

Who Cares Whether Your Church Exists?

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One of the most important annual questions every church board must ask is whether or not anybody cares that this church exists. They will review all the potential sidetracks and irrelevancies of congregational life and mission; talk with all the possible alliances with religious, social service, health care, advocacy, corporate, and government sectors; and monitor perspectives from all the lifestyle segments of the zip code. And they will discover whether anybody really cared (or continues to care) that this particular church continues to occupy space on this particular community.

There is a deeper spiritual issue behind this question. Church leaders need to ask whether or not God cares that this church exists. Most church members are aghast that one might even ask such a question. *Of course God cares that this church exists*, they say. A closer scrutiny of scripture, however, and a careful reading of the book of Revelation in particular, suggests that this is not a safe assumption. God wants *faithful* churches to continue to exist, and he wants *unfaithful* churches to get out of the way.

It is entirely possible that God might *not* want a church to exist. Why not? The church might be siphoning away precious resources for its mere institutional survival that might better be used by struggling faithful churches somewhere else. The church might be compromising the integrity of core values and convictions, undermining the credibility of other faithful churches in the community. The church might even be providing a safe haven for otherwise dysfunctional Christians who would be better challenged by faithful churches to grow up and fly right. Yes, it is entirely possible that God might not want your church to exist. The pastor and the board need to find out.

Let us imagine that after careful prayer, intensive congregational mission assessment, and conversation with spirited leaders within and beyond the local church that the board decides God does want the church to exist for another year. They undoubtedly design a disciple-making process that will change lives through worship, grow Christians through small groups and Christian education, and send servants out to do great stuff and articulate faith. They will be ready with radical hospitality, great refreshments, the best worship experience they can train leaders to design, and volunteers eager to follow up. Now they face a dilemma.

How will the public know how relevant they are? How will they encourage the public to actually come to worship? How do they make the first contact that will eventually lead to great coffee, profound spiritual conversation, and the touch of the Holy? As the mission field becomes increasingly indifferent or hostile to the institutional church, how do they get on the radar screen of the lifestyle segments of the zip code? Media advertising isn't very effective. Door-to-door visitation is unwelcome and besides, nobody is home. People are increasingly wary of even the most sincerely smiling clergy sitting expectantly in the coffee shop. In the approach/avoidance world of contemporary spirituality, the reaction to even a faithful institutional church is mainly avoidance. What to do?

There are three basic ways to get on the radar screen of the diversity of the zip code.

Relevant Programs that Lead to Meaningful Conversations

The first strategy, obviously, is to take away money from institutional maintenance, and invest it in relevant programs for the public. Redeploy leadership energy away from taking care of members to reaching out to seekers. Instead of unbalanced resources deployed 80/20 in favor of membership, unbalance the resources 20/80 in favor of the mission field. Stop talking lovingly among yourselves. Start talking lovingly among strangers.

It is not hard to discover the top 7 life issues most on the minds of the major lifestyle segments in your zip code. Any number of websites and demographic servers can tell you, and if you are in doubt you can always go out and listen. Most traditional churches, however, are in the business of renting property, maintaining programs, and hosting groups that are at best niche markets and at worst quite irrelevant to the

real needs of most people. They connect well with the hobbies, personal needs, aesthetic tastes, or political priorities of the pastor or the members ... but not with the major lifestyle segments of the community.

Even when the church gets the programming priorities right, they still must create a *conversation*. Any social service or government agency to do good stuff, and the public will be glad to consume what they have to offer. It is the same with the church. Unless you train and deploy spiritually mature leaders to engage the public in meaningful conversation, they will never introduce them to the experience of Christ. They may be healed, but never know the healer. They may be counseled, but never know the source of true wisdom. They may be vindicated, but never know the liberator. Give a stranger a fish, and they will hunger again. Teach a stranger to fish, and they will have the means to feed themselves. Introduce them to the creator of fish, and they will find everlasting life.

Mentoring Relationships that Lead to Personal Fulfillment

The second strategy builds on the first. There is no better way to draw people to church to experience Christ than through a personal relationship. It's not just a matter of talking. It's a matter of modeling. "Let your light so shine ..." that others may see your joy and inquire where you got it. The best invitation to church is one that is in response to an inquiry.

The one thing most in demand, and hardest to find, is a mentor. A mentor is someone who can guide you through the ambiguities of daily living; around obstacles to personal growth; through challenges of health and ignorance; to the confidence of self-fulfillment. The more mature Christians a church can deploy into the neighborhood, the more mentoring conversations will draw people back to worship.

The professional co-dependency between laity who rely on clergy to be the sole spiritual authorities, and clergy who glory among laity in being the sole spiritual authorities, is the most significant block to mission growth. This is what limits social service to mere philanthropy. The best outreach programs fail to bear fruit in multiplying disciples. The public is left waiting for a handful of clergy to show up in the neighborhood. The laity hang around the church mowing the lawn and making quilts.

Growing and deploying laity to be the mentors who interact with seekers is neither easy nor automatic. This is not a matter of nomination and election. It is a matter of spiritual discipline and training. The more laity commit to spiritual growth, surrender to personal mission, and equip themselves to shape their lifestyles around God's mission ... the more people see their example, ask them questions, and are guided to an experience with Jesus Christ. Ask any successful small business. Your clients are your best salesmen.

Signature Ministry that Draws People to Give Thanks

The third strategy follows on the second. Personal mission grows into team outreach. The congregation develops a big, bold, outreach that deserves the combined sacrifice of the members, and captures the imagination of the public. It is more than a project or a program. It is a mission that clearly presents the core values and convictions of the church to the lifestyle segment for whom its heart bursts. It is the front door into the experience of Christ.

The signature ministry is the single most important transforming strategy of the church in the zip code. It is all about grace, and has absolutely nothing to do about membership. The people know it. The church knows it. God knows it. This is not just about outreach. It is about inreach. It is about the church recovering what it is supposed to be about, reaching deep inside to discover Christ at the center of control, and surrendering every budget line and pew to a higher purpose of blessing the stranger. What that blessing is varies from place to place and heart burst to heart burst. It will only be revealed after a whole lot of meaningful conversations, and a ton of personal fulfillment.

The most important thing about a signature ministry is that both the givers and the receivers are driven to give thanks. Gratitude overflows. The joy of giving, and the benefits of receiving, are just so unbearably great that you just have to thank God for it. The signature ministry is consistently supported by

prayer in worship; mission leaders are regularly consecrated through worship; and transformed people are regularly received in worship. Worship catches them. People flock to worship. Those who bless, and those who are blessed, worship side by side and become indistinguishable from each other. Tomorrow the one who is blessed will become the one who blesses. Pretty soon, nobody will know which is which.

Now that the church is on the radar screen of the public, all the preparations for radical hospitality and life-shaping worship bear fruit. People have a motivation to come; people have a motivation to leave. Worship is just one step in a process of growing up and reaching out.