

Discernment

So that you may be able to discern what is best. Phil. 1:10

Marketing and Church Growth

■ Christianity takes root in specific cultures at specific historical moments. This phenomenon of growth raises a central question in evangelism and church expansion: At what point does the Gospel become compromised as we adapt it to people and cultures? We know that some adaptations adulterate the Gospel and, consequently, foster an inauthentic expression of saving faith. When does adaptation become compromise, and enculturation become a falling away? As communicators of God's truth, how "native" can we go in becoming all things to all men?

In *The Next Christendom*, Phillip Jenkins documents numerous cultural adaptations of Christianity during its expansion around the globe. He reminds us of the successful cultural translation practiced by the later 19th century missionaries to China sent by China Inland Missions. They rejected Western attire for Chinese dress and grew their hair into ponytails, both acts showing submission to imperial power. In displaying allegiance to a foreign government, these evangelists risked a radical translation of the Gospel, but their ministry also expanded to 800 missionaries by 1900 (p. 36). Such maneuvering has been the norm of evangelism in most places during most of history.

The Western church is fully enmeshed in these crucial questions of cultural adaptation. Foremost among today's issues is the commercialization of our daily lives. Saturation advertising and targeted marketing shape our expectations and our choices; utilitarian calculations in which we weigh benefits against costs infiltrate

our thoughts and acts. We expect an ever-expanding range of services and products to meet our individual needs. Every part of our lives is tainted by this consumer mentality, from relationships, to healthcare, and even to religion.

What is the proper response of the local church to the challenges of consumer culture?

Do we use marketing mechanisms to attract the seeker and target the unique needs of an ever-fragmented populace? Or ought the local church flee from any trace of consumer appeals? Ought a church use marketing strategies as an acceptable translation of the Gospel to our culture, or does this compromise the Gospel by treating it—and the associated fellowship of believers—as

another commodity, transporting market logic into matters of the soul?

We culled the following articles from a vigorous live exchange during CACE's 2003 David A. Penner Debate (co-sponsored by the Penner Foundation) on Wheaton's campus. In addition to our four featured debaters, we provide three additional retrospectives that sharpen and extend the issues. Far from settling the questions, these essays lead us into new areas, and even the terms of the debate are challenged. For all of these authors, the very communication of the Gospel is at stake. This is an ethical engagement of significant import.

Kenneth R. Chase, CACE Director, 1998–2004

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At the 2003 David A. Penner Debate at Wheaton College, four scholars gathered together to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of employing seeker services, cultural adaptation, and marketing techniques within the Church. The following articles are edited versions of their remarks.—Editor

The Church in Post-Christian Culture

By George G. Hunter

■ We are discussing the growth of Christ's church, which presumably is desirable, and church growth through seeker churches, which may or may not be desirable. Some people swear by seeker churches, some people swear at them, and some people ask, "What are they?" My purpose is to reintroduce seeker churches, the populations many of them serve, and their approaches to outreach.



The rise of seeker churches is explained by the long-term secularization of the Western World. In a thousand-year period historians call Christendom, Christianity was the establishment religion of the West.

And in that period, as best as we can tell, most of the peoples of Europe thought of themselves as Christians. But several sustained events, such as the Renaissance, the rise of science, and the Enlightenment, produced the secularization of the West—in the sense that it moved the Christian church from the center of the culture well toward the margins.

For several centuries, secularization proceeded inch by inch until suddenly it stampeded in most of Europe following World War I and in most of North America following the Korean War. The most important consequence of secularization is secular people, defined historically as people who have never been substantially influenced by the Christian religion, and who furthermore are no longer culturally programmed to relate to our inherited European ways of doing church. In other words, among the unwashed pagan masses of Europe and North America, there is no epidemic interest in 18th century German pipe organ music; maybe there ought to be, but there isn't.

Some people, such as Feuerbach and Marx, predicted that secularization would produce populations with no religion at all. That hasn't materialized. Rather, we now have a religious smorgasbord from astrology to Zen where Christianity finds itself in a competitive position. The crisis of our time is that at least eight out of ten churches have not yet decided whether they intend to compete for the minds and hearts of human beings.

The Beginnings of the Seeker Church

The more immediate history behind seeker churches began in the revolutionary 1960s. Christian leaders like Chuck Smith perceived that many secular beatniks, hippies, and other counter-cultural populations were looking for life and for God, but in all the wrong places. These leaders also perceived that most of these seekers experienced traditional churches as unwelcoming and irrelevant. So the Jesus movement emerged as an alternative approach to communicating Christianity. The movement began where the people were: engaging their issues, speaking their language, and using their music without apology.

In the 1970s, other Christian leaders, such as Bill Hybels in Chicago, observed that many culturally conventional secular people could not relate to traditional expressions of Christianity either. So, the seeker church movement was conceived in the mid 1970s as an apostolic experiment. Such churches, and seeker congregations within established churches, began proliferating in the middle to late 1980s. Seeker churches are best known for their culturally current, celebrative worship services that present Christianity 101 while engaging people's issues through music, drama, film, and testimony, as well as preaching. Many seeker services today engage many pre-Christian people that traditional services cannot reach.

The seeker service, however, is the only feature of a seeker church of which most bystanders are aware. Three other features are at least as important. First, the small group is the most essential feature of many seeker churches. Small groups reach people, minister to people, and build people in ways that seem to be impossible in larger settings. Second, lay ministries typically drive most seeker churches. With 60% to 90% of all the people involved in some ministry, a typical seeker church functions more like a local movement than like the traditional church down the street, where the pastor does most of the ministry that matters. Third, the seeker churches have pioneered an astonishing range of outreach ministries to populations not usually on a traditional church's radar screen. The recovery ministries and support groups are fairly well known, but their outreach ministries may also include deaf people, blind people, people with mental illnesses, pre-literate people, single moms, prisoners and their families, homeless people, street people, at risk kids, elderly people, and many other distinct populations. These churches also reach educators and business people who are drawn to a church that cares enough and dares enough to engage in radical outreach. Some seeker churches are now reaching immigrant populations in several languages, and most of the outreach ministries are lay ministries usually invented by entrepreneurial laity.

Objections to the Seeker Church

Now, seeker churches today have their fair share of critics, including half of the people in this debate. So, let's look at two typical criticisms. First, the critics tell us that seeker churches target people who are consumer-oriented. Most critics say these churches even pander to such people. What may be going on here? Traditionalist church people have invented a lengthy list of alleged reasons why most pre-Christian people cannot become Christians. So, in many traditionalist churches that say they want to grow, I have been told that unchurched people are

not nice people, or they just want to be entertained, or they are slackers, or they are probably living in sin, or they wouldn't be interested, or they wouldn't fit in, or they are not like us, or they are not of the elect, or they would only come as consumers, etc. All of these reasons, however, are steeped in one underlining dynamic: We have decided that they are not appropriate candidates for Christianization.

Seeker churches, by contrast, are much more for outsiders than against them. A year ago, in two seeker churches in Florida, I interviewed about thirty converts—many with backgrounds in addiction, crime, or struggles with abuse or mental illness—single moms, compulsive gamblers, and Haitian immigrants—who had no prior church from which to transfer. It would not have occurred to me to label them as consumer-oriented. One of the two churches did minister to obsessive-compulsive consumers—people recovering from a credit card addiction—and I heard a lot of honesty in their support group. I observed a lot of tough love, but no pandering.

Second, the critics also charge that seeker churches engage in marketing to reach unchurched people. Marketing is the seeker church critics' favorite four-letter word. This charge actually has some validity. In the sense in which Philip Kotler talks about in *Marketing for Non-profit Organizations*, seeker churches do identify underserved populations, understand them, develop ways to serve them, and communicate the service to the people. In this basic sense, many seeker churches do marketing. Indeed, there is no known way to serve—say gambling addicts—effectively without finding them, understanding them, developing relevant ministries, and inviting the people. So, seeker churches do some marketing in ways appropriate to their type of non-profit organization, but they do not do marketing like Ford or Disney. Detractors love to exaggerate what seeker churches do in marketing, but the fact is, seeker churches are no more essentially about marketing than Catholic churches are essentially about Bingo.

“The crisis of our time is that... churches have not yet decided whether they intend to compete for the minds and hearts of human beings.”

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The Theological Danger of Church Marketing

By D. Stephen Long

■ The local church must avoid a marketing strategy that targets the unchurched, because there are no such people as “the unchurched,” and to think that

there are is to have already committed a serious theological mistake. To use the term unchurched is to subordinate the mission and the witness of the church to the logic of the market.

The “unchurched” is a category invented by sociologists and advertising executives; like other such categories—Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennium Generation, etc.—it seeks to describe in neutral terms broad sociological target audiences in order to convince

these target audiences they need certain products. If you are to be a successful Baby Boomer, for example, you need to drive a SUV or a minivan, and, for heaven’s sake, use Michelin tires if you love your children. Generation Xers have different needs and wants, and we must understand them. Some drink Coke; some drink the Uncola. Some are churched; some are “unchurched.”

The “Unchurched” Error

The term “unchurched” produces a new target audience that will inevitably require a different kind of gospel. We do not call our target audience “sinners,” “the unbaptized,” “the lost,” or even “the world.” The “unchurched” lose the theological status of those former categories precisely because, consistent with corporate America, we wouldn’t want to offend our target audience. We target the “unchurched” instead and ask them to become “churched.” And I fear—not always, but on the whole—we promise this on their own terms, falsely promising self-fulfillment. That is a long way from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s claim “when Christ bids

someone, ‘Come and follow,’ He bids that person, ‘come and die.’”¹ “Church” itself becomes a consumer item that persons need for their own self-fulfillment. This works against the Christian tradition of conversion and replaces it with manipulative market relations.

So I ask, can the commission, “Go and church the unchurched by developing a market strategy that draws upon the best sociological expertise and uses the market as well as any Fortune 500 company,” fulfill or even be consistent with the church’s commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded?”

The Specificity of the Gospel

Now those who argue for a marketing approach that targets the unchurched surely envision their work as being consistent with our Lord’s Great Commission. The theological argument that is almost always used to justify this is that we must make the gospel relevant in our context through an incarnational ministry.

But notice what we already have had to do to our theological language to justify this practice. Can the term “incarnation” be used in such a context? The Incarnation is a specific particular event; it is God assuming Jewish flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, who is then crucified and bodily raised from the dead. Any appeal to the incarnation, if it is theologically warranted, must have a direct relationship to the risen body of Christ. But once we justify a marketing strategy, the Incarnation often loses its particular bodily significance and becomes vacuous, meaning something like using the best available technological means to present some idea of the Gospel. Almost always, virtual reality replaces the material reality of the Incarnation in such justifications.

Another theological argument to justify using a marketing strategy is that we should use the



wisdom of our age to express the Gospel, just as Paul did in his. But can the logic of the market be that wisdom? Before using Paul's "all things to all people," we must ask, "Is the logic of the global market a hindrance or merely neutral to faithful Christian living?" Make no mistake about it, if you say: "Yes, we should use a marketing strategy," you are inviting the logic of the Global Market into the sanctuary of the church, and the logic of the market is like a cancer. It grows and it grows, solely for the sake of growth, taking over everything in its midst.

Now, we are not yet at the place of other cultural industries. We don't yet stop in the midst of a service and say, "And before I begin, let me remind you that today's sermon is brought to you by the good people at Starbucks." But we are not that far off. The dangers are more real than many of the church growth experts want to believe.

I am convinced that the logic of the market is a threat to the Church's mission, because growth replaces faith. Growth is important as a secondary concern for the life of the Church. The first concern is faith, because Jesus said to Peter, not multiply my sheep, but "feed them." And He said, "The question when I come back is, will I find faith?" I am convinced the global market is a threat to the church and should be kept out of the sanctuary. Even if some good could come from the influence of the market, we must be scrupulous.

The Destruction of Culture

Let me give you a reason why I think this is the case. Some twenty years ago, fresh out of Taylor University, I went to be a missionary in Honduras. I was a local preacher, and my wife ran a medical clinic. We lived on an island among a people called Guarifuna; they were an African people who had been brought over in the Middle Passage. They rebelled against their slave captors and lived on this island. For over 400 years, they had maintained their

traditions through dance and song.

We thought we had been fully accepted by the culture one night when they asked us to see the traditional African dances. We walked with them out past the village to see this cross-cultural experience. We arrived only to realize that the music sounded vaguely familiar. And in fact what had happened is, the young people gathered before the elders and were dancing to Michael Jackson's "Beat It." A global cultural product had subordinated and destroyed a local particular tradition.

I remember speaking with Brother Toribio, who was the last person who would be able to speak the Guarifuna language, and I remember the sadness in his eyes when he told us, "When I die, the language dies with me." What opposition couldn't do, what slavery and violence couldn't do, the enticement of the global market did. It destroyed that culture.

Now I don't know whether the Guarifuna culture had some plan in the divine economy and needs to be preserved, but I do know that Christianity is also a local particular culture with a specific kind of language that has to be passed on from generation to generation. Christianity is a

democracy of the dead founded in the communion of saints where no single generation has the right to say, "We have to do it differently, because our context is so new and unique." And I know, as Joseph Schumpeter has taught us, that the logic of the market is what he called "creative destruction." It seeks to destroy the old, always for the new and improved. The logic of the market claims that it will provide the wealth of nations if we are obedient to it. It replaces Christian eschatology.

So for that reason, even if some good would come from it, the local church must avoid a marketing approach that targets the unchurched.

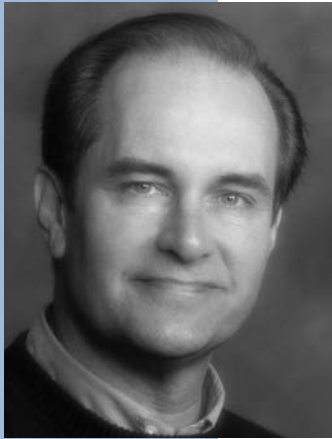
The local church must avoid a marketing strategy that targets the unchurched, because there are no such people as "the unchurched."

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¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), p. 89.

A Story of Outreach

By S. Craig Bishop



■ Thirteen years into the life of our church, we faced a crisis. Having been birthed by a handful of Mennonites under the influence of the charismatic renewal in the early 70s, we weren't doing well. We were hundreds of members strong, but we were on a spiritual plateau. The excitement of the startup had long been forgotten, and with each passing Sunday service, we were becoming more inwardly focused. In a little over a decade, we had created a Christian subculture, complete with arguments over budgets, buildings, and best worship practices. It isn't that we weren't committed to an outward focus in theory, but we were out of touch with our surrounding community, and no one seemed to have noticed. By all appearances, we were following the Pharisees' doctrine of salvation by separation. Like it or not, we had become practicing segregationists, believing that holiness was achieved by avoiding contact with unclean sinners. Would we, like they, be offended by the behavior of Jesus—who engaged the Samaritans, who ate dinner with tax collectors, who touched lepers, and showed compassion to harlots? There would be no way to find out, because if Jesus was showing His face out and about town, being a friend of sinners, we most certainly were not. And we were not alone. Plenty of churches in our area were hiding behind walls of separation with church-as-a-fortress mentalities. Still, some of our congregational leaders were troubled. Too few of our members were showing signs of vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Did we need to expose the cadaver we were calling our Body of Christ to the fresh oxygen provided by new converts coming into our midst? Some of us thought so.

Finding Our True Purpose

We began a discussion about how the local church is defined. Were we motivated by the primary purpose

of caring for those 99 already here or inviting them to join in the search for that one that was lost? Though few of us wanted to admit it, we recognized that we were organized for maintenance, not mission. We had focused on nourishing the faithful, not reaching out to our contemporaries filled with unbelief. We studied I Corinthians 14 and saw the danger of a church focused on its own members' experiences while ignoring the needs of others. We recognized that we needed some culturally sensitive people building a bridge to our unchurched friends, rather than calling to them from one distant shore to the other.

After months of discussion and prayer, and armed with a mission statement and a purpose-driven church model, we set about to turn the church inside out. We started with the church environment itself, once ungracious, judgmental, and condemning, now gradually becoming more loving, accepting, and forgiving. Through informal surveys and focus groups, we learned how to provide a place that was understandable to newcomers, eliminating in-house terminology and programs that were barriers to the uninitiated. To accommodate our newer attendees, we launched a class that would help guests find their way around. With each successive step, new insights washed upon the shores of our minds. Suddenly, we saw the New Testament as a book about mission, replete with examples of Jesus meeting felt needs, and Paul demonstrating cultural sensitivity.

The Mission-field Next Door

I will never forget the moment the light went on for one of the key leaders. "We are like missionaries in a foreign land!" he exclaimed. We were discovering that true missionaries don't need to go outside of their country, state, or even their own community. They need only go outside themselves. It began to dawn on some of us that culture was not a synonym for the world, which is the term the New Testament often uses to describe the evil anti-Christian values

and systems of our present age. The culture we wanted to engage involved the spiritually neutral aspects of living in any society. These might include language, music, clothing styles, habits, and points of reference.

The opening phrase of the BranchCreek mission statement declares that we should use every available opportunity. If by avoiding the language of the Christian ghetto, providing a contemporary beat to our music, dressing informally, and offering multiple services, we could engage our culture, then we were taking steps in fulfilling our mission. If someone in the late 80s had told us we were marketing the church, we would have objected: “We are simply communicating with care in ways a lost person might understand.” To help our community make sense of the Gospel, we offered classes for skeptics, for those in need of recovery, and for other specific needs. For those making commitments to Christ, a series of three nine-week classes teaching basic church doctrine, called *First, Second, and Third Steps* was launched. As more spiritual seekers began to attend, we had to release our inner core of leaders from committee work and invite them to help provide pastoral care through a network of small groups. This lay empowerment released new ministry and strengthened our outreach capacities. All were invited to serve with their gifts.

Does this sound exciting? Well, not everyone was happy. Over the course of three to five years, many families left the church saying their needs were not being met. Yet, we held the course. We did not believe that being sensitive to the needs of the seeker meant being insensitive to the believer. In fact, over the next decade, we added Bible study options, new small groups, classes teaching spiritual disciplines, and even an alternate service offering extended worship and expositional preaching. By distinguishing between forms and functions, we found that we could be both seeker-sensitive and biblically sound. We discovered that it is possible to

build a culture-friendly church without compromising Christian values. In retrospect, it was our attitude toward the unreached that had fundamentally changed. God so set our hearts on fire with a passion for bringing His lost loved ones home that it superceded all rhetoric about marketing and all arguments from church-growth detractors.

The Courage to Reach Out

The church must have the courage to be scandalized just as Jesus was if it hopes to win the world. At BranchCreek, a favorite metaphor we use to describe what we are all about is that of the

Prodigal Son. Remember in Luke 15 that Jesus was confronted with religious leaders upset with Him, because He was too conversant with despised tax collectors, filthy prostitutes, and low-life non-religious sinners. The Pharisees were anti-culture, but Jesus sought to dissuade them. He told them the story of the lost son. The father’s response of lifting his robe and running to the rebellious son and hugging him must have seemed so inappropriate, and here was Jesus doing the same thing, opening the door to culture so that He could hug those in it

that they might be transformed. That, my friends, is our calling: to reach out into culture with the same loving, reckless abandon and to throw a party for all who return home.

If we examine the response of the older brother in this story, we are helped to understand those who disagree with this approach. That son wasn’t impressed by his father’s display. In fact, he was angry that one so undeserving received so much attention. Now, the father loved him too, and he needed grace and understanding as much as anyone, but in our churches, we must decide whose behavior we will imitate. You can put me down as a culturally-sensitive prodigal hugger. If to you that means I have sold out to a marketing mentality, so be it. My faith in what we gained by family expansion supercedes my fear of what we might lose in personal pride.

“Like it or not, we had become practicing segregationists, believing that holiness was achieved by avoiding contact with unclean sinners.”

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Seeker-Sensitive, not Consumer-Oriented

By Douglas D. Webster

■ Ten years ago, after writing a book entitled, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong With Marketing the Church*, we moved as a family from a large suburban

evangelical church in Denver to an old downtown mainline church in San Diego. We left an upscale, homogeneous, wealthy congregation for a highly diverse and struggling congregation. I went from ministering to a target audience of baby boomers to being the target in a conflicted church that was struggling with its identity.

At the time of our move, my church's diversity amounted to blue blood Presbyterians, a social gospel

soup kitchen, a group of homeless people who came and heard nothing about the gospel, a religion and arts concert series that attracted the highbrow, and a core group of believers who were hungry for biblical preaching. The church was divided over the gay issue; 300 members wanting the church to bless and facilitate gay marriages left the church with my coming as the pastor.

Over these last ten years, we have moved from being a fragmented, polarized congregation into becoming a Christ-centered household of faith. We minister today to the flip-flop, board-shorts crowd as well as to downtown professionals. We feed several hundred homeless every Sunday afternoon and they are beginning to participate with us in our Sunday morning worship service; many are involved in small groups. Young families have joined our congregation. The average age of the congregation has become much younger. The most exciting thing is that lost, searching people regularly attend our services and come to Christ. We have the privilege of preaching and living the gospel of Christ before a very diverse crowd, including pagan new-agers, professionals, downtown condo retirees, international students,

Navy personnel, the homeless, and suburban families.

Remaining True to the Gospel

For us, church growth means nurturing a loving, serving, joyful, inter-generational, cross-cultural, mission-focused congregation that is truly open to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. To be a growing church involves compassion to all, especially to the poor, faithful proclamation of the Bible, meaningful worship, and opportunities for service and fellowship. The ministries the Lord has called us to are clear: Christ-honoring worship and evangelism, effective Christian education for all ages, an urban Christian elementary school, a ministry to the homeless, and a partnership with cross-cultural missionaries.

If we look to Jesus on the subject of church growth, we come away with a decidedly different message than the one we receive from modern church growth experts. There is a huge difference in being seeker-sensitive and consumer-oriented. Much of what Dr. Bishop described is a wonderful seeker sensitivity that does not need to be classified as a consumer orientation.

Jesus' images of growth do not transpose well into today's fascination with modern marketing, powerful personalities, entertaining "worship," and a full range of felt-need programs. His images of growth point away from humanistic planning and engineering to God's hidden work of grace. Jesus never even came close to prescribing Ten Steps to Church Growth. Instead, He drew analogies that insisted on a natural, organic growth process that remained a mystery to the harvester. Jesus seems to relish telling us that the growth process is out of the farmer's hands. "Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself, the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head" (Mark 4:27-28, NIV).



Lifting up Christ

We set out to have God-centered, Christ-honoring worship and to really mean it. Our aim is to treat people seriously, not just to try to win them over to our side, but to reach people who are really lost apart from Christ and desperately in need of salvation. Our ministry is based on the fact that people are really not secular but spiritual, made in the image of God, and need to be appealed to, exhorted. So, I don't believe in a "how to, feel good" sermon, nor do I believe in a "take it or leave it" sermon. Our approach is best expressed in Isaiah's words, "Come, let us reason together. Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18, NIV).

There are not two strategies for growth, a numerical strategy for growth that appeals to consumers and a spiritual strategy that deepens their walk with Christ. The marketing approach may seem popular at first, but long term, it has some real problems. People are really resistant to being categorized and typecast. If anything, Jesus decategorized in His approach to people, and the Gospels are a wonderful description of Jesus reaching the very people a marketing approach would overlook. Yet, the seeker-sensitive pastor of a consumer-oriented church says that the way you can detect your target audience is by picking out the person with whom you would like to go on a vacation. I find that more discriminatory than discerning.

When the Apostle Paul spoke of his church growth strategy in I Corinthians 2:2 (NIV), he said, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Then he proceeded throughout the Corinthian letter to plant the cross in every specific issue confronting the church. Everything that we do by way of evangelism, by way of worship, by way of outreach, should be marked by the cross. If it isn't consistent with, "Come, follow Jesus, take up His cross, and follow

Him," then I really don't think it fits. Why would you plan your worship service to appeal to 15% of your congregation who are seekers, when 85% are Christians in need of spiritual growth? Our experience has been that the 15% who are seekers want to come and experience God-centered, Christ-centered worship. They want to see what Christians are really like. And in that context, I think the Gospel is extremely compelling.

Resisting Stereotypes

I close with two statements from individuals who resist and resent being treated as consumers. The first is from Sarah, who writes about being stereotyped as a Gen-Xer: "We know you have tried to get us to church. That's part of the problem. Many of your appeals have been carefully calculated for success and that turns our collective stomach. Take worship, for instance: you may think that fashionably cutting-edge liturgies relate to us on our level, but the fact is, we can find better entertainment elsewhere. The same goes for anything you term 'contemporary.' We see right through it. It is up to date for the sake of being up to date, and we are not impressed by the results."

The second comes from a conversation I had last week with a ballerina who dances in the San Diego Ballet and her fiancée who is the lead singer in a rock group that had just returned from touring in Europe. I said, "What attracted you to our church? I would have thought that this old stone church and traditional worship would not have appealed to you." He answered, "You know, we have visited a lot of churches, and it seems like we are being worked. We wanted to come to a place that was serious about the Bible and lifting Jesus Christ up."

And I imagine all four of us in this debate want what my friend is seeking, a place where the Bible is taken seriously, and Jesus Christ is lifted up.

"Jesus' images of growth do not transpose well into today's fascination with modern marketing, powerful personalities, entertaining 'worship,' and a full range of felt-need programs."

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Question and Answers

Immediately following the debate the participants answered audience questions. The following is an edited transcript of their remarks. —Editor

■ Eric Wolthuis

(Wheaton College Graduate Student):

I come from Southeast Asia, and I am sure, as all of you are aware, that a lot of what is happening in the North American church has ripple effects overseas. What implications does the consumer-oriented, or maybe we should say the seeker-sensitive church, have for the worldwide church?

Bishop:

I like the term sensitivity, because in many seeker-sensitive churches, we have learned from missionaries in the field about what it means to speak another language, and what it means to identify with a culture in order to build a bridge so that you can reach it. So, in many cases, a lot of the insights are being pulled from the folks that I speak with. This involves being willing to be challenged continually.

Hunter:

I would agree that much of the traffic has not gone from North America to the two-thirds world as much as the other way around. Many of the seeker churches of America learned a version of a basic paradigm of small groups and lay ministry through Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, and adapted that approach to this land. Cross-cultural adaptations like this are a great benefit to the church.

I think the question our colleagues are asking is whether an emphasis upon, say, cultural relevance, small groups, lay ministries, and outreach ministries is Biblically faithful. I would suggest that Christianity as reflected in the pages of the New Testament was a lay movement. No one was ordained in the sense that current denominational traditions now define it. Furthermore, they met primarily in house churches, which by virtue of the size of the houses were small groups at least 80 to 90 percent of the time.

Long:

I don't think this debate is about house churches, which, incidentally, I completely support. The question is, "Should I spend my time reading books on management techniques and using them in my ministry?" I am not an expert in world Christianity, but if you go into the bookstores in the seminaries in Africa and Asia, I doubt very much that you would find these books, *Marketing the Congregation*, *Create Your Own Future*, *Seven Steps for an Effective Church*. I have been in those seminaries, and I have never seen those kinds of books in those seminaries where the Gospel is busting out. The movement about which we are debating can be defined by a book titled, *Create Your Own Future*. That is a book in this church growth literature. All I could think of is, "Nietzsche is right. God is dead, and we have killed Him." Because if we have to create our own future, we don't need Jesus to come back.

I think any person of above average intelligence is going to realize, "Well, if you can use these sociological tools to get people to do what you want, then you don't need God. God no longer matters." This isn't new. Go see what Charles Finney said about revivals. He claimed that they have nothing to do with miracles, they have nothing to do with supernatural abilities, they have everything to do with the application of good social sciences and how human organizations work.¹

Marx was right. If you can explain these things solely in terms of causal sociological relationships, you don't need God to explain it. If you have a church that you can explain without having to make reference to God, what is the point in having a church at all?

Hunter:

In reference to Finney, he also clarified his statements by saying that a revival of religion is not a miracle nor dependent upon a miracle if by a miracle you mean God suspending the usual laws of the

human mind and the human audience.² His point was that the Holy Spirit works through human language, community, etc. In fact, half of the book on those famous lectures is on prayer. You can't read his lectures on revival and stereotype it the way you did with that comment.

Tony Nord (Wheaton College Student):

Why is it inappropriate to target specific groups? Do not missionaries target the poor, the rich, the deaf, the blind, etc? Missionaries cannot be effective unless they have researched and understood the specific people they are ministering to.

Webster:

What we want is sensitivity as opposed to selectivity, discernment as opposed to discrimination. We do need to understand the people to whom we minister. In our particular church, there is a spectrum that includes homeless, destitute, and addicted people as well as wealthy banker-types and everyone in between. The Gospel is wonderfully preached into that spectrum, and the Holy Spirit does a phenomenal job in reaching that spectrum.

As a church, we want to be sensitive to that whole spectrum, so that the smelly, homeless person on Sunday morning feels welcome, gets a donut, a cup of coffee, and a specific invitation to come into our sanctuary and to worship God. That's part of what we want to be as a household of faith.

Sometimes missionaries have to define and determine a very narrow group of people, but that narrow group of people inevitably has a wide spectrum and great diversity. We seek to practice openness, not the market practices of Peter Drucker, Lyle Schaller, and George Barna. What works for Disney does not work for the church. What worked for IBM does not work for the household of faith. To think it does is a modern day heresy, as real as any heresy we have had in the life of the church.

“What we want is sensitivity as opposed to selectivity, discernment as opposed to discrimination. We do need to understand the people to whom we minister.”

Holly Sutton (Wheaton College Student):

How do you propose to reach postmodern, truth-relative, radical Gen-Xers without creating a marketing strategy, without changing the way you do things in your church?

Webster:

The way not to reach them is to develop a marketing strategy. At least that is what we have found in an urban, downtown setting. What people want is to come in and feel that the people they are relating to are real: real about God, real about sin, real about the Word, and not be so concerned about “How I am

coming across.” How do you like relating with people who are overly concerned about how they are coming across? That is hard, isn't it?

Expand that now to the life of the church. We must be less self-conscious and a little bit more self-forgetful, and live in the freedom of Christ. We find people are wonderfully attracted to that, especially a postmodern, new age, pagan relativist. They either like it, or they are turned off by it, but we find that people who are turned off by it still tend to come back.

Long:

Dorothy Day, who is one of my favorite Christian figures of the twentieth century, used to say that the task of Christian witness is not to engage in propaganda, but to live one's life in such a way that one's life would not make sense if the God in whom you confess were not true. And for me that is the first task. The task is not how do we speak to the postmodern Gen-Xers, or the Baby Boomers, or whoever. The task is, what does it mean to live your life in such a way that when you proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord, your neighbors would say, “Well, they are an odd lot, those neighbors I have, they are strange. They are different. You would have to understand their God to make sense of their lives.” Now, the truth of the matter is that we blend easily into this culture. We are not odd enough. We don't look strange enough.

Bishop:

I would like to respond to that, because I come from an Anabaptist background, and we have many Mennonites in our community. Some of them paint their bumpers black. They wear black clothing. Their communities are relatively exclusive: visitors immediately feel out of place. In some cases, visitors are not welcome. Many of those churches now are making attempts to adapt into what you might call seeker-sensitive churches because of their desire to relate to the folks that they feel called to reach.

All seeker-sensitive churches, to a certain degree, fit into a specific culture, but that is not to say that they automatically fall into the category of those who have turned their faith and focus away from Christ. They have not compromised with their culture. I think the claim that seeker-sensitive pastors have compromised the Gospel is hurtful to the church. I don't think it is helpful in building the unity of the church, and that is one of the things I am concerned about. Prof. Long, you seem to have a mental model in which all of these different churches and techniques can fit in a single bucket for you, and I am concerned that we have potential pastors and church leaders in our audience who may get the impression that if they read or pick up the wrong kind of book, they are somehow no longer dependent on Christ.

“All seeker-sensitive churches, to a certain degree, fit into a specific culture.”

Brian Howell (Wheaton College Faculty, Sociology/Anthropology):

There is an insight from sociology that is relevant to this discussion, and that is the issue of class, and how class factors into churches that are situated in particular communities. Cultures are not neutral but are embedded with power relationships that create exclusions. Some communities are homogeneous in terms of home ownership, dress, car ownership, music preference, etc. Is it counter to the inclusivity of the Gospel if we ignore the ways in which our neighborhoods and our community are, in fact, exclusive? Do we in fact make ourselves exclusive by marketing or by seeking to an exclusive community?

Bishop:

But would you agree that church has a class status as well? A church, as a whole, has some communication to an outsider or a first-time guest of some status, be it low or high, so it isn't as though we can avoid the class issue. In other words, it is really the seeker-sensitive churches that are trying to get in touch with the perceptions of the outsider coming in. One of the things we determined in interacting with folks is that people feel more relaxed when you dress casual. So, we learned it was a barrier for people entering our building to see everyone dressed up in a coat and tie. Now, those in our community easily can wear a new suit every week, but, as a result of our new awareness, we wanted to make the opportunity for people to participate less threatening.

Webster:

Leith Anderson is a great pastor, working in a great church, but some observations he offers are hard to swallow, e.g., that you could have a great Sunday School class with a great teacher with a great curriculum and the only reason it is not growing is the color on the walls.³ That is a class comment. Well, who cares? They should adjust to the color on the walls. When church

boards get strung out on questions like that they are really majoring on minors. John 6 is a great passage for looking at how Jesus handled a range of communication issues, beginning with the meeting of felt needs that were real needs. Many of our felt needs in our culture today are entertainment needs. A church needs to distinguish between the felt needs that are real and the felt needs that people have for entertainment. Jesus drove that argument in John 6 all the way to the point of driving off many of His disciples, and then He turned to the Twelve and asked, “Do you want to leave as well?” And Peter spoke up saying, “No, You have the words of eternal life, and we have come to believe You are the Holy One of God.”

¹ See Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, I. 3.

² *Ibid.*, I. 1.

³ Leith Anderson, *Dying For Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), p. 132.

Giving Children Space

Interview with Dr. Scottie May

■ **Discernment:** *What differences have you observed in children's ministries over the past twenty years?*

May: I see radical change in children's ministry. It almost appears as if children are used as the ploy for getting adults into the service. I hear comments like, "We should have this be fun for the children so they keep coming, then their parents will come."

Discernment: *But if children are being given the gospel, and if they are being pulled in through fun-based ministries, what kinds of concerns might one have?*

May: What we have now is almost identical to a Saturday morning television kid's show: a cartoon-orientated stage, flashy colors, worship bands for three and four year olds—basically entertainment. It is changing the way children experience the Gospel, and it actually interferes with their spiritual life.

Discernment: *How do these elements interfere?*

May: According to research in neurobiology, children cannot respond *affectively* and *relationally* at high speed. They need slow speed. So, we did work in the last year and a half which puts children in a very different environment—a very slow, thoughtful, contemplative environment—and I have found children as young as four enter deeply into reflection. In one experiment, we had a prayer corner on one side of the room, a praise corner on the other side of the room, and space for individual response in between. We used phrases such as, "We walk slowly here, because we have all the time we need." "We speak softly here, because someone might be listening to God." And these children caught that environment. Their whole manner changed because of it. In the prayer corner one day, a five-year old came out after several minutes and said, "God touched me." I am deeply concerned that encounters with God are not part of the agenda of some children's ministries. In attempting to make the gospel relevant, we are doing everything we can to give children everything we

think they want, not what they yearn for—and these are quite different.

Discernment: *Wouldn't it would be difficult to attract children to a Sunday School program by advertising a prayer corner?*

May: I wouldn't advertise it; that is part of my concern with marketing. I would instead prefer that a church carefully set its priorities for children: first, to have encounters with God; second, to help them fall more and more in love with the Lord Jesus. Now, I think it is perfectly acceptable to have events every quarter, even once a month, to get together and have a wonderful time doing all these wild and wacky things. But for me, if the people of God gather together to meet God regularly, children need to do that too. They need that quiet space, that safe space where they have a sense of awe and wonder, because they have heard God's voice.

Discernment: *Is it even possible to shift children's ministries to a focus on the spirituality of children?*

May: It happens when the children's ministers have had their own deep encounter with God. If this level of spiritual relationship has happened with leadership, then they yearn for the children to have it so much that they are willing to start at the grass-roots level and build it in.

Recommended Resources:

Berryman, Jerome. *Teaching Godly Play: The Sunday Morning Handbook*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1995

Bunge, Marcia, ed. *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000.

Cavalletti, Sofia. *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children*. Chicago: Liturgy Training, 1992.

Ratcliff, Donald, ed. *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Spirituality and Applications*. Brockton, Mass.: Cascade, 2004.

Stewart, Sonja, and Jerome Berryman, *Young Children and Worship*. Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox, 1990.



Scottie May is Assistant Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College. Her research focuses on children's ministry, particularly on bible teaching and original conversion experiences for very young children. She is currently co-writing a text on children's ministry, tentatively titled *Children Matter*.

The Alien Witness of the Church

By Mark Husbands



Mark A. Husbands, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Theology at Wheaton College. A Canadian citizen, Dr. Husbands received his Ph.D. from University of St. Michael's College, Toronto. His academic work focuses on Barth, Luther, Calvin, and Jüngel.

■ The question posed is whether the Church, in an effort to carry out its mission and witness, ought to conceive of the Gospel as a product requiring strategic placement in a given market. Those who answer affirmatively seem to have a disturbing commitment to marketing practices at odds with the fundamental nature of the Church. The uncritical acceptance of the logic of consumption within a market economy belies a trust in the following ideas: (1) the logic of a market economy is morally neutral; (2) the glad tidings of the Gospel can be readily conceived of as a “product” or “service”; (3) the Gospel ought to be promoted in a fashion which conveys the belief that it will satisfy the desires of the consumer; and finally (4) acceptance can be achieved by those who succeed in strategically targeting the “right audience” for their product. Any serious attempt to defend these assumptions must counter a number of questions.

What does it portend for the witness of the church when the language of repentance, selflessness, and the way of the cross is jettisoned in favor of more attractive categories such as community, relationship, fulfillment, or transformation? Has the attempt to communicate this gospel to an affluent, highly educated cohort eclipsed an awareness of the socially, economically, and racially transgressive nature of the church? By ‘transgressive’ here, I am pointing to the kind of socially disruptive ministry undertaken by Christ (cf. Luke 4:18).

George Hunter is to be credited with nurturing an astute claim: “seeker churches” he argues, “are much more for outsiders than against them.”¹ Alas, the positive gains of this observation evaporate quickly once one stops to examine precisely who constitutes this “other.” Rick Warren, for instance, claims “explosive growth occurs when the type of people in the community match the type of people that are already in the church and they both match

the type of person the pastor is.”² The underlying belief here is that growth requires the existence of a good cultural and socio-economic “fit” between a church and the target audience of her witness. While such affection for homogeneity apparently develops from pragmatic concern, one ought, as anthropologist Brian Howell suggested,³ to examine a range of assumptions pertaining to class, economics, and cultural xenophobia.

In the end, the dilemma facing the church in a consumer culture is this: By failing to recall that it is God alone (rather than marketing expertise) who

brings about Christian life and witness, do seeker-churches unwittingly betray a lack of confidence in the Gospel? Have they failed to believe that God can call and use them to love those on the periphery of power, status, and wealth? This is precisely where the collected voice of the two-thirds world is illuminating. In 1999, the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission gathered in Foz de Iguassu, Brazil, to produce the Iguassu Affirmation

that called for “all Christians to commit themselves to reflect God’s concern for justice and the welfare of all peoples.” Not surprisingly, such hunger for justice resulted in the call for “a healthy critique of mission theories that depend heavily on marketing concepts and missiology by objectives.” The disruptive nature of the Gospel demands nothing less than a deep reliance upon the Spirit and a genuine love for the impoverished and urbane alike. A church that truly seeks to proclaim the glad tidings of the Gospel will welcome all in the name of Christ, confidently entrusting the results of its mission to God alone.

“The disruptive nature of the Gospel demands nothing less than a deep reliance upon the Spirit...”

¹ See page 3.

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 177.

³ See page 12.

A Dynamic Model of the Church

By Barry Gardner

■ When listening to debates between proponents of “traditional church” and “new church” models, I’ve been struck by the different conceptions of time that separate the two views.



Defenders of “traditional church” develop their arguments upon the nature of the church and the principles for which it stands. They are rightly concerned that the church not compromise God’s truth in fulfilling her mission on earth. At the same time, I think the traditional view of the church is a static

one (analyzed at a single point in time). They focus on what the church is rather than how the church becomes. In contrast, proponents of the “new church” are working from a dynamic model of the church: how does it grow and change as it accomplishes God’s purpose in the world?

Sometimes the word “growth” seems to separate the two views. It shouldn’t. Like the human body, which sheds and replaces millions of cells daily, the river of time in which the church finds herself requires replenishing members continually. All churches must attract new members. Churches that attract members faster than they lose them grow in size. The analysis is straightforward.

Church member losses have only three causes: (1) deaths, (2) members moving away, and (3) members becoming disaffected for some reason. The “new church” understands that she can do little about either death or the mobility of church members. But advocates for the “new church” are keenly interested in knowing why people become alienated. Christians believe axiomatically that God’s word is powerful and true. If people aren’t receptive, the problem isn’t the message; lack of receptivity is attributable to either the audience’s hardened hearts or to the way in which we’ve presented the truth.

I think the difference between the “new church” and the “traditional church” is that the former

is overt about its consideration of what the people think, using surveys and other instruments, while the latter would rather talk about it in the elders’ meetings. But all successful communicators develop their message giving consideration to their audience.

The dynamic view of time also looks at how members are gained. Again, the church replenishes members from only three sources: (1) births (in churches with good Christian education programs, these children often accept Christ and join), (2) Christians who transfer from another congregation, and (3) people who become Christians (evangelism).

While there have been churches whose growth has depended on high fertility rates, “be fruitful and multiply” has not been a contemporary Protestant emphasis. Encouraging transfer growth (“sheep-stealing”) has been viewed unkindly within the clergy—though growing congregations are often attractive to disaffected members of other churches. So, converting non-Christian neighbors is the Biblically-mandated option that’s left.

Again, considering one’s audience is the key communication principle in play. And the audience here, by definition, lacks Christian perspective. They don’t understand God-talk, they may have been turned-off to church in the past, and they have other things to do on Sunday morning. But they have problems at work, struggles with their kids, and may be searching to know the meaning of their earthly lives. They wouldn’t ordinarily postpone their golf game to hear an exposition on I Corinthians, but they might do so if they thought the sermon could help with their marriage.

Every church needs to replenish its membership as older members are lost. Healthy churches—a term I hope encompasses churches of both “traditional” and “new church” varieties—know their audiences and have figured out how to communicate with them. The striking thing about the “new church” is that it considers the audience that doesn’t attend their church . . . yet. The trick is preaching to both the audience that already attends and the one that should.



Barry Gardner, MBA, is a Wheaton-based consultant to Christian non-profits and churches. A former professor in Wheaton College’s Business/Economics department, he attends a seeker-sensitive congregation in South Barrington, Illinois.

CACE News & Notes

Words From Our New Director, Dr. Lindy Scott

■ I begin in this post with a great sense of awe and responsibility. My predecessors have established CACE as a clear and articulate voice within Christian ethics. It is my goal to continue in that tradition as we attempt to bring the Word of God to bear upon the great moral challenges of our day.

Recent Programs

■ “The Future of Humanity: Technology, Medicine and Genetics,” was the focus of the Center’s Spring Conference Triologue Workshops, Mar. 16–18. Our two keynote speakers were Dr. Gilbert Meilaender—member of the President’s Council of Bioethics—and Lori Andrews—professor of law and policy advisor on genetic and reproductive technology (Chicago-Kent College of Law, ITT). Our website (www.christianethics.org) has more information on all our past programs.

CACE 2005-2006

■ Our coming year’s theme is: “Community & Freedom.” The Sept. Penner Debate will explore the issue of the role of the United States in the world community. We will be inaugurating the “Wheaton Lectureship in Moral Formation,” Nov. 7–9, with Ruth Padilla DeBorst, President of the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana.

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