

continuous conversion

by Sara Tusek

Marketing or Deepening the Faith?

It seems to me that all Christian congregations have two responsibilities that are a bit contradictory:

1. MARKET THE FAITH.

2. DEEPEN THE FAITH.

Market the faith. Marketing involves getting out the word about Jesus. The best marketing technique uses person-to-person friendship relationships built on trust and shared experiences. You invite a friend or co-worker to church; the person says “okay” because of the esteem he or she has for you. In church jargon, this is evangelism.

Deepen the faith. Deepening the faith of believers is, in contrast, serious and sustained work : it’s called sanctification. Following Jesus is not easy at all. He tells people who flock to Him for His miracles that they must pick up their cross every day and follow Him. He uses metaphors such as yoke, burden and dying to self to emphasize that He does not offer an easy life, but He does offer a life of closeness to Himself, a life of purpose and meaning.

Is it #1 or #2 ?

Most congregations I've been part of were good at #1, but not #2, or vice-versa, since the environment, programs and attitudes needed for the two responsibilities are quite different. How would churches using these two approaches look?

What does a #1 church (marketing-oriented) look like?

To be effective, any type of marketing needs to be simple and clear. The first steps of getting involved with the product or process being marketed need to be easy and convenient. A marketing emphasis produces lots of newcomers and vi-



Wall mural in Castle Zbiroh Chapel, Czech Republic

brancy, but many people leave when they realize that Christianity will not promise them a pain-free life. #1 churches are like revolving doors—they are frequently in motion, but they have little stability.

#1 churches almost always look good. They get lots of accolades for growth and for having an impact on their community. They often “put on a good show” during services to attract newcomers and may have a panoply of programs aimed at involving every member of the family in at least one church activity.

These churches use methods that lure the visitor (i.e., customer) into a commitment with small steps. They

use a modified “hold the puppy” sales technique: once you’ve held the puppy and she’s licked your hands, it’s hard to put her back down.

In the same way, churches that are strong #1 believers will separate the kids from the parents right away and whisk the kids off to the bright, friendly, well-equipped nursery or Sunday School. The staff members assigned to the welcoming committee will have newcomers signed up and in a home Bible study before they leave the building, and will call them to invite them personally to the first meeting.

This concentrated attention can be very attractive to people who are “church-shopping.” In fact, some people are perpetual church-shoppers, always looking for the experience of being made to feel special without being required to do anything in return except show up. The marketing emphasis on making Jesus accessible sometimes leaves out the sterner parts of following Him.

What does a #2 church (sanctification) look like?

#2 churches tend to be inward and sometimes stagnant. Too much emphasis on the spiritual growth of the members may produce a "holier-than-thou" attitude. The church has a well-defined hierarchy of who is the most spiritually mature, with old-timers lording it over newcomers. Such churches are more like cliques or cults than real gatherings of Christians.

It takes some grit to go to a #2 church. Often the members are of the mindset that following Jesus is unpleasant. They emphasize that "it's always hard to step out for God" and like to see themselves as misunderstood martyrs for their faith, mocked by the evil world that surrounds them.

Of course, it's not necessary to become paranoid to be a mature Christian! But so often I've seen serious, sincere followers of Jesus who are too insulated in their own little world. They become severe and critical in their judgments about the bigger world and develop a "them-or-us" mentality.

What's worse is that such churches seem to encourage a kind of spiritual rigidity. The members can be cruel, even to each other, if they think it necessary to preserve their sanctity. This kind of thinking, that a mature Christian must be remote and unstained by the sinful world, has produced both wonderful and dreadful fruit: wonderful monasteries, convents, hospitals, retreat centers and sanctuaries on the one hand; dreadful religious crusades, mob actions, terrorism and xenophobia on the other hand.

Need for Balance

To strike a balance between these two responsibilities is not easy. Early Christians tried to divide their Sabbath services into two parts: the "marketing" part was first, open to anyone. Here Scripture was read and a sermon (homily) was preached. The "strengthening" part was communion (the Lord's supper), which was only for members. A bell was rung just before the second part, indicating that non-members had to leave.

This order of service (liturgy) is still evident (though the bell is optional) in Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and other liturgical churches; it was thrown out by many Protes-

tants and is therefore not found in Baptist, Czech Brethren Evangelical, Assembly of God, Nazarene, Amish, Mennonite, Friends, and other strongly Protestant churches.

It would be hard to say which approach is better: dividing the service between the public (marketing) and the private (sanctification). Both are efforts to fulfill some part of the responsibility of a Christian congregation and are characterized by both positives and negatives.

Personal Balance

This need for balance is also personal. Some Christians take the #1 approach and want to get to know all kinds of people, so they can communicate to them about Jesus. These Christians "sup with sinners," as Jesus did. Their friendship circle is large and varied, including many people with worldly lifestyles. They may have a beer with a co-worker or go to a movie, activities that aren't exactly "Christian" and may draw criticism from #2 types.

Christians of the second type want to segregate themselves, avoiding non-Christians as much as possible. These people agree with the Apostle Paul, who stressed the need to live a spotless life as an example to the sinful world. Their friends are usually family members and a few well-known friends whose views agree with their own. Their world is small and safe, keeping them from temptation and helping them develop habits of Bible study, meditation and "good, clean living."

Probably most solid churches and individuals have found a balance between #1 and #2. But balances are notoriously hard to maintain, and need constant readjustment. In my 20's I was firmly in the #2 camp. I wanted to focus on knowing Jesus and following Him, and I spent most of my time doing so, in the company of like-minded people. Later, I spent 12 years teaching in a Christian school with a decided #2 emphasis.

Since summer 2009, I've been in mode #1, meeting a wide diversity of new people in Lake Mary as we prepare to move to Prague this summer. My hope is that, as I make friends, some people will notice that I follow Jesus and want to know more about Him. I want to market my faith!