

NEW STYLES FOR THE UNCHANGING MISSION

Understanding the drive behind changing styles in church.

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Despite all the dreams of lovers, poets, architects, and politicians, time simply will not stand still! Time keeps rolling on and bringing changes: changes in poetry, building styles, governments, and, yes--even lovers!

There are things timeless; they do not change: the Lord, His Word, His purposes, etc.

But the world surrounding the church changes often. And those changes bring fresh challenges for the church.

The Scripture indicates that churches have a responsibility to accomplish several major tasks: evangelism, growing Christians, worship, caring for people, leadership development, prayer, involvement in world missions, etc. And these responsibilities continue through the centuries.

Churches concerned about the Scriptures try organize themselves to accomplish those tasks. They try to come up with an organization and a "style" of church life that fits within the boundaries of the Scriptures and makes sense to them at their particular point in history.

However, when cultures change significantly, the well-established forms of church life come under new scrutiny.

When missionaries go from their home to start churches in a new culture, their familiar "style" of church life often has to be altered to fit within the new culture. For example, African church music often reflects African approaches to music more than Bach. The new church style has to make sense to the new Christian people and be faithful to the Scripture.

Missionaries are forced to evaluate what parts of their former church life are Scriptural and what parts are merely cultural. And, they have to decide what adaptations to the new culture are not allowed by the Scriptures.

Even in our own country, as time goes on, new situations crop up in the society around the church -- situations that prompt churches to

- examine the new challenges and opportunities in the society around them;
- re-evaluate the effectiveness of what they are currently doing;
- search the Scriptures for guidelines on meeting the new challenges;
- and add new ways of carrying out their mission in the world.

Not all the new ways of church life turn out to be helpful. Some turn out to be out of line with the Scriptures and are ultimately rejected. Others may be in line with the Scriptures but prove naive or ignorant in their approach to the contemporary culture. They simply fail.

Other new ways of doing church endure and make a lasting impression on contemporary churches. For example,

- Sunday School did not exist until the late 1700's when a man began to school the illiterate children off from work on Sundays.
- Evening worship services began when natural gas lamps replaced the the older candles and oil lamps-- and a crowd could be drawn after dark to look at the new invention!
- Women's Missionary Union (WMU) did not arrive until the late 1800's.
- College ministries started in the 1920's.
- In the late 1970's churches began adopting "discipleship training" programs.

As time has passed these "new ways" have become the "time-tested and proven" ways of doing church life. The new method becomes a venerable "tradition."

The past twenty years have seen many attempts among Bible-believing Christians to innovate and produce more effective ways of doing church life in the USA. 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-boomer" population and the generations after them. "Boomers", people born between 1946 and 1966, comprise about one-third of the U.S. population and are mostly unchurched. Their children and grandchildren are also largely unchurched.

The unchurched Boomers have significantly different tastes in music from their parents and are quite skeptical about churches. They have stereo-typed church life as boring, insincere, and unrelated to real life. The generation after the Boomers has much the same values and viewpoint with different "stylistic" twists. So churches have risen that work hard to change their "style" to overcome the stereotype. Huge "Boomer" churches have grown across the USA with attendances in the thousands. And, 50-80% of their growth has come from conversions, not simply from people transferring membership from another church.

Most of these "new style" or "innovative" churches share several elements in common. Some of them are

- a strong commitment to the integrity and authority of the Scriptures and to evangelism;
- use of "Contemporary Christian" music, often with a band with guitars, drums, keyboards and synthesizers. Hymns are still used, but more easily sung Scripture songs tend to dominate the music.
- sermons that are more "laid back" and usually teach about practical areas of daily living from a Scriptural viewpoint.
many do a children's Sunday School and have group meetings for adults during the week.
- "customized programs:" a tendency to look at the needs of people in the congregation and then come up with a program to meet the needs, rather than to take a denominational program and recruit people to attend it.

The next twenty years will provide new challenges to the church--challenges that will open the door to new opportunities to communicate the timeless truths of the Gospel.