

Faith Pulpit

Reflections on the Church Marketing Movement

Within the last few years, several books have been written about what we shall call the Church Marketing Movement. These writings include:

- Anderson, Leith. *Dying For Change*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990. 208 pp.
- Barna, George. *The Frog in the Kettle. What Christians Need to Know About Life in the Year 2000*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books (A Division of Gospel Light), 1990. 235 pp.
- Barna, George. *User Friendly Churches. What Christians Need to Know About the Churches People Love to Go to*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books (A Division of Gospel Light), 1991. 191 pp.
- Towns, Elmer L. *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches: What They're Doing, How They're Doing it & How You Can Apply Their Ideas in Your Church*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books (A Division of Gospel Light), 1990. 273 pp.

Anderson's book presents characteristics of American society, as well as guiding principles for the church wishing to minister in this day. Barna's books deal with what American culture is like today and will be like for the next ten years or so (see: *The Frog in the Kettle*), and with the principles gleaned which help to make churches grow (see: *User Friendly Churches*). Towns' book profiles ten "successful" churches by name and then gives an analysis of the elements in these churches which helped make them so successful.

Some Observations and Reflections:

What are this Movement's major characteristics, and how are Bible-believing Christians to respond to it and its emphases?

1. Certainly we wish to see our churches experience numerical growth and teach those about us with the truths of God's Word. The concept of marketing one's church is not necessarily bad. We all

recognize that the way our church's building facility looks, the kinds of programs we offer through our church ministry, and the way we conduct our church services all either attract or repel people. In one sense, then, every church has been, and is involved in marketing its product.

Why the stir? A new movement is emerging which targets specific people and urges institutional changes away from the traditional in order to attract and hold these people. As a result, some churches are replacing their traditional church services and offering in their place (or, sometimes, as well as) a non-traditional /contemporary "seekers service." One has characterized these services in the following way: "Typically, a seekers service avoids traditional hymns and other 'churchy' forms of liturgy. It does not include an offering. The sermon is short and interesting. The service generally employs contemporary music, often drama and even forms of interpretive dance. It requires little of the person who attends except to sit, watch and listen" (see Alliance Life, Vol. 126, #23, November 20, 1991, "Editorial Voice: Nontraditional Morning Services": p. 28).

In his book, Anderson says we are "to be aware of the needs and interests of whoever is to be reached and to be willing to change the existing structures in a way that is responsible, responsive, and effective in reaching people. These are not easy things to do. They require that we

1. decide who is to be reached,
2. learn about those people,
3. discover the most effective means of reaching them, and
4. change the church or other Christian organization accordingly (Anderson, p. 99).

2. The Movement focuses on secular marketing principles and views these as a (maybe "the") major guide for methodology. In an editorial in Christianity Today entitled "Church Growth's Two Faces," the writer quotes researcher George Barna as saying: "The major problem plaguing the Church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment." Later in the same editorial, the writer states: "Church marketing has sometimes been described in almost messianic terms. Writes Barna: 'If a church studies its market, devises intelligent plans, and implements those plans faithfully, it should see an increase in the number of visitors, new members, and people who accept Christ as their Savior.' God is not even part of this equation! It is all too easy for churches to give lip service to prayer while, in fact, trusting in technique" (Christianity Today, Vol. 35, Number 7, June 24, 1991, p. 19).

3. The Movement focuses on numerical growth as the barometer for success and upon meeting the targeted audience's felt needs as the means for reaching and holding them. Responding to an article published in Christianity Today, a writer to the editor observes: "In spite of mumblings to the contrary, success in church work and the status of pastors is measured almost exclusively by Sunday morning body counts. (Your own articles reinforce this. They say hardly a word about the spirituality of churches but cite all sorts of statistics about numerical growth and decline.) Ambitious pastors and would-be denominational leaders almost invariably target upwardly mobile yuppies. The three things

almost all religiously inclined, upwardly mobile yuppies want are

1. an uplifting, contemporary, and emotionally satisfying worship experience,
2. a social context filled with people like themselves with whom they can form friendships, and
3. a program that will occupy and benefit their children and hopefully impart some of their own values.

Furthermore, they want these things with minimal demands or commitments. Successful church leaders have found that if they provide these three things and find out how to market them, they will have growing and hence 'successful' churches" (Christianity Today, Vol. 35, Number 6, May 27, 1991, p. 6). Barna underscores this by saying: "The best way to get the unchurched or nonbelievers to consider the Church valid and worthwhile will be by making ourselves relevant to their lives. How do we do that? By understanding their most pressing felt needs and responding directly to those needs" (The Frog in the Kettle, p. 146).

4. Because numerical growth and meeting felt needs are held high, anything which does not contribute to them (often the traditional) must not be practiced. A key element, then, is CHANGE. Towns (p. 11) tells us:

Five areas of change are greatly influencing current church growth. These five factors are evident to some degree in each of the 10 churches in this book:

First, they have created innovative methods based on research. They are able to target a receptive audience, because they have a profile of who they can reach (see chapter 15). I call this 'reaching the reachable.'

Second, these are 'Boomer' churches—churches that have especially targeted Baby Boomers, the generation born between 1946 and 1964. Several have adopted new programs specifically to reach the Boomers (see chapter 11). Within 10 years the larger Church will be a Boomer church that will influence the culture. Those who ignore or reject the Boomers will become hibernating churches. America will be run by Boomers within 10 years, and the church must be prepared for their style of leadership.

Third, these 10 churches exercise an effective style of pastoral leadership that is different from traditional leadership.

Fourth, these churches are innovative in worship expression, refusing to be tied to the worship forms of the past (chapter 12).

Finally, these churches are consumer oriented. They understand marketing. In short, they not only can preach, teach, counsel and evangelize; they can run a church in a business-like manner without becoming a business. The Church of the future will be more influenced by business methods than ever

before, rather than following traditional ecclesiastical styles of operation.

5. Some of the problems with this Movement, as this reviewer sees it, are the following:

1. There is the danger of replacing the purposes of the local church as found in the New Testament with the goal of “reaching” (satisfying the felt needs of) a targeted people,
2. There is the tendency to rely upon marketing principles and innovative methods without genuine dependence upon the power of the Spirit of God, and
3. There may be the minimizing or ignoring of distinguishing denominational labels and New Testament teaching concerning local church methodology and practice.

One pastor, responding to a newspaper article on megachurches and their emphasis upon marketing, summed things up this way:

In response to your May 13 page-one article on “Megachurches”: I am a registered principal with the New York Stock Exchange and NASD, and make a market among my church peers around the country. I’m also full-time senior pastor of the Napa Valley Baptist Church, and I wrote a seminar for Elmer Towns, whom you quote concerning the church financial base and how to increase it. My problem with your article is the inference that all churches and/or pastors should be looking at the Second Baptist Church of Houston and following its example. Quoting Mr. Towns’ book *The Ten Most Innovative Churches in America* gave credence to that inference. As a pastor, I feel folks need the spirit of God back in their lives, not entertainment. They need salvation, not comfort. I would change the title of Mr. Towns’s book to “The Ten Most Innovative Ways to Kill the Churches and Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

I think churches that shoot pool and have rock concerts and ridiculous menus in the name of Jesus Christ would make the hair stand up on the napes of the Apostles. These churches have gotten away totally from the commission of our Lord to His New Testament churches. My beef is not megachurches per se, but the inference that the rest of us soul-searching, God-fearing pastors must ‘do it like the megachurches’ or be swallowed up. There are thousands of folks in Houston who are not going to Second Baptist Church, and they are perfectly happy. (Sherman S. Smith. *The Wall Street Journal*, “Letters to the Editor,” Monday, July 1, 1991, p. A9)

Dr. George Houghton

Former VP of Academic Services at [Faith Baptist Bible College](#) | [Other Articles](#)

George Houghton, former vice president for academic services and college dean at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, is a graduate of Bethel College, Central Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, and holds a Master's and a Doctor of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. He retired in 2010 after serving for 36 years at the institution.