

Circulation of the Saints (6)

The Seeker Sensitive Church

How large an area is a pastor expected to serve? In 1920 the typical answer was, "People living within a mile or two of our church."

At the western end of Lake Huron on Georgian Bay, Parry Sound was, in the 1920s, a small community, a place to go through up or down from Sudbury. When the young Anglican lay leader "Rusty" Wilkes stepped down from the train on the Parry Sound station platform in January 1925, he began a life of adventure and hardship. Wilkes' typical exhausting Sunday went like this: In the morning he assisted the rector as a lay reader at the church in town. At noon he would sling a small rucksack on his back containing his robe, church books, and a change of socks, then head out for six miles by foot along a snow-covered gravel county road. At three o'clock he conducted a service in a one-room country schoolhouse. Afterwards he trudged through tangle foot bush and shin-high crusted snow for another six miles. At 7.00 p.m. he had another service in another one- room schoolhouse. The schools, which held only about 12 people, were always packed for the services. The congregations came by horse drawn sled or wagon.

Car-Oriented Culture

Times have changed. With the arrival of the automobile, distances were nearly obliterated. The love affair with the car became fuelled by people's preoccupation with independence. Cars allow people to do what they want, when they want, irrespective of distance or obstacle. As cars freed up drivers to live, work, shop, and play farther from home, these distances made car ownership virtually necessary for full participation in society.

The shift has been subtle, but unmistakable, as we've moved from thinking of the car as a convenience to considering it a necessity. This cultural change also affected the church. With the car came suburban living. The construction of better roads and the increased dependence on motor vehicles made it relatively easy for people to drive ten, twenty, or thirty miles each way to church two or three or four times a week. The size of a congregation was no longer limited by the number of residents living within a mile or two of the meeting place. It was the beginning of the end for many small country churches. Former thriving downtown churches lost members. Some moved to the suburbs. By 1999 literally thousands of American Protestant churches were serving a congregation scattered across a circle with a radius of 10-15 miles from the meeting place. A few megachurches in the United States draw worshipers from a a thirty-mile radius.

Ample parking space is high on the priority list for megachurches. On any given Sunday thousands of casually dressed people jam the parking lot of the Willow Creek

Community Church and stream into the building. A church-growth guru said, "The No.1 rule of church growth is that a church will never get bigger than its parking lot." Its parking lot? *In Dining with the Devil* Os Guinness says that it is "a dead giveaway for the suburbanness of church growth." And if church growth depends on the size of a parking lot, a few questions are in order. Guinness, "Parking lot No.1? Above growth in faith? Before growth in the Word and Spirit?"

Robert H. Schuller

Robert Schuller is probably the foremost exponent of popular religion in America. Upon his graduation from Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, he was ordained, and accepted a pastorate of the Ivanhoe Reformed Church in Riverside, Illinois, whose membership increased tenfold during his four-and-half year stay. In 1955 Classis California of the Reformed Church in America asked Schuller to begin a congregation in Garden Grove, in Southern California's growing Orange County. Schuller, always an innovator, rented a local drive-in theater for Sunday worship services and established the world's first "come as you are – in the family car" drive-in church. He began his ministry perched atop the theater's refreshment stand with no choir and no props, just a microphone. In a culture crazed with the automobile, the idea caught on, and the Garden Grove Community Church quickly grew from one hundred to several thousand.

In 1980, the Garden Grove Community Church moved into its new \$18 million "Crystal Cathedral" with ten thousand window panes of sparkling glass that capture the rays of the sun. But Schuller never abandoned his love affair with the car and the idea of a drive-in church. In his superstructure he preaches simultaneously to an indoor congregation of three thousand and an outdoor "congregation" sitting in their cars. He defends his mammoth and extravagant superstructure with a spiritual- sounding explanation. "God showed us that there is no such thing as an impossible job. Just little thinkers!"

Schuller's building extravagance still receives continual accusations from some quarters in the evangelical community. For example, in *Will Evangelicalism Survive Its Own Popularity?* Jon Johnston believes the posh-faddish Crystal Cathedral can be a real source of alienation for those entering the church doors for worship and fellowship. He refers specifically to the poor who typically find it difficult to relate to such affluence. But it is Schuller's television ministry that brought him fame and success for his church and programs. He established his own TV ministry in 1970, broadcasting the weekly church services as the "Hour of Power." Since many viewers are also regular churchgoers, his broadcast has become a model for what viewers feel their own churches should be like – both in form and content.

Schuller is a master of utilizing psychology, sociology, and marketing research. He tapped into the religion of mass culture, which asserts that nothing is mysterious, everything is understandable, and everything is remediable. His theology has been described as a hybrid between evangelicalism and a Dale Carnegie-type positive

thinking, which Schuller appropriated from his mentor Norman Vincent Peale. He sometimes compiles his sermons in book form before he preaches them. Schuller's "seeker-church" approach is very influential in church growth circles. For example, Rick Warren of Saddleback imitated Robert Schuller in building his church. He advertised his church as, "A new church for those who've given up on traditional church services." Bill Hybels also drew considerable inspiration from Schuller, who spoke in 1977 at Willow Creek's initial fund-raising banquet.

Key-Stone Community Church

The Willow Creek "seeker services approach" attracted followers and imitators in the Christian Reformed Church. In *Trends in Christian and Reformed Worship* (Calvin Theological Journal, Nov. 1997) Dr. Emily Brink suggested that the influence of the Willow Creek model for the seeker service would continue to grow in the CRC worship services, due in part to strong encouragement from the CRC's Home Missions agency.

One example of the latest seeker model in the CRC is the Key-Stone Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In October 2003, the church started to build a new \$2.9 million facility on 35 acres of land donated by Doug DeVos. Obviously, it has an abundance of parking space for church hoppers and shoppers. The 31,000-square-foot building will include offices, youth areas, and a 500-seat auditorium around a central hub featuring a café. The church was initially funded by seed money from the CRC, but is now financially on its own. The church neither looks like a church nor acts like a church. Its pastor Gene De Jong said, "We have no desire to build something that looks churchy. We're willing to sacrifice all of the church look to get function and efficiency." A Keystone service is so seeker-friendly, it does not resemble a church service. The leadership shaped its ministry into one that caters to unchurched people who might have a negative perception of a traditional church. On Sunday morning there are no baptisms. There is no communion. There are no Bibles in the auditorium. Offering plates are never passed around. There are no elders or deacons. And there is an intermission halfway through the morning service. There are no classes to take or any public professions to make. De Jong describes his church as "a group of friends embarking on a postmodern Christian journey." There are about 450 "friends" at its weekly services. De Jong maintains that Keystone has a Christ-centred focus. Yet he also says that the church has "a number of folks who are openly not Christian and feel like this is home."

Observations

The seeker service approach raises numerous questions. I believe we are engaged in a struggle for the very soul of the church in our time. It is not about holding on to tradition or about worship style, it is about theology, confessional integrity, and what it means to be church in the 21st century. The test for Christian worship is whether it squares with Scripture, not whether it is palatable to the unchurched.

In worship God meets His covenant people. The search for a "" for church actually threatens genuine Christian community, for the purpose of true worship is to offer to God what will be pleasing to God. The seeker service concept of church ignores the meaning of church as a covenant community in Christ, serving the Lord in every sphere of life, including politics, education, and social justice.

(To be continued)

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