

The Opportunistic Church

Recently one of the congregations in our association asked me to share my thoughts on the local church and her mission in the community. As I considered what to say, I realized there are a couple of realities that must be faced before progress can be made.

Reality 1 – *The “interested prospect” pool for churches is drying up.* What I mean is that there is not a significant number of unreached people out there who are interested in church or even view it favorably. This is true in communities of all sizes and ethnicities. It is true right here in the good-old Bible Belt just as much as in the “godless” northeast or northwest corners of the country. There are very few ready-made church prospects, and they are getting fewer all the time. The percentage of the population with a biblical worldview is shrinking and so is the influence of the church in the community. Both invitational (i.e., inviting people to church) and cold-call evangelism are less and less effective because they assume a mindset that is largely absent. For most people outside the church we Christ-followers might as well be speaking in a language from another planet.

Reality 2 – *Christians and churches are becoming more isolated from the general community.* There is a huge values-and-lifestyle gap between serious followers of Christ and the general population. Each side stands aghast at the other. The church abhors what is being said and done in the world. The world abhors what is being said and done in the church. Some of our more notorious church brethren are making the situation worse with their stupid antics done in the name of Christ. In this environment churches feel under siege, are struggling to survive, and therefore are tempted to “circle the wagons.” Naturally we start acting like the local mission field is hostile territory to be avoided.

And yet, remarkably, some churches are rediscovering their mission in the present situation. They are seeing it as an *opportunity*. These churches have caught the spirit (Spirit!) of Colossians 4:5-6:

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Your speech should always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person. (HCSB)

What characterizes these opportunistic churches who realize, as Reggie McNeal says, that “it’s A.D. 30 all over again”? In a nutshell:

- They have stopped thinking “church growth” that assumes there are interested prospects looking for a church.
- They have started thinking “pre-evangelism” that realizes most people are pre-Christians with no concept of the gospel.
- They have stopped thinking “get’em in here” (i.e., the “attractional” model of church).
- They have started thinking “get us out there” (i.e., the “sent” model of church).

So how can you be one of these opportunistic churches who are “walk(ing) in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the time”? Begin processing everything you do through this strategic question: *How can we be a faithful presence among pre-Christians, doing everything Jesus taught us to do?* After all, that is the very definition of a baptized disciple according to Matthew 28:20. Observation tells me that churches who are thinking this way will inevitably find themselves serving the underserved, blessing people, and sharing Jesus over this “bridge” they have built into their local mission field.

Brethren, it’s a lost world out there. Go to’em!