

The Upside-Down Church?

I've faithfully served in the ministry for almost a decade now – the past six years in one location. I have watched different “church growth” strategies, and “the next big thing” plans come and go in that amount of time. Most come from good hearted men and women whom God has used in unique and great ways. However, almost all have utilized the same basic church structure and foundation to build upon. A glance around at most of the churches in your area will yield the same results – a lot of churches doing the same thing in different ways. The individual methods may look & sound different from each other, but they are really striving to reach people within the same basic structure.

Imagine the church being an automobile. Churches/body styles may differ in musical format, small group/class structure, style of preaching, evangelism program/strategy and the like. But when you raise the hood & look inside you see that all of them at the heart have basically the same system for getting you from one place to another. Most churches are doing the same thing, just in different ways.

What if God wants to create a new vehicle, however? One that uses a new kind of fuel, or has an extremely different body style or new innovation? Most would look at such differences in the car market with a condescending smile – dismissing some such changes as simply unnecessary ‘fluff’ or discounting that this new car would ever run.

I believe that this is exactly what God is doing. The church is in a re-birthing process, with the basic structure that we know and are familiar with yielding to new wineskins. In fact, most churches striving to exist with the same basic approach and structure as they have always known will find themselves being totally upside-down within the new church. Let me explain.

THE FUNNEL

Imagine the overall structure of most churches as a funnel. This is a mental picture that has been used for years to describe what the church does. In the typical church the primary focus is on getting people into a building. Think about it: revivals, conferences, “Friend” days, etc. ... all of them have as a strategic focus the aim of getting people into the church building. In fact this strategy carries beyond simply special events or emphases. Christians are told from many a well-intentioned minister that they should be inviting their family members, friends & workmates to come with them to church.

In many churches this strategy is working. Even setting aside the multitude of church-swapping members who move their membership from one church to another, many churches are still seeing a greater number of people coming to weekly worship services.

After awhile, however, the ministry leadership realizes that while the number of individuals sitting in the pews has increased, most are still only coming to the worship service. There is no fellowship taking place, no relationships being formed. So the strategy is expanded to try to get worship service attenders to become active members of the church through ministry or group involvement. The aim becomes getting ‘wishy-washy’ Christians plugged into a group setting – Sunday School, small groups, ministry teams (even ministry leadership), etc. Again, this approach seems to work, though not on the same scale as worship service attendance. We sit back and watch the numbers rise and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done.

Then reality sets in again: we begin to realize that while more people are involved in groups, most are immature, baby Christians who are not growing on their own in their spiritual

journey with Christ. So once again we expand our strategy in order to begin to equip people to grow in their individual relationships with Christ. In the process we often times see people who thought they were Christians coming to Christ. Why? Because they realize that worship service attendance, group involvement, and even ministry leadership is not the same thing as having a personal relationship with Christ.

The process is a funnel because as you go deeper into the strategy you see fewer and fewer people involved at each level. You have great numbers of people padding your worship attendance numbers, but very few growing on a day-to-day basis individually. In most cases the contrast between these two sets of numbers is shocking.

UPSIDE-DOWN?

What are we doing wrong? What are we not doing right? I believe that many a ministerial burn-out has come from either pressure to produce numbers on the wrong side of that equation or the sudden realization of the very few numbers of people who are actually growing in a relationship with Christ. Perhaps the reason is that we have the funnel upside down.

Consider, for a moment, beginning from the end of the previous strategy. What if the majority of our focus as a church body was in caring for individuals and striving to equip and connect them in both their relationship with Christ and with other Christians? What might happen if the large percentage of church members began growing spiritually and sharing on this journey with a group of other individuals doing the same? We might find that the groups would start to become too large to truly cultivate this level of fellowship and community. New groups would have to be formed to meet the demand of individuals growing spiritually and encouraging others doing the same.

As groups began to multiply we would soon find that ministry needs would naturally be met, because the individuals who make up the groups (and subsequently make up the church body) would be learning how God had shaped them to serve others. As groups began to multiply we would soon find that new people were being reached. Individuals would be less concerned with introducing their family, friends & work mates to their church & become more concerned with introducing them to Christ. New Christians would find a welcome and safe place as they are invited into the thriving community. As groups began to multiply we would soon find that our corporate times of celebration and vision would be busting at the seams – not because we have thought of another gimmick to trick people to coming to a building, but because people are reaching people, encouraging people, refining people, and celebrating alongside people within a common worship setting.

I see evidence all around the world of churches springing up with this type of church life at the very heart of what they are doing. The church is in a re-birthing period as God continues to mold and shape His people. If all of this is true, as I believe it is, we must ask ourselves how we are to be a part of the process. What will your place be?