and outreach. Anything the church can do to give permission for new ministry ventures, while equipping people to be more capable representatives of Jesus, will better equip Christians to live out their faith amid the challenges of a changing culture. It’s simple, but it’s not easy. We learn. We teach. We grow, and we ask others to help us grow. We learn to embrace the slow, messy, and sometimes painful process of growing in Christ. We take risks to engage others in faith, hope, and love. And in the process we discover our roles in becoming the church of the future.

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