

Making church relevant in the community

Let's not talk about theology. Instead, let's see what we can we learn from the practices of business to help us grow the church and impact the people of our city. As you will already have gathered, I am not a pastor and am not your typical church employee.

But I have chosen to devote my time and career to building the church. I just don't do it from the pulpit.

I recently completed an MBA through Henley Business School and used my thesis research paper to better understand how we can attract more people to fellowship in church on a Sunday. Here we are not talking about theology – some churches are grace-based, while others are law-based. The same principles apply to both.

So, setting theology aside (let the pastors debate that one), what influences a person to visit a church for the first time and start becoming a regular church attendee? What can we learn from the practices of business?

There are three lessons, plus one surprise:

Practical environment

In my thesis I considered how the practical environment influences people's first experience at a church and their inclination to return. The influence of the environment of a church can be closely linked and compared to that of a shopping mall. Ok stay with me I'm not turning church into a "market place". Remember, we set theology aside. Well-frequented shopping malls are very intentional about the environment they create, as they understand how this affects where and how people shop.

Many churches are not even aware of what their practical environment communicates. A visitor to a church is probably already feeling uncomfortable coming to a new place. They can be settled by a welcoming and familiar environment to which they can relate.

The first physical line of site is experienced in the parking lot. A friendly welcoming smile from volunteers who are well-informed about how to assist a visitor is important.

People feel comfortable when things are familiar to them. Appropriate seating and up-to-date-decor contribute to a sense of comfort.

Informative signage and lighting provide a sense of ease. These are things that shopping malls are very intentional about. The flow of people in and out of the building, clean bathrooms with children and baby-friendly facilities all make a difference. Why shouldn't the church be intentional?

Relevance

The ability of the pastor to articulate a message that everyone can understand and benefit from, regardless of the stage of their journey, will influence whether or not the person attending will want to come back.

Congregants and visitors want Sunday messages that are relevant, and that they can use on Monday morning. The question is whether attending church add value to their everyday lives?

Research shows that many millennials are not coming to church because they see it as irrelevant and hypocritical. Millennials want to be friends first, and work out whether you are a nice guy or if this is a nice place. Then they will decide if they will get involved.

Relevance extends to the type of language we use in a church or on a Sunday. Are we using a language of inclusivity, or does our language unintentionally exclude people, particularly the millennial generation?

Leadership

The leadership ability of the pastor of the church will determine the structure or lack of structure used for running the organisation. An intentional leader can shift the culture of a church. I considered two business subjects in the thesis: Strategy and Marketing. Both are hugely important in growing a business. Surprisingly, many church leaders do not have an intentional strategy for growth. Strategy within a church's leadership needs to extend further than prayer and fasting and include practical steps for people to follow. The leader's ability to recognise the need for change or implement a strategy for the growth of an organisation will affect the ceiling to which the church can grow.

Safety

So, all three of the above-mentioned points can be unpacked in greater detail, but the biggest outcome, which was the golden thread through all points in my thesis, was the ability for a church to create an environment where people feel safe to explore faith at their own pace.

Safety is experienced when a person can attend a Sunday service without anyone asking questions about their history and accepting them as they are. This gives people the assurance that the church has the person's best interests in mind and allows the new attendee time to find value in what the church is offering.

People who feel safe return each week and choose to become regular attendees. Relevant churches provide an opportunity for people to find community, with authentic relationships which don't have agendas.

We should be asking ourselves whether we, as the congregants of a particular church, create a safe and welcoming environment in which anybody – I mean anybody – can feel safe?

Can we gather a crowd, tell the story of salvation without judgment and sounding weird? And are we brave enough to let God multiply the loaves and fish without needing to take the whole crowd up the mountain straight away?

To wrap it up with a bit of theology...off the record (ha-ha) ... We should trust the message of the Gospel so much that we don't feel we need to rush people through the process of spiritual growth and to put the pressure of timelines on the unfolding of their spiritual journey with God.

Ryan le Roux, Fathers House Church.