

Why I am Leaving the Church Growth Movement

By Dr. Randy White

Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I have been burdened the past couple months with the need to address my concerns about the church growth movement (exemplified in our area with churches like New Life). Dr. White's article summarizes my concerns very well. The evidence that we are in the last days continues to mount –This article highlights signs of the rising apostasy in the church. I pray that the Lord Jesus will help our own and all other fellowships of true believers to be like the church in Philadelphia until the day He takes us home.

*"I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; **for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name** --- Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. Revelation 3:8, 10-11 NKJV*



Church growth is all the rage. For pastors, the focus is on leadership. For laymen, on “reaching people.” In the church world, church-growth is the standard of success. If a church “reaches people,” and the pastor is a “visionary leader,” then the church will be considered a success. If a church makes it into somebody’s bogus “Fastest Growing Church” list, then the growth frenzy continues with the sheep flocking to check out what innovation has been initiated to reach the masses for Christ.

Personally, I think the Emperor has no clothes. For at least four reasons, I reject the church-growth and church-health principles taught at almost every pastor’s conference, and expressed in almost every church. Our church will be different, because I reject these principles. Although different will likely mean odd, behind-the-times, and shrinking in size, I go there anyway.

1. I refuse to believe that a “Christian community” will save anyone. Community is the big word today (along with missional...and if you claim to be a missional community, you are really on the cutting edge). Churches work hard to design *community*. They do it through small-groups, centered around felt-needs, and gathered in living rooms across the country. These community groups gather for the bigger community in a weekly celebration of magnificence. This weekly celebration has been carefully scripted, from the ridiculously silly and manipulative countdown screen, to the last triumphant note of victory at which the community members are sent out to create a Christian society by building community within their neighborhoods.

These community groups gather for “Bible study,” which is almost always a double misnomer. The only Scripture used will be out-of-context references that came from the latest book by the latest Hollywood-looks celebrity pastor who gathered his thoughts (from the internet?), and allowed a nameless editor to work them into something profitable. The group will neither study the passages, nor the book itself. They will simply read a chapter before they come, spend 45 minutes talking about the parts they liked, share how the chapter made them feel about themselves as well as any insights gained, then go away and tell their friends about their marvelous Bible study. It reminds me of when my dad told me we were having tube steak for dinner. I was somewhat disappointed when I found out he just used that lofty sounding name to refer to hot-dogs. Today much of the Bible study in missional-communities is the equivalent of tube steak.

Following “Bible study,” the groups engage in fellowship time, then go on their way as biblically empty as when they arrived. Soon they will gather for a “mission project” in which they repair a home (painting the door red so all the town will know that this is one of the homes repaired by that missional community, and will rise up and call the missional community wonderful). If not a home repair project, it may be picking up trash for the city, or painting a dilapidated school, or providing shoes for shoeless children. The sermon will often be aimed toward raising up an army of Christians who adopt the orphan, visit the imprisoned, and blog for social justice.

Even if I believed that these “missions projects” were as successful as the church websites claim (“we had an awesome God-thing happen at our last gathering”), I don’t think it has any lasting impact. As I see it, the Christian is not so much to engage his society, but to come out from it. The church today is filled with those who are both in the world and of the world, and who are organized to change the world into a kinder, gentler place to be. The success rate of the mega-church missional-church movement has been an utter failure. Society is more liberal and godless than ever before, with no end to its decline in sight. The mega-missional church will gather in their multi-campus celebrations this weekend and slobber over themselves for their victories, yet our society doesn’t display that they have achieved a single victory. Not one.

Building missional community does nothing more than produce a feel-good complacency to the community members. Although they live, assured they are going to be people of impact, as part of a community, they fail to really make any difference. They fool themselves into thinking the Emperor’s clothes are superb.

Have you noticed that I’ve not mentioned anything about the proclamation of the Word, and the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? That’s because there is not much to mention from the church today. The church today does good works, has good music (in the ears of many), has a really good sound-system, and a pastor who could lead circles around Moses. What it doesn’t have is the backbone to proclaim that our world must reject humanism, social justice, poverty eradication efforts, and other white-washed measures of “expanding the Kingdom of God”—and, must find its only hope in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. I reject all manipulation and aim toward persuasion. The second reason I’m leaving the missional-community church-growth movement is because I reject manipulation of all kinds. In fact, more than ever before, it disgusts me. The modern church is so built on manipulation that I’m convinced it could not continue without it.

I recently attended a relatively small Bible-believing, Bible-teaching church as a guest. I was refreshed to see that almost every participant had their Bible—and opened—during the sermon. This told me that the pastor regularly delivers enough verse-by-verse content that looking up one verse on an iPad just wouldn’t suffice. Bibles, for this rare congregation, were a necessity. I was also impressed by the music. It was bad...and that impressed me. It wasn’t polished. There wasn’t a carefully selected Praise Team who passed the “Sunday morning test” of looks and sound, dressed in color-coordinated clothing, closing their eyes and looking to heaven as if they were in an ecstatic moment (I’ve often seen these *ecstatic* moments turn on and off like a light switch). In fact, the song leader was clearly not a professional, and his tone was often off just a bit. But the people sang with joy. I was impressed with their prayers. They prayed for real and legitimate needs during a Sunday morning service. It would never pass the church-growth test, because it wasn’t seeker-friendly at all with random people from the congregation praying at-will over the needs of the members. As a first-time visitor, I felt out-of-place during that prayer, and I thought that was wonderful. After all, if I was looking for a church, I’d want one that really cared about the hurting people they knew, the flesh-and-blood people who sat in their pews each Sunday.

Most churches (including mine) are not like this. In most churches (not mine), I wonder if they would be able to continue the “worship” if the electricity went out. The service is so dependent on mood-lighting, electric instrumentation, sound amplification, and video enhancement that it would fall flat in a New York minute with no power. In my church, thankfully, if the electricity went out, we would give one another a quick glance and grin, and keep on singing or preaching. If the electricity-dependent “worship” of the modern church lost electricity, we would see quickly how much vast emptiness there is in these churches, and in short-order, the churches would be vastly empty. No show, no crowd. (Incidentally, I’m not a fan of the black-box architecture of the missional-community church. This is a total rejection of centuries of theologically-driven architectural principles of church design that understood a theology of aesthetics.)

Rejecting manipulation...

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