

MODELS OF CONTEMPORARY CHURCH LIFE

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The past twenty years have seen many attempts among Bible-believing Christians to innovate and produce Scripturally valid, more effective ways of doing church life in the USA. The result is a variety of approaches to church life that have been adapted to a variety of denominations: Baptist, Methodist, etc.

Many of the innovative churches founded in the late '60's and 70's were fueled by a desire to lead Christians into a deeper experience with the Lord and help them become effective lay ministers in the world.

From the late '70's another stream of innovation has focused on evangelizing the unchurched "Baby-boom" population and the generation after them. "Boomers", people born between 1946 and 1966, comprise about one-third of the U.S. population and are mostly unchurched. Most of these "new style" or "innovative" churches share in common a strong commitment to the integrity and authority of the Scriptures and to evangelism.

The types of church life being used today can be roughly put into five broad categories. Within each category there are different streams. For example, the "Traditional" church actually has several different styles of "traditional" within it.

A look at the Sunday morning worship service gives an indication of their underlying approach to church life:

"TRADITIONAL" CHURCH

MUSIC: mostly hymns with a choir, organ and piano.

ORGANIZATIONS: The church program organizations have a high profile in the worship service: Sunday School attendance reports, committee meetings mentioned in the announcements, WMU presentations in the service, etc.

THEMES: Often the theme for the service and message relates to the denominational calendar: Baptist Colleges and Seminaries Sunday, Race Relations Sunday, Associational Missions Emphasis Sunday, etc.

SERMON: often evangelistic with an invitation to make public decisions.

MEMBERSHIP: people desiring membership are often voted in immediately after the public invitation.

APPEAL: The familiarity of the worship service and its obvious denominational identity make the church especially appealing to visitors from the same denominational background.

"CLASSROOM" CHURCH:

MUSIC: a mix of hymns and contemporary Christian music with choir, piano and organ or orchestra.

SERMONS: are the focal point of the service. Usually they are "expository" (going through a book of the Bible verse by verse) or "doctrinal" (teaching the major doctrines of the Bible). The congregation usually takes extensive sermon notes.

MEMBERSHIP: Often people join after completing a New Member's Class.

APPEAL: The sermon quality especially attracts those wanting to know more about their faith.

"SEEKER" CHURCH:

CONCEPT: Sunday morning services are carefully designed to make sense to "seekers," unchurched people who are open to the Gospel and in attendance for the first time.

MUSIC: high quality contemporary music with vocalists and a band. Drama is often used.

SERMONS: deal with practical issues (finances, time use, parenting, marriage communication) from a Biblical viewpoint. Public response to invitations is not usually called for, but follow-up is done on "communication cards" filled out voluntarily by the visitors.

"SEEKER-SENSITIVE" churches often have one Sunday worship service meaningful to Christians but easy for seekers to fit into.

"SEEKER-TARGETED" churches build the whole morning service completely for "seekers." Most of the music is performed with only one or two contemporary congregational songs. A second worship service Sunday evening or later in the week is designed for believers. It provides more participative singing and expository teaching.

MEMBERSHIP: often after a seminar covering the Gospel and the church's philosophy of ministry.

Particularly in the West and Northeast these churches may identify themselves as "community churches," rather than using denominational names, because of the unchurched Baby-Boomers' stereotypes against denominational labels. They teach about their denominational identity in their membership classes.

APPEAL: Often 50-80% of the people coming in have been converted through the church ministry.

"SMALL GROUP" CHURCH:

CONCEPT: Services are designed more for the strengthening of believers but with thought to making them palatable to unchurched visitors.

MUSIC: more contemporary with an extended singing time, but not as extended as "Worship" churches.

SERMONS: more expository. Drama is often used.

SMALL GROUPS: The major focus of church life is the ministry of church members in and through small groups meeting away from the church campus.

MEMBERSHIP: often after a new member's class or training program.

APPEAL: The emphasis on walking with God practically in all of life's relationships makes the church especially appealing to people desiring the reality of daily Christian living. Where the small groups are strongly geared to do outreach to friends, significant growth by evangelism of adults takes place.

"WORSHIP" CHURCH:

CONCEPT: The worship service is designed to lead into a personal experience with God, usually through an extended time of singing to the Lord (twenty to forty-five minutes, depending on the church). The feeling is that, once genuine worship takes place, the rest of the Christian life and responsibilities tend to come more easily.

MUSIC: contemporary with highly participative singing moving people toward a "spiritual high."

SERMONS: practically geared to encourage faith and worship in daily life. In some churches the sermon is more "tacked on" to the worship. In others it is more a key part of the service.

APPEAL: Some of these churches are more Charismatic, emphasizing the "supernatural gifts" of the Holy Spirit. Others are NOT Charismatic and simply desire a legitimate, energizing personal experience with God. The worship especially attracts people desiring a deeper personal awareness of the Lord. The extended worship may be uncomfortable to "seekers" attending.

Many churches you encounter will fit well into one of the broad categories. Others may be blends of categories. Quite often the different styles of church life do not compete with one another. Their different approaches make them attractive to different types of people with different types of needs and backgrounds.

Perhaps in another twenty years many of the innovative facets of the new styles will become "time-honored traditions."

One thing is for sure: the future will come with changes in society and challenges to the church. And the challenges will cause some to go back to the Scriptures, take a close look at the unchurched population, and come up with new ways to meet the challenges in faithfulness to their Lord and His Word.