

Reflections On Congregational Life

BIG BOX CHURCH®

by

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Big box churches are a new phenomena in church history as they are a product of the late 20th and early 21st century. They have received praises from church growth advocates and scorn from mainline denominations.

There are at least three stereotypes that characterize a big box church. First, it is for the young; it niche-markets to those under the age of 40. Rick Warren's "Saddleback Sam" is an example of this stereotype.

Second, a big box church is for those with little or no church background. Demographic studies indicate that Baby Boomers, for the most part, did not worship regularly as adolescents or adults nor did they raise their children in the church. In order to reach Baby Boomers and their children, a big box church built worship space that resembled a movie theatre; i.e., a stage without a cross or altar, a big screen for movie clips and PowerPoint, and theatre seating complete with coffee cup holders.

Third, since a big box church is for the young and those without a church background, those attending this type of church just want to be entertained. Critics claim that PowerPoint, movie clips, short dramas, and contemporary music are appropriate for entertainment but not for proclaiming of the Gospel.

In light of these stereotypes, every mainline church leader, pastor and lay, should ask two questions: First, are these stereotypes accurate? Second, what, if anything, can a big box church teach mainline congregations?

Addressing the Stereotypes

In answering the first question, I refer to a survey conducted by a big box church to determine who attended this congregation. Instead of the sermon, this congregation asked its 5500 worshippers to respond to several questions. Following is what those in attendance revealed about a big box church.

A big box church is not just for the young, it attracts worshippers of all ages Forty-three percent of those present were over the age of 40. Nearly half, 46%, were between the ages of 30 and 50. Sixty-one percent were between 30 and 60. If anything, worshippers in this congregation were middle-aged.

A big box church is not only for those without a church background, it attracts those who grew up in the church One of the statistics that caught my atten-

tion was that 60% (3300) of respondents worshipped every week. Perhaps the most surprising statistic was that 24% of the respondents also worshipped regularly at another congregation.

One can surmise that a commitment to worship grew out of two sources. The first source is a respondent's relationship with Jesus Christ. Sixty percent of the respondents described themselves as "seasoned" Christians who are still growing as followers of Christ.

The second source contributing to a commitment to worship was a respondent's previous church background. Seventy-one percent attended worship regularly when growing up. Worshipping today is a continuation of previous beliefs and behaviors. In addition, 48% were previously worshipping at another congregation before coming to this congregation. For all practical purposes, one-half of those worshipping were "transfers" or visitors from other congregations.

A big box church is not for those seeking entertainment, it is for those who want to grow in their faith and make a difference in the world in the name of Jesus When I hear the entertainment stereotype, I think of Dr. Pat Keifert's definition of entertainment. "Entertainment is not to bore. Entertainment is to make one feel welcome." Dr. Keifert concludes those who are opposed to entertainment want to bore worshippers and make visitors feel unwelcome. (Dr. Keifert is a professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary and director of Church Innovations)

Those worshipping at a big box church want to be challenged and to serve others. When asked what they wanted in a weekly message (sermon), 79% said they wanted to be challenged to grow in their faith. When asked how would they describe this congregation, 51% said "God at work."

I have attended this church on occasion. It holds massive food drives, gathers and delivers an enormous number of Christmas packages, and works with other social service agencies in its city. In the current recession, this congregation is purchasing a 1.6 million dollar building to house community agencies to help those who have done everything "right" but still lost their jobs, homes, and savings. They are very intentional about communicating their outreach to those who worship with them in very positive and appropriate ways.

Certainly, the stereotypes of a big box church fit some large non-denominational churches. On the other

hand, the above data belies the stereotypes of the big box church. Many big box churches are multi-generational, attract those who have been taught to worship in their youth, welcome those who have been active in other congregations, and challenge those whose spiritual interest and needs go far beyond entertainment.

What can mainline congregations learn?

A word of caution before we draw conclusions about the data above. Mainline congregations are meeting the spiritual needs of many; therefore, the “baby” (their theology and liturgies) should not be thrown out with the bath water. On the other hand, the question needs to be raised, If one-half of the worshippers at a big box church previously attended other churches, what spiritual needs did these worshippers have that were not met in their previous church? What can mainline churches learn about meeting these needs from a big box church?

First, music style AND message are important

Traditional liturgies and hymnody are meaningful to some but they are not for everyone. A big box church offers an alternative to traditional worship. It is interesting to note that in the survey there were no questions about the style of music. It was assumed that the praise songs and band were well received. But, there were questions concerning the message (sermon). Seventy-nine percent of respondents wanted a message that challenged them to think and grow in their faith. They wanted practical advice on how to live a Christian life.

In a study of 20-30 year olds, the importance of a challenging message is confirmed. The top two priorities for this age group when considering a church are: 1, the church cares about me and 2, the church preaches and teaches in an idiom I understand. It is the combination of the style of worship and the perceived relevance of sermons that determines worship attendance. (**Lost and Found** by Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayer, chapter 2) We can learn from the survey’s answers that just adopting a contemporary or alternate style of worship is not a panacea in turning around declining worship attendance. The content and challenge of the sermon are of equal if not greater importance than the style of music and/or liturgy.

Second, personal invitations grow a congregations

The day of visitors “dropping in” on a worship service or ministry program is over. With an occasional exception, random visitors are a thing of the past. A big box church has excellent programming, up to date technologies, well signed buildings, grounds that are very attractive and welcoming, and large outdoor signs advertising their ministry programs. All of these are very important. The absence of such attributes are barriers to any church growth. The thing that brought worshippers to this church was a personal invitation from a friend or colleague. Without a personal invitation, a church and its leaders can do everything right and still have very limited success.

In the early 1970s, evangelism experts stated that 66% of those visiting a congregation for the first time did so because a family member, friend, or neighbor invited them. More recently, an Alban Institute workshop taught that up to 86% of those visiting a congregation for the first time did so because of a personal invitation. Seventy-one percent of those worshipping at this big box church were there because of a personal invitation.

A personal invitation is more than saying, “You should visit my church.” An effective personal invitation includes an offer to accompany the visitor to a worship service or a ministry program. Accompanying the invitee reduces the anxiety of being in an unfamiliar building, feeling alone when others walk by without saying hello, or the fear of doing something stupid.

Third, worshippers want to make a difference in the world through their congregation Fifty percent of respondents said there was a connection between worship, growing in their faith, and doing God’s work in the local community. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents volunteer in a ministry program or service. The thing that stands out here is not the good works that are being done in the name of Jesus. What stands out is that members and the general public know the good this congregation does in the community in which it exists. Appropriately, members are told that their church makes a difference. Making a difference encourages the extension of invitations to attend worship, learn about the Christian faith, and to participate in a congregational ministry program.

Summary

Big box churches can teach mainline churches a great deal about demanding excellence in ministry, the importance of welcoming visitors, recognizing that diversity is needed in worship, educational, and fellowship ministries. Of course, the things a big box church can teach mainline churches need to be modified to match the size and location of other congregations. Unfortunately, inaccurate stereotypes hinder many mainline congregations from adopting the good ministry practices of a big box church. From a survey of worshippers in one big box church, we learn that all generational groups can worship together, there is room for those with and without previous church backgrounds in worship and ministries to others, and worshippers want to be challenged to grow in their faith.

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