

Circulation of the Saints (4)

The Church Wired for Service

Fascination with modern technology and preoccupation with planning, methods, and strategies have surfaced among the leaders of the Church Growth School Movement. This current interest in taking "technical" control over the growth and management of the church largely accounts for the megachurch phenomenon. Church growth consultant Gary L. McIntosh says, "Churches that wish to experience biblical church growth will use proper techniques, methods, and strategies. Their leaders will use the power of their personalities in setting vision and direction for the future." George Barna, specialist in research for churches and church-related groups, argues that the church should not "ignore the technology needed to reach an audience."

Videos

Not only do megachurches use power points, overhead projectors, and the latest in sound systems, but the churches most likely to use videos are those pursuing younger adults and "seekers." When the sermon begins in the Resurrection Life Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, no one is looking at a preacher. All eyes are fixed on a pair of 8-foot video screens that transmit a taped sermon given the previous night at the Grandville "mother" church nearly 20 miles away. Most of the worshipers had been attending services at the main building in Grandville. They find the new accommodation more informal and convenient distance-wise. The concept is one church, two locations. An estimated 150 churches across the United States are experimenting with the video campus concept, said to offer the stability of an established church and geographic convenience.

Telemarketing

In the past decade, the use of telemarketing to increase church attendance has stirred interest among evangelicals. The churches most likely to have turned to telemarketing as a growth tool are those that are just starting, the megachurches, and the ones that use contemporary elements in their services. Literally millions of telephone calls have been made by church members or by hired telemarketers to interact with people who do not attend church or who are dissatisfied with their own church. But the results have been less than satisfactory. Nearly one-third of those who used telemarketing said it did not produce any known visitors. This technique has its critics even among church growth school advocates. George Barna calls it "an intrusive process." He says, "Cold calling, even when a soft pitch is used, often portrays the church in a negative light simply by the impersonal, mass-marketing technology."

The Internet

Not so long ago the Internet was still unknown. Now it appears that no one can do without it. The majority of Internet users live in North America. This medium is now widely used by churches. Already in 1997, Christian web sites made up more than 80% of the web sites of the world's five major religions. The Internet has been heralded as a great breakthrough for evangelism. In his book, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, Jeff Zaleski claims: "If information is power, then during the next century Christianity, of all the major world religions, will benefit most from Internet growth."

Web sites are used not only to give information about churches. Even church services are offered, which occasionally have led to some bizarre results. A New York businessman was so impressed by a California church's web site that he joined that church. He watches the worship service on-line every Sunday morning and submits his offerings by MasterCard.

How beneficial is the Internet for the spread of the Gospel? The immediate problem facing anyone seeking spiritual information online isn't the paucity of information, but the plenitude. As someone said, "The Internet is anarchy in action, a libertarian cyberland." The many Christian web sites often offer conflicting interpretations of the Gospel. Furthermore, to thrive among competitors, a well-constructed web site gives more than information. It must consider its entertainment value – whether the digitized information it offers is pleasing to eye and ear, and to some extent whether it incorporates the latest innovations in online technology. It does not require personal knowledge of the people or churches that are visited. Consequently, a web site has the potential of the medium subverting the Gospel message. Churches that rely on ecclesiastical authority, confessional standards, as well as the sacraments will have a hard go on the Net. Internet ministries are never meant to be a replacement for real church. It is impossible for anyone to develop a personal relationship with God without being around His people, His church. There are certain functions – baptism, the partaking of the Lord's Supper, and personal pastoral care that cannot be offered on the Web.

Television

Television's enormous impact on society is well documented. Canadian writer Michele Landsberg goes so far as to say that "television is not part of our culture; it is our culture." From the start, television became a means of entertainment. It is theater. By the 1950s, television delivered in one year more dramatic fiction than 18th century Americans and Canadians were likely to see on stage in a lifetime. We have now a generation raised by television. As a result many seek only the next entertainment, the immediacy of fun. Television's nature intensifies the appeal to emotions. Its rapidly changing images and its simplistic thought prevent in-depth reflection on the vital issues of life. In his book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, Os Guinness observes, "With rare exceptions, television so disdains 'talking heads' that the very act of thinking becomes unthinkable on television."

The impact of television as a vehicle of entertainment has changed the way church members respond to sermons. It was assumed that when worshipers came to church,

they bore the responsibility to listen carefully to the sermon. But now the responsibility lies with the preacher. It is up to him to get the attention and to maintain it. In the megachurch world, an entertaining speaker now ranks above a "scholar" or "expository preacher."

Television also fosters a constant desire for the new and novel. Through remote control the viewer can journey from one program to another instantly. This constant quest for the novel can be extremely addictive. It causes people to be dissatisfied with the worship in their own churches. The question raised by many is: Should our worship be more like television or should we change worship in such a way that people will ask better questions about television? Over time, television ministries set the standard even for churches with no broadcast intentions, so popular did the style of Dr. Robert Schuller or the format of "The 700 Club" become. And observers of the church scene mention that increasingly, worship times resemble concerts, with the choir or soloist on a "stage" in front of the "audience," in an "auditorium" that resembles a concert hall more than a sanctuary. I wonder whether the advocates of the latest developments in worship thinking have forgotten that the Lord charged the apostle Peter to feed His sheep. He didn't tell him to entertain them. In his Letters of Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer, C.S. Lewis observes, "Novelty, simply as such, can have only entertainment value. And [believers] don't go to church to be entertained. They go to use the service, or, if you prefer, to enact it. Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive the sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore."

Willow Creek is an example of a church impacted by modern technology and entertainment culture. Hybels uses "nonsacred" architecture, innovative worship services, popular music, drama, and diverse programming to meet the needs of people who feel unwelcome in traditional churches. Willow Creek's effective use of drama attracts a lot of attention. One of the sharpest and severest critics of the impact of the entertainment world on the church is Stanley Hauerwas. He argues that a church like Willow Creek "merely exemplifies the loss of the Christian worship of God in the name of 'more members.'" He states that the difficulty with worship intentionally shaped to entertain those who are "new" is not that it is entertaining, but that "the god that is entertained in such worship cannot be the Trinity. For example, to worship the Trinity requires at the very least that we learn to say together the Apostles' Creed."

Technology

Please understand. The issue with the use of modern technology is not either God or modernity, but which, in practice, is the decisive authority. My concern is that so many evangelicals assume that all technology is good, progressive, and beneficial. Their confidence in technology rarely faces either its religious or nihilistic character. They don't appear to reflect seriously on what we are doing with technology and why. In his *Faith and Hope in Technology* Egbert Schuurman points to the danger in unreflective use of technology. He warns that with his technology man can seek to rival God, make a name for himself on earth, and thus to seek to build a culture without God, a "tower-of-Babel" culture.

How does the Gospel spread in Third World countries? Most Christians now live in areas relatively low in technological capacity and with little hope of ever having access to what the nations of high technology possess. It shows that God does not depend on technology. The new life in Christ comes through the work of the Spirit. The Gospel spreads like "a grain of mustard seed" (cf.Mark 4: 26-34) throughout the world.

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