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Village Seventh-day Adventist Church

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ABSTRACT

A LEADERSHIP STRATEGY TO IDENTIFY AND REVERSE THE
EFFECTS OF CONSUMERISM ON THE COMMITMENT TO
THE MISSION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE VILLAGE
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH MEMBERS

by

Ronald Paul Kelly Jr.

Advisor: Victor Jaeger

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Professional Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: A LEADERSHIP STRATEGY TO IDENTIFY AND REVERSE THE AFFECTS OF CONSUMERISM ON THE COMMITMENT TO THE MISSION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE VILLAGE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH MEMBERS

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Date Completed: May 2023

Problem

Low levels of commitment have detrimentally affected many aspects of the Village Church's health and vitality. The present study was developed to see to what degree the leaders of the Village Church had imbibed consumer constructs of identity and ministry and to what degree those constructs could be changed when presented with a biblical construct of identity and ministry.

Method

A week of spiritual emphasis entitled “Built on the Rock” examined the principles of the church growth movement as manifest in the megachurch movement. By contrast, the scriptural paradigm of the church as a family was presented as a high-cost discipleship alternative to the current consumer mindset of the megachurches. Participants were surveyed pre-and post-intervention. Focus groups were also conducted before and after the week of prayer. The study involved twenty-one leaders from the staff and board of the Village Church.

Results

The participants’ understanding of the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the church growth movement were greatly enlarged. On a 10-point scale the aggregate score of the group moved 1-2 points from the methods and teaching of the church growth movement towards the biblical high-cost discipleship model.

Conclusions

Most Seventh-day Adventist leaders genuinely desire to reach the lost, but do not understand the incompatibility of the theology or practices of the church growth movement. When explained and contrasted with the biblical model of the church as a family, they recognized the limits of a consumer approach to evangelism and ministry and embraced the biblical call to a life of full surrender and discipleship.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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A Professional Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by

Ronald Paul Kelly Jr.

May 2023

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Description of the Ministry Context

The Village Seventh-day Adventist Church is a 1,164-member church in the Michigan Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It was organized in 1915 as an off-campus congregation and religious place of worship shortly after the founding of Emmanuel Missionary College. Over the last century it has held services in a variety of places, including what is now the Berrien Springs Court House. In 1967, it moved to its current location, expanding its physical plant two more times with the addition of the Reiss Chapel in the 1980s and the Family Center in the 1990s. Over the course of the last forty years the membership reached a peak of 1,250 and then slowly fell to 927 by 2013. The ten years preceding this Doctor of Ministry project have been the informal intervention utilizing the principles enumerated during the “Built on the Rock” series. Those principles were not always discussed or explained; however, they remained the theological and operative framework of decision-making for the Village Church. The data shared in this study regarding the financial and membership growth of the Village Church should be considered the longitudinal case study of the theological applications presented in the project. In other words, the project proposal of A LEADERSHIP STRATEGY TO IDENTIFY AND REVERSE THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS CONSUMERISM ON THE COMMITMENT

TO THE MISSION OF THE VILLAGE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH has informally and developmentally been underway since my arrival at Village in September of 2013.

The project entailed an eight-day week of prayer, entitled “Built on the Rock,” encompassing nine presentations related to the subject of leadership and church growth through a “high-cost” discipleship model. The contrasting model of the church growth movement, built on a consumerist mindset, was also examined. Equipping the Village members to properly critique the principles that undergird the consumer church growth model and build a biblical model for church growth through biblically informed leadership was a primary focus of the intervention. It must, however, be acknowledged, that an eight-day week of spiritual emphasis would not be sufficient to change a church’s world view.

The week of prayer had an in-person attendance fluctuating between 75-200 and an average viewership of 3,500 views per evening on YouTube. Two focus groups were gathered for dialogue and reflection both before and after the intervention. One was composed of volunteers from the staff and the other, volunteers from the church board. The week of prayer began with a Sabbath morning sermon preached at two services, followed by seven consecutive evenings with meetings lasting approximately one hour in length. The week of spiritual emphasis was concluded on Sabbath morning, March 4, 2023, with a message entitled, “The Cost of Discipleship.”

As the principal investigator in this research, the description of my location relative to the project both personally and professionally is as follows. I am the senior pastor of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church and have held this position for ten years. At the time of the project, I was fifty-nine years old. I was not raised in the Seventh-day Adventist faith

but was converted to Seventh-day Adventism through Adventist education at the age of thirteen. After graduating from the SDA Theological Seminary, I served a small three-church district in north central Indiana from 1991-1994. I was ordained in 1994 and invited to lead the Cicero Seventh-day Adventist Church, where I pastored for nineteen years. In 2013 I was called to lead the Village Church. I have served as an adjunct professor at Andrews University in the undergraduate Religion Department.

Statement of the Problem

From the earliest days of Seventh-day Adventism a central tenet of the faith has been the missiological imperative to reach the lost. Compelled by love and encouraged in the writings of Ellen White, members, ministers, and evangelists have sought to develop new methods in order to bring the lost to Christ. This focus, along with an emphasis on felt-need evangelism, laid the groundwork for the adoption of the methods of the evangelical megachurches by Adventist ministers and ministries. *Ministry of Healing* page 143 was found ubiquitously in the SDA Theological Seminary in the late 80's and early 90's: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed his sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then he bade them, 'Follow Me.'"

Without a prayerful and biblical scrutiny of the church growth movement and its underlying theology and philosophical paradigms, the Seventh-day Adventist churches began slowly abandoning a family model of the church, and cross-bearing as a central tenant of discipleship in favor of a consumer model. This ever-growing consumer mindset, along with the phenomenal successes of the consumer churches left many SDA pastors and congregations wondering why they too couldn't benefit from the new techniques. In the

adoption process little scrutiny was applied to the theology that undergirded the methods of the megachurch movement. Why couldn't we too "bring people to Jesus" and talk later about Christian lifestyle?

Statement of the Task

The tasks of this project were to evaluate the theological and missiological belief system that not only allowed, but co-opted consumer-driven ministries in the church. It was specifically designed to build a theological understanding of the church as a family in contradistinction to the church as a business. Its goal was to give the local leadership of the Village Church the ability to critique and reject any method which rejected the centrality of the cross in lives of sacrifice, its ministry of discipleship, or robbed the church of its family identity. It also focused on calling the church members to a new commitment to Christ as members of His family embracing both the privileges and responsibilities of being children of God.

Delimitations of the Project

This project was conducted in a defined environment. The most notable contextual dynamic was the faith-based environment of a Seventh-day Adventist Church. Related to this is the placement of the Village Church in the midst of an Adventist "ghetto." While thousands viewed the messages online, and a live audience was present, the only source of formal feedback and dialogue was with two different leadership teams in the Village Church. The project was conducted in a North American, English-speaking context. While the project subject matter had wide ranging applicability, it was focused on leadership education in the Village Church.

Description of the Project Process

The development of the project involved a theological reflection, an examination of the current literature available on the topic, the planning and execution of the intervention, and finally an evaluation and reporting on the findings.

Theological Reflection

To theologically engage and evaluate the consumer model of church growth I chose to reflect on the experience of the New Testament church, specifically focusing on the central tenant of Donald McGavaran's church growth principle, the homogeneous unit, and its role and presence, or lack thereof, in the experience of the first-century church. Because the ministry of Jesus was largely inside the Jewish experience, I chose to focus on the methods of Paul and the experience of the churches that he planted in the multicultural parts of the Roman Empire. Secondly, I examined the ministry of Christ in the context of the marketing paradigm that is so central to the business model of church growth. Because the Gospel of John describes the interactions with Jesus in great detail, I chose to examine these encounters to see if the marketing model of mutually beneficial exchanges was His operative method. I then examined His interactions in the synoptic gospels. I also examined the difficult sayings of Jesus and the concept of high-cost discipleship in His ministry in contradistinction to the low-cost discipleship modalities of the megachurch movement. I then proceeded to examine the theological identity of the early church as either a family or a business. I closed my theological reflection with a consideration of the biblical warning against conforming to the world and the challenge of identifying with non-believers while remaining faithful to our identity in Christ.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed relative to this topic is unique, in that most of the seminal writings of those who founded the church growth movement were only slightly scrutinized by many in the Protestant denominations, and clearly not by most Seventh-day Adventist pastors and administrators. This requires a re-examination of original source material by the leading proponents of the movement. These sources, while dated, reveal the elemental theological flaws that allowed the movement to flourish. I also examined the developing critiques of leading voices from the latter part of the twentieth century as the movement reached its ascendancy. I have also gathered the current critiques of the movement as it has yielded data both quantitative and qualitative which is able to be examined. My review examines the history of consumerism in American culture and religion and analyzes the principles and precepts of the church growth movement in their application of the market-driven church. I investigated the history and theology of how the modern church came to be built on a business model with marketing principles. I also reviewed the resulting problems of religious marketing as it involves the identity and worship experience of the church. I conclude with a summary of principles and practices from the writings of Ellen White regarding the ideology and practice of religious consumerism and marketing strategies that impact the spiritual identity and worship services of the church.

Development of the Intervention

Nine years of ministry at Village Church had yielded significant growth in membership, attendance, finance, and mission activity. However, the principles upon which these gains were achieved had not been fully articulated or systematically explained during those years of ministry. What was missing was a systematic understanding of the biblical

principles that would, and had, promoted genuine spiritual growth and revival. It also appeared that many did not understand the flawed premises and practices of the church growth movement. I understood that what was needed was a thorough theological critique of the teachings and premises of the church growth movement. The leaders of the church needed to understand the foundation from which corrupt methods were so often encouraged and urged upon the church for nurture and growth.

The levels of commitment to research, the excellence of execution in method and practice, and the dedication to the renewal of the church, has been an admirable and worthy contribution to western Christianity by the church growth movement. The movement has also ended the irresponsible hiding of church leaders behind platitudes and ineffective traditions, however, it has fallen short of discovering the spiritual solutions needed for the western world.

While many could see the new vitality and life of the Village Church, most could not properly explain the reasons for its growth. From my theological reflection and literature review I developed a fuller understanding as to how the Village Church, and many other Seventh-day Adventist churches had co-opted practices from the church growth movement that rendered the renewal of their churches impossible. I came to understand that, while the church growth movement brought a renewed and determined focus to the examination of the church, the theological foundations of the movement could not be reconciled with the most basic principles of Christianity, the Protestant Reformation, and the biblical foundation of Seventh-day Adventist belief and practice.

Structure of the Intervention

The intervention was based on the didactic model of proclamation in a week of spiritual renewal. Nine presentations were presented over the course of eight days, beginning and ending with a Sabbath service. Every night for eight straight nights, a forty-five-minute presentation would examine the absence of biblical support for the church growth movement in both theology and practice. The contrasting scriptural framework for a biblical church growth model was also presented. Each evening presentation was preceded by an architectural object lesson that emphasized the necessity of following principles of proper design and structure. The programs were well attended and viewed by thousands via the church's YouTube channel.

Research Methodology and Protocol

The purpose of the research was to determine what level of perception and understanding existed in two levels of church leadership regarding the theology and practice of the church growth movement. Of particular interest was the degree to which the chosen leaders might change their understanding after attending or watching the presentations. With a research method built largely upon qualitative methods, limited quantitative measures were also taken at both the beginning and end of the intervention.

All twenty-one participants in the two leadership groups agreed of their own volition to participate in the study by signing an informed consent document. Reasonable efforts were made to protect the confidentiality of the participants and reliability of the data. The data included two rounds of reaction group discussion for each of the two groups of leaders. One discussion preceded the intervention and one followed. A brief survey was also administered prior to the week of spiritual emphasis and following the nine presentations that comprised

the week of prayer. The project is more clearly described in chapter 5 of this document. Conclusions from the intervention are described and explained in chapter 6, along with other discoveries made in the course of study.

Significant measurable indications of the success of a family model at the Village church are evident in Appendix C. Significantly notable are the financial and attendance data. Other measures of health and vitality, including commitment to the church, spiritual and relational health, unity, prayer meeting attendance, and missionary outreach could have been included if not for the limitations of time and measurement. While the church growth movement relies extensively on data to establish proof of its methods, the measurable success of the Village church has been achieved through prayer, the Spirit's leading, and many encounters that have involved exhortation, rebuke, and conflict management, all of which are inimical to the business model of modern religion. The measures of success are similar, the methods, however, are bi-polar opposite of the religious consumer model and counter-intuitive. The church growth method is severely compromised by self-interest and worldliness, the family model defies self-interest in the name of love and self-sacrifice. The successes of the Village church are a result of the latter.

Definition of Terms

The subject of church growth is one that many in the church have a keen interest in. While most of the terms employed will have common and universal meaning there are certain phrases and terms that deserve special mention at the outset of this paper. The church growth movement has a certain vernacular of its own. Such terms will be defined here.

A Homogeneous Unit is a group of people that share most things in common. Little adaptation is required when one is kept in their homogeneous unit. In his book, *The Bridges*

of God (1981), McGavran explained that any church or religion that asked people to abandon their tribe, caste, or class would fail. Stated another way, humans relate best to people most like themselves. “We must make sure that we ask people to become Christians where they don’t have to cross barriers of language and culture and ***class and wealth style of life***” (McGavran and Arn 1973, 45, emphasis added).

Religious consumerism as used in this paper is a perspective that views the church as a business offering goods and services. The religious customer picks and chooses from a variety of churches and/or services that best suits their perceived needs. Churches are competing for customer attention (Paas 2016). Hartman (2011, 6) describes consumerism as an “ethos ... that places great value on shopping and consuming.” It is a mindset that views the primary role of the church as an entity designed to meet the needs of its own members.

Marketing, “is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that will satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (Kenneson and Street 2003, 37). While every church is involved in some form of marketing, the principles of the church growth movement in conjunction with a consumer society have lent themselves to churches, radically altering their roles in society.

Mutually beneficial exchanges are interactions between entities where both parties find themselves advantaged or satisfied with the transaction. For some it is the simplest definition of the final stages of the marketing experience. The exercise of this model requires the church to maintain the good graces of its members and forbids the family dynamic of confrontation leading to conviction and potential change.

Religious pragmatism is a colloquial phrase used to describe religious practice that builds attendance, draws crowds, or appears to bring measurable success. Gilley and Wegter (2009, 109) describe it as “the god of ‘what works.’” Methods are adopted regardless of the spiritual consequences or biblical principles that might be violated by those methods. It makes little to no allowance for scriptural principles or religious tradition. The proclivity of the marketing method to measurable results lends itself to this short-sighted and often damaging approach to church identity and growth.

The market-driven church is any religious body that defines itself primarily by its understanding of the perceived “felt needs” of a certain demographic that it is trying to reach and is willing to shape its worship and identity practices by such research.

Consumer church as used in this study is a method of church governance where the desires, wants, and wishes of the members are the primary directive of worship and programming, in contradistinction to the family model where responsibilities and duties are obligatory in the culture and thinking of the church. Winning churches respond better to the needs of their clientele (Wells 1998, 31).

A bridge, in the thinking of Donald McGavran, is a relationship with a family, cast, or tribe whereby a person becomes a Christian (Suarez 2013, 196). For McGavran, the old method of the mission station was an obstacle to the conversion of the masses. According to Bishop and Cushing (2008, 164), McGavran believed that any church or religion “that asked people to abandon their tribe, caste, or class would fail.”

Perfecting is the term used by McGavran (2005, 15) to describe moral or ethical change in the new believer. It would be too simplistic to suggest that this is the equivalent of sanctification, since most Christians believe that some measure of moral and ethical change

accompanies conversion; however, in McGavran's writing this moral transformation follows accepting Christ.

Unchurched is a familiar term to many Christians; however, it should be understood that when the term is used in church growth literature it is not the equivalent of "unconverted." Using the term unchurched separates the seeker from the embarrassment of theological truth (Wells 2008, 45). Because church services are developed for "pagans" (Warren 1995, 294) and the designers of these services are not anticipating any moral change associated with conversion and subsequent baptism, the church, in an effort to reach the unchurched, may itself become and look unchurched.

Megachurch is a term used to describe the final developmental phase and application of church growth principles (Guinness 1993, 21). Pastors who embraced this model took the concept of "tribe" to a new level with anthropological and demographic research. It represents the most market-driven phase of the church growth movement.

Felt needs may be the most important term to define in the church growth matrix. The felt needs spectrum in the church growth context includes spiritual felt needs. If the carnal heart is deceitful beyond understanding, the idea that the lost are self-diagnosing and self-directing in their spiritual journey is fraught with potential pitfalls for the church and those it is attempting to reach. If entire church services are built around an unconverted person's spiritual opinions the result could be the paganization of the church and its services. Seventh-day Adventists have typically only engaged their community on felt needs that involve non-spiritual matters.

Summary

This brief introduction is designed to describe the challenges and opportunities present in this project as related to the healthy development of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church. The derived analysis is intended to provide spiritual and professional value to pastors, administrators, and lay leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church who desire to build healthy churches on the timeless principles of scripture. It is my sincere hope that the examination of the principles and methods of the church growth movement will reveal the incompatibility of its methods and beliefs with the basic tenants of Christianity. I also hope that all who read this project will be re-committed to the inspired methods of scripture as the only solid foundation for character transformation and lasting growth.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR ENGAGING

A CONSUMER CULTURE

When a technique is necessary to get people to listen to the gospel there will be failure. That is not the method of Christ. To build an institute in connection with the church, and provide all kinds of entertainment for the young people, in order that they may come to the Bible classes, is to be foredoomed to failure.

—G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Mark*

For the past four decades the experience of the American church has been shaped predominantly by the teaching and praxis of the church growth movement. The movement sought to leverage the gospel for success in the modernist consumer culture. The understandings that form this paradigm were initially received by the church with caution, eventually embraced by a large spectrum of religious leaders, and are now again receiving a new level of scrutiny. Donald Miller states that these “new paradigm churches and their members have responded to the therapeutic, individualistic, and anti-establishment themes of the counterculture (Miller 1997, 21). “Churches cater to people’s consumer passions of getting what they want, when they want it, and at the least perceived cost to themselves” (Metzger 2007, 10). As Turpin (2006, 43) states, “No one has to be initiated or confirmed into consumer religion.”

The religious narratives are all around us and within us. Developed and propagated in an age of declining interest in the traditional church, they appeared to be the long-awaited-for solution to the generational demographics and new spiritual appetites of the 80’s, 90’s, and

succeeding decades.” Vincent Miller (2003, 85) ascertains that contemporary society is gripped by a fragmented narcissism that transforms everything, including religion, into a self-centered therapeutic exercise. “The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper’s concerns — how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money” (Petersen, 1987, 1).

In his book *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch (2006, 42, 43) describes his own experience as a pastor of progressive congregation:

Like most churches in the modernist-Christendom mode, we had built the model of the church on a consumerist model and, in the end paid the price. Sound harsh? Didn’t church growth proponents explicitly teach us to mimic the shopping mall and apply it to the church? In this they were sincere, but they must have been unaware of the ramification of this approach, because in the end the medium always becomes the message. They were unaware of the latent virus in the model itself – that of consumerism and the sins of the middle class.

The purpose of this chapter is to biblically test the assumptions, teachings, and practices of the church growth movement and their resulting adaptation in the megachurch phenomena. The focus of this theological reflection will be limited to concepts relating to the application of McGavran’s homogeneous principle and its role in the market-driven methods of the megachurch movement.

Central to the study is the question: Can the church co-opt business principles and stay true to her calling? Do the Scriptures embrace or allow for a “customer” approach to the church? Can the Seventh-day Adventist Church build successfully around the marketing process, or will this disfigure the core identity of God’s remnant people and their subsequent witness?

Section one examines the experience of the New Testament church as it relates to the homogeneous principle. Were apostolic churches intentionally and unavoidably cross cultural or were they market-driven as gatherings of convenience? Section two analyzes the practices of the megachurch movement against biblical examples, teachings, and principles beginning with the life and ministry of Jesus, progressing to the apostle Paul and other New Testament authors, and finally reflecting on various Old Testament teachings and examples. Section three concludes by considering warnings in the writings of Ellen White regarding apparent success and unscriptural methodologies in ministry.

Pragmatism, Self-interest, and Measuring the Growth of the Church

In his book, *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop (2008) tells the story of Donald McGavran who is widely recognized as the father of the church growth movement (Wagner, Arn, and Towns 1986), and for his examination of the church's missional efforts on the subcontinent of Asia. A cornerstone theory derived from his observations is the "homogeneous principle." Based on his analysis, McGavran concludes that any church or religion that asks people to abandon their tribe, caste, or class will fail. In *Understanding Church Growth* he states, "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (McGavran 1990, 163). Simply put, humans relate best to people most like themselves. This premise is examined more in-depth in chapter 3.

At the heart of McGavran's homogeneous principal is an agreed-upon phenomena that anthropologists, sociologists, and Bible writers acknowledge: we feel most comfortable with "our own." In his book, *How to Grow a Church*, coauthored with Win Arn, he states, "We must make sure that we ask people to become Christians where they don't have to cross barriers of language and culture and *class and wealth and style of life*" (McGavran and Arn

1973, 45, emphasis supplied). He renounced segregation based on pride, arrogance, or exclusive but encouraged the targeting of social groups on the basis of the “normal, natural, innocent fact that people like to be with other people of their own kind” (46). Win Arn responds in the conversation with the following observation, “And they gravitate to churches of their own kind for reasons of convenience” (46).

Jesus recognized this reality in the Sermon on the Mount when He contrasted the love His followers would have for their enemies with the love of those who love only their own. “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?” (Matt. 5:46, 47).

The largely unexamined question in regard to church growth teachings and the market-based paradigm, is the degree to which the homogeneous principle and marketing techniques, as applied in the megachurch movement, can be legitimated in the beliefs and praxis of Scripture.

The gospels record a variety of distinct groupings of people with whom Jesus circulated: Galileans (Matthew 4:23), Samaritans (John 4:43), publicans and tax collectors (Mark 2:16), Greeks (John 12:20-21), Syrophoenicians (Mark 7:24-30), as well as scribes and Pharisees (Mark 12:28). Luke and Paul, writing during the time of the early church, chronicle the history of racial and religious strains in the new movement. A major challenge to the unity of the church was the religious, ethnic, and racial divide that had grown up over centuries between Jews and gentiles (Acts 6:1-7). The water turned to wine in John 2 was originally purposed for ceremonial cleansing to remove the lingering influences of Jews mixing with the pagan public (Nichol 1980, 922). Against this backdrop of long-established

segregating by preference and prejudice the question looms: Did Jesus and the apostles leverage the church for growth through a market-driven application of convenience, preference, and social comfort? Is the homogeneous principal as currently practiced a Bible principle for growth?

McGavran (2005, 17–35) in his book, *The Bridges of God*, develops his “people movement” theology on the homogenous principle and asserts that the early chapters of Acts describe a people movement of this type. He states, “The early church was made up of Jews only. It was a one people church for some years. It could have been nothing else” (18). This paper attempts to determine whether McGavran’s cornerstone principle of homogeneity is biblical and if the resulting practices of “people movement theology” as practiced in the megachurch movement is indeed the method of evangelism and discipleship practiced among the early believers.

Homogeneity and the Early Church

Diverse Disciples

The group that comprised Jesus’s inner circle gives us our first clue as to the nature of diversity characterizing the early church. Ellen White (2002a, 20) comments:

In these first disciples was presented marked diversity. They were to be the world’s teachers, and they represented widely varied types of character. In order successfully to carry forward the work to which they had been called, these men, differing in natural characteristics and in habits of life, needed to come into unity of feeling, thought, and action. This unity it was Christ’s object to secure. To this end He sought to bring them into unity with Himself.

In the selection of the twelve apostles, social, economic, and class uniformity was not a governing principle for Christ. Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9), Simon the zealot (Luke 9:15), the fishermen from Bethsaida (John 1:44), and the polished Judas, represented

widely varying stations in society and the church. According to Mark 9:34 they argued amongst themselves, even in the lead up to calvary. In John 17:21 the prayer of Jesus was that they would be one as He was with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It would be their oneness in Christ in the midst of their diversity that would constitute the power of their witness.

Diverse Church

In Colossians Paul acknowledges the cosmopolitan nature of the church and writes to forge a new identity for the menagerie of early believers: “a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11 NASB20).

Moule (1894, 125, emphasis in the original) comments on Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “[‘there is neither’] The Greek is emphatic; **there exists neither**. ‘Not merely the fact but the possibility’ is negated (Lightfoot). In Christ, such differences ‘cannot breathe.’” Well aware of the many reasons the church might divide given their diverse history and cultures, the apostle emphasizes oneness in the midst of diversity.

In his first Corinthian letter Paul spends most of chapter 12 expanding on the concept of oneness by emphasizing varying spiritual gifts, but “the same Spirit.” His metaphor of the body (the church) is built around the diversity of body parts and yet their oneness in the Head (Jesus.) In verses 12 and 13 he states: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink-into one Spirit.”

This theme of oneness in the midst of diversity is also present in his epistle to the Ephesians where he declares the church to be the body (1:23-24), the infusion of the gentiles into this body (3:6), the “oneness of the body” (4:4), and the breaking down of the wall of partition and making both Jews and gentiles one. In Ephesians 2:14 he states, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation.” In verses 16–17, regarding both the gentiles and Jews, he declares Jesus’s purpose was “that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.”

The final declarations of Ephesians 2:19-22 capture the imagery of a new temple with living stones. This temple is architected with Jewish and gentile converts as stones that are “growing together,” thus living stones.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

The emphasis on oneness in the church and the inclusion of the gentiles into the fellowship of Christ and the family of God is strongly asserted. This oneness of Jew and gentile is possible because of their inclusion into the family of Abraham.

In James chapter 2 the writer confronts the natural tendency of stratification in people groups – in this case a socioeconomic stratification. The setting is a religious meeting, most likely a church service. What James forbids is favored seating arrangements for the wealthy. The church is not to recognize or organize itself around the class system of society as the world does, but to treat all men and women as equals. No prior people group identity was

allowed to shape the culture of the new sect, and their fellowship was to stand in stark contrast to the social stratification of the world. Christianity created a new order of oneness across the multi- and varied layers of cultures and classes.

Larry Hurtado (2016, 97) in his book, *Destroyer of the Gods*, describes how the Greek word *ekklesia* transitioned in meaning during the Roman age. Although the modern theological use of this word is a synonym for the church, its original meaning described the voting members of society (a privileged group with voice). The word evolved to describe a new communion of equally endowed members, all holding the same social status in the church, independent of their status in secular society. One of Hurtado's emphases is the triumph of this new society built precisely around its egalitarian nature, revealed most prominently in the non-homogeneity of those who comprised the group.

In these passages (Eph 2:14-15) we see the notion that the circle of believers incorporates Jews and gentiles into a new and full unity that is established by Christ, reflective of a group identity that transcends the former ethnic distinctions between them. But their respective ethnic identities are not actually abolished. Instead, what the text depicts is effectively a radical widening of the circumference of God's people, gentile believers now jointly inheriting with Jewish believers a status as God's favored children. (Hurtado 2016, 100)

Peter's vision in Acts 10 of the sheet let down is given to bring down the wall of partition that existed between the Jews and gentiles. Peter's natural disfavor of gentiles is a residual of his Jewish religious heritage. His abhorrence of mixing with "the common and the unclean" is evidenced in the needed repetition of the vision (Acts 10:16). The thrice repeated divine directive and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household reveal to what ends heaven will go to communicate its message of inclusion and belonging. Both his inbred prejudice for the Gentiles, and the power of the heavenly lesson are not lost on the reader when Paul later relates in the book of Galatians that Peter is freely mixing with the

Gentiles at Antioch. Unfortunately, he reverts to his old habits of segregating upon hearing of an upcoming visit from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul records Peter's fellowship with the Gentile members of the church in Antioch and his reversal of practice and writes that he confronted Peter in the presence of the entire church for his regression to pre-Christian practices of segregation (Gal 2:11-12).

Intentionally structuring "churches of convenience," or congregations of our "own type" does not appear to be the practice of the apostolic church. Paul's directive, and the early church's praxis, is re-echoed in Galatians 3:28-29: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

Paul reminds us that in Christ we belong to God and to each other as family with all the associated privileges and responsibilities of the children of Abraham. The triumph of the early church over common prejudices and segregating tendencies was one of its greatest victories and most prominent testimonies to non-believers.

Jesus the Master Marketer

George Barna (1988, 30) in his seminal work, *Marketing the Church*, attests that "many of the efforts of Jesus and the disciples represent lessons in marketing and ought to reduce our concern that marketing ... is not Biblically sound." He goes on to state, "*My contention, based on careful study of the data and the activities of American churches, is that the major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment*" (23, emphasis in the original). He introduces four premises on which his book is founded. "First, the Church is a business" (26).

With a business frame of mutually beneficial exchanges placed onto the gospels, a case could be made for the strategic genius of Christ as Barna does.

Jesus the Confronter

However, many and varied are the interactions of Jesus that elicited frustration, anger, and disappointment resulting from His teachings and directives. The New Testament narrative reveals a Messiah who is often anything but well-marketed for mutually beneficial exchanges (religious consumerism). Even a cursory survey of the life of Christ discloses a history that is fraught with confrontation, rejection, and misunderstanding. If any sizable measure of customer satisfaction were the basis of evaluation for the ministry of Jesus, then much of His work would have to be considered a failure. Resisted and denounced by the Pharisees (Jn 8:12-59), misunderstood by His inner circle (Matt 16:21-23), rejected by the masses (Jn 6:60-67), abandoned by the Twelve (Mark 14:50), and betrayed by two of His closest followers (Matt 26:47-56, 69-75), the life of Christ in its fullest sense, appears to be a poor model of business and marketing acumen.

Jesus and the Message of Repentance

Both Jesus and His forerunner came with the same message, “repent” (Matt 3:1-2, 4:17). The call to repentance is confrontational and contradictory in its very essence to the constructs of consumerism. In a successful business model, everyone goes away satisfied through a mutually beneficial exchange. In a gospel experience truth confronts, convicts, and liberates. The journey to freedom, however, can be turbulent and emotionally unsettling. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance, preceded by John the Baptist with the same message. Mark intentionally introduces Jesus proclaiming the same message as His cousin

John, “repent” (Mark 1:15). Luke begins the story of Jesus’s ministry with a rebuke to His congregation in Nazareth who attempted His murder (Luke 4:28-30). John begins his gospel with the story of the water turned to wine, and the people’s amazement, quickly transitioning to the cleansing of the temple (John 2:13-25). Each of these narratives describe an introduction to ministry far removed from mutually beneficial exchanges. One need not wonder as to the result of such a confrontational approach. In Matthew 15:12 the disciples are intent that Jesus understand the negative affect of His words when they ask Him, “Do you know the Pharisees were offended . . .?” From early in His ministry Jesus appeared willing to make enemies in the name of grace and truth for the salvation of those he was hoping to reach.

Jesus and the Temple

The twofold act of cleansing the temple stands like bookends of Christ’s public ministry (John 2, Matt 21, Mark 11, Luke 19). While this event garnered considerable publicity, it could not be considered a mutually beneficial exchange for all involved. He acted with the confidence of a prophet in confronting the abuses of the church. The move, a clear rebuke of current ecclesiastical practice, undoubtedly left many resentful and resistant to Him and His ministry. A reasonable case could be made that such conduct hastened His own death.

Jesus and Nicodemus

Early in His ministry Jesus was visited by a leading scholar and religious administrator (John 3). In this nighttime rendezvous Jesus is unwilling to allow a cordial compliment to transition into collegial dialogue. At the risk of rejection, Jesus confronts His

guest with his need for spiritual regeneration. Not immediately receptive, Nicodemus purports the impossibility, or perhaps the ridiculousness of the born-again concept. The interchange reveals a confronting Christ that is willing to tackle pride and spiritual formalism in order to reveal the plan of salvation. The encounter lacks even the remotest sense of a mutually satisfying transaction.

Jesus and the Woman at the Well

In John chapter 4, Christ again shows a measure of disregard for the laws of mutually satisfying encounters. While bridging the cultural, religious, and gender divide with a request for water, the conversation quickly turns to the woman's need for forgiveness and hope. Beyond the societal boundaries breached with His request for a drink is the awkward conversation Jesus holds with the woman. Revealing her tainted relational history (John 4:17-18) and contending over the proper place of the Jews in the plan of salvation (John 4:21-24), the encounter could hardly be considered a model of mutually beneficial exchanges. With grace and truth, a wayward woman was won as the result of love and truth skillfully applied. The encounter, however, embodied a serious potential for breakup or breakdown in the conversation. The story ends with a large harvest of Samaritans precisely because Jesus kindly, but directly brings the results of her poor choices into contrast with the liberating power of grace and truth. This result could not have been expected if Jesus had not risked the uncomfortable confrontation and pointed her to Himself as the Savior of the world.

Confrontation in John's Gospel

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus reveals a model of interaction that places truth and grace on display inside dialogues that contend for the eternal salvation of souls. In

relating to the nobleman of John 4:46-54, Jesus rebukes his unbelief and requires him to leave in faith that his son will live. To the man whom Jesus heals at the pool in Bethesda, Jesus commands him to carry his mat through town on the Sabbath day, thus creating offense in the hearts of the leading religious rulers. In John 6 Jesus refuses His disciples and the masses the satisfaction of crowning Him king after feeding the five thousand. The gospels consistently reveal a chagrined and chastised Peter who was rescued and rebuked by Jesus after losing his footing on the water and nearly drowning. John 7 archives the Master arguing with the priests at the Feast of Tabernacles, resulting in a warrant for His arrest (v. 45). John 8 outlines the conflict and deepening animosity of the Pharisees toward Jesus, whom He identifies as “liars” (v. 55) and “sons of the devil” (v. 44), resulting in His near stoning. To the Pharisees and family of the man born blind in John 9, Jesus contends for the legitimacy of compassion on a Sabbath day. He makes no attempt to unravel the offense of faithfulness or to save any from promised excommunication who would follow Him. In John 10 the stones are again in the hands of the religious leaders (v. 31) as Jesus defends His identity as God. The story of Lazarus in John 11 includes purposeful delay and disappointment to the family of the deceased. John 12 opens with an uncomfortable dinner appointment in which a sinful woman crosses the barriers of respectable social and religious mores and ends with Jesus delivering a sharp rebuke to Judas and others for their criticism of her (v. 7).

The triumphal entry is one of the few experiences in the gospel of John that could be construed as a mutually beneficial exchange. Jesus is announced as Messiah. The people have their deliverer, and Jesus receives praise. An unexplainable session of uncontrolled crying dampens the experience. The jubilation is largely a misunderstanding because Jesus will not receive the crown, but the cross. Their temporary joy will only make the

disappointment more bitter. In John 13 Christ solves an uncomfortable situation (no provision for foot washing,) by creating another uncomfortable situation by washing the feet of the disciples (v. 5). When Peter resists His act of humility, He challenges (v. 8) and later offends him by prophesying his soon denial of Himself. At His arrest in the Garden Jesus again rebukes Peter for his violence (John 18:10). In His trial and condemnation, Jesus refuses to deliver Pilate from the difficulties of righteous judgment (John 18:37) and challenges Caiaphas in his administration of justice (John 18:20-21). The book ends with a rebuke to Thomas for doubting (John 20:29), and to Peter for worrying about the future of another disciple (John 21:21-22). John reveals a challenging and controversial Christ who follows the path of mercy and justice.

Confrontation in the Synoptic Gospels

The synoptic gospels tell a similar story. Matthew records John the Baptist confronting the scribes and Pharisees, calling them a “brood of vipers” (Matt 3:7). Jesus challenges church leaders regarding religious practices and exposes their hypocrisy on subjects of prayer and giving. (Matt 6:1-5). In delivering the demoniacs of the Gadarenes, He sends the demons into a herd of swine feeding nearby, creating major offense to the citizens, and receiving requests to leave their region (Matt 8:28-34). In Matthew 9:9-13 He fellowships with Matthew and other tax collectors creating social, religious, and political disapproval. In commissioning the twelve disciples He warns of difficulty, rejection, and martyrdom (Matt 10:16-22).

In Matthew 10:34 He calibrates the expectations of His followers, reminding them that He came not to bring peace “but a sword.” He allows John the Baptist to languish in prison and pronounces woes on cities in Galilee, including comparisons to Sodom (Matt 11).

In Matthew 12 He defends His disciples in “Sabbath breaking” and heals a man with a withered hand in the synagogue (Matt 12:1-14), resulting in the Pharisees determining to “destroy Him.” (Matt 12:14 NASB). In chapter 12 Jesus repeats John’s original determination that the leaders of the church are a “brood of vipers” (Matt 12:34). When revisiting Nazareth, the town again takes offense (Matt 13:57). John the Baptist’s untimely death is recorded in chapter 14 because John rebuked an adulterous relationship. In chapter 15, Jesus confronts the institutional undermining of the fifth commandment with the practice of Corban. The encounter prompts the disciples to point out that “the Pharisees were offended” (Matt 15:12). When the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign He refuses (Matt 16). Peter confronts Jesus over discussions of suffering, who delivers a strong rebuke, “Get thee behind me Satan” (Matt 16:23).

In Matthew 17, Jesus rebukes the entire crowd and His own disciples for their lack of faith. (Matt 17:19-20). The rich young ruler might have become a disciple with a bit of encouragement had not Jesus strained the relationship to the breaking point (Matt 19:21). Matthew 21 records the second cleansing of the temple (Matt 21:12) as well as parables that rebuke church leaders (Matt 21:18-22, 33-43) with a final warning that the kingdom will be taken from the Jews. Matthew 22 records a lengthy interaction with the Sadducees that rebukes their ignorance of the Scriptures (Matt 22:33-46).

Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, Matthew 23 records a litany of woes on the Pharisees in which Jesus refers to them as hypocrites, fools, snakes, dirty dishes, graves of death, and murderers (Matt 23:18-36), statements that could be construed as spiritual abuse and even unchristian in our modern age. Arguably, they were guaranteed to create a negative reaction.

Even a brief survey of the life and ministry of Christ reveals a paradigm counter point to the notion of religious consumerism and its mutually beneficial exchanges.

The gospels record a limited history of mutually beneficial exchanges. The pattern of Jesus's care is embodied in the role of shepherd (John 10:11) as guardian and protector. The shepherding motif is predicated on the premise that the sheep need protection, do not know what is good for them, and cannot always sense danger. Jesus' ministry is a stewardship of enlightened care, much like parenting.

The Difficult Sayings of Jesus

Beyond the ministry of confrontation with both institutional church leaders and His own disciples are the difficult sayings of the Teacher. The consumer church movement is built on the marketing premise of meeting the customers' self-perceived needs and desires. Various statements made by Jesus are difficult to reconcile with the marketing culture of the 21st century.

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10:34-39)

Hurtado (2016, 15) notes that extreme derision followed the disciples of Christ across the Roman Empire. "Outsiders refer[ed] to Christians as different, odd, and even objectionable." He also notes that "the Jesus movement became trans-local and transethnic" (67) and that "amidst social hostilities and periodic prosecutions, this body of beliefs, though

preposterous in the eyes of some pagan critics, seems to have been winsome to many others” (66).

The homogenous proposition and its application as a marketing principle, while attempting to minimize obstacles to the transmission and reception of the gospel, cannot remove the offense of the gospel. As Gilley (2005, 74; 2006, 111) states, “they have redefined salvation” and undermined the authority of the Scriptures. Jesus Himself made no effort to remove this offense. In whatever form the modern church growth movement applies the principle as a marketing tactic, removing the offence of the cross, it reshapes the experience of the church and its potential converts. The simplest and most direct words of Jesus call us to understand that the dearest people and belongings of the Christian will have to be offered up on the altar of potential surrender.

Salesmanship vs. Discipleship

The conspicuous absence of businesslike marketing in the gospels should startle contemporary religious practitioners who examine the church growth movement. Jesus’s ministry was trans-ethnic, trans-local, and defined by grace and truth, thus creating a new culture all its own. Its appeal was the embodiment of God’s love in His person and teachings. His self-selected identity was that of a shepherd, meeting the broad spectrum of human needs defined not by the flock, but by inspiration. His disciples were called to allegiance, obedience, and sacrifice. Conspicuous in His methods were the habits of the prophets in warning His listeners of their spiritual danger.

Deeply embedded in the preaching and practice of Jesus was a knowledge that every person must face the truth, confess their need, and in His power choose to deny the unholy expression of self. The theology and metaphor of this life-changing experience are embodied

in the cross. In choosing the cross, they would daily refuse the expression of their carnal nature. Jesus refused to engage the sinner on any platform that confused the elemental place of the cross as the centerpiece of the plan of salvation. The inescapable question is, Why would anybody choose this way of life? The answer for Jesus and His follows is clear: Love. Christ's ministry model was not based on salesmanship but on discipleship. It was the beauty and nobility of His love, not the carnality of self-interest that brought His followers to Him. Paul himself would confirm these truths when he exclaimed, "I am not peddling the gospel" (2 Cor 2:17).

Measurable Results

Foundational to the church growth marketing model is an axiom of measurable results. This is the natural result of emphasizing "what works." Proponents of the church growth movement arraign the modern church in the western world, most notably mainline churches, with statistical failure (Barna 1988, 21, 22). With multiple stories of apparent missional foundering (McGavran 2005, 3, 5, 6, 10, 119), church growth advocates lay the foundation for a new definition of success that is measurable, quantifiable, and built around the self-defined needs of religious consumers.

It is not the absence of trackable data and measurements that makes a work holy. The emphasis on quantifiable objectives was partially adopted to bring accountability and rigor to the efforts of the church. Few would deny the benefits intended through measurement and analysis. However, when combined with a belief that a church that is not growing is diseased and is failing to fulfill the great commission, the church is liable to permutations of a disfiguring order in the name of success. In the same manner that standardized testing can influence teachers to abandon creativity and organic pedagogy in order to raise test scores, so

an emphasis on measurable success can subtly reconfigure the church's culture from gospel faithfulness to successful pragmatism in the name of "reaching" the lost.

In the market-driven church, the priority of measurable results combined with a theology of conversion (baptism) that requires no ethical change in lifestyle (McGavran 2005, 81, 86) opens the door to a religious pragmatism that eclipses the call to transformed and holy living.

One of the church's roles is to calibrate the collective conscience of a community or nation. One could not expect the church or its leaders in times of necessary societal confrontation or protest to produce satisfactory customer ratings. Measurable growth might not be expected in times of discipline and accountability as well. The masses left Jesus (John 6:66). Stated simply, success in a marketing model might be failure in the eyes of heaven, and what looks like failure in a marketing model might in actuality be success.

Self-Directed Religion

An almost perfect storm has struck the protestant churches of America. Western culture is obsessed with empirical data and awash in personal consumer choices. At the same time many traditional and mainline churches are suffering stagnation and massive statistical losses. Historic Judaic Christian values are under siege in a culture war where truth is defined experientially by the individual. "By the mid-1970s, the self-directed approach to religion had morphed from a phenomenon of the hippie fringe to an emerging norm in American Protestantism" (MacDonald 2013, 19). In the midst of this confluence of forces, traditional biblical teachings appear to be irrelevant. Churches are affirmed and legitimated by their size, programming, and customer ratings, much of it formed around meeting the

communicated desires of their targeted audiences and members. Postmodern Americans have learned to vote with their feet, their wallets, and their social media outlets. Astute pastors and administrators have taken note. They realize that finicky customers can “take their business elsewhere” (Kenneson and Street 2003, 77). They know what works when it comes to filling a church or connecting with a new generation. The largely unexamined question, however, is, Will the same methods fill heaven?

Self-interest and the Gospel Message

Religious consumerism has co-opted the business principle of mutually beneficial exchanges. Built with marketing constructs on the philosophical foundation of the homogeneous principle, the church has repackaged itself as relevant to the unconverted heart. This new frame of ministry has emerged as interest in propositional biblical truth which defines sin and the human condition, the divine-human relationship, and the church’s obligations to God and man have been on the decline. The new order is in the felt need of the customer/member and measurable success. While surveys and certain marketing strategies have limited value for interacting with a community, they have disfiguring dynamics when used for shaping the spiritual identity of God or His people. “Traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences” (Miller 2003, 84).

Identity of the Church

Business or Family?

Largely absent in the discussion of the megachurch movement is the impact of market-driven worship and evangelism on the corporate identity of the community of faith.

Only in recent decades (Barna 1988, 12–16, 26) has the church been viewed as a business. Prior to the church growth movement, the church was considered a family.

Early in the biblical record we discover a deep bond between God and His people. Made in His image and invited into close spiritual intimacy, our relationship to Him is familial. God directs Pharaoh to “Let My people go” (Exod 5:1) and refers to Israel as His “firstborn son” (Exod 4:22). He is Father to His children (Ps. 68:5, Isa. 9:6, Matt 6:9). The people of earth who walk with God are called His sons and daughters (John 1:12). Isaiah the prophet would declare that even a mother’s bond to her nursing baby could not equal God’s bond to His children (Isa. 49:15). When that relationship was broken in the garden, God initiated a work of redemption and restoration which deepened His ties to the human race.

When we examine the language of the New Testament the family paradigm continues. Luke reveals in his genealogy of Jesus that Adam was the son of God (Luke 3:38). Jesus declares that those who do His will are His mother and brothers (Matt 12:48), and that it is “your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). He refers to offending members of the church as brothers and directs that they should be forgiven (Luke 17:3), examine their own lives before judging brothers (Matt 7:4), and that as brothers they should resolve their problems in an orderly manner (Matt 18; 5:24). John reminds us in his first lines that to those who believe he gave power to become the children of God (John 1:12). Paul restates the fact in Romans 8:16 that “we are the children of God,” and the author of Hebrews reminds his readers that like a father, God disciplines His children (Heb 12:8).

Paul carries the family frame forward and refers to fellow Christian men as brothers more than thirty times in his epistles. James challenges us to notice the humble and deprived “brothers” in our midst (James 1:9; 2:15) and warns against judging fellow brothers. Peter

refers to Silvanus as a “faithful brother” and Paul as a “beloved brother” (1 Pet. 5:12; 2 Pet. 3:15). John frequently refers to fellow church members as brothers in his three pastoral letters, with an assurance at the onset of Revelation that he is a “brother and companion in the tribulation” (Rev.1:9, NKJV). To suggest that the church is not a family is to contradict one of the most simple and systematic teachings of Scripture regarding the church.

The Church as Bride

Another aspect in which God describes the deep bond between Himself and His people is through the metaphor of marriage. “For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth” (Isa. 54:5, NKJV). In Jeremiah 30:20 (NKJV) the prophet declares, “Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel.” The experience of Hosea and the written record of his life reflect the message of unfaithfulness in marriage as one of God’s best efforts to explain His heartbreak at Israel’s betrayal (Hosea 4:12). Jeremiah invites the harlot Israel to return to her husband (Jer 3:1).

In the New Testament, husbands are directed to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25). Jesus illustrates the relationship between God and His people as bride (the church) and Bridegroom (Matt 9:15). Paul writes that he desires to present the church to Christ as a pure virgin (2 Cor 11:2). John the Revelator describes the church as a virgin in Revelation 12 and calls us to rejoice in our place at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19). The final call of Scripture is from the Spirit and the bride (church), inviting people into a saving relationship with God (Rev. 22:17).

The identity of the church is found in its deep family ties to God and to each other. These bonds are born out of God’s twofold act of creation and redemption, both of which are

initiated by Him. The belonging and inclusion into God's family transcends even family attachments and, at times, in the name of this new bond, strain and break our earthly families apart (Matt 10:34). It is this family identity that directs the values, actions, purposes, and priorities of the church.

Such a family identity is crucial in defining both our responsibility and methodology in dealing with fellow church members, society, and potential new believers. While an agreement of mutual exchanges can serve well in a business transaction where expectations serve self-interest, it is nearly non-existent in the Scriptures, and completely absent in healthy families. Mutually beneficial exchanges in the Scriptures that are family related are often associated with unhealthy and damaging dynamics to the people of God. The unsanctioned attachment of harlotry in the story of Judah in Genesis 38, and metaphorically throughout the Old and New Testament is transacted as a mutually beneficial exchange. The sale of Esau's birthright for a bowl of pottage (Gen. 25:31), and that of Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28) are also exchanges in which self-interest corrupted family harmony and happiness. The responsibilities and commitments of a family compel a distinctly different frame of motivation and engagement where self-interest is not the motivation for action.

Mutual self-interest, precisely because it is self-oriented, is antithetical to the revelation of God's person and practice in Scripture with His people and those he longs to save (John 3:16). This concept is also contradictory to the most elemental understanding of family (Isa. 49:15) and bereft of the ennobling power to awaken love and the self-sacrifice that marked the life of Jesus and His followers. Like all functional families, the church has a distinct identity that cannot be built on self-interest without corrupting itself and its message.

The very essence and being of the church is the love of Christ which compels (2 Cor. 5:14) us to reach the lost.

The Great Controversy and the Primacy of Identity

At the heart of the church and family are a litany of transactions that are not mutually beneficial. Paul's admonition to cast out the offending brother of 1 Corinthians 5, and the multiple references to "discipline" or "chastening" in Hebrews 12 are effective family methods that produce Christian character but are not mutually beneficial exchanges. The author of Hebrews states, "Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11).

The Old and New Testaments are the story of God bridging the chasm between fallen man and heaven. The Scriptures witness to the love of God for man and the sacrifice of Christ in recapturing our freedom and reinstating the privilege of belonging to the heavenly family. The plan of salvation is God-initiated with man as the recipient. The encounter can certainly be described as transactional, but it is a debtor's trade of condemnation for justification, provided for by the sufferings and death of Christ. It is a gift (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8). To lay the template of self-interest and mutually beneficial exchange over the experience of salvation is to destroy the simplest teachings of the gospel and eviscerate the divinely infused value of man created by the sacrifice of Christ. The Scriptures are clear that we were rescued while we were enemies (Rom. 5:8) and sought after while we were wanderers (Ezek. 34:11; Luke 19:10). Like a parent spending sleepless nights watching over a sick child, a higher order of motivation motivates and controls God and His people. Christ

has paid an eternal price to redeem us. “He collected all the riches of the universe, and laid them down in order to buy the pearl” (White 2003a, 118).

A relationship built on consumer principles and practices is the undoing of the church and society, for it denies the transforming power of self-forgetful love. While the church may be able to bolster its sagging corporate self-esteem with statistical affirmation, it may also be denying the only remedy for transformation. Only through an understanding of the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ can the human heart be awakened to the principles of love and willingly yield its allegiance and service, a transaction the Scriptures call conversion. The result is worship and “fruits worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8)

In mankind’s unconverted state the Bible describes humanity as lost and blind (Luke 6:39) and recognizes the unrenewed heart as deceitfully wicked and unknowable (Jer. 17:9). The transaction of hope initiated by God is motivated by love and awakens love in man. While God finds joy in our reception of salvation, the concept of Divine self-interest is a theological oxymoron, a contradiction of the very essence of God’s being. Marketing constructs of mutually beneficial exchange reconfigure the very nature of redemption and the covenant with man. They have "redefined salvation" (Gilley 2005, 74). To motivate the church on the basis of mutual benefit is to destroy the refining and sanctifying influence of the love of God. To transact with the unconverted public on the basis of self-interest is to constitutionally flaw their relationship with God from its inception. Free to mankind, yet costly beyond human comprehension is the sublime mystery of godliness that would seek to redeem man. Any paradigm that minimizes the hopelessness of our sinful condition and the unfathomable condescension of God is a betrayal of the essence of the gospel and cannot save. Further, it has a disfiguring power on the church itself as the practice of “bridge

building” to the sinner often leavens the experience of the saint. To infuse self-interest where only love belongs is to engineer a terminal flaw into the divine-human relationship. When the initial ministries of the church appeal to the self-interest of the "seeker," when and how will the church reconfigure the relationship to build on the self-sacrificing love of Christ?

Jesus declared that eternal life was to know the Father through the Son (John 17:3). His person and our restoration into His likeness and His family is the great centerpiece of the gospel. The invitation is to spiritual intimacy with His person, an exchange that is wonderfully beneficial to the recipient and extremely costly to God. The encounter begins through experiencing God’s love, progresses to a conviction of unworthiness and commitment to God, and ends with a promised assurance of eternal life through Jesus.

When the religious meetings, including the worship services, adapt the relational frame from debtors to customers, the message may be received favorably by the targeted group, even glowingly affirmed; however, it is no longer the gospel. The notion of “customer” or mutual exchange infers that we have something to offer that is of value to God. While Christ’s sacrifice has placed inestimable value upon us, our initial status is one of condemnation as an enemy of God (Rom 5). Our righteousness is as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). The Good Shepherd comes in search of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4). He has not transacted business that benefits Himself but has provided deliverance at the expense of His own life in order to save His children from death.

Having paid an infinite price to redeem us and bring us back into the family, God is owed the entirety of a surrendered life, and expects a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) as a freewill offering from the redeemed. The efforts of the saved in supporting the church and cooperating in reaching the lost is a privilege and obligation. A marketing construct relieves

the church of its divine obligations to reach the lost through love and self-sacrifice and incorporates the world into the church through “bridges” that attempt to identify with the unconverted.

As a mother or father sacrifices, disciplines, and even strains the parent-child relationship to deliver them from self-inflicted destruction and death, so God expects the church to work for the spiritual well-being of its own members. And as God came in search of a lost world, so His church, revived by His love and motivated by the same, makes every sacrifice to reach the lost. The concept of mutually beneficial transactions is a denial of the existential indebtedness of the human race, the incomprehensible love of God, and the transformational power of disinterested benevolence working through God’s people to reach the lost.

The incomprehensible condescension of Christ, bridging the otherwise unbridgeable chasm that sin placed between the family on earth and the family in heaven is the wellspring of our worship and the motivation of our lives in selfless service. The Scriptures consistently portray man in a hopelessly lost condition without the intervention of God (John 3:18). Building worship services and religious meetings with potential or existing church members on the basis of mutually beneficial transactions deconstructs the gospel narrative of divine condescension to suffer, sacrifice, and die a cruel death, all for the redemption of man. This approach levels the relationship between God and man to a dialogue of relative equals both looking to come away satisfied. Abandoning the narrative of man’s desperate plight and God’s amazing grace destroys the foundation of worship and releases man from the obligation of offering himself as a living sacrifice. This paradigm shift trivializes the condescension of God and minimizes man’s wretchedness.

Distinction from the World

Our identity as the family of God is in contradistinction to the culture, manners, and habits of the citizens of the world. God's role is Lord and Father. Receiving acceptance into His family is to leave the identity of the world behind. When the church co-opts the spirit or practices of the world in an attempt to connect with the lost or to retain its members, it betrays its relationship to God, denies the centrality of the church as a family with standards and expectations, and confuses the recipient in regard to God's expectation of holy living. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, describes the clear distinctions between those who follow God and those who are of the world (2 Cor. 6).

Likeness vs. Otherness

The homogeneous principle and the marketing principles built upon it hold powerful potential for good or evil in its application. In Acts 15, the church determined that ethnic Judaism was not to be a part of the gospel message; in a similar manner many churches recognized the liabilities of imposing western culture on indigenous converts.

The misapplication of the homogeneous principle in the church growth/marketing movement occurs when the church brings business practices to the identity dynamics of the church, primarily its worship and spiritual activities. While all churches participate in some form of marketing (business practice), and while felt needs have a place in connecting with the community, certain aspects of the church are not marketable and are completely incompatible with a consumer construct. This would include the prophetic ministry, both public and private, that calls the church to holiness. The spirit of the world, including its music and theatrics, cannot be co-opted for conversion. The misconfiguring dynamics of self-

interest will unravel the fabric and character of the church and misshape the proselytes. Connection on the level of human need was Christ's method and should be ours; however, methods that bring with them the spirit of the world will compromise biblical values and standards, and consequently our identity as children of God.

This philosophy of church growth must be rejected outright. Stated another way, human needs, or those common to man, offer a door of opportunity for ministry and connection. However, when marketing and surveying reveal appetites and interests that contradict the teachings and principles of Scripture regarding holy living, the church's identity and call to a distinctly "other" life must be clear, direct, and unpolluted by self-interest. Beyond this is the larger concern of members developing the mindset of customers, which would be the great inward turning of the soul of the church.

Transformational Power of Methods

Contrary to the sentiments of Barna (1988, 26), the church is not a business. This is the first of his four premises for marketing the church. The acquisition of members as part of a mutually beneficial exchange in order to ensure the survival of the church is contradictory to the nature and methods of Christ. Speaking of the early church, Ellen White (2002a, 28) states, "Christ's name was to be their watchword, their badge of distinction, their bond of union, the authority for their course of action, and the source of their success. Nothing was to be recognized in His kingdom that did not bear His name and superscription."

People who share this deep family bond with God and His children are willing to be misunderstood in the ministry of love to fellow church members and the lost. Sacrificial love is the cornerstone of healthy families, and its absence in the motivations and methods of the home will surely deform and destroy. No less could be said regarding the church.

Conversion vs. Customer Service

Lost upon much of the modern church is the elemental experience of transformation in heart and action in the plan of salvation. John the Baptist in preparing a way for Jesus proclaimed the need of repentance (Matt. 3:2). John's warning to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8) is leveled at the highest order of church leadership. Jesus followed in Matthew 4:17 with the same message. He rebuked the residents of Galilee for their hardness of heart and compared them to the inhabitants of Nineveh (Matt 12:41), whose spirits had not been so resistant. The rudimentary role of repentance in the plan of salvation precludes any model that would make potential converts into customers and eliminate the unavoidable and incontrovertible diagnosis: we are desperately sin sick and in need of a Savior (Isa. 1:5-6). The experience and necessity of repentance is mutually exclusive to the religious consumer model. It is much more convenient for the lost to remain in the position of "shopper" in the spiritual marketplace. As Os Guinness (2003, 10) states in *The Call*, "Seekers are rarely looking for anything in particular. Often, they are drifters, not seekers, little different from the 'hoppers and shoppers' who surf the media and cruise the malls of the postmodern world."

Jesus declared to His disciples that they would need to be converted (στραφητε) and turn from their previous ways of thinking and become as little children (Matt. 18:3). Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost affirmed this need when he proclaimed to the crowd, "Repent therefore and be converted (επιστρεψατε) that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). At the heart of this conversion experience is a turning away from the desires and lifestyles of the unrenewed heart. Without this turning away the power of the gospel is denied, and the hearer remains

beyond the transforming touch of Christ. The church pews may fill without corresponding joy (Luke 15:7) in heaven or transforming power for our communities on earth.

Identity vs. Identifying

Central to the church growth/marketing process is the discovery of the customer's needs or wishes. These desires being understood, a potential relational bridge can be built to the lost. The Scriptures affirm this method and goal (1 Cor. 9:22). Largely unexamined, however, are the principles and precepts that set the boundaries for how far the church can go in its efforts to identify before it loses its own identity and witness for heaven. Central to the gospel commission is the sinner's need of salvation. These needs may not be understood when interacting with the lost, yet they constitute the elemental beginning of the salvation experience and a relationship with God. It is imperative that the church does not remove the offense of the cross in its witness either in spirit or method (1 Cor. 2:2). The unavoidable confrontation of the gospel message that diagnosis man as lost and hopeless without Christ, is a bridge that must also be crossed.

For hundreds of years the Christian church has sought to win the hearts of the lost through works of charity. The worldwide network of hospitals, schools, and aid agencies are a vibrant legacy to the Christian service of the church. The soul searching that is now incumbent upon the faith community is an examination of its faithfulness to the person of God and His call to holy living. James declares that we are to keep ourselves "unspotted" from the world (James 1:27). The line too often crossed by modern day marketing/church growth adherents in their attempt to reach seekers is the difference between enlightened, disinterested benevolence and a compromised, disfiguring patronization.

Central to the vitality of any church and the effectiveness of its witness is the power of self-sacrificing love represented by the cross of Christ. The religious consumer construct is antithetical to the identity and mission of the church. Jesus brought the cross front and center to the Christian experience (Matthew 16:24). Surveys and opinion polls have value in an attempt to interface with the secular public; however, relying on them to shape the faith habits and corporate worship of the body of Christ is a departure from the tenets of inspiration and the person of Christ. The worship service is not an evangelistic meeting (Gilley 2006, 72).

While felt needs may bring people into the church's sphere of influence through its outreach ministries, the body of Christ (the church) cannot reflect His identity if decision-making pivots on the unconverted consumer. Much of the challenge with the marketing/church growth movement and its emphasis on research and measurement relates to separating marketable ministries from non-marketable biblical values. The homogeneous principle and the marketing/church growth strategies that have emerged from it have been used to turn the worship service into a consumer-driven event. Ironically, God has been displaced as the central figure of worship in an effort to bring Him to the masses. "The old gospel is about God; the new gospel is about us." (Gilley 2005, 74). The consequence has been the loss of converting power for transforming the lost and the infusion of the spirit of the world into the church. This phenomenon is now normative in the Christian world. Its results, though rarely attributed to market-based methodologies, are documented in Christa Cressy's book, *Almost Christian*.

Winning the trust of non-members through identifying and meeting felt needs originated with Christ Himself. Ellen White (2003b, 143), commenting on the methods of

Jesus, states: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’” The study of demographic data to identify a community need can have value. However, it is one thing to discover community interest in effective parenting or healthy living and another to learn that convicting sermons are a turn off. Marketing/church growth techniques, precisely because they are customer driven, cannot be used to direct the worship practices, lifestyles, and discipleship goals of the faith community.

The Apostles and Marketing

A New Testament examination of apostolic teaching and praxis reveals the consistent primacy of scriptural truth and the confrontational nature of the gospel. Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost is first ridiculed and then received as he holds his audience culpable for the death of Jesus (Acts 2) and calls them to repentance.

The dramatic growth of the early church is well chronicled in the book Acts. Despite beatings (Acts 5:40), imprisonment (Acts 4:3), and death (Acts 7), thousands turned to the Way (Acts 2:41; 4:4). One could reasonably assume that the expectation of certain persecution for those joining the new sect protected the fledgling movement from halfhearted and casual constituents (Acts 5). As Christ had counseled, one should count the cost before receiving Him. In the midst of this membership explosion is the growth-chilling narrative of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. One is compelled to ask why heaven’s judgment fell so heavily on two people and decelerated church growth, if growing the church was the goal. Clearly, unqualified numerical enlargement was not the goal or the accurate measure of true success. The sincerity, genuineness, and integrity of its members in a life-changing

relationship with Christ must be protected. Spiritual integrity as defined scripturally through the application of the Word and the impression of the Holy Spirit was obviously a higher priority to God than the apparent success of swelling ranks. Hypocrisy was and remains a spiritual disease to be highly guarded against.

Paul and His Letters

Authoring one of the largest parts of the New Testament, Paul leaves a trove of ministerial methodologies, none of which reveal a marketing mentality. After experimenting in Athens with less confrontational methods, he announces the centrality of the cross (1 Cor. 2:2). His rejection by various Jewish congregations where he began his proselytizing ministry is well documented for the sake of those who would also meet with hostility and resentment on behalf of the message of the cross.

In 2 Cor. 2:17 he states, “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God. . . .” His writings are conspicuously absent of a consumer motif. Rebuking, exhorting, correcting, with all long suffering and pastoral care (Titus 2:15) Paul strains and stretches relationships with the new believers as he calls them to the standards of Christ. To the nascent Corinthian church, he doles out stinging spiritual rebuke according to his self-described role as their spiritual father (1 Cor. 4:15). The second epistle to Corinth records Paul’s sacrifices on behalf of the gospel - none of which could be considered beneficial to himself (2 Cor. 11:25). His preaching and teaching create vengeful enemies bent on his destruction, as well as truehearted converts who are constrained by the love of Christ.

Final Words

John the Revelator, recording the messages of Jesus to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three affirms many, rebukes most, and invites all to a renewed experience in Christ. Each church, like a family, receives the appropriate message to encourage and direct their discipleship journey. Many believe that these churches represent the experience of God's people from John's day to the close of time. If true, the message to Laodicea is a prophetic template of Christian leadership praxis in the last chapters of earth's history (Rev. 3:14-22). The seventh church receives no commendation, a stinging rebuke to its lack of self-awareness and an invitation to a new experience with Christ. A strong case could be made that it is the most negative narrative of the seven. At the end of the censure is a reminder that could only bring hope if the recipients knew they were part of heaven's family. The message is fatherly correction with eternal consequences emanating from a heart of love (Rev. 3:19).

Conclusion

Marketing principles serve well to advance business relationships involving little or no fiduciary responsibility. However, in the spiritual realm they stand antithetical to the responsibility of the church to love and warn a lost world for Christ and to shepherd the flock of God. Seeker-driven worship services and the making of disciples using a marketing paradigm are existentially contradictory to the gospel in culture and teaching. Man's hopeless condition, God's great sacrifice, and the indebtedness of the human race are theologically and philosophically incompatible with the marketing approach to the core identity and worship dynamics of the church.

The application of the market-based/church growth principles in the name of evangelism has been reshaping the experience and identity of God's people in many Protestant circles over the past thirty years. The crucial error has been the placement of self-diagnosis and self-interest of the lost in the driver's seat of the church's identity, evangelism, and worship elements. The Scriptures are clear that "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Contrary to postmodern thinking, unchurched Harry and Mary do not know what is good for them in their spiritual quest. We understand that they don't want to be told what to do, and this may be the larger part of the problem (Strobel, 1993).

While surveying people to establish basic human interest and desires has various merits, the concept of self-identified spiritual directing is antithetical to the Bible and the message of salvation. Man without God is in darkness, and it is not until God arrives that the light shines to show the way (John 1). At the center of the salvation experience is the proclamation of truth from God's Word. The gospel invitation is to a transforming love relationship that evidences itself to saints and sinners through new lives and lifestyles that contradict the practices and principles of the world. The remnant church, while desiring to reach the lost, understands the limits of relational bridge building and market modalities. God's person, presence, and teachings shape the identity and methods of His people.

Over a century ago Ellen White (2002c, 570) penned a warning:

There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must, to a certain extent, conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss. Against every subtle influence that seeks entrance by means of flattering inducements from the enemies of truth, God's people must strictly guard. They are pilgrims and strangers in this world, traveling a path beset with danger. To the ingenious

subterfuges and alluring inducements held out to tempt from allegiance, they must give no heed.

As Bonhoeffer (1995, 43) penned nearly a century ago, “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church, we are fighting for a costly grace.”

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE RELATED TO AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT PHILOSOPHIES AND METHODS

The Christian Church has survived a variety of strains, stresses, and persecutions over the past two millennia. Despite these internal troubles and external pressures, God has retained a faithful witness to the invitation of salvation and the call to holy living. However, in the modern and postmodern era, societal forces have created monumental paradigm shifts relating to the identity of the church, its methods of engaging the lost, and the substance and proclamation of the gospel. The new normal in the church is, “Self-centered spiritual consumerism, and shallow, me-driven faith” (Groeschel 2011, 19). Such churches make “no uncomfortable claims to objective truth or moral demands” (Roberts 2011, 58). “The old gospel is about God; the new gospel is about us” (Gilley 2005, 74). As MacDonald (2013, 32) states in *Thieves in the Temple*, “Churches are doing whatever it takes to attract crowds.” However, “the Bible offers little support for this self-fulfillment ethic” (Shelley and Shelley 1992, 54). “We have ended up with much more, but we ourselves have ended up being much less. We have become spiritual vagrants in the modern wasteland, wanderers with no home to return to” (Wells 1994, 15).

The primary purpose of this current study is to examine a premise initially rejected by twentieth century secular writers (Weber 1968) and Christian leaders (Barth and Thurneysen

2009), but embraced over time as axiomatic in the marketing/church growth movement: that the church is a business and should view its mission through the marketing lens (Barna 1988, 26). This concept appears to be a timely adaptation for the church whose patrons (current and potential) have been trained in the milieu of consumerism. If “the practice of marketing has no intrinsic value” (Barna 1988, 48), then a business template should be enthusiastically embraced in the religious culture of America. If, however, the market-driven church is built on methods and assumptions contradictory to the essence of family and the efficacy of the gospel and “distorts the church and its narrative in several ways” (Kenneson and Street 2003, 27–28, 48), then the church may “mark and mar our generation” (MacDonald 2013, 26) and obstruct their efforts to know God, themselves, and their community. The role of the cross and the denial of self are either central to the growth of the church or they are not (Luke 9:23). These concepts abandoned in the name of pragmatism, success, or mission could result in a people group or generation resembling those described by Paul in 2 Tim. 3:1-5, “having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.”

In this literature review I will examine the history of consumerism in American culture and religion and analyze the principles and precepts of the church growth/marketing movement in their application of market-driven church. I will review the history of how and why the modern church pivoted to a business model with marketing principles and procedures. I will also examine the theology and definition of terms related to the church growth/marketing movement and consider the resulting problems of religious marketing when it involves the spiritual identity and worship experience of the church. I will conclude with a summary of principles and practices from the writings of Ellen White regarding the

ideology and practice of religious consumerism and marketing strategies that impact the spiritual identity and worship services of the church.

For the purposes of this review, the phenomena of viewing the church as a business, reshaping its spiritual identity and worship experience in order to appeal to a target audience, and relating to its members (current and potential) as customers, will be referred to as “spiritual or religious consumerism.” This analysis will focus on the adverse effects of a “customer orientation” that reshapes the core spiritual identity and religious practices of a faith community based on market research and data. The goal is to achieve mutually beneficial exchanges with your exchange partners (Wrenn, Kotler, and Shawchuck 2010, 62). Several facets of the church growth movement are valuable for refocusing our churches on reaching the lost, and no reasonable person would deny the usefulness of various components of marketing to communicate the church’s mission. However, when the spiritual identity of the church is reshaped by the appetites and desires of the lost in the name of marketing, no one is converted to the cross, and the church is conformed to the world.

Background of Consumerism in America

Kenneson and Street (2003, 37) assert that to understand how the church pivoted to the marketing model we need to understand the historical context in which the phenomena developed. They say marketing can be understood simply with a 1985 definition produced by the American Marketing Association: “Marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that will satisfy individual and organizational objectives.”

Three distinct phases of marketing can be charted in well-developed economies. These include a production phase, a selling phase, and a marketing phase. In the production

phase a shortage of goods removes the necessity of convincing anyone that your product should be purchased. The mentality of the producer is that “a good product will sell itself” (Kenneson and Street 2003, 37). This phase dominated the early part of the industrial revolution and is illustrated best by Henry Ford’s famed line that customers could have a Model T in any color they wanted as long as it was black.

The second business era is described as the selling phase. During this period the production ability of the American economy greatly improved, but the war effort absorbed the excess. After the war they describe people as reluctant to purchase more than necessities. Salesmen where needed to find homes for the excess.

The years from 1950 onward embrace the third era of business, or the marketing years. The demilitarization of the industrial war machine launched us into a full-fledged consumer culture, no longer producing bullets and tanks, but dolls and cars (Steinberg and Kincheloe 2009, 156). During this period surplus goods and multiple options for the buyer made the customer king (Kenneson and Street 2003). MacDonald (2013, 13) notes that “a pervasive consumer mindset was taking hold on American culture.” We are now living in the age of the empowered religious consumer.

Marketing Spreads to the Church

Kenneson and Street (2003, 39) point out that this new role for the American consumer was not limited to the dynamics of business but “created an entirely new way of thinking—a way of thinking rooted in the conviction that other people should be prepared to satisfy our desires.” They further state: “Friendships and marriages increasingly reflect this consumer orientation, with their easy dissolution often viewed on a par with changing

brands” (39). G. Jeffery MacDonald (2013, 13) in *Thieves in the Temple* states that “Americans brought their enthusiasm for consumption to the church as well.”

Origins

Where did the original seeds of religious consumerism germinate in the church? Os Guinness (1993, 13) states: “Many people identify this movement narrowly with the specific architects and advocates of its earlier stages—most famously, Donald McGavran, C. Peter Wagner, and the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth School.” He continues: “The movement rose out of Donald McGavran’s missionary work in the 1930s” (20). Guinness identifies three stages of the church growth movement: the missionary stage, American stage, and the megachurch stage (21). This movement fused the sciences of anthropology, demography, and marketing to “reach” the various segments of society. Founded on the theology of McGavran and Wagner and George Barna’s marketing methods, it has flourished in the consumer culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. According to Bishop and Cushing (2008, 161, 181), it all began with a missionary who examined the results of the colonized and traditional mission stations of India.

Donald McGavran, originator of the church growth movement, found the genesis of his teachings in the disappointing church growth history of the traditional mission station movement in India and from the discovery of J. Waskom Pickett’s book, *Christian Mass Movements in India*. Through Pickett’s emphasis on group conversions and the successful efforts of an Indian indigenous missionary named Ditt, McGavran developed the concept of the “homogeneous unit” (Bishop and Cushing 2008, 161–164). Bishop and Cushing (2008, 164) say McGavran “believed that any church—any religion— that asked people to abandon

their tribe, caste, or class would fail.” Stated another way, humans relate best to people most like themselves. Defined in his own terms, McGavran (1990, 69) stated in his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, “The homogeneous unit is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common.” He also noted that “the homogenous unit is an elastic concept, it’s meaning depending on the context in which it is used (70). According to Bosch (2011, 425) in *Transforming Missions*, McGavran also believed that “Numerical or quantitative growth should have first priority in a world where three billion people are not Christians.” These beliefs, combined with Barna’s marketing paradigm, would radically alter the methods, practices, and identity of the American protestant church experience.

McGavran’s writings and teachings were largely unrecognized in America until 1965 when he was invited to Fuller Theological Seminary to begin the Church Growth Institute, and his charts and talks found their way into print. In that same year, a landmark reversal of American church statistics would commence; for the first time in 200 years church attendance began to decline (Bishop and Cushing 2008, 167). Nine years later a young pastor named Rick Warren would read an article about McGavran subtitled, “Why Is This Man Dangerous?” in *HIS*, a Christian magazine “As I sat there and read the article on Donald McGavran,” Warren (1995, 29) wrote, “I had no idea that it would dramatically impact the direction of my ministry.”

The article transformed Warren’s philosophy of church, ministry, and evangelism. In his own words, “McGavran brilliantly challenged the conventional wisdom of his day about what made churches grow (Warren 1995, 29). Warren would go on to build one of America’s largest churches through a study of demographic data and an application of the principle of

the homogeneous unit. His target audience was “Saddleback Sam.” Once Warren knew what he liked, he tailored the church experience to create identity, connection, and comfort for Sam.

McGavaran (1973, 45, emphasis supplied) in *How to Grow a Church*, writes in dialogue with coauthor Win Arn, “We must make sure that we ask people to become Christians where they don’t have to cross barriers of language and culture and *class and wealth and style of life*.” He also states that “Men like to become Christians in their own social groupings without crossing barriers” (45). He renounced segregation based on “pride, arrogance, or exclusiveness,” but encouraged the targeting of social groups based on the “normal, natural, innocent fact that people like to be with people of their own kind. Win Arn responds in the conversation with the following observation: “And they gravitate to churches of their own kind for reasons of convenience” (46).

Building on our natural comfort levels with our own “kind of people” McGavran (1973, 51) asserts that if you invite someone to church from a different homogenous unit within your own society “they don’t come. And if they did, they would feel ill at ease because their kind of people are not there.” He states that the sermon “that gets through to university professors will not speak to men who belong to unions” and further asserts that “university professors will tell you that they love factory workers, and I suppose they do; but as a matter of actual fact, men who work in factories don’t feel comfortable when they go to a church attended largely by university professors” (44, 45). To drive his point home, he states: “Nobody in one segment of society can be good enough to people in other segments of society to make them feel thoroughly at home” (52).

Using this anthropological concept along with highly refined demographic studies, disciples of the church growth movement were only a few logical steps away from highly targeted and carefully marketed “churches of convenience” for people of varying “classes, and wealth and style of life.” As McGavran (1973, 47) observed, people go “where they feel at home”. The goal seemed admirable: “to make it easier for people to become Christians” (Bishop and Cushing 2008, 179).

To be fair, some believe McGavran was not properly understood, and that his principles were wrongly applied in the western context. In commenting on the phenomena that McGavran began, Eddie Gibbs, the Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary (Bishop and Cushing 2008, 179) states, The homogeneous unit “was a missional principle, and when it came to the U.S. it became a marketing principle: . . . [Churches] picked up the tactical parts, but I’m not too sure they understood the deeper mission implication. And they didn’t really address the cultural implications because mission morphed into marketing” (181, brackets in original).

C. Peter Wagoner (1979, 283, emphasis supplied), commenting on the spiritual conditions of the church from 1950-1978, states that the churches of the sixties had not properly focused on evangelism, and thus “produced a wave of dissatisfied *customers*, so to speak, who deserted their churches in droves.” The use of marketing phrases such as “customers” was beginning to embed itself into the dialogues of religion.

Pushback

Warnings were sounded by the church establishment. Robert Evans (1979, 293, 304) from the Hartford Seminary Foundation wrote, “I can find no emphasis in the New Testament on a self-conscious strategy for growth.” The heavenly marriage feast “is, if I

understood the image correctly, the greatest breaking down of homogeneous units we will ever know.” However, despite mainline resistance, hemorrhaging church rosters and a developing consumer mindset had brought McGavran’s views back to the forefront. His book, *The Bridges of God*, which had flopped in 1955 would now become the seminal work of the nascent church growth movement, built largely around the homogeneous unit. From obscurity to his role as the founding Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1965, he would be at the head of what would become a major paradigm shift in church identity and praxis.

In his book *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches*, Russell Burrill sounds a warning for Seventh-day Adventist pastors who would imbibe church growth methods built on unscriptural definitions of discipleship. He states, “We must be careful that McGavran’s influence, which is strong in Adventist circles, does not force us into a false mission that is not biblical” (Burrill 1996, 26).

Burrill’s caution is built around McGavran’s definition of the word “disciple.” “The problem,” he states, “is that McGavran created an artificial definition for disciple in place of a biblical definition (Burrill 1996, 26). For McGavran (2005, 14) in his seminal work *The Bridges of God*, to “disciple” is to bring the lost to a decision where “polytheism, idolatry, fetishism or any other man-made religion or its corporate loyalty is eliminated.” He defines “disciple” as one who “feel[s] united around Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, believe themselves to be members of His Church, and realize that ‘our folk are Christians, our book is the Bible and our house of worship is the church’” (14). His definition requires no “evidence of ethical change” (15). He further states, “Emphatically both ethical change and dedication will come . . . but such growth is not an essential part of the first stage” (15). This

first stage he calls “discipling” and the second stage he calls “perfecting,” where ethical change occurs.

Church Marketing Ideas Explained

Wagner (1987, 38), in *Strategies for Church Growth* states, “Church growth leans toward a phenomenological approach which holds theological conclusions somewhat more tentatively and is open to revise them when necessary in the light of what is learned through experience.” This pragmatic theological relativism is seen by some as part of a counterfeit revival characterized by experiential pandering (Hanegraaf 1997, 101).

The church growth/marketing movement combines McGavran’s soteriology (Wagner 1979) with no initial call to ethical change (McGavran 2005) and the pragmatism of marketing (Barna 1988), to discover the relational bridges to the unchurched. Not only the identity of the church, but the message it presents to a lost world is to be shaped around the principles of mission. Rick Warren (Warren 1995, 219) states in *The Purpose Driven Church*, “It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. . . . It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person’s felt needs.”

McGavran’s definition of discipling substitutes “churching” for “converting,” and asks for “no ethical change” (McGavran 2005, 14, 15). This combined with Warren’s emphasis on finding “the key to a person’s heart” opens the methodological door through market-driven missiology to bring the values and practices of the unsaved into the church, including its worship services. This construct of missiology leads to practices that were previously understood to be contradictory to the healthy development of Christian character, the principles of holy living, and the accountability dynamics of the gospel.

According to McGavran, because behavior change will follow in the “perfecting” chapters of the convert’s life, the modern market-driven church can build “bridges” to the “unchurched” using methods that appeal to self-interest, with the goal being to “church” them. The use of the word “unchurched,” as opposed to “lost” is not incidental. McGavran’s soteriology charts a distinctly different course to baptism and conversion than most mainline churches prior to 1965, including Adventism. The resulting religious pragmatism, though contradictory to the New Testament call to self-denial and holy living, is acceptable if it eventually brings the unchurched into the church where transformation will occur.

Contributing to this pragmatism is what Os Guinness (1993, 84) describes as a shift, “from the primacy of worship to the primacy of evangelism.” As Gilley (2006, 72) notes: “That evangelism can take place when the church is gathered is not in question, but biblically, evangelism is not the primary focus when the local body of Christ gathers for worship and edification.” The worship service is an experience for believers focused on God. However, in the success metrics of the movement the church must grow. The absence of growth is a failure of the church, a sign of spiritual disease, and more importantly a failure to carry out the Great Commission (McGavran and Arn 1973, 12). These concepts created tremendous pressure on pastors to reconfigure their worship services as evangelistic meetings and opened the doors of the church to be completely reconfigured using formerly rejected methods to “reach” the “unchurched.”

Parsing the Terminology and Methods

Few would argue with the idea that building bridges should be the goal of every Christian. Felt needs are a potential starting point for any human relationship. Adventist seminaries and schools of religion bring Ellen White’s (2003b, 143) statement to the

attention of many students: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”

Many Adventists read this commentary as a statement of the discipleship process when in reality it is a step towards discipleship. It is an oft quoted and little analyzed description of Christ’s methods. To examine the operative phrases and the author’s meaning would help Adventist pastors and churches determine where they can and cannot benefit from church growth/marketing methods.

True Success

First to be considered is the definition of “true success.” For the market-driven church with its insistence on measurable growth, nothing less than statistical progress is success (McGavran and Arn 1973, 12). Using this definition, the ministry of Christ is found wanting. A family model of the church defines success in contradistinction from the world of commerce. Leadership and discipleship inside a family involve many relational dynamics that are irreconcilable with mutually beneficial exchanges (marketing) and measurable progress. Another consideration is the phrase “reaching the people,” which is the terminology that drives modern ecclesiastical pragmatism in an age of religious consumerism. Is reaching the people getting them into the church for programs and activities, or does it represent conversion and changed lives? The difference between the word “churched” and “converted” is at the heart of this discussion. When considering praxis, Christ’s actual methods of mingling, sympathizing, and ministering are recorded in Scripture. The operative question is, were His relationships the result of strategic marketing and defined and directed by the

“seeker?” Or was He the seeker (and His people) ministering to their real needs? Lastly, for distinguishing White’s intent from the modern overlay of the church growth/marketing movement, let us consider the word “disciple.” Is there a difference between activities and ministries that meet human needs and build relationships and the chosen and committed spiritual journey that we call discipleship? In other words, does discipleship even begin until the call to “follow me” is accepted?

Many Adventist ministers, marinating in a clerical culture of church growth/marketing principles and a secular environment of religious consumerism have memorized White’s quotation without considering the impact of divergent definitions of the words “success,” “reaching,” and “disciple.” Little scrutiny and theological reflection has been given to the misconfiguring pressures of market-driven missiology built on a completely different theology of salvation. Few have recognized the divergent ramifications of the church as a business versus the church as the family of God. The result is an inadvertent reshaping of Adventist culture, soteriology, and worship services.

McGavran’s definition of discipleship is the theological cornerstone of the “seeker” service. Apparently bringing people into the church while requiring “no ethical change” is effective in filling churches, regardless of the fact that it is in direct contradiction to the words, methods, and practices of Jesus (Luke 14:28-30). As McDonald (2013, 45) states, “People get their baptism on the cheap, without even pondering the costs of Christian life. The teaching moment that baptism affords is lost.”

Discipleship

Ellen White’s reference to winning trust and building relationships echoes the mantra of the church growth/marketing movement. However, Adventist missiology and soteriology

cannot be reconciled with the pragmatism and self-interest dynamics of the church growth/marketing construct. Adventists recognize the high value that Scripture places on worship, Christian values, and holy living and cannot allow the unconverted to shape these experiences.

Seventh-day Adventists must carefully examine the limits of church growth and megachurch methods in the experience of the church. While the movement brings many valuable tools for congregational assessment regarding commitment to mission and reaching the lost, in matters of worship and corporate spiritual identity the church growth/marketing methods and teachings are theologically flawed. As John Yoder (1973, 40) relates in *The Challenges of Church Growth*, “If you are trying to make it easy for the people to whom you come say ‘yes’ as a group to your message, how do you keep from saying yes to their unbelieving identity and being unfaithful to the gospel in the way you put the question?”

A full generation of Adventist leaders and members have been exposed to and embraced portions of the church growth/megachurch model in varying degrees (Burrill 1996, 28–29). Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, was a best seller, and his 22,000-member Saddleback Church is an icon of success. In an age obsessed with empirical data and given over to pragmatism, the obvious has been noted regarding the church growth/marketing paradigm: “It works.” Over time, the pressures of a consumer culture have been theologically infused into protestant religious practice and worship. Should we be surprised when our parishioners act more like customers in a cafeteria line picking and choosing (Seiffert 2023, 46) as opposed to members of the family of God fulfilling responsibilities and obligations? It is no longer the business world alone that crowns them “king”; the churches are under tremendous pressure to do so as well.

As the experiment in church growth produces statistics of its own, it is time for a new level of scrutiny regarding the methods, theology, and results of the movement. Is the seeker sensitive, or is the seeker-directed spiritual journey the biblical model of Jesus? Does it achieve New Testament gospel objectives? Perhaps like McGavran's examination of the statistical records of the missions of a century ago, empirical data will shine new light on the path forward.

The Marketing Problem

In *Thieves in the Temple*, MacDonald (2013, 24) states, "The consumerist approach to religion has produced a spiritual crisis in America." Opponents of the consumer approach to religion cite as an elemental methodological flaw, the attempt to reduce all goals to measurable objectives. Barna (1988, 100), in his seminal work *Marketing the Church*, has legitimated the emphasis by the church growth movement on numbers with the mantra that "objectives should be measurable and achievable." MacDonald, in keeping with the concept of objective measurement, seeks to empirically establish his theory of the spiritual insolvency of the consumer church and its negative impact on American culture. Unfortunately, the church seems to be on a slippery slope of impotency in affecting the larger culture, even as it strives for a new level of relevance. The consumer church appears to be losing its grip on the habits and practices of its parishioners.

Disturbing Concerns About the Faith Community

The Pew Research Center (Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009) reported that 71 percent of Americans favored the torture of suspected terrorists under certain circumstances. The startling part of the research was that 74 percent of evangelical Christians held a similar view. The research showed a positive correlation between active church attendance and

support for the use of torture. In analyzing the data it was noted, “Christian leaders across the theological spectrum recognized that something had gone terribly wrong” (MacDonald 2013, 90)

MacDonald (2013, 89, chapter title) attests that the church has produced “A Bumper Crop of Weak Moral Character.” In the chapter, he addresses problems the church once tackled, but in an age of growing religious consumerism go unaddressed. Noting that only one in 100 Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and American Hindus are overweight, he contrasts the lack of self-control among Christian denominations. One in five Methodists is obese, and more than one in four Baptists, according to a 2006 Purdue University study. Notably, he asserts that 75 percent of clerics in America are either overweight or obese (93).

Self-control is also lacking in the financial dynamics of the Christian home. He states that “Dozens of organizations have formed over the past fifteen years to serve Christians who face financial disaster as a result of overspending” (MacDonald 2013, 94).

Young Christian high school students are more likely to cheat than their secular counterparts according to a 2002 survey. Seven of ten Christian students in the survey admitted to having cheated in school (Josephson Institute of Ethics 2002). While cheating has always been a challenge in the educational setting, the higher incidence of young “Christians” cheating is disturbing. MacDonald (2013, 96) notes, “The church’s customers still get the mood boost they seek on Sunday, but the lack of demand for tougher messages seems to be taking a toll on the character of a rising generation. In *Making Disciples*, Ralph Moore (2012, 16) confirms what others have noted that “the problem stems from a self-centered faith.”

Leadership Journal (2001) surveyed pastors and found that “one in three” pastors admitted to visiting a pornography website within the last year . MacDonald (2013, 97) states that for 48 percent of self-identified believers, pornography is a major problem in their home. “Apparently the Church’s focus on pleasing customers isn’t enough to prevent them from pleasing themselves whenever possible.” Barna indicates that Protestant Christians divorce at the same rate as the general public, though the rate among evangelical Christians is somewhat lower than the general public (The Barna Group 2008)(Barna Research Group, December 21, 1999).

In her work *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean (2010) reflects on the National Study of Youth and Religion, a massive two-year study that examined the faith of the young. Because “the faith teenagers develop during adolescence serves as a kind of barometer of the religious inclinations of the culture that surrounds them, [this gives] parents, pastors, teachers, campus ministers, youth pastors, and anyone else who works closely with teenagers fifty-yard-line seats from which to watch America’s religious future take shape” (9). “Time and time again in our interviews, we met young people who called themselves Christians, who grew up with Christian parents, who were regular participants in Christian congregations, yet who had no readily accessible faith vocabulary, few recognizable faith practices, and little ability to reflect on their lives religiously” (16). She indicts religious consumerism stating, “Churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. These theological proxies gnaw, termite-like, at our identity as the Body of Christ, eroding our ability to recognize that Jesus’ life of self-giving love directly changes the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-

actualization (5). Groeshel (2011, 19) adds, “The majority of people [in the church] claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him.

In a discouraging conclusion, MacDonald (2013, 108, 109) outlines the measurable results of church attendance and people who self-identify as Christians. From 1990 to 2008 the percentage of Americans who were willing to call themselves Christians shrank from 86 percent to 76 percent. According to the American Church Research Project the percentage of Americans in church on any given Sunday was 20 percent in 1990. By 2005 the new measure was 17.5 percent, and the same study projects a drop to 10 percent by 2050. “The broad trend of removing sacrifice from Christianity may be pleasing certain market niches in the short run,” MacDonald (109) notes, “but the long-term outlook for a faith made ultra-easy is bleak.”

Roots of Church Marketing

The theology and basic constructs of the church growth movement are rooted in the writings of McGavran, Wagner, and Arn. The pragmatism and business overlay, however, are anchored firmly in the research and writings of George Barna. Barna (1988, 26, 27) states four premises that undergird his teaching:

1. The church is a business.
2. Marketing is essential for a business to operate properly.
3. Most churches do not have a marketing perspective.
4. Most Christians are sufficiently concerned about the state of religion in America that they are willing to consider alternative ways to build up the church through the local body.

The message quickly took root. Cimino and Lattin (1998, 59) affirm that churches are marketing themselves with as much sophistication as corporations or politicians. Barna is now considered by some to be the most quoted person in the church today.

Wrong Premises

Some take issue with a number of these marketing premises.

Put as straightforwardly as we know how...if you treat people like customers, they will act like customers. Or the flip side: When people come expecting to be treated like customers, you will likely benefit if you so treat them. In other words, what the church marketing story fails to emphasize clearly enough is that the engine driving the marketing models is not the congregations that desire a more effective way of “serving,” but the consumers of religion who well know that they are in a buyer’s market. (Kenneson and Street 2003, 67)

They contend that while marketers have grown savvy at cloaking their business model with religious terms the fundamental identity of the church is what is at stake. Miller (2003, 84) states, “Traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content, which is then repackaged and recontextualized in ways that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences.” As the form of worship has changed, so has the content and meaning of worship (Ward 2005, 169). Gilley contends church marketers have “redefined salvation” (2005, 74) and undermined the authority of Scripture (2006, 111). Scholes (2013, 110) affirms that marketing requires the commodification of belief which inevitably injures “religious ideas and their history.” This leads some to believe that

Once the church’s fundamental identity has been constructed as a business whose purpose is to serve its constituency by attempting to meet its insatiable and undisciplined desires and needs, all in the name of ministry and furthering the kingdom, then the church is no longer in the position to be what God has called it to be; an embodied witness to the God whom Christians claim to worship. (Kenneson and Street 2003, 72)

With spirituality absorbed into the market there is no “countervailing social force to the ethos and values of the business world” (Carrette and King 2005, 126). The church may now be part of the problem instead of the solution.

In the business model, especially the marketing world, the customer is always right, but does this square with the claims of the gospel and the sanctifying transformation of the community of faith?

At the heart of marketing theory is the concept of “exchange”:

An emphasis on market orientation and felt needs would insist that something be considered relevant, valuable and desirable only to the extent that it is deemed such by those consumers we are attempting to engage in exchange. However, such a view is completely antithetical to the message of the gospel. As a result, it is difficult to see how anyone can ‘promote’ the church in this way without simultaneously disfiguring it. (Kenneson and Street 2003, 75)

What Is the Solution?

Kenneson and Street make no attempt to suggest a solution to the problem of the consumer church phenomena. Their mission has been to identify the poisoned well from which the methods have been drawn. MacDonald (2013, 192) writes, “Given today’s propensities to minimize costs of discipleship, churches could soon derive as much of their revenue as possible from corporate sponsors.” He proceeds to describe how such things are already happening, but then hopes consumer members can be led in a more positive direction by “elicit[ing] what’s best from our religious heritage” (194) and hoping that as parishioners become aware of what a “well-toned spiritual body looks like,” they might request more challenging exercises (195).

He ends his book with the challenge that “few moments in history have offered ordinary people as much opportunity to shape the institution that points to highest things. Getting it right will be worth the effort” (MacDonald 2013, 198).

Burrill takes a definite stand in support of the confronting and radical teachings of the Scriptures. He chooses a completely different frame from which to approach the modern challenges of the church. It is not an adaptation of the marketing paradigm, nor does it resemble the spiritual consumerism of the church growth movement. He recognizes a distinctly different foundation for the phenomenal growth of the early church and believes its implementation would profoundly alter the spiritual landscape of our twenty-first century church.

In his book *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches*, Burrill (1996, 36) states, The fantastic success of the early church was not so much due to their correct methodology as to their consistent witness by exemplifying in their lives the clear marks of discipleship that Jesus modeled for them. It is a tragedy when the “masses” are brought into membership in the church without these clear evidences of discipleship. . . Jesus’ instruction on disciple-making as the job of the church seems to be designed to prevent development of a church that would compromise its witness. Jesus is concerned about reaching the masses, but He wants them reached with the “real thing,” not with artificial Christianity.

In the chapter “Doctrines Produce Disciples,” Burrill (1996, 95) writes, “It is the purpose of the eternal gospel to implant Christ’s victory into the lives of those who have accepted Him as Savior. This is the first step of the discipleship process. . . .” He further states that “Adventism has always advocated high standards in this respect, but it is important that these standards be presented as a vital part of the work that needs to be done to prepare people for the coming of Christ.”

High-Cost Discipleship

Advocating for a “high-cost” spiritual experience, where church members are called to a biblical standard, MacDonald (2013, 111) recognizes only one denomination by name that is successful in eliciting meaningful sacrifice: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This church is recognized two times in his writing (7, 111).

The discipleship movement has offered a recent critique of the consumerist church experience. Wilson (2017, 58), in his book *Multipliers*, excoriates the current measurement metrics stating, “We’ve shifted our focus to more butts, bigger budgets, and bigger buildings. He refers to our addiction to adding things as a form of lust. Malphurs (2009, 21), in *Strategic Disciple Making* spends an entire chapter examining the state of the church and likens its current status to an ostrich with its head in the sand. English (2020, 27) places the role of the cross and self-denial front and center in the experience of the disciple, stating, “Discipleship is not about self-actualization or self-preservation; it is about self-denial.” He further affirms, “One of the greatest challenges facing the church is discipleship that centers on the autonomous self” (23). Wilson and Wegner (2018, 56) in *Made to be More*, are leading their readers to a vision so “audacious that it pushes beyond the needs of ‘running the church,’ towards the dream of fulfilling God’s mission.” They go on to challenge the reader to see “the Gospel not as a message of personal salvation but the total cosmic reorienting of all things.” Seiffert (2023, 47) utilizes the metaphor of the Christian with a shopping cart trying to get as much in as possible. Challenging the prevalent trend of Christianity, she states, “Feeding on the world of self is sucking the life from us.” Chip Ingram (Ingram 2013, 9) in the foreword to Randy Pope’s *Insourcing* states, “Even our most successful churches and programs are not producing mature, godly, high-integrity followers of Christ.” Hull

(2010, 14) is curious to know “what can be done about the last three generations of Christians who have been trained to evaluate their Christian lives by how much they enjoyed the worship service.”

In the writings of Ellen White numerous principles emerge that have guarded Seventh-day Adventists from embracing the philosophies and methods of consumerism, including certain forms of marketing and a missiology built on mutual exchanges. In short, she warns of the disfiguring power of self-interest to the concerns of the church and its mission and the limits of empirical measurement.

“Nothing in this world is so dear to the heart of God as His church. It is not His will that worldly policy shall corrupt her record” (White 2002c, 590).

Warning against self-interest, even in ministerial lines, she writes: “Some cultivate selfishness by striving to make their part of the work a success. But the apparent success...is not true success. God’s people will not be excused for working in accordance with worldly policy” (White 1899, Letter 10, paragraph 17).

She addresses unconsecrated men and unscriptural methods that would eclipse the pure and distinctive identity of the church in an effort to do “a larger work.” She recognized early efforts at gaining favor with the masses through strategic marketing as dangerous to the work:

The religion of Jesus is endangered. It is being mingled with worldliness. Worldly policy is taking the place of the true piety and wisdom that comes from above, and God will remove His prospering hand from the conference....

These things have gone as far as they should without someone protesting against them in plain words. The Lord’s time to set things in order has fully come.... In the night season I was present in several councils, and there I heard words repeated by influential men to the effect that if the American Sentinel would drop the word Seventh-day Adventist from its columns, and would say nothing about the Sabbath, the great men of the world would patronize it; it would become popular and do a larger work. This looked very pleasing. These men could not see why we could not affiliate with unbelievers and

non-professors to make the American Sentinel a great success. I saw their countenances brighten, and they began to work on a policy plan to make the Sentinel a popular success. (White 1999, 96)

She had a special interest in the work at Battle Creek and wrote various warnings to this large and influential Adventist community. She held a special concern for the methods of this large church that would be copied by others in the field.

Dear Brother Jones:

Your letter was received last evening.... I have an intense interest for the work and cause of God all over the field, and especially in Battle Creek where Satan has worked in varied ways to bring in erroneous methods and strange fire that God has not kindled. Had Satan been permitted to have his way, the cause of God at the very center of the work would have been hopelessly ruined. (White 1898, Letter 61, paragraph 1)

Over a century ago she warned against the religious consumer practice of training the people to give only in expectation of receiving something in return (mutual exchanges).

Even the church, which should be the pillar and ground of the truth, is found encouraging the selfish love of pleasure. When money is to be raised for religious purposes, to what means do many churches resort? To bazaars, suppers, fancy fairs, even to lotteries, and like devices. . . . The barriers of self-restraint are weakened. Selfishness, appetite, the love of display, are appealed to, and they strengthen as they are indulged. (White 2002b, 22)

In contrast to the practice of marketing the church service, or other religious activities, she employs the imagery of the shepherd going in search of the lost. In contradistinction of luring the lost in through advertising and marketing, she directs an active seeking them out, a responsibility of those who find themselves in the folds of the church.

The ninety and nine sheep are left, and diligent search is made for the one that is lost. The entire effort is made for the unfortunate sheep. So should the effort of the church be directed in behalf of those members who are straying from the fold of Christ. And have they wandered far away? Do not wait till they return before you try to help them, but go in search of them. (White 1915, 187)

Summary

American culture finds itself immersed in the consumer experience. The church, in an attempt to remain relevant, has co-opted for market-driven methods and a business paradigm. Established on McGavran's theology of discipleship and bridge building, combined with the demographic and marketing research of George Barna, the church growth movement has reshaped the church's methods and practices and consequently, its very identity. In an attempt to build relational bridges and bring the unchurched to church, the business model of religion has facilitated the evolution of church identity and the message it preaches.

Ellen White, who recognized the corrupting influence of human nature and the unchanging standard of God's Word as both the model and the mode for church growth, wrote and taught in stark contrast to the operational frame of business methods and mutual exchanges that are foundational to many of the church growth methods. Her direct counsel against strategies and techniques that build around the elemental component of self-interest is everywhere apparent, especially when one understands her euphemisms such as "worldly methods" and "strange fire."

The history of the modern church growth/marketing movement and its linkage with modern marketing techniques have left the twenty-first century church powerless to transform a culture of self-indulgence and compromise from within. The emphasis on measurable outcomes has provided, rather ironically, the objective data that the church run as a business has failed at impacting the character of its own members and the culture in which it exists (Putman, Harrington, and Coleman 2013, 20). Tozer (1985, 9) announced our need, just as the consumer church movement was gaining momentum; "We are missing the

genuine and sacred offering of ourselves and our worship to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The doctrines and teachings of “high-cost” churches that call individuals to a life of surrender and sacrifice are succeeding in transforming lives, even if largely unrecognized by main stream Christianity. After three plus decades of church growth/marketing strategies in the ascendancy in America the data reveals what the Scriptures teach: No other foundation can be laid, than that which is laid, even Jesus Christ. Seventh-day Adventist pastors and leaders have a fiduciary responsibility to shepherd the flock of God and embrace the biblical paradigm of the church as the family of God actively in search of the lost. Methods and philosophies of ministry that re-enforce self-interest, individually or corporately, war against the well-being of the existing membership of the church and those disciples it seeks to make.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE “BUILT ON THE ROCK”

WEEK OF PRAYER INTERVENTION

For the past four decades the church growth movement has molded and shaped the philosophy and practice of church planting, church growth, and evangelistic outreach in much of Protestant America. Under the guidance of its founders and celebrity practitioners, a paradigm shift in the theory and practice of evangelism and worship has reconstructed the identity of the church in the minds of many believers, who would argue regarding its disfiguring effect on Christianity. As Alan Hirsch (2006, 42) describes in his book, *The Forgotten Ways*, “Like most churches in the modernist-Christendom mode, we had built the model of the church on a consumerist model and, in the end, paid the price.”

Modern church growth theory asserts that the church is a business (Barna 1988). Its primary tools for success are found in the finely honed craft of marketing and demographics. The church uses these tools to discover and then meet the self-described needs of the member/customer. Surveys and data become the primary instruments and tools of the leaders. Marketing becomes a form of spiritual warfare (28). The church’s responsibility is to reshape itself, based on its understanding of those it is trying to reach, into an attractive and relevant institution in our modernist era. This intervention will examine the history, philosophy, and teachings of the church growth movement, describe the movements’ departure from biblical

principles and beliefs (Pritchard 1996), and communicate a philosophy and practice of church growth that is consistent with Scripture and inspiration. It will define the limits of business practice in the church and will document how the intervention has shifted the beliefs and practices of its participants.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first segment will describe the development of a faith-based church growth intervention. It will describe the pastoral context from which the intervention grew and build a foundation both theoretical and theological for the intervention. The second will describe the intervention in its modalities, structure, and substance. The final segment will describe the research methods employed.

Development of the Intervention

Background

The faith-based church growth intervention at the heart of this research project is rooted in my own pastoral ministry. In 1994 I was called to the Cicero Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was the second largest church in the Indiana Conference, with 367 members in a modern and attractive facility not yet ten years old. The church, however, was in a financial crisis and lacked a unifying purpose and mission. With only \$8,000 on its books, and with a debt of \$13,000 to the conference, the financial bankruptcy visible in the ledgers reflected the overall condition of the congregation. The treasurer was retaining the monthly tithe remittance until the end of the month in order to have access to cash to pay the congregation's own bills. The dire financial condition was startling and emblematic of a variety of challenges.

In response to these challenges, the church embraced a scriptural philosophy of purpose and missional responsibility, adopted a family-based paradigm of church identity,

and embraced faith-based leadership and administrative principles. The church school doubled in attendance, the church became responsible for building dozens of other churches in a variety of countries, exerted a strong local health and evangelistic mission, and watched its tithe base triple with a corresponding growth in local offerings and attendance. Perhaps most importantly, a strong unifying spirit permeated the social and administrative interactions of the church. The experience in Cicero became the foundation for the challenges that would follow in my next assignment. Tracing the development of the intervention at Village begins with the principles learned in Cicero and brought intentionally to my current appointment.

Called to lead the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2013, I was confronted with another congregation in serious decline. A large facility in poor physical condition with an equally discouraged membership had produced many of the same symptoms I had faced in Cicero, only on a larger scale. It was a genuinely devitalized church. Attendance and membership had declined from a high approaching 1,300 to an inherited low of 927. Financial reverses reflected the same trend. In order to create sufficient cash flow to pay bills, the monthly subsidy sent to the local church school was retained until the end of the month. An associate head deacon with oversight for the physical plant explained that he left some of the light sockets in the pendant fixtures empty to save money. Multiple pieces of equipment were in disrepair. The budgeting and spending decisions were almost completely focused around saving money. Poorly executed services and ministries left most members and visitors without courage or inspiration. The sanctuary, erected in faith fifty years prior, was still decorated in the same carpet, wall decor, and pew coverings that were originally installed. Additions to the physical plant had been erected, but the process had divided and

demoralized the membership. As one longtime resident of Berrien County stated, “Village was the church no one wanted to attend.”

In an attempt to attract the “younger crowd,” the second worship service had engaged a more contemporary music genre and relaxed approach to worship. First service was a traditional worship experience, not stated, but clearly understood to be for the older generations. Many of the slides for the worship service had misspellings. Participants and support staff arrived “just in time” to fulfill their roles. The midweek prayer meeting had single digit attendance. Once the family church of Berrien Springs, the congregation was a skeleton of its early days.

Rebuilding an institution is a long-term process based on relational, spiritual, and leadership laws. The issue to be determined was whether the principles that had revived the congregation in Cicero would revive and remake the corporate experience of the Village Church.

Principles

The revitalization of the Village Church has been a function of biblical principles in contradistinction to the church growth philosophies and practices. The principles built upon are as follows:

1. The church is a family, not a business (Gen. 12:3). It is the family of God, and like any family, its members have privileges and responsibilities. Its leaders are chosen for their spiritual and relational competency and their family experience. Members are taught and expected to fulfill their familial obligations.
2. Healthy families and churches are cross generational (1 Tim. 5:1-2). No patronage to generational science and its resulting segregating effects have been

practiced. The seniors are honored for their life experience. The young are trained for mature adulthood and expected to serve. The middle aged are encouraged in the myriad responsibilities that they carry.

3. Bible based congregations have no customers and no mutually beneficial exchanges (Barna, 1988). Marketing, while beneficial to mission, is not a cornerstone principle of strategy and growth. An intrinsic reward system based on the love of God directs the members (2 Cor. 5:14.)
4. Conversion, not “churching” is the goal (2 Pet. 3:9). While building bridges by mingling and ministering is an important facet of winning trust, Christian discipleship begins at the cross with a call to repentance and surrender. Until a full surrender is made, we are engaging and building relationships with the lost, but not discipling them. They must choose to become a disciple after they have counted the costs (Matt. 16:24).
5. Worship is central to theology and identity and is not subject to the shaping interest or appetites of the unconverted (Rev. 14:7). God, not the current church members or potential members, is the focus of that worship and is developed and built upon Scripture, the prophetic gift, and tradition, - not demographic data.
6. Missiological pragmatism is held in check (Prov. 14:12). Inspired writings and prayerful deliberation guide our understanding and practices (2 Tim 3:16-17). While empirical science and sociological data can bring benefits, it is subject to biblical interpretation in its application. Surveys and demographic statistics have a limited role in directing the methods of outreach, and no role in shaping our corporate culture and church identity.

7. The call to holiness shapes identity and mission (1 Pet. 1:13-16 KJV). A distinction in habits, practices, and lifestyles exists between those of the world and those of the church. These scripturally defined lifestyles are a safeguard to the Christian experience and critical to character formation. These distinctions are highlighted, not surrendered or compromised, in method or person in an attempt to reach the lost.
8. A distinct Seventh-day Adventist message and mission directs (Rev. 12:17). The church understands its call to serve locally and abroad for the advancement of God's cause and the development of its own members. This involves not only acts of Christian benevolence, but the proclamation of the Three Angel's Messages. The church is transformative in the culture, not transformed by the culture.
9. Conviction from the Word of God is central to the messaging (Acts 5:29-33 KJV). Impending judgment conveys a unique sound to the preaching and teaching of the church. The congregation understands its remnant identity and obligations. A divine warning is consistent with grace.
10. Membership is not offered or acquired on the lowest possible threshold of commitment. Members, both current and potential, are all called to the cross in a high-cost Christian experience (Matt. 16:24 KJV). Excellence of person and ministry are expected.

Over the past nine years these principles have guided in the revitalization of the Village Church. This alternative approach to church growth and revitalization has benefited the congregation with a new spiritual, missional, social, and financial prosperity. It is the

purpose of this intervention to describe, define, and instruct the leaders/member/participants of the Village Church in the biblical and inspired principles that have revitalized the congregation. Furthermore, its purpose, beyond education, is to call the Village Church leaders and congregation to a re-commitment of these corporate health-giving principles.

The Intervention

The intervention method is pedagogical. It was built on a series of ten presentations that chronicle the history of the church growth movement, the rise of the marketing paradigm, and the ascendancy of consumerism in the American religious experience. We examined the primary theological foundations of the church growth movement and how those beliefs led to its methodological pillars. We examined where the principles and practices of the movement could, and could not, be reconciled with the Scriptures and other inspired writings. We contrasted how the principles of Scripture reveal an identity for the church and a methodology of reaching the lost. These are built around the family paradigm and the presentation of the gospel with roles, responsibilities, and purpose all connected to the cross and our relationship to God.

Especially noteworthy was the contrast between modern church growth theology and practice with the methods of Christ, the apostles, and the New Testament Church.

The purpose of this research project was to understand what the participants had knowingly or unknowingly embraced of the teachings and practices of the church growth movement and to what degree those understandings would change if presented with a scriptural model and inspired guidelines.

It proposed two questions:

1. What level of familiarity did they have with the church growth movement and how had those teachings impacted their understanding and practice of how worship and evangelism should be conducted?
2. Would their understanding and practice shift if presented with the contradiction between a business/marketing model with an emphasis on demographics and pragmatism and the principles of Scripture?

The research project primarily used a qualitative case study design, chosen because researchers are interested in discovering how people interpret and construct meaning rather than determining cause and effect (Merriam 2009, 5)

Modalities, Structure and Substance of the Intervention

Disclosure of the Researcher's Position and Bias

In this study I functioned as both the researcher and presenter, serving as the senior pastor of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church. To those participating in the research I clearly explained my twofold role and my centrality in the presentations, data gathering, and analysis. As a convert to the Seventh-day Adventist Church I acknowledged my bias in favor of high-cost religion, having to take my stand for Christ sometimes in contradiction to my parents, and certainly without their active nurturing. I also acknowledged and communicated that my experience was distinctly different from many of the participants who were raised in the church. For instance, I recognize the various perspectives of the parent or church member who in desperation to reach their adolescent child or nominally interested relative or friend incorporates consumer methods and modalities that initially make religion more appealing or interesting but may also undermine its transforming power.

Detailed Procedures

The intervention was an eight-day week of spiritual emphasis with ten presentations, focusing on church growth, evangelism, and religious identity through the contrasting lenses of the church growth movement and the Bible, along with the writings of Ellen G. White. The event transpired from January 27 to February 4, 2023. The gathering of data, including interviews and focus groups, extended to February 20 of the same year. Analysis was limited to three main items. First, the participants were engaged to determine what level of familiarity they had with the basic constructs of the church growth movement. This assessment had three levels: (a) what level of familiarity did they have with the religious consumer mindset and the resulting modalities of worship and evangelism in the church growth movement, (b) did the participant recognize the divergency of the church growth movement from scriptural principle and practice, (c) could the participant articulate for themselves why a consumer model of religion as practiced in the church growth movement was detrimental to personal and corporate experience of the church and the church member? Second, I kept a field journal of interactions and observations made by myself. Third, video recorded focus groups were conducted at the end of the intervention to determine to what degree of evaluative ability the various groups had acquired through the intervention. The discussions were transcribed with the omission of the facilitators' comments.

Research Methods

In order to strengthen the credibility and dependability of the intervention and to minimize the potential influence of my dual-status role in the presentation, data gathering, and interpretation of the data, the following practices were employed: (a) multiple methods

of data collection were used and triangulated and/or crystallized: written reflections, video recorded focus groups, research notes and observations (Merriam 2009, 216); (b) focus group dialogues were transcribed and participants were invited to validate the record if they desired (217); (c) maximum variation was sought (227); I spent ten hours with the general research participants, twelve hours with church board participants, and fifteen hours with pastoral staff participants; (d) emergent findings were pursued to the point of saturation (219); (e) unexpected findings were included when deemed appropriate; (f) my own biases were shared with the participants when describing the research (219).

Establishing the external validity or transferability of this research was achieved by acknowledging my dual role as presenter and researcher with declared biases. This involved a detailed explanation of the context and circumstances of the Village Church and an audit log or research journal that recorded a history of the project (Merriam 2009, 223). The log also clearly disclosed how the data was collected, categorized, and interpreted. Detailed contextualization of the Village Church research allows for the best evaluation of the data for potential application for other researchers and readers (211).

Questionnaire at the onset and conclusion of the presentations

A twenty-five-question survey was taken by both focus groups before and after the intervention to determine their current belief structure regarding church growth practices, and what degree of change occurred in their thinking due to the “Built on the Rock” presentations. The survey is available in appendix D.

Data Analysis

Surveys, interviews, and responses were examined for emergent themes. The data was organized into a narrative with the interpretation of the researcher.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The historic decline of the church in America, which became statistically recognizable in the mid-1960s (Bishop and Cushing 2008, 167), prompted a serious internal look at the practices and effectiveness of Protestant churches (MacDonald 2013, 19–20). The result has been the development of the science and practice of the church growth movement. The movement became mainstream in the 90's and has predominated religious thought and practice for the past thirty years.

The Village Church finds itself in a unique environment where competition for members lends itself to experimenting with church growth practices and techniques sometimes incompatible with the principles of the gospel and the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of sanctification. Leaders and members of the Village church were untrained and unprepared to examine these methods and practices against the principles and teachings of Scripture.

The week of prayer intervention entitled, "Built on the Rock," allowed the participants to move from awareness, to analysis, to reflection, and to action (Yeagley 2015, 89). The broad spectrum of participants with an emphasis on board and pastoral leadership has provided the lay member and the leader with the biblical and managerial framework upon which the revitalization of the Village Church has progressed. It has created an alternative framework on which the promised biblical vitality can be achieved.

The description of the learning experiences and personal growth journeys of the participants is described in chapter 5 as a qualitative case study.

CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE OF THE INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION

Each year in the life cycle of a Seventh-day Adventist Church some consideration should be given to the topic of the Great Commission. Many churches hold a yearly evangelistic meeting and a variety of other outreach-oriented activities. Fulfilling the Great Commission is so central to our reason for existence that the church manual states, “Every church must have a functioning board whose members have been elected during a church business meeting. Its chief concern is having an active discipleship plan in place, which includes both the spiritual nurture of the church and the work of planning and fostering evangelism” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2022, 134–135). The mission of the church board is to guide its collective expenditures of time, talent, and treasure, and encourage and facilitate personal witnessing. This mission spans a spectrum of effort from personal ministry to church-organized local efforts, to globally coordinated ministries.

The purpose of this intervention was to raise awareness and develop commitment to the principles of church growth that have fostered vitality and unity to the Village Church from 2013 to the present. It was also designed to examine the theology and practice of the modern church growth movement and its incompatibility with the best practices and belief system of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its proclamation of the gospel. Its goal was to highlight the God-implanted desire to live lives of purpose and sacrifice for a great cause, especially the cause of Christ, in opposition to the consumer models of self-interest in the

pursuit of God. Stated another way, high-cost religion is the only personal and congregational experience that will have long-term success and facilitate transformation of congregations and persons. The principles that have reconstituted the vitality of the Village Church have never been systematically shared, even with its governing body. This implementation attempted to explain the managerial and theological foundation upon which the Village Church has been renewed in contradistinction to the modalities of the church growth movement, using primarily a qualitative approach. This chapter will highlight the three main components of the intervention. The first segment will summarize the focus group discussions and highlight themes, as well as unique contributions derived from the group dialogue. It will also reflect the change in perspective between pre-event and post-event dialogues. The second segment will summarize the presentations given over an eight-day period at the “Built on the Rock” week of spiritual emphasis. The presentations were designed to systematically examine the theological and methodological principles of the church growth movement and contrast them with the inspired model found in Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy. The third segment will examine the quantitative analysis of the shift in belief system in the focus groups determined by contrasting the pre-intervention and post-intervention survey data.

Pre-Intervention

Survey

In February 2023 before I conducted focus groups, each volunteer completed a questionnaire designed to establish a numerical reference point in regard to their belief or understanding of the topics to be presented in the “Built on the Rock” week of spiritual emphasis (See appendix D). The respondents were instructed to assign a numerical value of

agreement or disagreement on a scale from one to ten for each survey question. The same surveys were administered after the series and a numerical analysis revealed to what degree the respondents had re-framed their concepts of ministry and theology as it related to the church growth movement (See appendix D).

Focus Groups

On February 20, 2023, I began the formal intervention with the staff of the Village Church. The first focus group was comprised of twelve individuals who form the primary leadership team of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church. This group was chosen for its central role in directing the ministries, culture, and management of the church. It was also chosen for its interconnectedness and depth of relationship with each other and with the senior pastor. All of the individuals possessed a deep commitment to the staff team and the mission of the Adventist Church and seemed comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. This group meets on a weekly basis for approximately three to five hours for administrative purposes where they worship, exchange ideas, and manage the mission and ministries of the Village Church. The group was comprised of nine men and three women. Eight of the participants were not employed by the church and four received salaries from the organization. Recognizing that this staff has been selected and mentored by me for over ten years of my ministry at the Village Church, I acknowledge that their participation held potential inherent bias. There was no mechanism in this study to determine that bias.

The second focus group was enlarged to include the church board. Because one of the primary purposes of the board is to oversee and facilitate ministries associated with church growth, and because the board protects the identity and culture of the church, it seemed to be the next logical group to engage for discussion. All of the staff focus group were either

members or invitees to the church board and were thus invited to participate in the board focus group, consisting of twenty-two people, fourteen men and seven women. Eight members of the board focus group were paid employees of the church, whereas fourteen were volunteers. All members of both groups, consisting of paid employees and volunteers, participated freely of their own volition.

Focus Group Demographics

Table 1. Gender

Gender	Number	% of total
Male	14	64%
Female	8	36%

Table 2. Racial background

Racial background	Number	% of total
Black	3	14%
Asian	3	14%
White	14	63%
Hispanic or Latino	2	9%

Table 3. Age demographics

Age range	Number	% of total
Over 65	6	27%
51–65	10	46%
41–50	2	9%
31–40	2	9%
18–30	2	9%
Under 18	0	0%

Each of the two focus groups were facilitated by me. There was an acknowledgement that I was not an unbiased catalyst for the discussion modules that I was leading. Both groups were administered six questions in written form which were discussed for varying time periods by the entire group. The discussions were video recorded, and time stamped for later referencing. The following paragraphs highlight the collective and distinct conclusions of each group and its various members.

Summary of Discussions

The questions were discussed in pairs and were related. The first set of questions were: *How do you think a church and business are different? How do you think a church and business are the same?* The first and most repeated theme in differentiating a church from a business was the centrality of money as a primary goal of a business. It was noted without disagreement that a completely different set of motivations guided the two entities. Another point of general agreement was that both entities needed to have goals and to cast a vision. Somewhat surprisingly to the moderator was the recognized admiration for forethought,

commitment to excellence, and hard work that a well-run business required. These sentiments brought to mind the admonition of Jesus that the sons of this world are “more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light” (NKJV Luke 16:8). The effective business, it was stated, actually preempted the thinking process of the masses and created products that would be needed or wanted. As one person noted, a business can have altruistic goals and methods. Some businesses, it was stated, exist to help people fulfill their dreams. It was recognized that the principles that make a church work well should make a business work well also, and that many dynamics of business, including organization and focus, would benefit churches similarly as they would a business.

The elements that make a church distinct captured the largest section of both the staff and board focus groups. Some of the comments follow (all names in this chapter are pseudonyms). One participant noted that a business looks primarily at profits and another participant agreed that businesses are driven by financial gain, but a church is to be guided by God. A third participant commented that a business will compromise to make the customer happy and that a church is not in a position to do this. Yet another participant agreed and observed that the Bible remains the same and that there should be a certain element of unchangeableness about a church. One more participant observed that in the business model the customer is king, but in the church God is King.

The following statements capture the trend of comments offered by the two groups:

- A business offers services for money - but a church offers agape service.
- The church is to lift up Christ, but a business exists to promote itself.
- A business brings people what they want, a church brings them what they need.

- A church is to have a moral guidance system - not money, although money can corrupt in a business as well.

A further listing of comments can be seen in appendix D.

One of the most insightful set of comments was made by a person who has lived in a cut-throat business environment his entire adult life. He noted that for businesses to succeed they needed to look to the future and consider what the forecast of need might be. He reminded us that survival for many businesses requires 100 percent dedication and exceptionally skilled workers. He noted that when a business ran well, it was a benefit to everyone who worked there and who lived in the community, and that the church was also tasked with a certain role that if done well, would also benefit the larger society.

The next set of questions was paired around the concept of marketing.

- Question 3. Should a church market itself to its surrounding community?
- Question 4. Are there limits to what a church can market about itself?
- Question 5. How far can a church go in copying secular business practices?

The general consensus of the group was that the church needed to promote its activities and purposes. Some noted that the “product” of the church was its people, and that if it produced a compromised or shabby product that would hinder the growth of the church. As James noted, “a truly converted life will attract people, and like other innovative and attractive products people will naturally desire what is lived.” Jimmy agreed, noting, “We are God’s workmanship” (Eph. 2:10). Personal contact and word-of-mouth were recognized as some of the best ways for marketing both the business and the church. Others noted that businesses produce things that people need and the church should help people see the things they need, in an attractive way. Observations were made of new products like the Mustang in

1965 that created a sense of need, or entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs who anticipated what people might like and created new interest. Lyra noted that we can use the things of God to attract people, like we do with children through beautiful objects that God created, but she warned, not the things of the world. Andrew noted that life eternal is “like a gated community” and there are requirements that must be met for entry.

On the side of marketing limitations was the recurring theme that the church cannot relate to people as a business relates to customers. As Joshua noted, “If the customer is king, where does this lead? If you survey people who are not sanctified, people who have sinful hearts, and want what the flesh wants, that leads one to market to the flesh, that leads people to sow to the flesh, which leads them to reap to the flesh, which cannot be sanctified.” Nate noted that marketing to the unconverted denied the scriptural reality of 1 John 2:16, “For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.” He was concerned that the use of worldly methods that promised freedom would only produce a deeper bondage in the name of Christ.

See appendix D for more comments from the focus group.

“Built on the Rock” Week of Spiritual Emphasis

My intervention began on Sabbath, February 25, 2023, at the divine worship services. The week of spiritual emphasis would contrast scriptural methodology and theology for growth versus the praxis and preaching of the church growth movement. The two morning services at 8:30 and 11:20 were entitled “Built on the Rock: Nothing is for Sale and Nothing is Free.” In these two repeating messages I began the examination of a church’s identity as either a business or a family. I reiterated that families do not work on the principle of self-interest. I explained some of the basic premises of the consumer church and appealed to my

listeners to recommit to the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to the family of God. The sermons were experienced live by 800 worshippers and watched later by 7,500 online viewers.

The second presentation in my intervention was entitled “The Family of God.” In this Sabbath vespers presentation, I systematically developed the theological truth of our adoption into the family of God. As Paul states in Ephesians 1:5 (NASB), “He predestined us for adoption,” and in chapter 2:19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” This program had a live audience of approximately 450 persons and was viewed 6,500 times.

The third presentation, “Jesus the Marketer?” was a systematic examination of the Gospel of John and the strained and difficult conversations that Christ held with a broad spectrum of people from church leaders to Samaritans. Multiple encounters reveal a Christ who brought truth to the forefront as a liberating invitation to choose life. From a strained dialogue with Nicodemus to an awkward encounter with a Samaritan woman, to the fierce conversations of John 8, we find Jesus speaking the truth in love as only the Elder Brother of the race could do. This presentation had 300 live participants and an online viewing of 4,700.

Night four was entitled “Churched and Unconverted.” This presentation brought to light the overlooked and undiscussed theology of the church growth movement which believes that expecting “evidence of ethical change” hinders or stops the discipling of people (McGavran 2005, 15). This belief system removes the cross and the cost of discipleship from the initial steps of the potential convert. It also spares the preacher the embarrassment of uttering theological truth (Wells 2008, 45) and is a dangerous distortion of the gospel (Pritchard 1996). Because no ethical change is expected before baptism, only a profession of

Jesus, the life-giving power of the indwelling Christ is stripped from the experience of the potential convert. The absence of ethical imperatives also opens the door to the co-opting of worldly methodologies in the name of connecting with the “unchurched.” John the Baptist made it clear at the Jordan River that there should be fruits “worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8 NKJV). The constructs of attraction evangelism (Warren 1995) and group conversion (McGavran 2005) are corollaries of this teaching and rely directly on the absence of proof of conversion. This presentation had a live audience of approximately 300 persons and was viewed 4,200 times.

Night five was entitled “The Consumer Church.” It had a live audience of 250 and was viewed 3,300 times. This presentation focused on the conversion of the church to the world as a direct result of using worldly methods, or user friendly services (MacArthur 2010, 58) to build bridges to the lost. The church growth methods are built primarily on self-interest, which plays a destructive role in maintaining the values and standards of the existing church membership and lacks transformational power for those being “churched.” However, one cannot but notice that these methods work (Gilley and Wegter 2009). Nevertheless, some consider the word “growth” one of the “most slippery words in theology or church practice” (Paas 2016, 111). At the center of the movement is a belief in the ability of the lost to understand their own spiritual felt needs - to determine what is relevant to their journey. Co-opting the consumer mindset to grow the church is an abandonment of the cross and a disservice to the true seeker. As I stated in this presentation, “A short cut to the baptistry might be a detour from eternity.”

The sixth presentation was entitled “Purpose Driven Deception.” In this address, I contrasted biblical authority and the influence of Rick Warren’s best-selling book, *The*

Purpose Driven Church. MacDonald (2013, 25) states, “The vacuum of authority has allowed parishioners to enjoy the spiritual equivalent of spending a day on the couch, eating cupcakes for dinner, and watching sitcoms until the wee hours.” In this message we examined Warren’s (1995, 293–294) premise of a church service designed for “hard core pagans.” Warren (253) states, “A crowd is not a church. But to grow a larger church you must first attract a crowd.” This statement reflects both McGavaran’s belief in people movements and group conversion as well as Warren’s commitment to attraction evangelism as promoted by the megachurch movement. Warren (243) also states, “We must be willing to adjust our worship practices when unbelievers are present.” He calls his critics “isolationist” and likens himself to a trailblazer for truth, suffering similarly to the martyrs who were burned at the stake (238). Warren (229) builds a number of false dichotomies by pitting two good things against each other, such as an “ought to” sermon versus a “how to” sermon. He further states, “The controversy over attracting a crowd boils down to two issues. The first has to do with the legitimacy of what is called ‘attraction evangelism,’ and the other has to do with how the church should relate to the culture it seeks to evangelize” (234). This presentation revealed in specific detail the unbiblical nature of the megachurch movement. It was experienced live by 262 live participants, and subsequently viewed by 3,200 people.

Night seven of the “Built on the Rock” intervention was entitled “Biblical Leadership for Growth.” This message dealt with the subject of fear and its ability to inhibit the proper role of leadership. The role of Caleb and Joshua in exhorting the Israelites to go into the Promised Land and possess it was examined. It was stated that the problem with most churches is a problem of leadership: leadership that will not challenge dysfunction and learns to love the security of the status quo. A thorough examination was made of the role of fear to

disable the leader and the congregation, and that confidence in God's revealed will could drive that fear away. The power of faith was examined to strengthen and nerve the people of God. This presentation was experienced by a live audience of 325 people and watched online by 3,600 viewers.

Night eight of the intervention addressed the issue of true success. The evening addressed the quotation from the Ministry of Healing p. 143 and its misinterpretation and misuse in opening the door of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the church growth methods. The quotation reads, "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me" (White 2003b, 143). At issue in the confluence of Adventism and the megachurch movement is the matter of the sinner's ability to understand and define his/her felt needs, especially spiritual needs. The megachurch movement defines its ministries around the self-diagnosis of the lost in explaining their spiritual needs. Traditional Christianity and Seventh-day Adventism have similarly held that the lost are blind and cannot self-direct their spiritual journey. As Paul states in the book of Romans, ". . . carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." (NKJV Romans 8:7). Warren (1995, 219) describes his praxis and theology of conversion, "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart." The result is a philosophy and missiological pragmatism that legitimates many methods that have here-to-fore been deemed worldly and ungodly, all in the name of reaching the lost. Christ recognized that not all would hear the call and respond and that many would choose the broad path that leads to destruction. The conclusion of the

presentation was that Christian leaders must be true to the principles of Christ. The evening was experienced live by 370 people and watched online by another 4,500 viewers.

The final presentation in the “Built on the Rock” Series was the morning worship services of March 4, 2023. The sermons were entitled “The Cost of Discipleship.” The messages were introduced by the experience and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his actions during the Nazi takeover of Germany. In this final sermon, the bankruptcy and impotency of a cross-less Christianity was presented. One final examination of the concept of the church as a business with marketable wares was critiqued. Bonhoeffer (1995, 43) writes, “Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner”. “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession” (44). “Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living word of God, in fact, a denial of the incarnation” (43). The conclusion of the series focused on Numbers 21 and the serpent on the pole. It ended with an appeal to surrender all to the gracious invitation of Christ. Fifteen people responded to the appeals made to come forward. The services were experienced live by 1,200 people and watched later by 8,300 viewers.

Post-Intervention

Second Survey

Before the focus groups began their discussions around the same five questions that preceded the intervention, each of the participants completed the same survey again. The survey responses were analyzed against the composite of the initial responses to determine whether the group had shifted in their understanding of how to recognize and reject unbiblical elements of the consumer/church growth model. The scores of the group did

reflect a better understanding of the dangers of the consumer approach to religion at the end of the intervention. A full report can be found in appendix C.

Focus Groups

On March 5, 2023, the two final sessions of focus group discussions took place at the Village Church. In the final sessions the board and staff met together jointly, with an invitation to the staff to linger for a longer session. I was greatly encouraged by the depth of insight and the articulation of thought that marked their observations. A sampling of their comments is included here with a more complete transcript included in appendix D. A businessman noted, “Again, as a business if you have a flawed mission statement you will use ancillary tactics... the best businesses don’t let the customers drive them; they drive the customers. And the best churches don’t let people tell them what they need; they show clearly the path of salvation to them.” One person commented, “It seems like the church growth model has put forth that the product the church has is the worship service—a worship service that the people want to buy—so they will come and worship. When I think of that in the biblical perspective, I think about the first conflict over worship in Genesis: Cain and Abel. They each had a way of worshipping that they were comfortable with. God said one is acceptable and one is not.” Another person offered the following summary, “I think the biggest thing I took away from this weekend is that the worship service is not ‘everything’—it’s not the evangelistic series, it’s not the ‘grow the kids’ moment, it’s not the ‘everything.’ The issues of our soul-winning, and meeting them where they are at, has nothing to do with the worship service. The church service is to be a worship service to God, and a place where God speaks however He wants to. It takes away a lot of the problems. I don’t have to please everybody in the worship service and meet them where they are at. It is for God.”

Conclusions

This chapter provides a glimpse into the thoughts and dialogues of the focus groups. It summarizes the subject matter of the intervention and provides a brief summary of the survey results in the focus groups. The perceived spiritual value of the intervention was derived first from the awareness that not all religious methods or beliefs regarding evangelism can be supported in the Scriptures. Just because something is labeled Christian does not make it so. Secondly, the group benefitted from the mutually shared insights in the focus groups. Thoughtful discussion of the focus group questions and careful listening provided a catalyst for deeper understanding of the Bible on dynamics of self-interest in evangelism or worship. Thirdly, the examination of the theological tenets of the church growth movement in the “Built on the Rock” series deepened the ability of the leaders to recognize incursions of worldly policy and flawed theology into the worship and methods of church evangelism. It provided the tools to critique and explain the incompatibility of many modern religious beliefs about worship and evangelism.

The perceived professional value obtained during this intervention will be realized in the ability of both focus groups to further educate the Village Church, and to understand how to better lead the congregation. The subject matter shared will strengthen the youth ministry of the church by allowing the leader to more carefully screen the programs that are provided for our youth. It is in youth culture and the attempts to reach the youth that the church growth/consumer model has made its most significant inroads into Adventism. The intervention has also revealed the emotional costs associated with leadership as said leaders protect the church from many of the modern trends. The perceived relational benefit is the

bonding of the church leadership team after spending two to four hours in focus group dialogue, processing a challenging topic.

In listening to the dialogue of the focus groups, it was apparent that expanded understanding and moments of epiphany were transpiring. Joshua may have captured it best, “There are two things — maintenance and education. So often the church will maintain without educating. And when that group of leaders is gone then it is whatever the next group feels like doing. Like in education, we might get something correct, but we don’t get the principles. God likes variety. And He likes creativity. But if you don’t know the principles then you can’t learn how to express something in the proper way. We have to make sure we don’t just maintain, but that we also educate.”

Perhaps as never before, where the label “Christian” is applied without scrutiny, we need to receive again the admonition of Paul to the Thessalonians, “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

Introduction

Seventh-day Adventism does not find itself immune to the gospel hardening that has afflicted modern society. Materialism and love of the world has limited the effectiveness of our outreach and the ministry and retention of our youth. Both groups require a conversion experience to become mature and productive church members. Our modern emphasis on research and data, combined with generational science and the ever-increasing dependency on demographics and social science has produced a not-so-subtle pressure on pastors, parents, teachers, and administrators to abandon inspiration and traditional methods in order to find something “that works.” The new god of pragmatism (Gilley and Wegter 2009, 109) has eclipsed our trust in divine guidance and power. The church growth modalities, built on the church growth theology, seemed, for a while to be the answer.

Summary of the Project Manuscript

This project sought to expand the theological understanding of the leaders of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding the principles and practices of the church growth movement, more specifically the megachurch model. It was designed to reveal the incompatibilities between the Adventist theology of church identity, worship, and evangelistic practice, and the consumer model of church. Its purpose was also to give leaders

the tools necessary to guard against the unexamined and un-scrutinized integration of church growth practices into Adventist practice and culture. It focused primarily on twenty-two leaders in the Village Church who shared a common journey in three primary elements of the intervention. First, they participated in a survey to determine their pre-conceptions regarding the topic. Secondly, they participated in a focus group to further articulate their beliefs and opinions on the given subject. Thirdly, they participated in an eight-day week of prayer entitled “Built on the Rock.” Each lecture was approximately forty minutes in length. To conclude the research, they engaged in the same survey a second time and were part of a post-intervention focus group.

Description of the Evaluation

The data from the intervention and its evaluation and interpretation are described in the following segments. Conclusions drawn and resulting outcomes are also reported.

Evaluation Method

The case study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative portions of the study were evaluated using content analysis. Thematic narratives were noted and coded using a transcript of the four hours of focus group discussion both pre- and post-intervention. Conclusion and findings were drawn from the data and appropriate narratives recorded. The descriptions drawn provide an opportunity for reflection and consideration by other professionals for their own leadership practice.

The quantitative data gathered from the participants consisted of one 25-question survey designed to elicit understanding and belief regarding the subject matter, both prior to the intervention and following it. The numerical analysis is descriptive of the leadership team

at the Village Church and was not used to test a hypothesis but represents a potential source of insight for other pastors and faith-based leaders.

Interpretation of the Data

The data revealed several themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. The participants gave strong affirmation to the church as a family in contradistinction to the church as a business. The centrality of money and self-interest was, in the minds of the focus groups, a distinct identifier of a business. The absence of moral principle, along with a willingness to compromise in order to generate revenue also describes the negative themes surrounding the definition of a business. The group recognized the corrupting influence of self-interest in a business paradigm of the church. When a business/church becomes dependent on the revenue stream of its customers, it is reluctant to hold those customers accountable for the sake of healthy relationships. In other words, the church itself could become corrupted by self-interest. The discussions did have a recurring consensus that certain aspects of business structure should overlap with the functioning of a healthy church. Those structures included organization and proper goal setting.

The aggregated quantitative data from the survey analysis showed on average a one-point move on a scale from 1 to 10 from support for previously unrecognized statements that revealed a consumer religion attitude, toward the model of the church as a family. This shift of one point is the combined church board and staff data. This movement is perceived as a result of the “Built on the Rock” series. See appendix C. Comparing the church staff data with the church board data, it is apparent that on most issues the staff more nearly agreed with the premise of the “Built on the Rock” series prior to the presentation.

Conclusions Drawn from the Data

Because the focus groups were comprised of people already sympathetic to the leadership philosophy and operating practices of the Village Church, and because a large percentage of them have held those positions for a number of years, it is not surprising that they received the “Built on the Rock” series favorably and moved farther away in their thinking from the principles and practices of the church growth movement. The data appears to reveal that the staff and board of the Village Church have thoroughly embraced the family model for governance and evangelistic effort. Though not systematically articulated, this philosophy has undergirded the operating practices of the Village Church for the last ten years. The data shows a strong commitment to excellence in the execution of business practices that would be common to a well-run business and church; however, in contrast, a customer orientation is incompatible with the privileges and obligations of the mission of the church in reaching the lost and nurturing the congregation.

Over-Arching Conclusions

Perhaps one of the most alarming concerns drawn from this intervention is the lack of theological scrutiny through the efforts of Adventist theologians, pastors, and administrators on this subject matter. Russell Burrill (1996), in *Radical Disciples for Revolutionary Churches*, is an exception to this general rule and gives limited theological critique to the incompatibility of McGavran’s view of discipleship when compared with Scripture. He builds a compelling theology of what constitutes genuine discipleship but stops short of examining the other pillars of the church growth movement. It is as if the lowering of the standards for discipleship had a general appeal to a broad spectrum of pastors and members across the western world, and such limited cautions as Burrill were largely ignored. Outside

of Adventism the critique was only marginally greater in scope and volume, especially when considering the aggregate of all Protestant denominations.

If one accepts the decade of 2013-2023 as the practical application and implementation of the principles shared in this intervention, an unavoidable observation is the radical change in the financial data of the Village Church. While the membership has grown by approximately 24 percent over the last decade, the giving has increased by 264 percent. General revenues have increased from 1.7 million to 4.5 million over the same time period. While it is difficult to prove a cause and affect association, a recognition of correlation is achievable, and becomes more apparent when one considers the years 2003-2013 as a base line (See appendix C). If a pastor and church embrace the centrality of the cross in their identity and mission, perhaps the lack of immediate numeric growth in attendance will be balanced by the higher order of commitment as revealed in the financial ledgers of the Village Church. It is also possible that the same higher order will be found in levels of commitment of time and talent to other missionary efforts of the church.

Considerations

Because significant increases in membership and financial commitment are measurable during the years of 2019-2022, one must give serious consideration to the role of the COVID pandemic in potential effects on the financial and membership data reported in this study. The Village Church adopted a non-typical, non-conforming approach to mitigation of the virus. Services were only temporarily suspended. Masking for in-person attendance was optional, singing continued, and an active support to those desiring religious exemption was made. The online viewership of the Village YouTube channel experienced significant increases. The willingness of the church to take risks may have provided an

unusual draw to other like-minded risk-tolerant individuals, the end result being a gathering of highly committed, courageous new members.

Future Research

As one considers the opportunities of further research, an examination of the causal effects on the distinct financial growth of the Village Church would present a potentially beneficial study. Consideration as to the measurable change in the life habits and levels of commitment related to this financial phenomenon would potentially benefit the Adventist Church at large.

When one examines the divergent paradigms for the identity of the church (business vs. family), another potential for future research in the Village Church would be the intentional role of bonding members to members and members to leaders as a managerial strategy. When the membership shares a “bond of affection” for one another, it transforms the way they interpret the actions of other members of the body. The result is a unity and sweetness that is winning. This bonding or team spirit should be evaluated for the role that it plays in levels of commitment and emotional well-being across all spectrums of church engagement, involvement, and commitment. Worthy of investigation may be the value of an intrinsic or internal reward structure focused on belonging and purpose that has even greater magnetism than the self-focused elements of the consumer model.

Closely related to the financial data and intentional efforts to create a family paradigm for identity and growth would be the examination of risk and reward in leadership training and mentorship. Considering the scriptural admonition that without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), examination of the leadership dynamics of moving a group into a greater faith experience could provide important data for the growth of

Adventist congregations. More specifically to be addressed would be a study in how to move a board from data-driven decision-making to a paradigm of spiritual consensus and faith-based risk-taking. How does a board practically engage the Holy Spirit for administrative and leadership direction?

The central role of mission, both local and foreign, as a catalyst for bonding and commitment may also yield practical benefits to the revitalization of Adventist congregations. Related to this subject is the centrality of the church in the lives of its congregants. Research into the structuring of a high-cost religious community might also provide insight and direction regarding youth ministry and the retention of our youth.

In 2013, the Village Church was manifesting negative growth data. An evaluation of the levels of leadership commitment necessary to the revitalization process of a congregation could manifest a healthy understanding of reversing downward trends. Just as beginning a new business or reviving a failing business requires exceptional levels of time, effort, and commitment, it would be valuable to isolate the leadership dynamics of leadership in “turning the ship around.”

Recommendations

In the same way that no family surveys the occupants of the home regarding the central set of values and priorities that governs the home, neither should any church or school survey the members regarding any issue of faithfulness to Bible principle or the sacred trust invested in the leaders relative to the health and well-being of the members entrusted to their care.

The health and well-being of an organization is a sacred trust committed to the leadership of the organization. In a business setting the leaders are tasked with a fiduciary

responsibility, how much more in a religious environment where the stakes relate to eternal life. Without a practical working relationship with God, the pastor is liable to bring in all types of permutations of identity and mission to the church in the name of success. A family-based paradigm of ministry is a faith dependent model. Only those leaders who themselves have known the intervening power of God and live in a God-directed dependency can implement this model.

Seventh-day Adventist pastoral leadership must be committed to a long-term view of success and functionality that includes confrontational practices when there is evident dysfunction. These methods will produce relationships that the leader would be glad to have if he or she were to remain in that church for 15 or 20 years. This requires a deep love for God and His people, a biblical understanding of what is healthy and functional, and a measure of common sense coming from one's own family life management.

Readiness for this type of leadership will require personal preparation and some form of conflict resolution training. Often the leader/pastor will have to deal with dysfunctional people and relationships that current and/or previous leaders have avoided due to the high emotional cost, lack of skills, and inherent leadership risks.

The personal preparation required for this type of leadership is a close walk with God that directs the leader when to speak up and when to remain silent. The personal relationships of the leader must be solid, deep, and generating surplus emotional strength for the conflicts and stresses that will develop as the church moves to a functional leadership experience.

Proper expectations are important for the leader who works according to the family model. In a setting with moderate to severe dysfunction it is likely that in the first years a significant leadership crisis will occur, testing the strength and respectability of the new

pastor. Ideally, the match between the pastor and the congregation was a prayed-over and spirit-filled experience so that both parties are certain that in the midst of the crisis their relationship can and should work out as they look to God. Ideally, this crisis should be avoided long enough to allow sufficient bonds to develop that can endure the restructuring of the family dynamics of the church. A family “crisis” must often develop for a healthy church to be reborn and break out of its dysfunction.

The level of commitment required for revitalization and transformation must be properly understood. The family paradigm of leadership will require tremendous amounts of time and sacrifice in the early years, which will more than repay itself in the re-building cycle of the congregation. The astute congregants will notice the sacrificial love exhibited by the pastor and their family. The pastor’s family must protect its own health, but an inability to flex, sacrifice, and go beyond the call of duty will destroy the ability of the family model to work. This is a higher level of commitment, and eventually it will yield a higher level of commitment from the members for God, His cause, and the leaders who are leading it.

The family model of church must embrace a new commitment to mission. The mission is not only the legitimate responsibility of the congregation, it is also the unifying and lifting dynamic of the church. The rewards of faith, the intrinsic joy of doing good, and the adventure of taking a spiritual risk by extending one’s self are necessary exercises to the family of God.

Personal Transformation

This intervention brought a confluence of required study and an examination of statistical data from the Village Church over the last twenty years, ten of which I have been

the pastor. The gathering of the measurable components of church health revealed an encouraging data set, affirming that measurable success can be achieved on a selfless, cross-centered paradigm for church management (See appendix C). At the onset of my research an expert in the field of church growth disputed my summary assessments of the movement and stated, “This does not sound like the church growth movement that I know.” The resulting challenge spurred a deeper examination of the writings of the founders of the movement in order to reveal from the authors of the church growth movement themselves, the principles and theology upon which the movement built the consumer model of church in the form of the megachurch model.

The examination of these writings and the discovery of multiple statements affirming the principles of marketing and self-interest in their methodology and theology was an amazing personal journey. To be able to explain the incompatibility of the church growth movement with the beliefs and practice of the gospel was exceptionally rewarding. With a ninth quarter emphasis in youth ministry from the SDA Theological Seminary, I had observed the consumer model working its way into the Adventist Church through the religious pragmatism of youth ministry in an attempt to keep our youth in the church. The “what works” mentality was taking root in Adventism through youth ministry. As the pastor of an academy church for nearly two decades I could see that it was not working. Moving to an Adventist ghetto in 2013 afforded me the opportunity to see if high-cost religion, the only kind that Jesus ever offered, could compete in the marketplace of ideas and experiences with the multiple offerings of surrounding churches. The answer has been a resounding yes!

Summary

In summary, the gospel responsibilities given to us by Jesus Christ cannot be made compatible with the business model of self-interest and mutually beneficial exchanges. The church is freighted with responsibilities to make certain that the world is given a warning and invitation. Rejecting the warning and refusing the invitation is the forfeiting of life eternal. The church and the world are to be taught that self-denial and unselfish love is the means whereby Christ saved us, and it is the method and means whereby we are called to reach others. After a disappointing evangelistic endeavor in Athens, Paul stated to the Corinthians, “I determined to know nothing among you, but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” Jesus warned us that the road was narrow. It is our privilege to point people to Jesus and remind them that “The way of the cross leads home.”

APPENDIX A

WEEK OF PRAYER INFORMATION



BUILT ON THE ROCK

Preparation for Earth's Final Tempest

FEBRUARY 25 - MARCH 4



SCHEDULE

Sabbath February 25 Church Service and 5pm

February 26-March 3 6:30pm

Sabbath March 4 Church Service

Presented By Pastor Ron Kelly

BEGINS SABBATH MORNING

SAT 2023
FEBRUARY **25**

VILLAGE ADVENTIST CHURCH

635 St Joseph Ave Berrien Springs, MI 49103

VISIT US ONLINE AT



WWW.VILLAGESDA.ORG

“Built on The Rock” Week of Spiritual Emphasis February 25 – March 4, 2023

Sabbath Morning, February 25, 2023

Nothing is For Sale and Nothing is Free

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkv8ByS6xZU&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=9&t=39s>

Sabbath Evening, February 25, 2023

The Family of God

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1_lh66nr4M&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=8

Sunday Evening, February 26, 2023

Jesus the Miserable Marketer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1_lh66nr4M&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=8

Monday Evening, February 27, 2023

Churched and Unconverted

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aad6ninYivo&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=6>

Tuesday Evening, February 28, 2023

The Consumer Church

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwX0FPsHvCU&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=5>

Wednesday Evening, March 1, 2023

Purpose Driven Deception

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0sBFgsfSd4&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=4>

Thursday Evening, March 2, 2023

Biblical Leadership for Growth

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idOmXWcGebQ&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=3>

Friday Evening, March 3, 2023

True Success and False Facsimiles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpUtPBD0ZL0&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=2>

Sabbath Morning, March 4, 2023

The Cost of Discipleship

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8IMI_mShxY&list=PLWhQIHGTHIkYIT7NccXbjfmRB5gG83eBZ&index=1

APPENDIX B

CONSENT MATERIALS

February 6, 2023



Institutional Consent

This document confirms that the Village Seventh-day Adventist church board has voted to participate in the doctoral project of Ronald Kelly, entitled:

A Leadership Strategy to Identify and Reverse the Effects of Consumerism on the Commitment to the Mission and Management of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Signed,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tom Wilson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is placed on a light blue rectangular background.

Tom Wilson,
Head Elder

Consent Form

Research Title: A Leadership Strategy to Identify and Reverse the Effects of Consumerism on the Commitment to the Mission and Management of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church Members.

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Principal Investigator: Ronald P. Kelly Jr. Co-investigator: Associate Pastor Michael Kasurawana

Research Advisor: Dr. Victor Jaeger

Statements about the Research: This research study is part of my Doctor of Ministry project, in partial fulfillment for my degree in Leadership, at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this research is to examine the theology and practice of the church growth movement against the teachings of the Bible and the writings of Ellen White and determine its impact on the thinking and practice of the leaders and members of the Village Seventh-day Adventist church.

Procedures: The participant will listen to lectures on various topics presented at the Village church for its Spring Week of Spiritual Emphasis and will engage in two discussion segments with a focus group that will last one hour each. One focus group will be held prior to the lectures, and one will be held after the lectures. The lectures will last 45 minutes each and will have 9 segments. Participants may not be able to attend all lectures. This need not limit participation.

Risks and Benefits: I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

All data collected in the research will be anonymized. Consent forms will be kept separate from the survey data and the two will not be connected. All data collected will be kept on a hard drive and locked in a church office. Only the principal and co-investigator will have access to the data.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. There will be nothing linking you to the study. None of your identifiers, if any, will be used in any report or publication.

Whom to Contact: If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, contact my advisor Dr. Vic Jaeger 469-475-0777, jaeger@andrews.edu or researcher Ronald Kelly, 269-362-3680, pastor.ronkelly@gmail.com. You can also contact the IRB Office at irb@andrews.edu or at (269) 471-6361.

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I Consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____

Your Name (printed) _____

Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent: _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent: _____

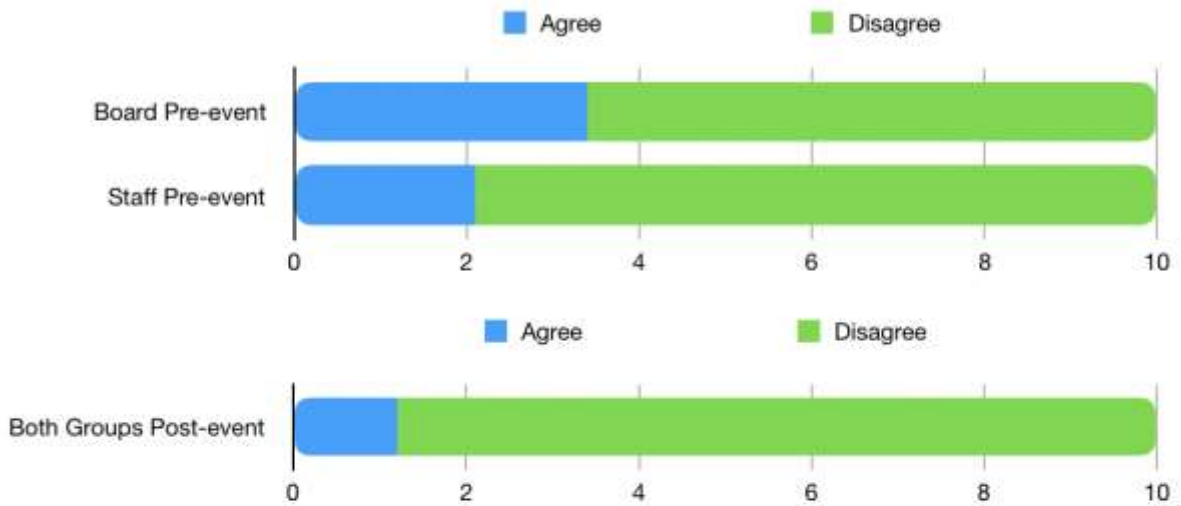
Date _____

APPENDIX C

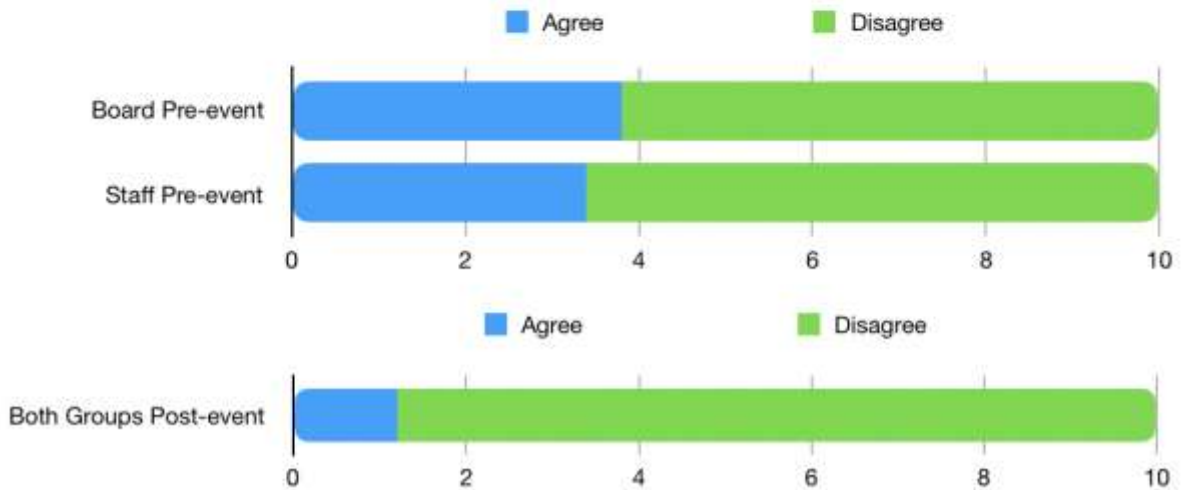
CHARTS

Survey Results Pre/Post Seminar

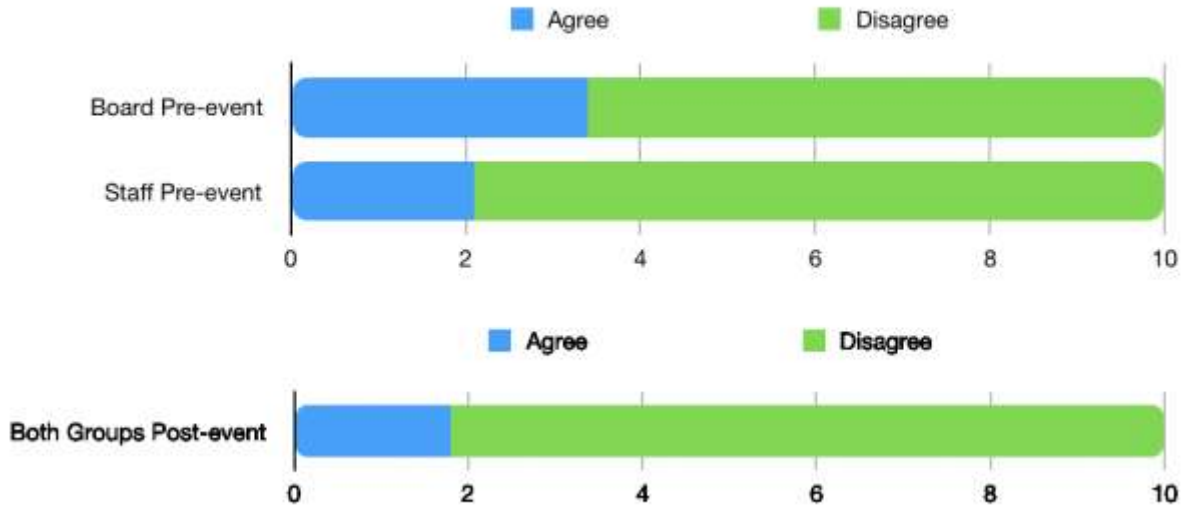
1. A church needs to do business like a secular business



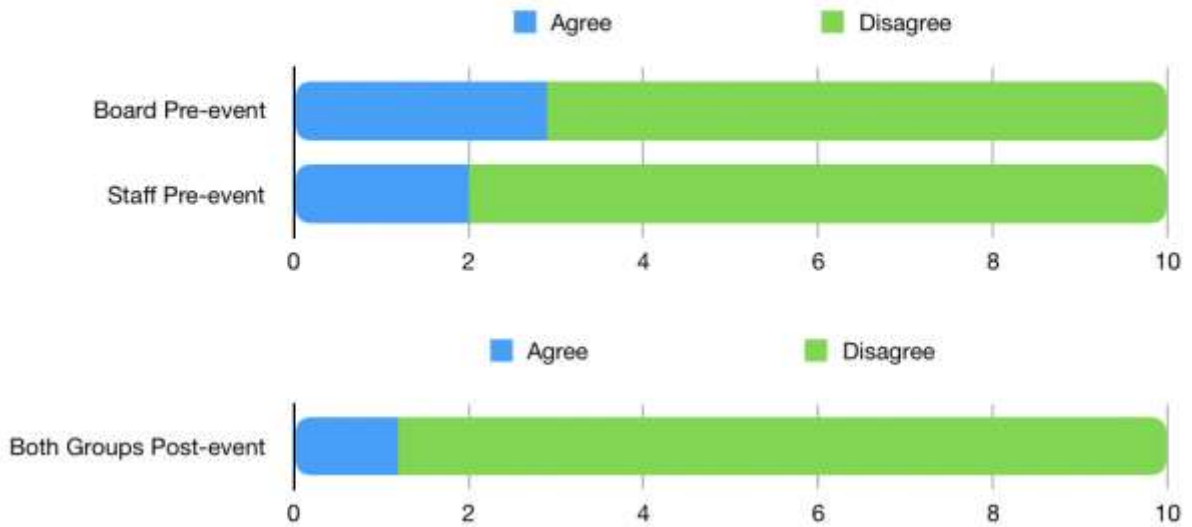
2. Effective marketing of a church will lead the church to change its worship services in order to meet the needs of those it is trying to reach



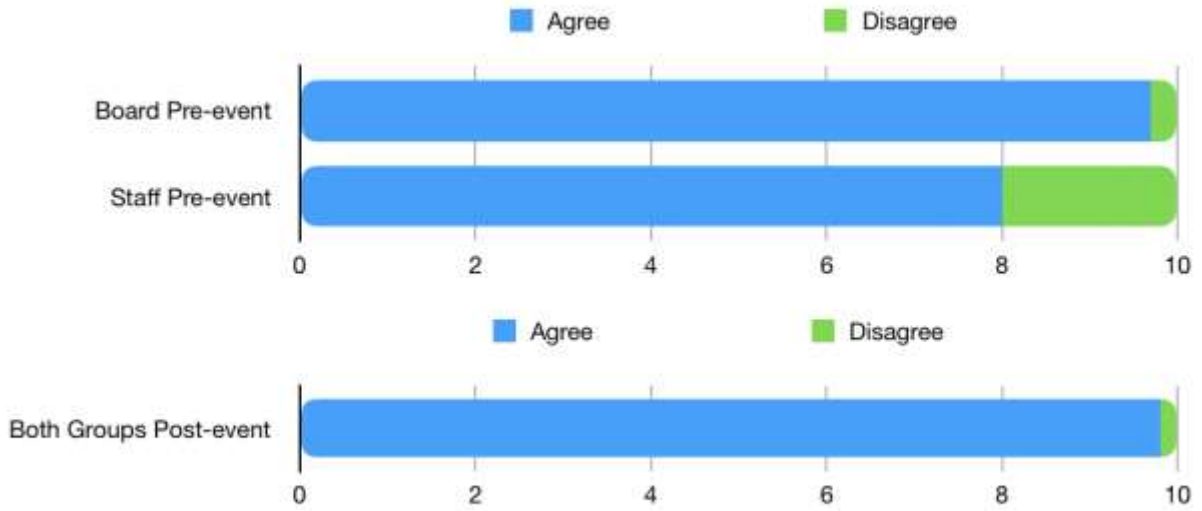
3. New members should be baptized into Jesus before they are taught church doctrines



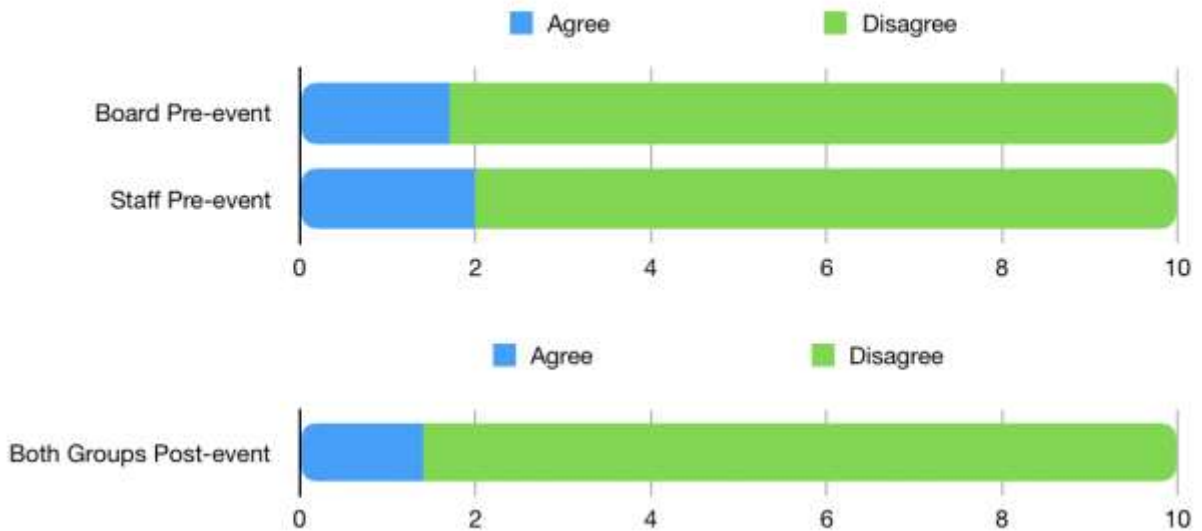
4. If we listen to our members like customers we will have more effective ministries



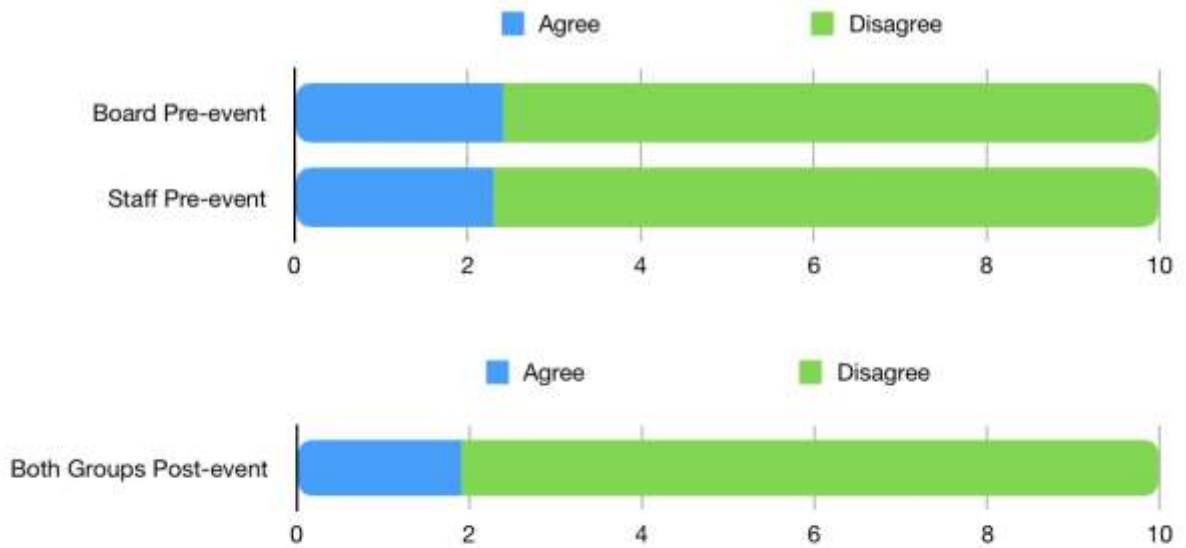
5. The church should be run like a healthy family



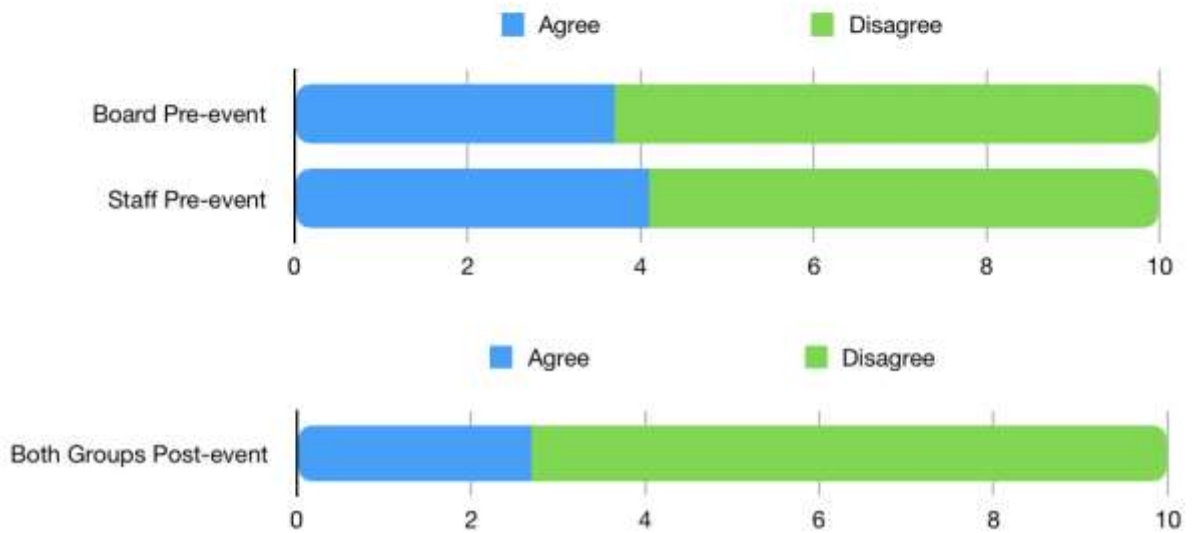
6. Churches that mention standards or make people feel convicted won't grow



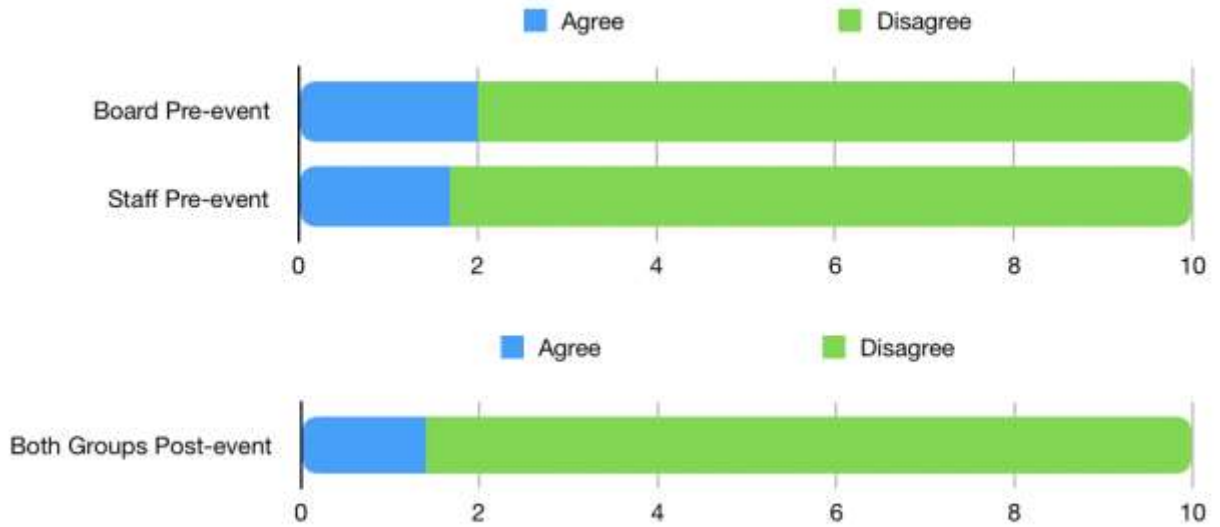
7. Preaching shouldn't make people feel guilty



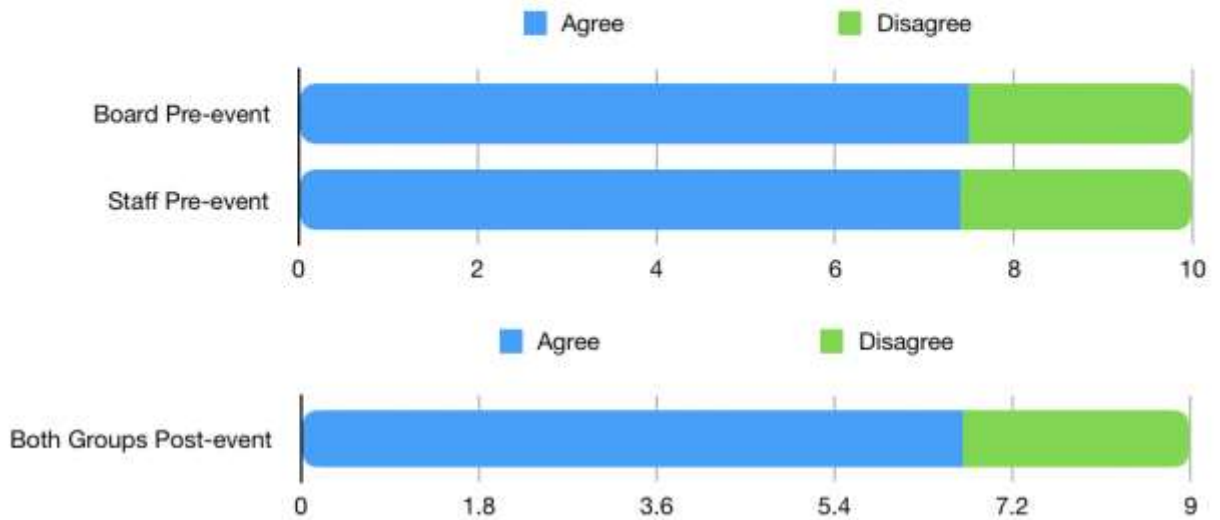
8. Developing worship services especially for a certain demographic will aid in church growth



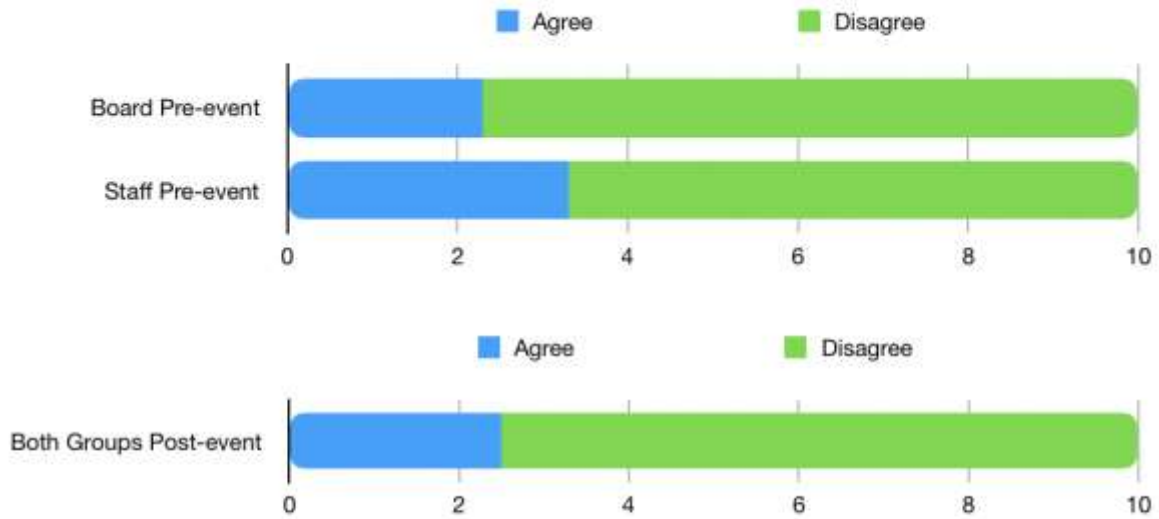
9. Young people will not attend services that aren't contemporary



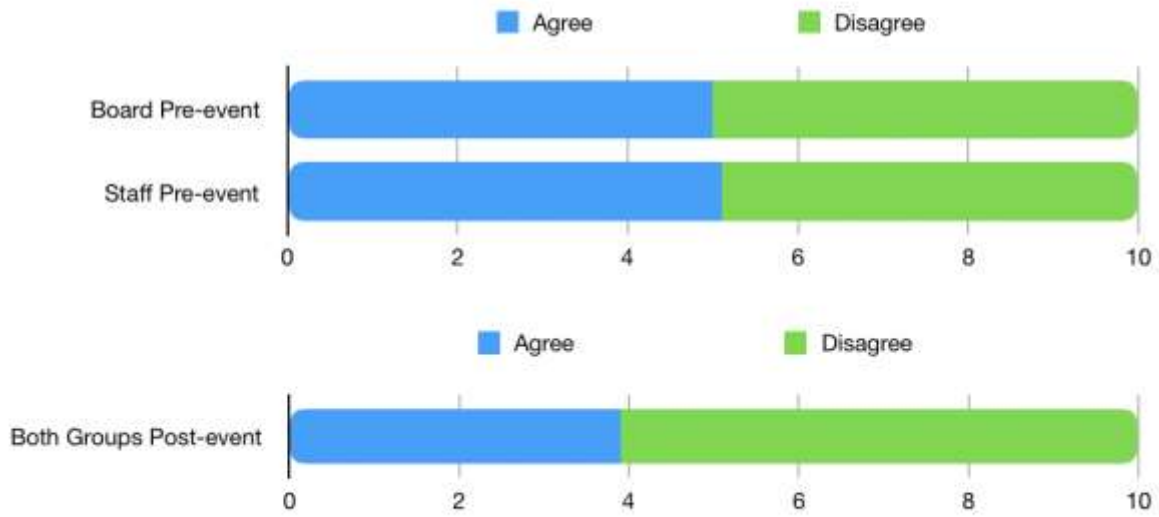
10. Lowering church membership requirements to the lowest common denominator in attempts to reach the lost will be bad for the church and the lost



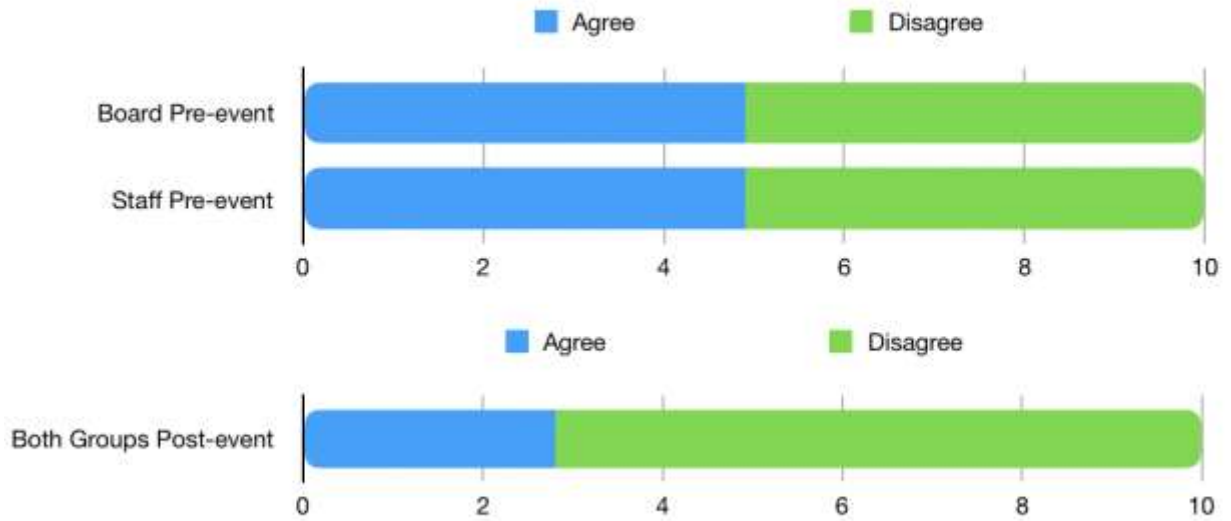
11. Worship services should use music that people enjoy if they want to reach the unchurched



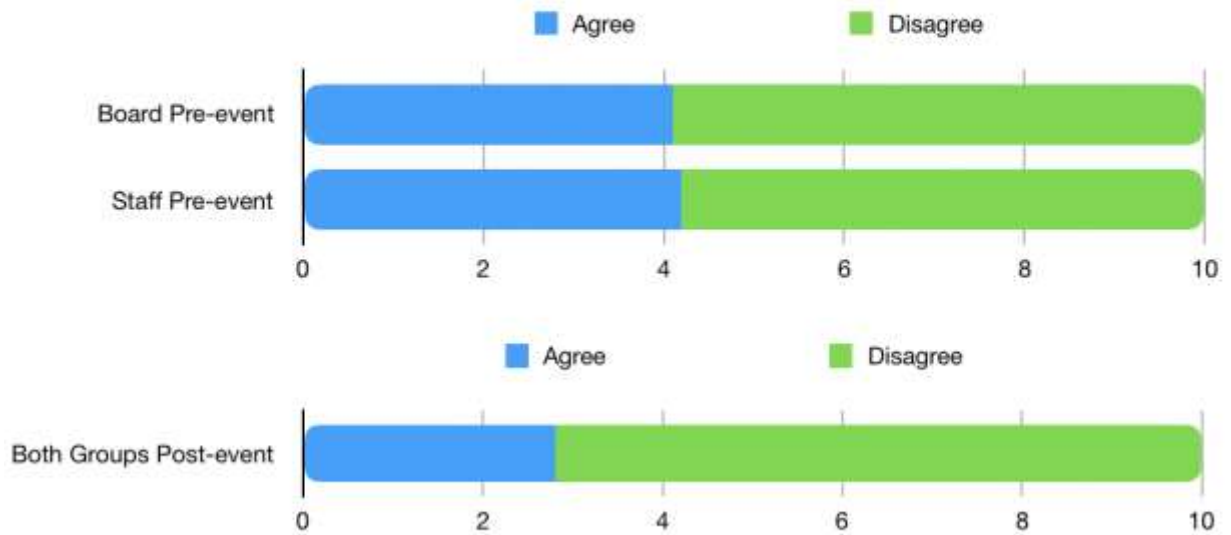
12. Advertising is very important to the growth of the church



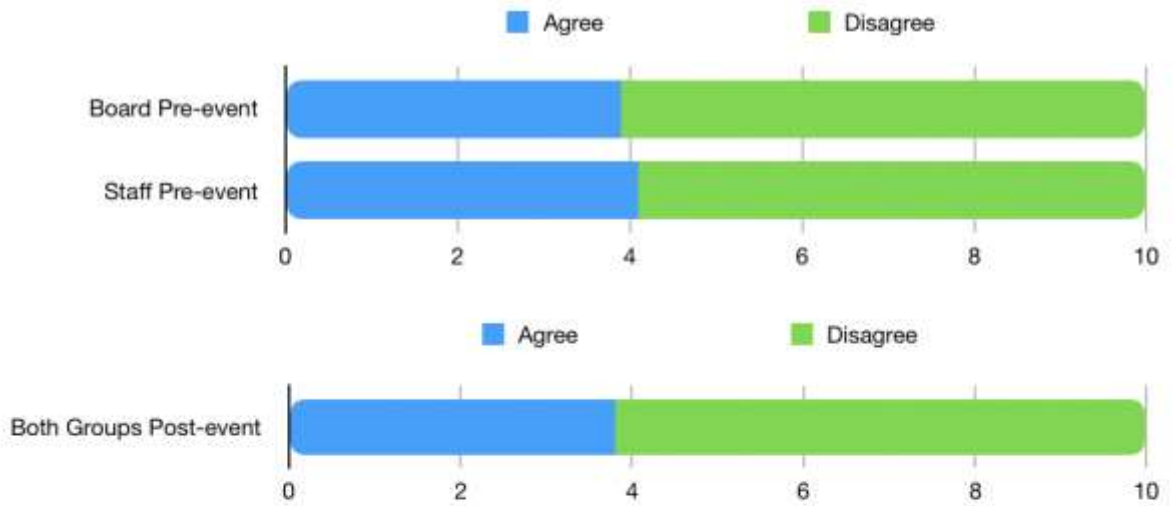
13. The mission of the church to reach the unchurched should drive the development of the worship service



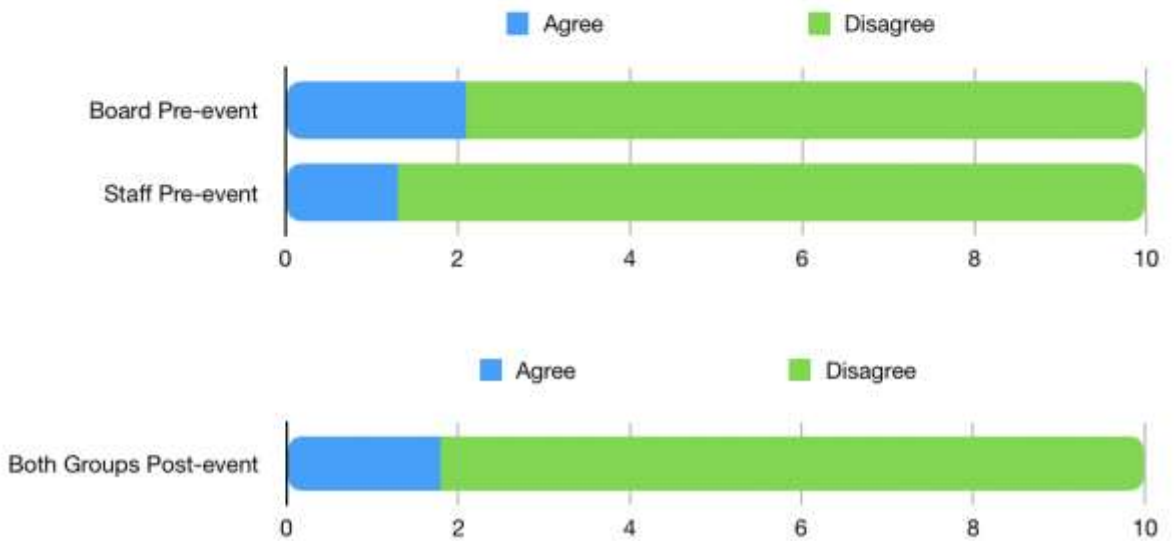
14. The worship service should focus around the needs of the seeker



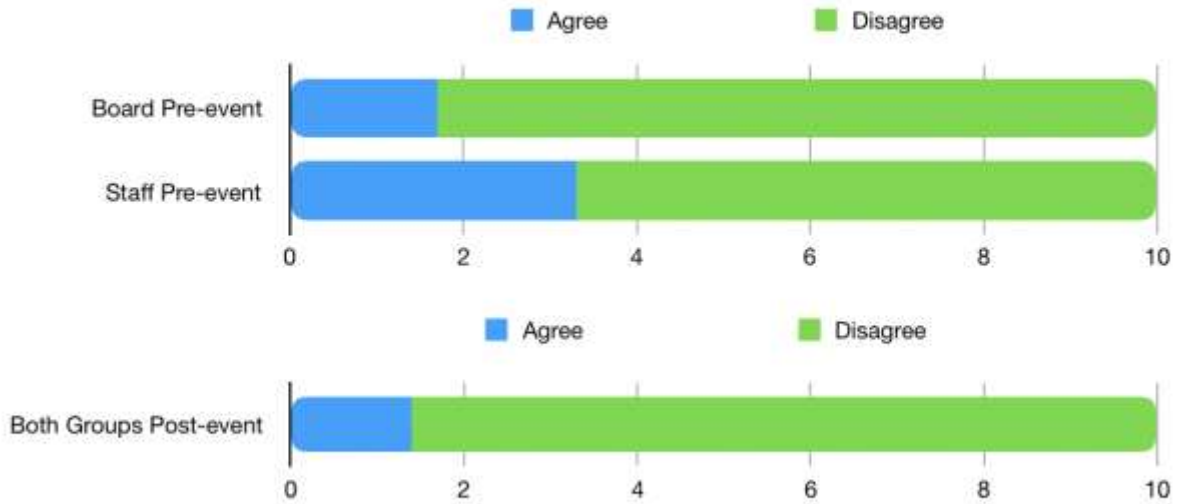
15. The church service is the most effective evangelistic tool the church has



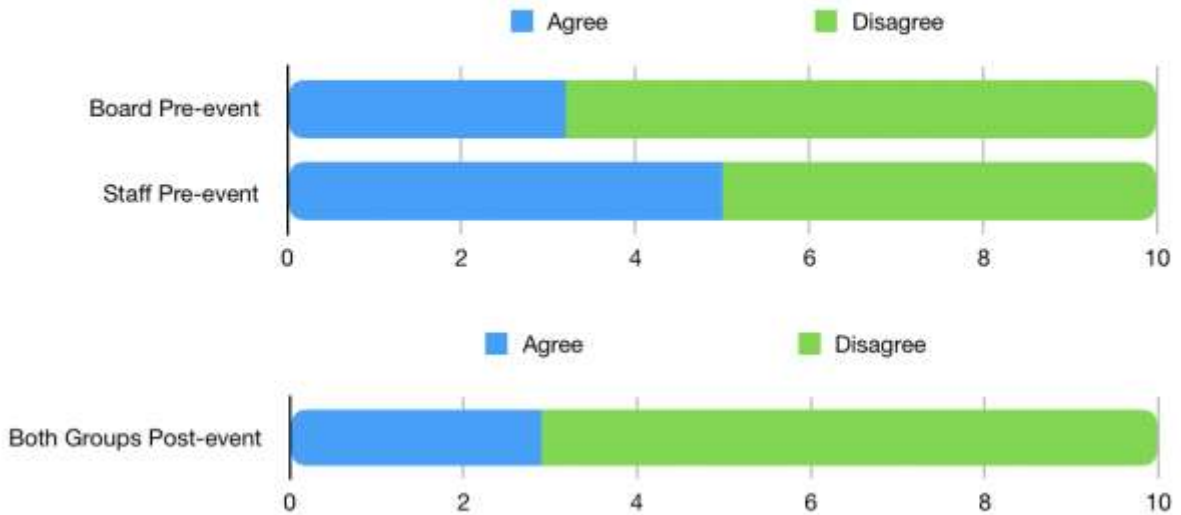
16. If you ask people to give up things they like to do, they will not become members of the church



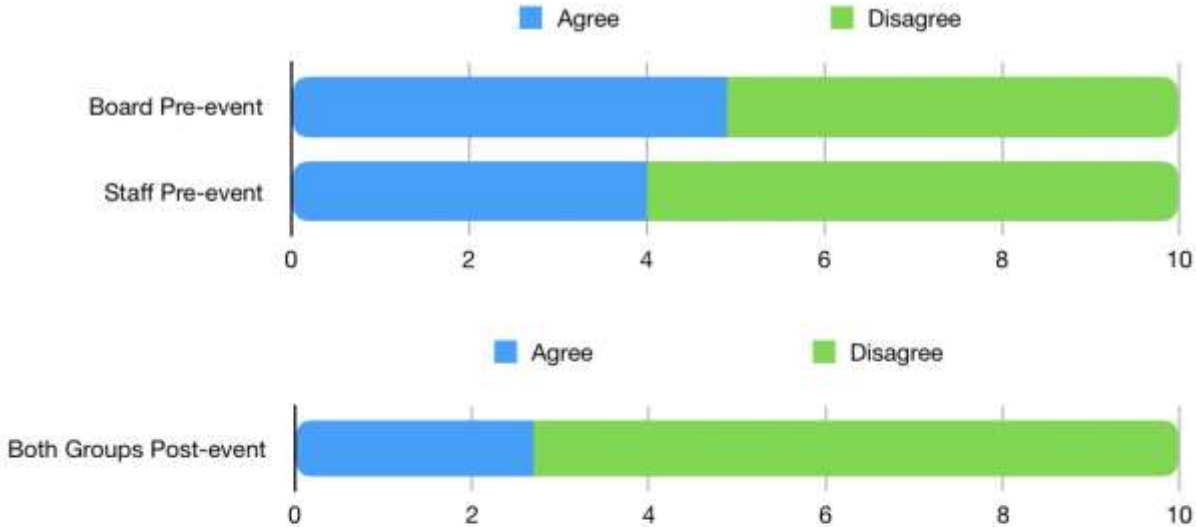
17. Asking people to dress up to come to church is old-fashioned and off-putting and shouldn't be done by any church that wants to grow



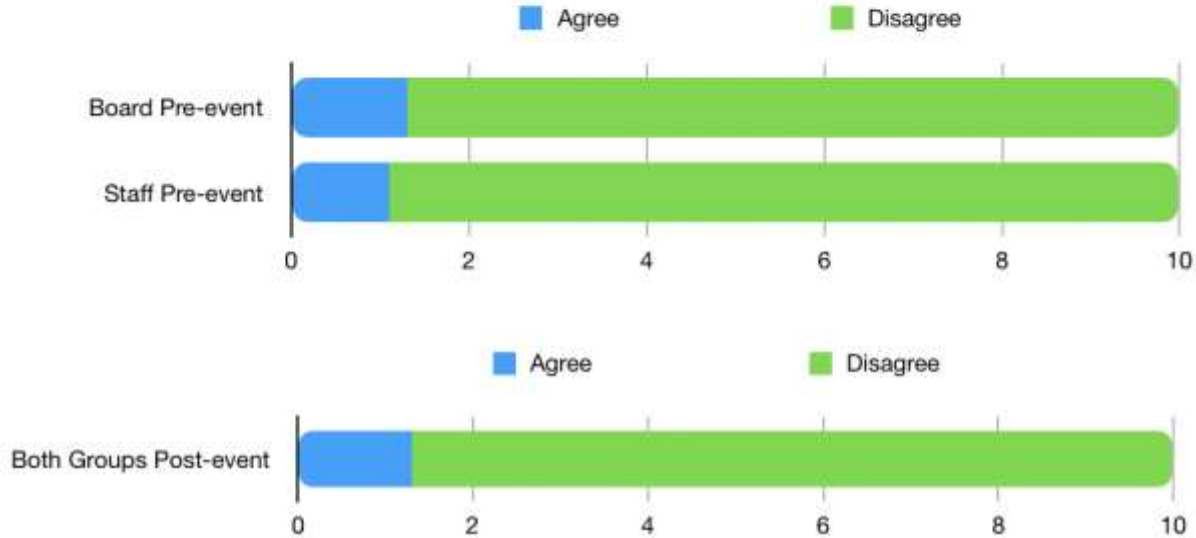
18. Occasionally skipping church to do missionary activities is a good idea



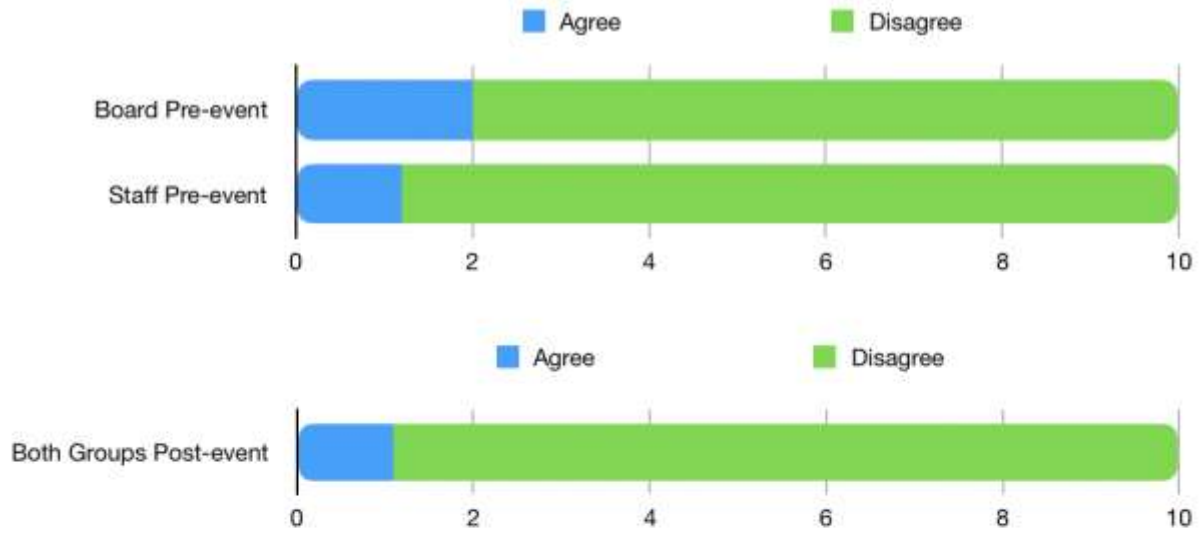
19. We should make attending church as easy as possible



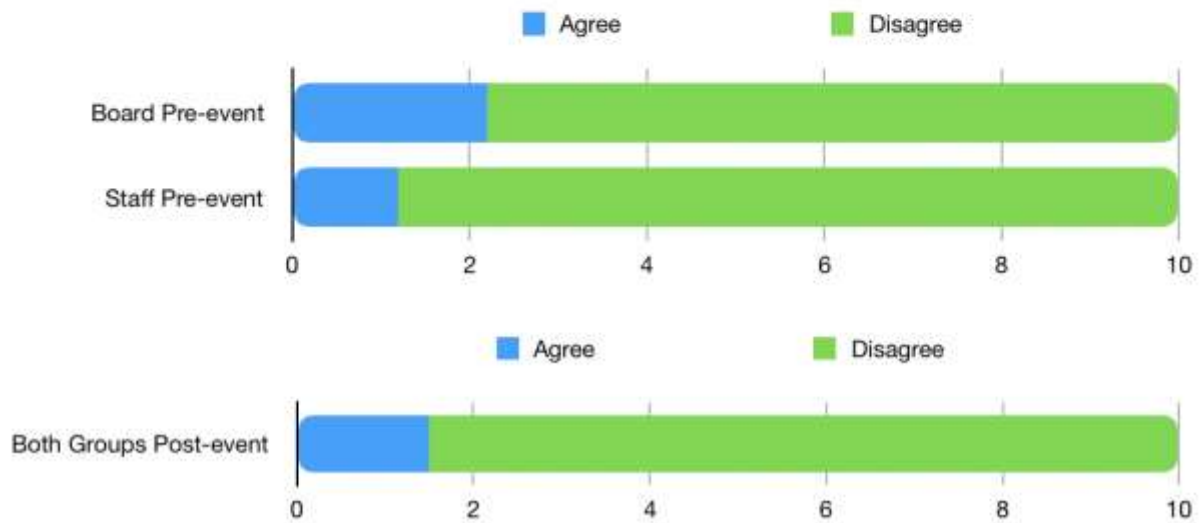
20. In order to make church comfortable we shouldn't collect offerings during the service



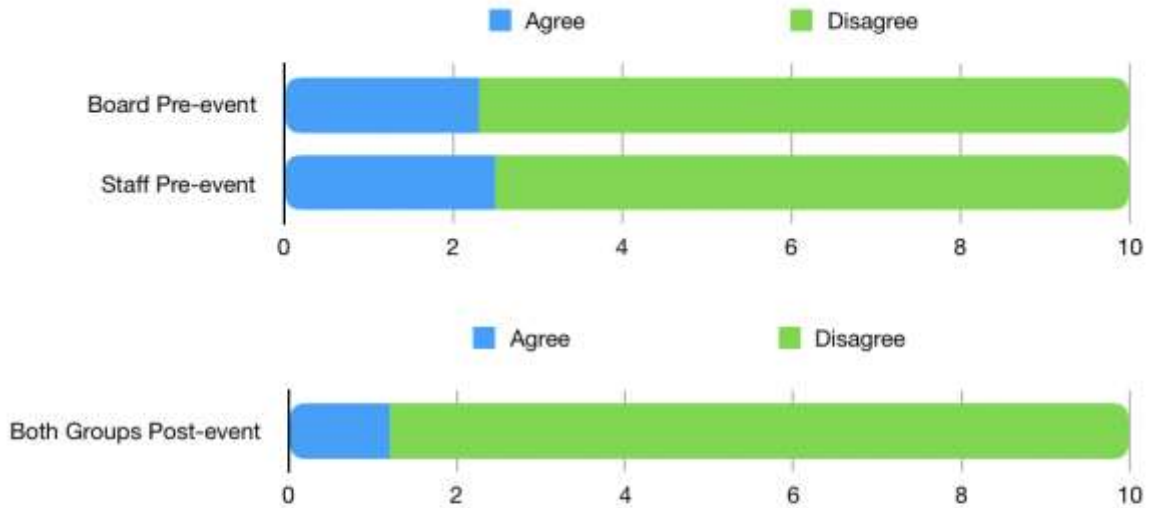
21. Young people need their own church services that meet their special needs



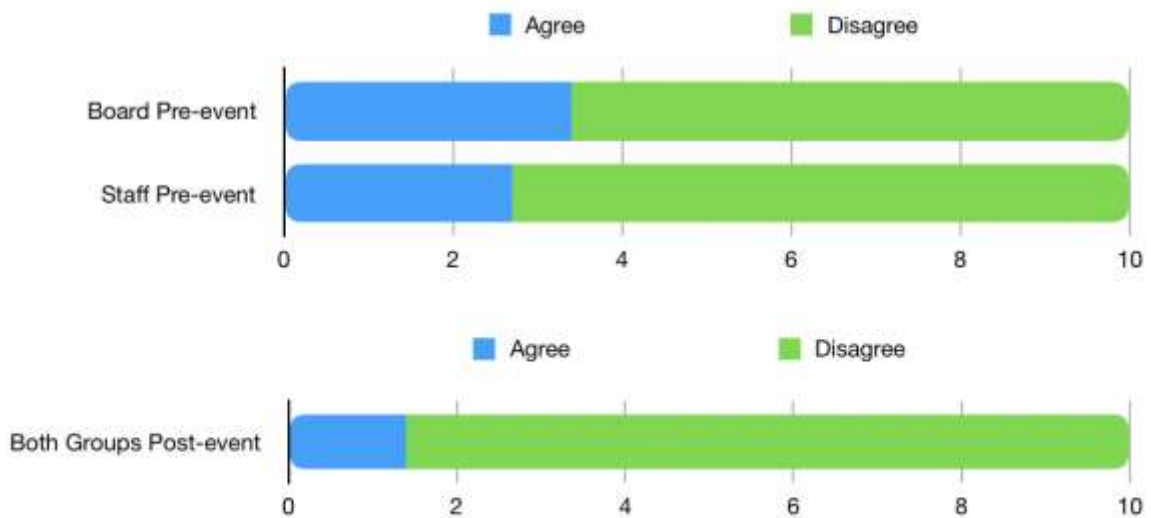
22. Old people don't understand the spiritual journey of today's generations



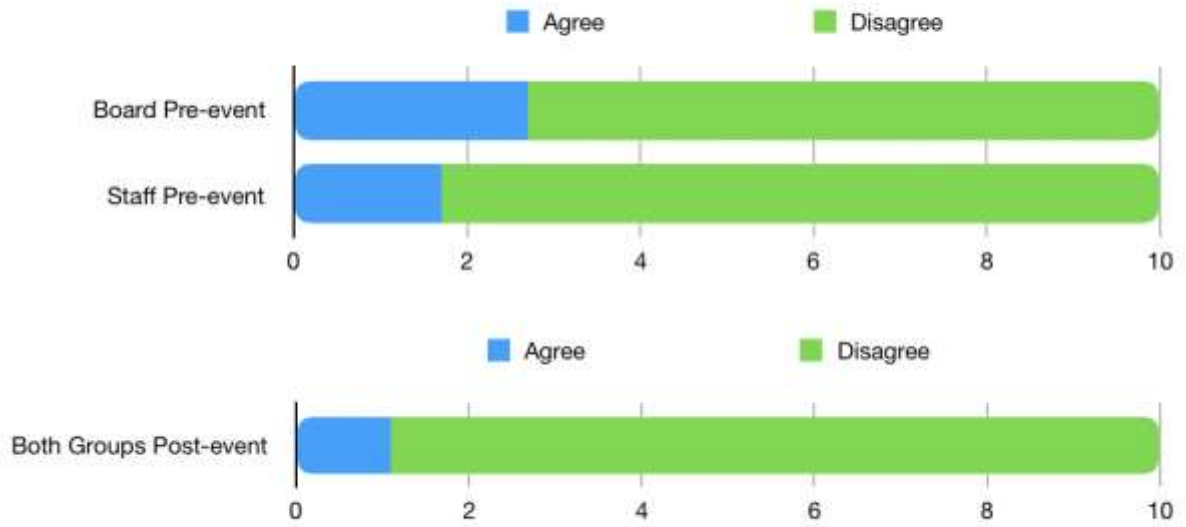
23. The real mission of the church is to make itself attractive to those it is trying to reach

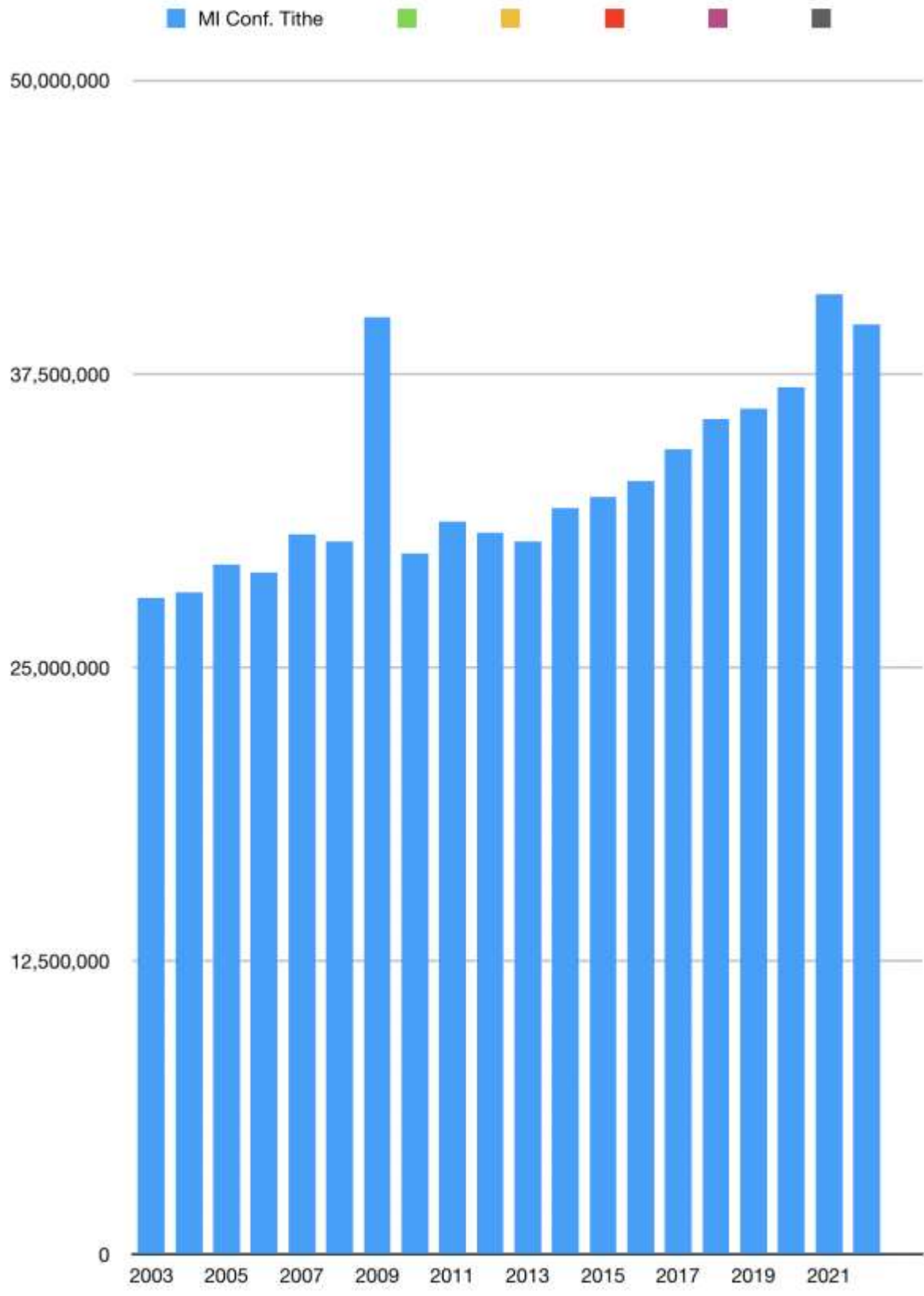


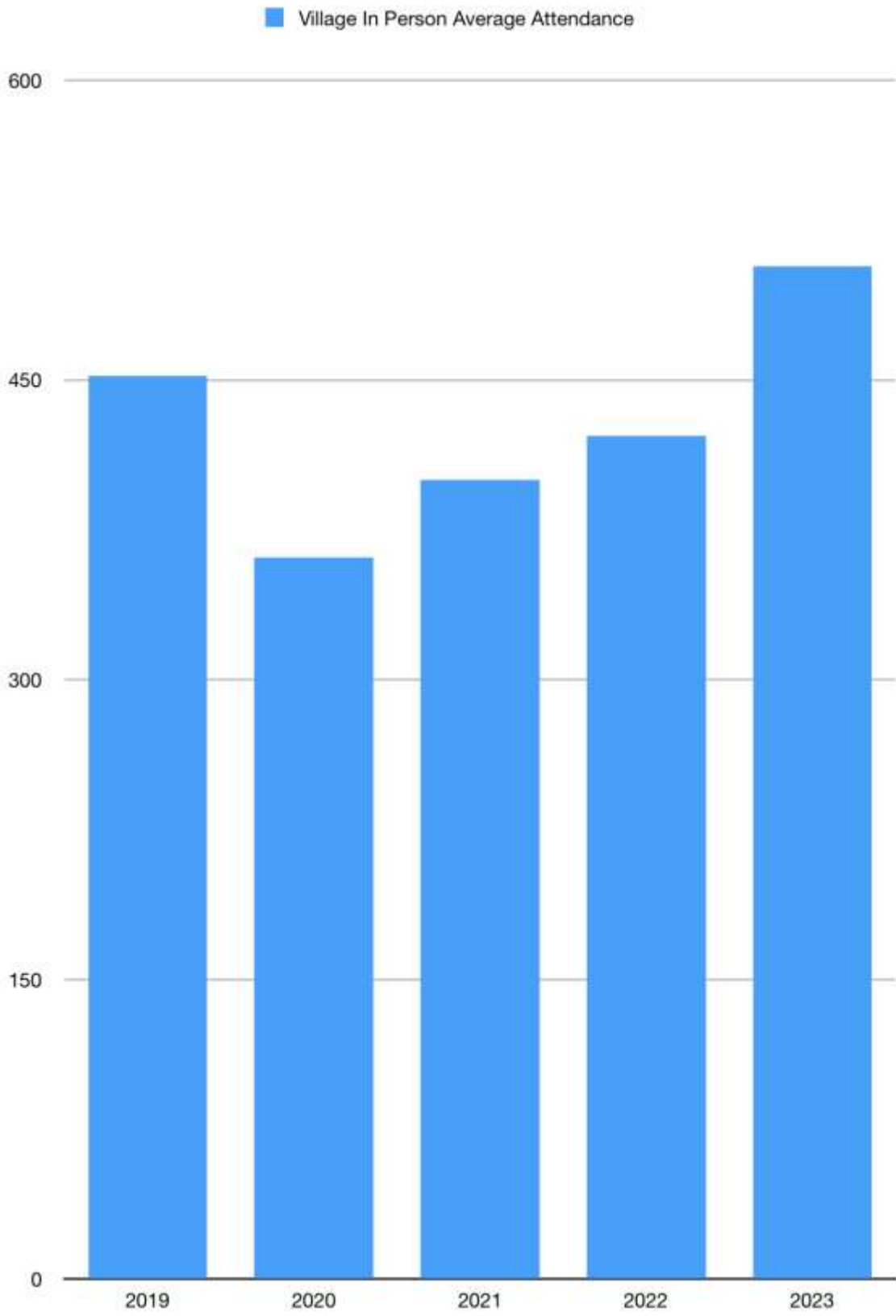
24. If we survey them, the unchurched will tell us what we need to talk about to reach them

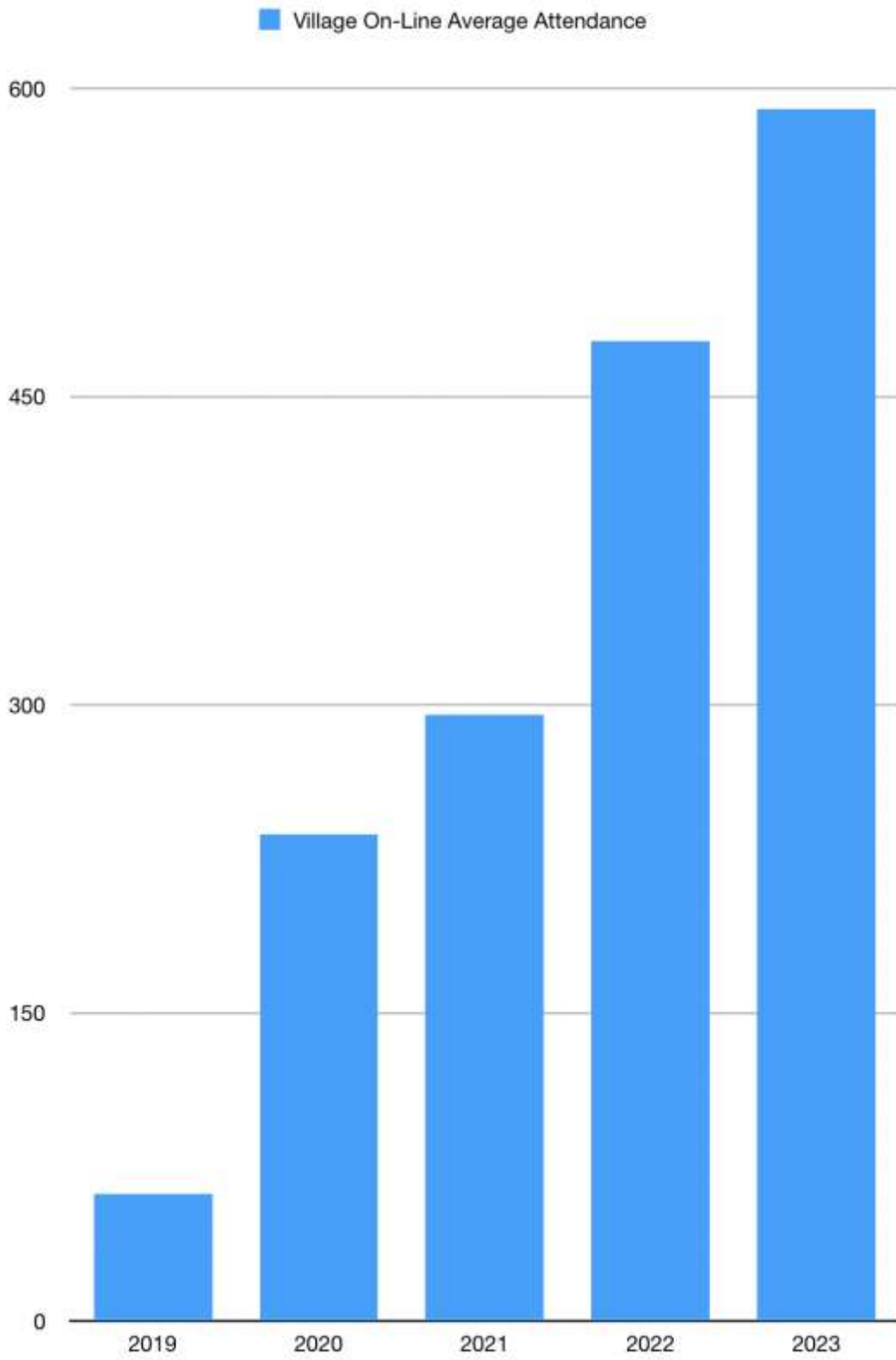


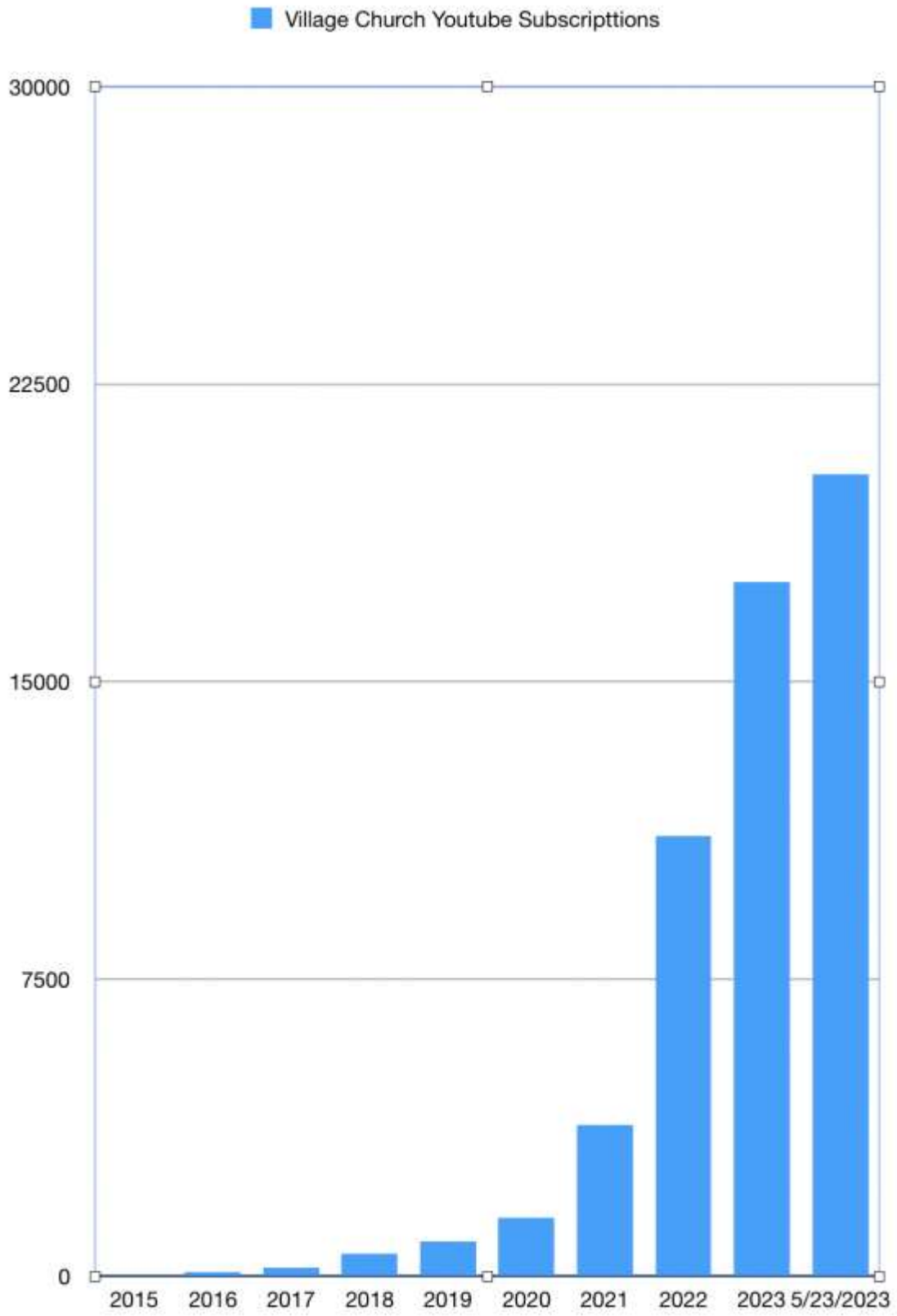
25. Surveys of the unchurched will give us the best direction about what direction our church should go

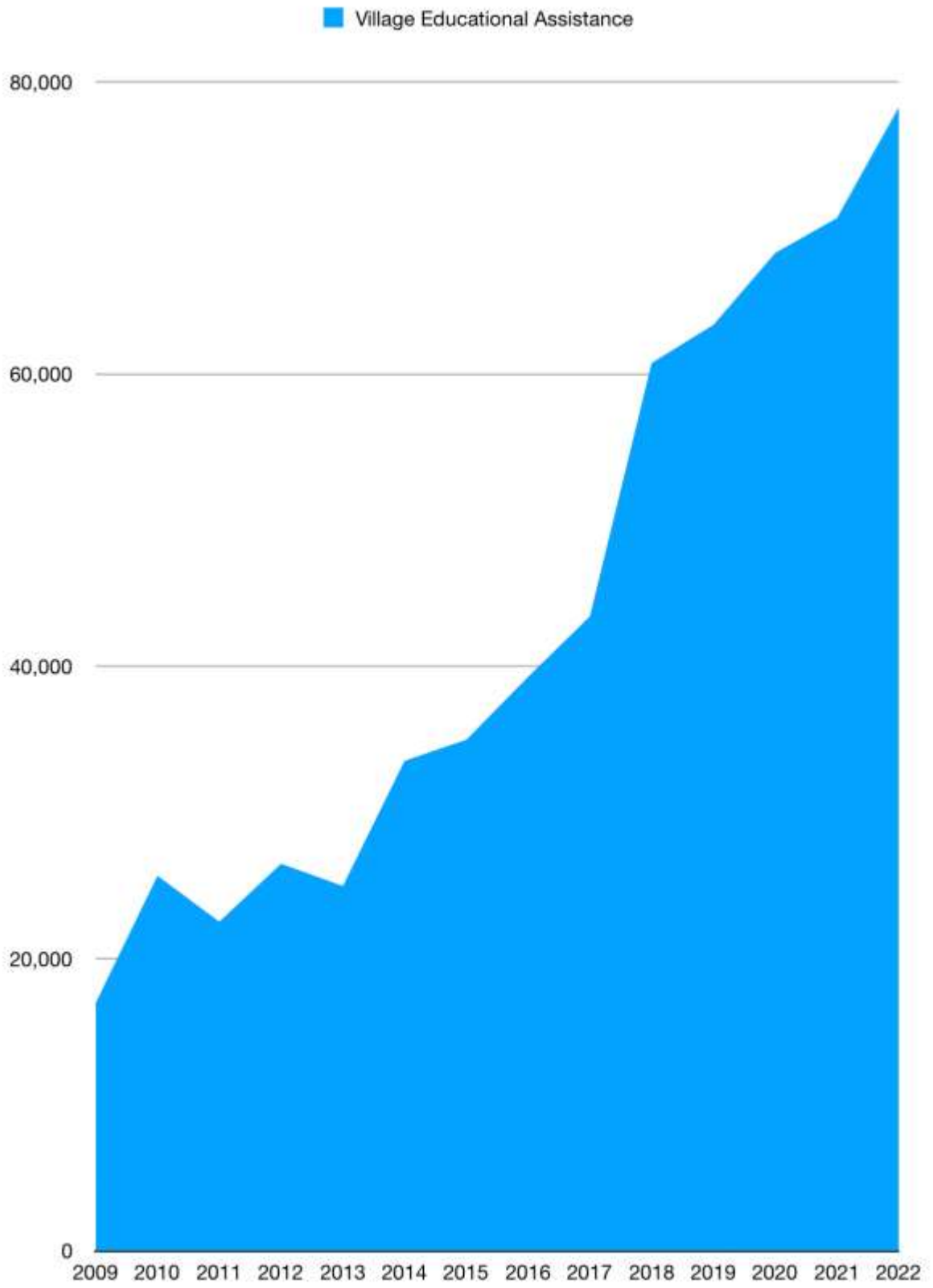


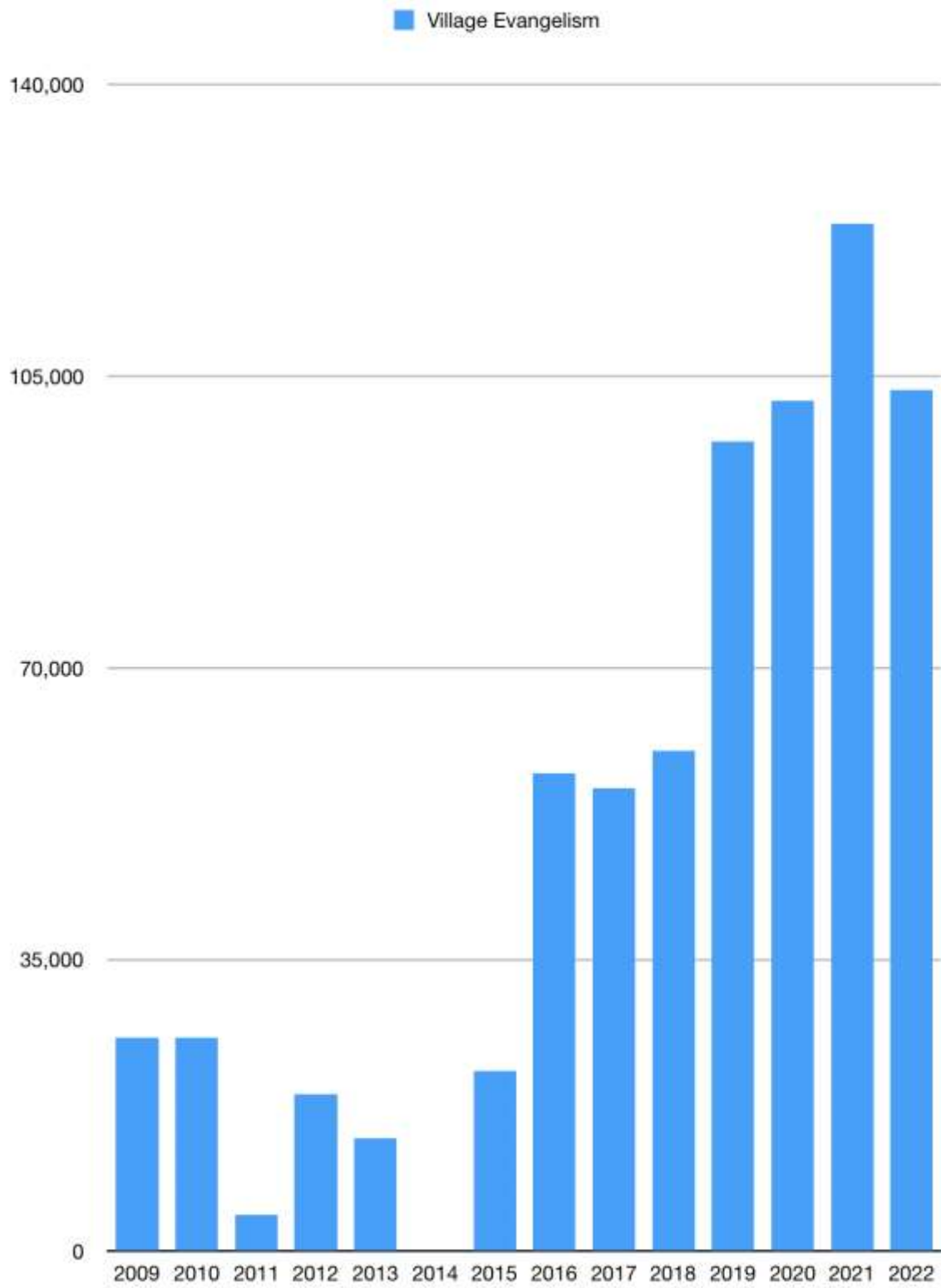


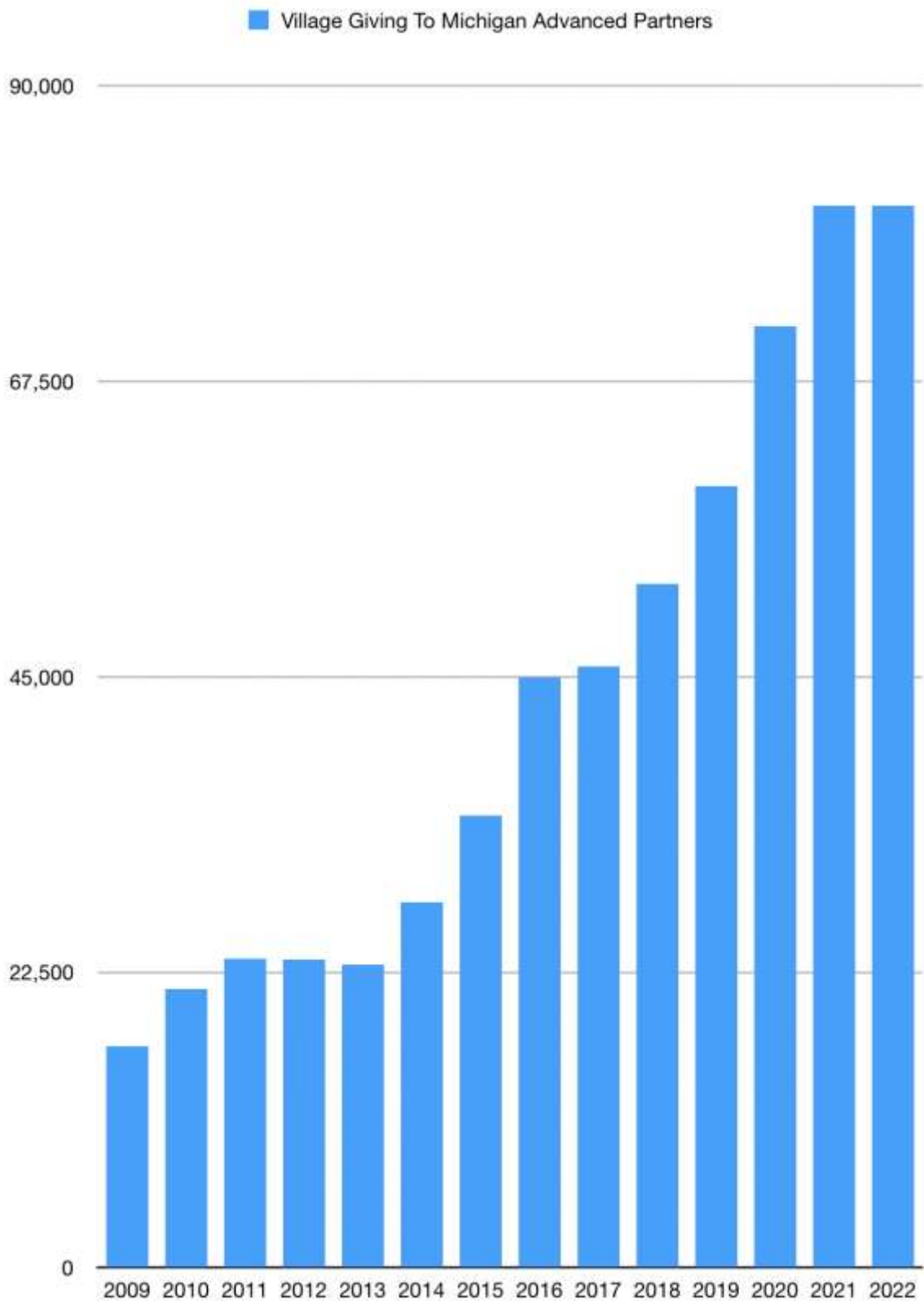


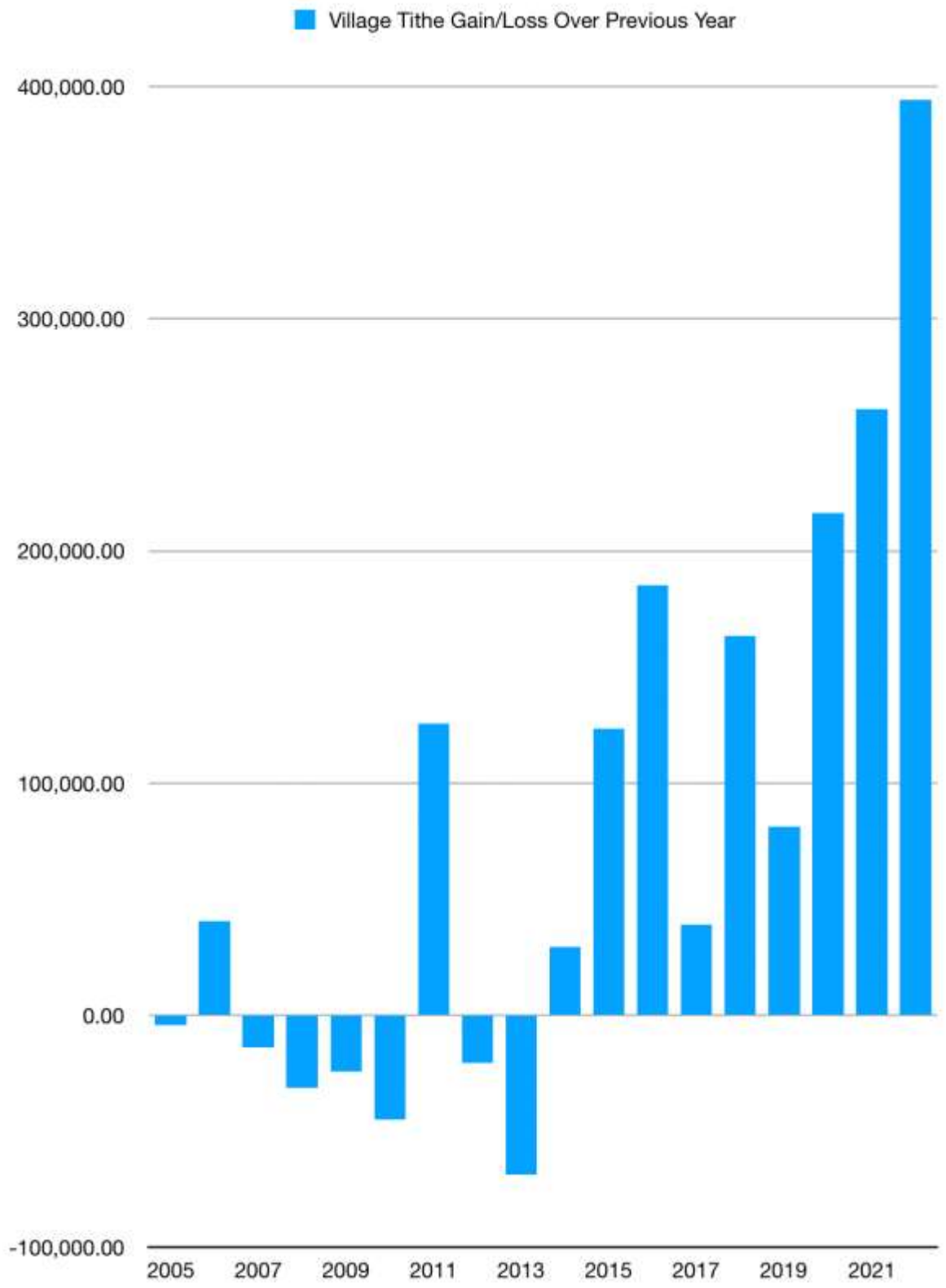


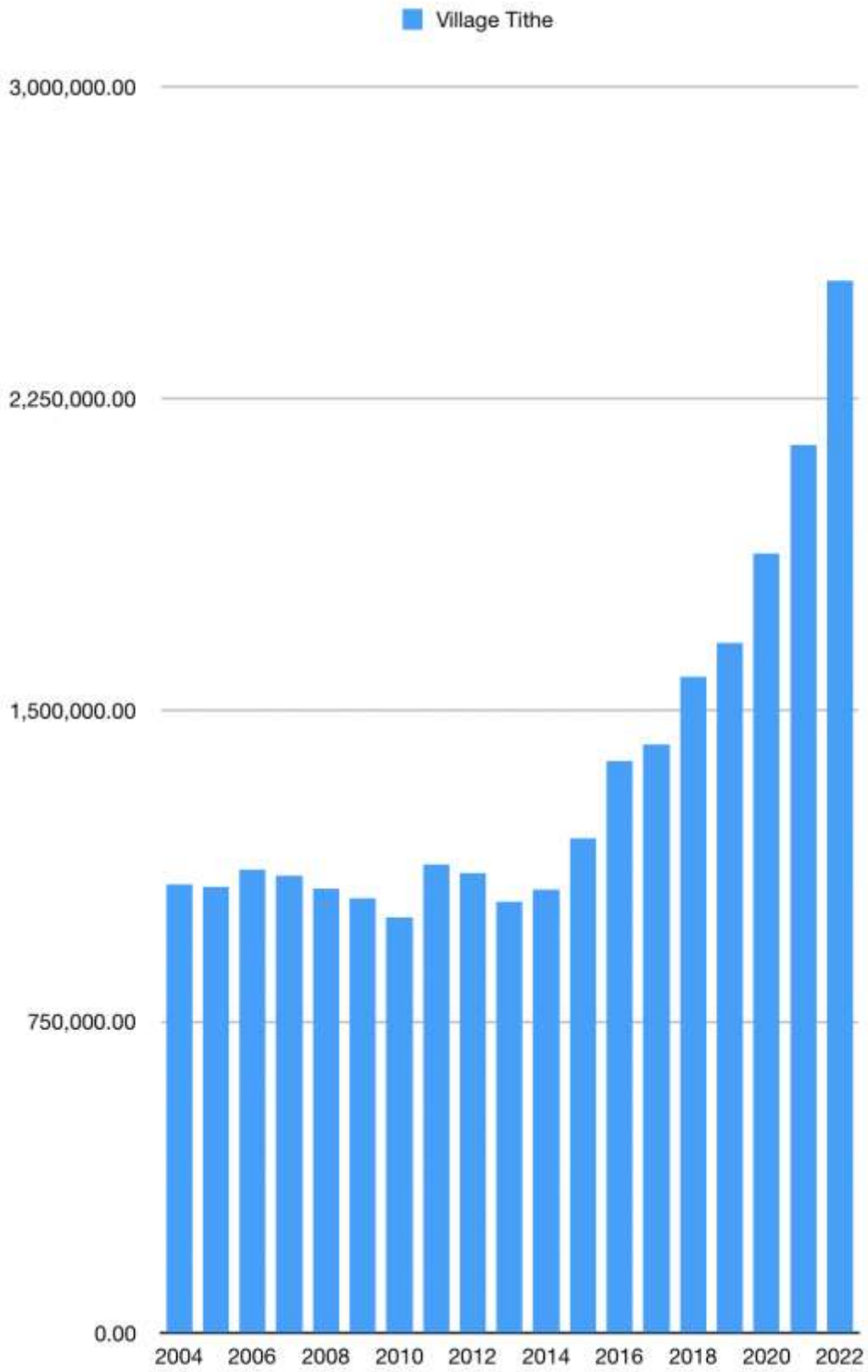












APPENDIX D

SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP MATERIALS

Pre-Event Focus Group Discussion: Staff Responses

Feb. 21, 2023

A person who is interested in serving the community, whether in business or the church, is a catalyst to aid persons in the community to fulfill their dreams and goals.

We are told that the world is doing things more shrewdly than the children of light. We should look at how those in the world are doing things because they are actually getting things done. When we don't have that push to do better, we lose a lot.

A business has customers, and a church has members.

Members are like family: you may not agree on everything, but you will work together differently than you would in a transactional business agreement.

Being part of a church family gives me support to get through difficult times. A church and a business are similar in that they both have goals to reach.

Business can be corrupt and dishonest, as a church can be. The business world uses various financial means to measure growth. Do we have some means to measure growth in the church? When I was growing up, we were asked, "How many pieces of literature did you send out? How many contacts did you make?" Now we are hearing, "How many baptisms have you conducted?" to measure church growth.

It comes down to principles and the importance of truth.

If you have "rice religion"—that is, coming to church for a bowl of "rice"—have you really accomplished your goal? It still comes down to motive.

The church is supposed to hold the standard and say, "There is no compromise because this is the ultimate thing."

Businesses are about flash and bang to get your attention and may involve possible corruption through corner cutting and cost cutting. Whereas the church is about improving quality, businesses are about, "Let's make this cheaper and make a lot of money off of it."

What is a church's product? Is our message a product? Is it the way we administer that product? ... If a product has shown itself worthy, it will show in the lives of the people representing that business or church.

...even as a church we can be taken away from the message that we are supposed to be giving. We are warned that the church can be going the wrong direction if we are not upholding what God has given us as principles of practice.

How we interact with the community is a type of marketing technique. But the purpose of our marketing flows from our heart that has been touched by Christ. We want others to know and experience the same peace and joy that we have. There is a different motivation to a church's marketing.

There is a difference between announcing and advertising. We definitely need to announce about our church—get the word out, invite people. But I think advertising is somehow different.

They say the best marketing is word-of-mouth. I used to hate marketing. I watched a lot of TV when I was young. All the appeals were on a shallow level. There needs to be a deeper approach regarding marketing towards needs, marketing done the right way.

We are to be an aroma, fragrant, an ambassador. Reflecting on these things does more marketing for you than anything. But you have to hold to these principles, be authentic.

When we have an evangelistic series, we market to the community. We want them to come out and see what we have to offer.... We don't want our neighbor someday to say, "Why didn't you tell me this?"

I think you wind up crossing a line when you compromise principles to appease someone's desires. Am I a son of God, or the son of a businessman? Your understanding of your identity will affect how you represent the One whom you serve.

You certainly need to have good business accountability; that is important.

There is an admonition in the Bible, "go save your brother but be careful how you do it lest you get trapped and ensnared by his ways." You have to be in the world but not of the world. You need to know where your value system is, and make sure you don't degrade it because you are trying to reach other people.

Copying secular business is something we should question. There are many things going on in the world that we can look at and say, “Wow, this is really good. Maybe I should copy it.” Maybe. But the limitation should be, does it agree with the principles and teaching of the Bible?

Pre-Event Focus Group Discussion: Board and Staff

Feb 22, 2023

There are things we should not be doing.

It is not just as simple as being out there to make money. You have to be 100 percent dedicated, skilled, and trained in order to avoid those pitfalls. And sometimes items like this could be learned by a church... So, I think one of the things that a church has in common with a successful business is being forward thinking.

The church is driven by God, and a business is driven by money.

A business wants to do whatever it takes to make you happy. So, they will not do anything to ruffle your feathers or step on your feet.

A business brings people what they want, and the church brings people what they need.

There is an unchangeability that should be in the church.

The difference between the vision a church casts and the vision a business casts is the motive behind it.

Both of them (church and business) are similar in that they must have a mission--where are we going? They both need to have a vision, a mission, of where they are going.

...everything will be different when you accept the “product” of coming into a relationship with Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Businesses don’t have anything close to that scope or purview.

Businesses will sell you a host of things, but most of them don’t care how you live your life after you buy their product. As long as you are a satisfied customer, they are happy. And so this eternal perspective, a wholistic formative experience that is called church--most businesses are not anywhere close to that.

A lot of the organizational principles are the same because they are built by human beings. The principles of human relationships, leadership, and organization are going to apply to any type of organization that involves human beings.

In a business, every worker is paid. In a church there are just a few paid employees and everyone else is a volunteer.

As a business owner, you are the top dog. You have laws, state laws, things you have to abide by, but you can run with a heavier hand than I think a church should run.

A similarity between a church and a business that comes to my mind is that a prosperous business will tend to be organized, just as a prosperous church will be.

As a church, we sell but we don't have a price that is outrageous or unachievable. There are similarities between a church and a business, yet there are differences that we need to pay attention to.

We are trying to get people to commit their lives to Christ, and not go in the front door and out the back door.

What makes businesses successful is what makes churches successful too.

When you get into situations where you forget what your goal is, you start running into trouble.

We toured an aircraft carrier from WW2 in Charleston, SC. Below each of the planes on the deck was a plaque reading: "Built by Ford Motor Company, Dearborn;" "Built by General Motors, Willow Run;" "Built by Chrysler, Tank Plant." Each one also bore an insignia stating that every plane that went out on a sortie in WW2 was built in a plant that instantly switched from making cars one day to making planes the next day. This was possible because every person was 100 percent dedicated to that work.

When you try to bring a business model into church, it is no longer about the transformation of the person's character, but rather about how you can make them feel good. It is not about challenging them, because you don't want them to go away. It's not about calling them to change, because you might lose a customer. So, you cannot bring a business plan into a church and expect it to do what God has called the gospel to do, because a business model is not built on the gospel.

With a business the customer is king and that can't happen with a church. It just can't happen.

We want to follow those principles in our businesses outside, as opposed to bringing the business principles into our church where God has given us His Word and the principles

we are supposed to follow. In regard to marketing, I think we do, and we should. I think of Paul's statement, "You are our epistles to the world."

We use beautiful pictures and colors for the children's divisions to attract the kids to want to be there. In some models couches and hot chocolate and doughnuts are used to attract the kids to be there. What is the difference? In one instance you are using things that are good, while the other uses things that are not good. One is similar to how God would do things; He attracts people to beautiful fruit...colors, everything He made is pretty. But coffee and doughnuts are not good for us. This way of attracting creates a lack of respect in an atmosphere that is not good. We can use the things that God uses to attract but should not use worldly things to attract.

A church should help people recognize their need.... How does a church cast a vision to show a need where people don't feel they have a need? That is part of the problem and part of the solution.

If the customer is king and you try to make that your church model, then you are not teaching your church members to serve; you are teaching them to be served. That is exactly the opposite of what we are supposed to be teaching them to do.

If we have been given the Bible, which is truth, why would we ask the unchurched, or people on the outside, what they need to hear? They do not know!

Contrary to what one might think, marketing a product is not something that makes for a successful business. The Ford Motor Company had an idea about what type of vehicle the demographics showed people wanted to buy, so they made a Ford Mustang. No one knew they needed that car. But as soon as they brought it out everyone "needed" that car. It met all the prerequisites of what the women wanted, and there were also men who would look at it and say "Engine swap. I know what I could do with this." When we look at the gospel many people who are unchurched have no concept that they need it; but when we present it correctly, in our lives, that is what marketing is. This type of marketing as a church shows them that the "product" we have, which is salvation through Jesus Christ, is what they need. A good company knows what someone needs before they know it.

People who are not sanctified, who have sinful hearts, and want what the flesh wants, leads one to market to the flesh, which leads people to sow to the flesh, which leads them to reap to the flesh, which cannot be sanctified. It is corrupt fruit because it was fed spiritual junk food.

The church needs different strategies to reach different people at different stages. There is likely debate around how to reach different people with different perceived needs or a lack thereof.

A good salesperson with integrity will not sell you something that you don't need. We, as believers, know what people need because we read the Word and know what it says. Whether they see it, or not, is another story. But regardless, everyone wants to be accepted and loved, which is a way we can show them a real message.

The best advertising for the church is a soul saved and transformed by the Creator God. They go out into the community and are happy, helpful, and want to reveal God's changing power in their lives. "We are God's workmanship" (Eph. 2:10). God works in our hearts and changes our lives so that we can be used by Him to market His love to the world.

Our belief in the gospel with mind, heart, and strength is self-marketing.

Steve Jobs remarked, "I never ask people what they want because they don't know what they want. I make something that people need and then I show them how to use it." So, there are many different business models out there.

A good friend who isn't around anymore used to say, "Preach the gospel and if necessary use words." That is pretty much what it is, your personal testimony, your conversion story. There are many different angles that can be marketed to different people. The change in your own life gives you an open door for sharing the gospel with others.

Post-Event Focus Group Discussion: Staff

March 5, 2023

If we had carefully followed the SOP, we would have avoided a lot of these pitfalls.

The church growth movement does not look at the purpose for which God created us, or at the gospel as a tool which God has chosen to restore us into His image. When you disconnect those two things you short-circuit any possibility of man making it back home.

We must make sure we don't just maintain, but that we also educate.

Using music as an illustration, Satan brought in a different kind of music that appeals merely to one's feelings and called it "worship music." The term "worship music" has confused everyone in my generation as to what worship is. When people think they need "true worship" in the church, they look for a feeling, and when an appeal is made and the Holy Spirit is there, people are not moved because they don't have the same feeling that they do with music. They believe God has not called them. Satan has redefined what worship is-- a feeling associated with worship.

The scripture in Thessalonians about people not being willing to obey the truth and God sending them strong delusion that they might believe a lie is one of the most solemn verses in the Bible. It is fearful to me.

The Christian church growth movement has gutted what God has set up to give the world a clear understanding of who God is and the communion of what the body is supposed to be.

The analogy of the church as a family is a new concept for me. When you embrace the "I'm going to please you" method, you are taking away the parents who know the better way. You are saying to the children, "you should now run the house. You can run it how you want to run it."

God's Word does not return to Him void. If God is directing you to say something, He is also directing people to hear that message.

When the week of prayer started, I prayed that I would have a reconversion experience. Paul tells us to "die daily," which is reconversion.

Post-Event Focus Group Discussion: Board and Staff

March 5, 2023

The biggest thing I took away from this weekend is that the worship service is not “everything”—it’s not the evangelistic series, it’s not the “grow the kids” moment, it’s not the “everything.” The issues of soul-winning, how we treat people where they are, and how we meet them where they are, have nothing to do with the worship service. The church service is to be a worship service to God, a place where God speaks however He chooses. That was a huge realization for me that swept away a lot of problems. I don’t have to please everyone in the worship service and meet them where they are. The worship service is for God.

...the best businesses don’t let the customers drive them, they drive the customers, and the best churches don’t let people tell them what they need; they show clearly the path of salvation to them.

A church run as a business or as a family are both goal oriented. They set goals and focus on people to be successful. But the difference is in how they each apply principles to reach their goal. A church trying to reach people for Christ will hold to a standard that they will not compromise and will be true to the Word of God, whereas a business wanting to reach people may compromise principles in order to achieve their goal.

A good business has a clear mission statement. They attempt to provide something. The church can go awry without a clear mission statement. The goal should not be to baptize members, to bring people in and help them feel better; it should be to usher them into the kingdom of God, which begins with repentance. As stated in your sermons, the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment. A church mission statement lacks these components results in a flawed theology.

When discussing “churched” and “unchurched” terminology the biblical model shows people who are unconverted, not in a relationship with God. There are also those who

are in a relationship with God but are unconverted, which we might call “unconverted Christians.”

...how can you work for God and use the devil’s tools? We must recognize that we have unconverted in the church and should strive to draw them to the truth.

... the entire concept of the church growth model, if indeed the product is the worship service and making people comfortable...indicates that the whole thing is fundamentally flawed at that level.

The business model for church growth, and the way it has been conducted, actually prepares the human mind to grieve the Spirit of God. Because they are not faced with conviction, when conviction does come, they are told by the leaders of the church growth movement, “Don’t worry about that now, we will worry about that later.” But tomorrow never comes; it is like a mirage in the desert. Tomorrow never becomes today. The Bible says, “Today when you hear the voice of God, repent...”

...when people are brought into a church where they are not told that a change of life must take place to be baptized and that there must be evidence of a surrender to Christ, they are basically being taught to grieve the Spirit of Christ.

I believe it is okay to use the method, “Let’s reach you where you are,” but we don’t want to say “come as you are; stay as you are.”

I think one of the biggest problems we have is to say, “Jesus accepts you as you are.” Rather it is more along the lines of “He receives you as you are.” On the point of receiving, Christ is like a shower. He receives you dirty but will clean you up.

When we consider that righteousness by faith is taking man’s pride and laying it in the dust, we realize that we are 100 percent dependent on God. We have nothing to lay on the table other than our broken selves. God is the One who really works within us and changes us; He brings a new heart. If we look at church growth the same way, it once again proves that we are 100 percent dependent on God for growth.

There is a group of people who are going to Heaven, which is really what church is. It is not just a social club. It is God working to take us where we are supposed to go. Are we safe enough for the rest of the world to say, “Yes, we will go along.”

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