

Our Church is Missional

There is a lot of emphasis on being 'missional' in the modern church. I'll call it 'Big Church'. Big Churches feel guilty about everyone around them not being saved, so 'getting the gospel to the world' is becoming a high priority. Taking the gospel to foreign countries is especially attractive. Jesus said to teach all nations, so we should do everything in our power to evangelize the world. If your church supports hundreds of missionaries around the world, it is a source of pride for your church. You can say that you are fulfilling the great commission the way God intended. There is also a growing effort to reach local neighborhoods with the gospel. Local schools are assisted in building playgrounds, immigrants from foreign countries are given aid, the poor are given money, food, and toys for their children. This is a great thing, and everyone should support the effort to spread love and the gospel.

It is a great thing to bring the gospel to the world and reach out in love to local schools and neighborhoods. God will bless every effort that is sincerely intended to bless others. Those efforts will bear fruit and God will use them. However, we need some clarity here. Jesus gave us a command to 'make disciples', which is a very different thing from evangelizing. Jesus never commanded us to evangelize. He commanded us to 'make disciples'. The word 'evangelize' shows up only three times in the new testament. That's it. Jesus never uses the word. Yes, evangelism is a gift, because it is listed in Eph 4:11, and it is one part of the discipling process. But I think it gets far more attention than it deserves. The word 'disciple' shows up 257 times, and Jesus does use it. First of all, evangelism is usually interpreted as sharing the gospel according to our understanding. Of course, our understanding is the only correct understanding, which means there are innumerable twists on the gospel, depending on who is sharing the message. That means the message could be anything from "repent and believe" to the communist social gospel, or Rick Warren's twisted version of it. And, of course, only 'our' version is correct.

Let's step back a bit and look at what is happening here. These efforts to bring the gospel to the world or the neighborhood always come from church staff or the pastor. There may be people in the church who see a local need, or a foreign need, and they may bring that need to the attention of the pastor or a staff member. Without the pastor agreeing to the effort, however, nothing happens. There are numerous efforts to start ministries that are quashed by pastors or church staff because they don't fit the church's 'agenda'. That agenda, of course, is established by the pastor and staff, not the congregation. Immediately, then, we have centralized control being imposed on what the church does, with most of the congregation unaware of what is going on until it happens. The congregation is then presented with the choice of supporting what 'their church' is doing, or sitting back and doing nothing, which, of course, is unacceptable. The congregation was not consulted before this effort was hatched, and unless it resonates within their spirits, it becomes a program managed by church staff. It is a business venture, not a spiritual effort. It has logistics, material, expenses, people, management issues, all of the business stuff.

That is not to say that good won't come of the effort. God will bless any sincere effort to serve him and express love to other people. God is so good at managing his Church, he can bring good out of absolutely any effort that is sincerely offered to him, no matter how stupid or screwed up that effort is. So no, I am not condemning those church-managed efforts to reach out to people. God will use them.

Now, however, we come to the crux of the matter. What is a church? According to the New Testament, it is an ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia). That is, it is a group of believers assembled together. One common characteristic of a church is that, "when ye

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come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying" (I Cor 14:26). In other words, a New Testament church is not 'managed' by a pastor or staff. Everyone works together and *everyone* has something to share. If the church commits to something, everyone is on board *before* it happens. There are no surprises foisted on it by a staff member or pastor ("Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, *be of one mind*, live in peace" 2Co 13:11). That is not to say there are no pastors, evangelists, or other gifted people in the church. However, they do not have clergy status. They have a regular job like everyone else and they share their time and love just like everyone else. They do not have a special place other than the place their spiritual giftedness gives them among the church. They also receive the benefits of other equally gifted members among the church. No one is greater than another, and no one gives orders to another.

Now let's go back to the Big Church evangelism efforts. Yes, God will use these efforts and good will come of them. The pastor and staff, who plan and implement these efforts, are doing their level best to properly manage the church they serve. In their view, if their church is reaching out to the world and sharing the gospel, that is exactly what they should be doing. It is fulfilling the great commission and is, in their eyes, the ultimate way of fulfilling their commission to lead their church. Their eyes are trained on the mission of the Big Church, because that is what they are able to manage. They can't possibly manage all the people issues in their church. They necessarily must concentrate on what they are capable of doing.

So what is the cost of this effort in spiritual terms? Within the congregation, people are hurting. There are people without jobs who are unable to feed their families; there are women facing depression; there are people going through sickness, old age, persecution; there are divorces, relationship problems, and all the other things that go on with people. Granted, these are things that will always be there, and it is impossible to deal with all of them—in Big Church. There is no way the pastor and staff can deal with all of these issues in their congregation. It is impossible. Therefore, they don't even try. They make the effort to deal with a few of these things, and they'll have a benevolence program, food pantry, or some other such program to help with these things. They will also encourage members of the congregation to help each other. They will not, however, spend a great deal of time on these things. They can't. The pastor has a sermon that he must preach each week, and he has to manage the staff, the budget, and oversee all the things going on in the church, so he just doesn't have time for these things. Neither does the staff. Although some of these things are dealt with, a great many of them are left as they are without the pastor or staff even knowing about them. And they don't know about them because they don't know their people. So we have a lot of people's needs being ignored. This is a common characteristic of Big Church. It is very easy to be anonymous and unknown in Big Church. You could commit a crime and show up in church next week and no one would know. Or you could die and no one would know, especially if you are disadvantaged and are unable to come to church regularly. There is no lack of people who feel ignored, or even hated, by Big Church. It's not because the pastor or staff are bad people. It is simply impossible to know more than about twenty people and minister to them properly.

So should the pastor and staff spend their time getting to know each member of their congregation rather than making sermons or managing programs? Yes. Preaching a sermon every Sunday and managing programs is impersonal work. A sermon can be made personal, but it is not personal by nature. It is a message containing information, which may or may not convey the love of Christ. Programs are managed as logistical efforts, not an inherently spiritual activity. Churches in this modern day do a lot of things on the Internet. Surveys, sign-ups, reservations for programs, all

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become very easy for the church staff to manage when they are done on the Internet. That's great for the staff that is doing a job, but it's not very good for personal relationships. Instead of taking a survey on the Internet, which is necessarily limited and makes it very easy for the staff, how about having focus groups throughout the membership and talking to people personally? It eliminates the impersonal and managed nature of the survey, and the staff will not only get a direct and accurate sense of what is going on in the congregation, they will actually get to know the congregation. What a concept! The staff actually knowing the people who go to their church! And actually understanding how they feel and think!

This isn't going to happen, though, except in rare instances. Big Church is designed to be managed as an institution, with a hierarchy, a CEO, a budget, and a physical plant. It has to be managed, because it will collapse if it isn't. So the paradigm continues, and quite a few folks are left in the spiritual dust. Meanwhile Big Church pursues 'Missional Living' and attempts to lead the congregation into the vision the pastor and staff have articulated, despite the fact that they never discussed it with the congregation beforehand. This is the way businesses are managed. The executive determines what needs to happen, and the employees do what they're told. Church members are volunteer employees, doing the bidding of their pastor and his staff. Or maybe they just sit on a pew and enjoy the service without being involved. Either way, this is not a real church.

So, while Big Church is being "missional", members of the congregation who are dealing with critical needs are put in the position of supporting the church's 'missional' effort while their spirits are crumbling inside them. And no one knows or cares that they are hurting. The Pastor and staff are blissfully unaware of these needs and don't bother doing anything about them. There is no venue where someone can share critical needs unless they already know someone, and many of these people with critical needs don't know anyone. They just need help. So we have a whole congregation of people who want to serve and help people, but because of the church's missional program, they ignore the unemployed man sitting next to them, or the young lady about to commit suicide on their other side, and spend their time and treasure being 'missional' by following the church's missional program. The unemployed man may join in the effort to be part of the church, but inside he is crying out for help. The young lady may go ahead and commit suicide without anyone knowing what happened. They don't dare say anything, though, because that would be selfish and it would redirect the church's effort toward them instead of the 'missional' effort. So they suffer quietly and the church brags about how missional it is. The pastor will read heart-warming letters about people who were blessed by the church's missional efforts and everyone will feel really good about that. Nothing wrong with that part, but what about the people within the church whose spirits are crumbling under pressure? I guess they just aren't important enough to deal with.