

CORPS RESOURCES



CHURCH MODELS FOR MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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A REVOLUTION

A revolution is taking place in both the theology and practice of the church as the twenty-first century begins. Statistics show that people are leaving the church at a rate of 4,500 per year from church attendance in Melbourne, and this probably reflects the case nation-wide [1]. There are numerous Christians who “have come to the conviction that the institutional church as we know it today is ineffective” and the church must change its attitudes and practices to engage with the average Australian [2]. Thus there are a number of different church models that are endeavouring to overcome to address these abysmal statistics.

SIMPLE CHURCH

The simple church model has been born out of a need and desire to redefine the nature and practice of church. It structures its life “around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth. The leadership and the church are clear about the process (clarity) and are committed to executing it. The process flows logically (movement) and is implemented in each areas of the church (alignment). The church abandons everything that is not in the process (focus)”[3]. Furthermore, simple church defines itself as “a Christ-centered community established primarily on relationship both to God and to the other members of the group”[3]. In doing so it discards many aspects of conventional expressions of church, which are considered beneficial by some, and problematic by

others. The simple church model gives those in the movement the opportunity to focus on what it considers to be the core practices of Christian spirituality” [4].

Whilst there are a number of benefits of simple church there are also some negatives or dangers that exist. For example, simple church can simply be an idea that is not practiced by those promoting it; simple church becomes complex when denominations get hold of them. They can also become insular and isolated, similar to what can occur in house churches or small groups [5].

MULTI-SITE, MULTI-CONGREGATION CHURCH

A multi-site church is where a church “meets in many locations...a multi-staffed church, meeting in multi-locations, offering multi-ministries, with a single identity, single organisation, single purpose and single force of leadership” [6]. These locations can vary from “different rooms on the same campus, different locations in the same-region, or in some instances, different cities, states or nations” [7].

A couple of strengths of a multi-site church. It firstly permits different sites to leverage all of the beneficial ministries of the parent site such as childrens, small groups and teaching. This can be an advantage because new church plants typically do

not have the resources to deliver these ministries at a high level from the start [6]. Another strength is what Dave Ferguson calls “Brand new and trust brand” which means the multi-site church has the benefit of “congregational loyalty” thus the particular congregation has a trusted brand (parent site), and another site in another location is brand new [8].

However multi-site church also has some disadvantages. The multi-site church can be a form of “Spiritual Colonization” [9]. The senior pastor functions as the “virtual” bishop, the parent site as the head office and the sites as “affiliated members” [9]. This spiritual colonization can be true of many aspects of the services, such as “the message, the musical style and atmosphere”, taking away from contextuality of the individual congregation. According to White this “contradicts the biblical principle of congregational polity because the founding location sets the budget, hires the staff, and determines the membership” [9].



MISSIONAL CHURCH

The missional church originates from the life of Jesus. The church defines itself around the principle of mission. Alan Hirsch says “when the church is in mission, it is true church...The mission of God flows directly through every believer and every community of faith that adheres to Jesus” [10]. Dan Guder believes mission is not a department of the church. The mission of God should define the church and its believers otherwise the “scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church” is unfulfilled [11]. The missional church is applicable in a number of different contexts. For example, it “can go to the average non-Christian in our context, a person who has little real awareness of, or interest in, Christianity but is suspicious of the church. Connecting with these people can be carried out in the average café, local bar/pub or nightclub” [10].

The missional church also has some disadvantages. Most missional churches in Australia thus far are only seem to be reaching the de-churched (those who have left the church to seek Christian life outside organized church structures) and not the non-churched (those who have never been part of a church community before beyond the occasional wedding, funeral and occasional Christmas and/or Easter service).

Though the missional church can endorse itself as the solution to advancing the kingdom, its techniques and appeal only impacts certain groups of people. In the missional church community there is a big focus on the arts and the same problems of exclusion can exist. The solution is not to expect everyone to fit into an artistic community mould, but network and rethink how to reach and connect with different interest groups such as ministry to children and elderly [12].

CONCLUSION

Even though there is a move towards different models or expressions of being and doing the church, models such as simple and missional church will exist alongside multi-site, multi-congregation. Thus both will need to work together in partnership. However unless churches start to “think about Christianity apart from its institutional expression [then] the church culture [will] continue to decline” [13]. So it is imperative that experiments such as simple and missional churches are explored and implemented to endeavour to connect with the average Australia then otherwise “in twenty years time the churches will be two-thirds of the size they are today, while Australia will have grown considerably larger” [1].



NOTES

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