
The Culture Around Your Church Determines How Best to Reach It

Radical Outreach

The contagion of culturally relevant Christianity and emotionally relevant Christianity are experienced fairly directly. Take the case of a young man who is now one of our seminary students. Eight years ago, two Christian friends initiated several conversations with him, and then they invited him to a youth service. As he walked in, good news and hope were being celebrated through music that engaged him; the speaker spoke his language and seemed to understand people like him; and the message offered freedom from the “narcissism” and the “anger issues” that, as he reported, had “tied me up in knots.” He found himself responding, and he kept coming back, and he learned all he could; within several months, he was a man of faith. **The church’s culturally and emotionally relevant ministry engaged him directly.**

Another cause of contagion, however, is experienced more indirectly. I have called it Radical Outreach. This point begins very early in the Christian narrative. Jesus and his disciples ministered to blind people and deaf people and lame people, to mentally handicapped people and possessed people, lepers and Samaritans, tax collectors and zealots, and others. The establishment institutional religion of the Temple had written these people off. Indeed, the Temple’s policy prohibited such people from even entering the temple. Those populations, and others, were officially “hopeless.” This is the point: **Christianity was conceived in the radical outreach that engaged allegedly hopeless people.** It typically begins when we visit their turf, and when begin where they are, rather than where we’d like them to be.

As the Christian movement spread to the cities of the Roman Empire, it gradually took a more institutional form, and in time became more like the Temple. Rural populations were not urbane and were therefore hopeless. The Goths, the Visigoths, the Franks, the Vandals, the Frisians, the Vikings, and all of the Celtic peoples, including the Irish, were not Latin speaking, Roman enculturated people. Obviously, all of those barbarians were not civilized enough to become “Christianized.”

This book of tragedy has many chapters, but we do not need to recount the whole volume. **Most churches today, in our nation and in our communities, assume that many types of people are unreachable; it would probably be impossible (they assume) for those people to become real Christians “like us”.** To be specific: For many (or most) churches, pre-literate people, “hard living people,” co-habiting couples, homeless people, bikers, Goths, jet setters, mentally-ill people, Mandarin speakers, people with tattoos, addictive people, introverts, and many others need not apply.

Perceptions, whether they are accurate or not, take on their own reality and, when acted upon over time, become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Using a metaphor borrowed from chemistry, consider “catalytic” growth. When an athlete takes in Creatine before a workout, the supplement catalyzes an energy source within muscles that

permits two or three more bench presses, which in turn catalyzes more muscle growth. In every society, there is an establishment population, and there are “fringe” populations whom the establishment people regard as “impossible” or “hopeless.” Catalytic Christian movements begin when some of the “hopeless” people are reached, and some of those people experience transparent life change. **Such transformations catalyze spiritual openness in many other people, including establishment people, and the faith now spreads, contagiously.**

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