

The Changing Church – (What’s happening to my church?)



Have you asked this same question? The truth is that multitudes are finding that aspects of their church that used to be alive don’t seem to offer the same life anymore.

There is much shifting and ‘morphing’ taking place in the ‘universal church’. Although we don’t have a clear picture of where it is going to end up, a dynamic of major shift is taking place. Many very serious Jesus lovers are finding the traditional (and not-so-traditional) church services less than relevant, now-a-days. There is a sizable exodus from traditional services towards more grass-roots gatherings (a la Early Church). More interaction and participation by all the members gathered, is one of the hallmarks of such gatherings. Several years ago, this trend seemed spurious and isolated, but this phenomenon now has sufficient significance that it is being measured by the global trend surveyors. www.barna.org and a book named MegaShift (by Jim Rutz) are just two resources that spell out the demographics and philosophies within this movement. My personal belief is that this trend is a strong and encouraging indicator of a great spiritual awakening ahead. Since this topic frequently emerges in conversations, here are some of my musings about the issue.

I’ve been pondering the topic of a more free and relevant church and wondering about the future of church. Many people have become bored with the irrelevancy of church. They’re not mad or bent out of shape or negative. They’re very sincere Jesus loving people, but church just isn’t ‘cutting it’ for them.

Some of our ‘generals’ (those with significant supportive spiritual leadership) are not attending anymore. Someone could say to them, “Just get in there and do more”. But they HAVE been doing more. Many of them have their own ministries – they’re obviously not slackers – but when they walk away from church services they have less ‘money’ in their spiritual account than when they came. Any conscientious church leader is being forced to wrestle valiantly with this disturbing reality.

Just as Abraham and Isaac had to dig many wells, they inspire us to look for another ‘well’ when one dries up. I’m NOT referring to switching churches here, I’m referring to the ‘well’ of the way we have done things. There is grace for each season that God takes us through. But sometimes we’re in the ‘between’ period. II Cor 3:18 says that we are being changed into his image from “glory to glory”. But sometimes we are just in the “to” part. One “glory” (well... or way of doing things) has dried up and the next “glory” (well... or way of doing things) is not yet available. Those are awkward times. The comfort of a past grace isn’t present anymore and we haven’t yet tapped into the next grace.

I feel that our old way of doing ‘church’ has reached the peak of its effectiveness – maybe past it. That’s not to say that it should be abolished, because for some, the old way will hold them securely until they get to heaven. But for many earnest hungry folks, we (church leaders) will have to find something new that is consistently relevant and substantive when the people give us their precious time. We can’t just ask them to give us more time, on more nights, from schedules that are already full. We must be responsible to not only ‘feed’ them but give them opportunity to ‘flex their spiritual muscle’ – which is the stuff that makes any of us grow.

All I know is that the old way of doing church is losing its relevance. Down deep — below the insecurity and timidity, people are tired of being spoon-fed pew sitters. I believe that it’s the innate desire of most red-blooded humans to be needed, useful and impacting wherever they go — even at church. Sadly, most of our meeting formats don’t effectively activate people during the small window of time allotted. Everywhere I go (and read in the world church statistics) the evidence is obvious; something has to change. Not only are we not doing the ‘greater works’ but we’re losing those who have been entrusted to us.

I think that what we’re really looking at is more of an early church model found in I Cor 14:26. Each member was ‘on deck’ and never knew but what the weight of any given moment of the gathering would be on him. That keeps us all ‘on ten’ and reaching and expectant. It provides a factor of wonder and adventure for everyone because the tapestry of every meeting is different. They say variety is the spice of life. Well.... how much variety do we have in our gatherings? Even in

some of our freedoms we begin to get pretty predictable. There just isn't any way that I can see to stay fresh, except to be committed to 'walk on the water' all the time. That means that what worked last week is potentially 'on the chopping block' this week.

I wonder if we leaders could really walk in the unknown (committed to walking on the water and leaving our boat behind), not leaning on our strengths or seminaries or? But what would the people say of our positions if we let ourselves look like we didn't know the order of the meeting any more than they? And what about our salaries, if we don't practice what our professional position requires (in traditional standards)? I wonder what the people would say if we all had to find Holy Spirit's direction together. But don't we have to preach? After all, that's the main thing we get paid for, isn't it? What if the newbie Christians had more impact in their innocent and somewhat raw, yet impassioned sharing, than our mature preaching? What then would we tell the people the reason is, for why we get paid? We'd have to completely reevaluate what church was all about?! OH, OH! Maybe we've stumbled upon something vital and profound even in our desperate musing and 'out of the box' wondering.

Here's a tangent thought: what would we teach new converts to be like right now if God gave us great grace for salvations? Would we teach them to be like us? Our way of doing things? In our present model? Does that measure up to the model of Holy Scripture? Maybe our current status is the reason why new converts and old veterans alike, are weak and sick and even "sleep" among us (see I Cor 11:30).

Well.... I wonder who will be the notable pioneers, when we read history books 100 years from now. Who will have been novel, desperate, daring, and hungry enough to leave the familiar behind and open a 'gate' for many to follow? Consider the Micah 2:13 'breakers'. Jesus found a dozen radical fellows who were just gullible enough and hungry enough to believe him. They changed the world. Could we be numbered among those who are the frontiersman, breakers, and standard setters of a new era in church life? I think that herein is a kernel that carries the possible DNA of a world impacting church that the Bible says will emerge in these days (see Isa 60: and Acts 15:16, 17).

I love our churches. They have gotten us this far. God bless them for what they've done to create a nest to get us here. But the empirical and statistical evidence along with current eschatological understanding seems to say that something new is on the horizon and is in the process of being birthed.

Men and women of spiritual tenacity ponder these things well and contend for them. This is much like Daniel who when he read the prophecies of Jeremiah, realized that "the fullness of time" (70 years of captivity) was upon them and so he began contending with fasting and prayer over the word of the Lord. Likewise we.

"For since the days of John the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force" - Matt 11:12.
So there you have it...some musings of my heart and the overflow of impassioned conversations with radical Jesus lovers.

– MLH

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A friend was inspired to write this simple poem

Humpty Dumpty's Third Day Church

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the Kings elders and all the churchmen
Couldn't put the old wineskin back together again

But out of the shell there arose to the sky
Hundreds of birds set free to fly

Eagles they were once chained to a pew
And now to their places freely they flew

Out of the audience and on to the floor
Open the mic there's got to be more
It burns in my heart and I've just have to say
The river of God flows deep, the third day.

by Nam E. Less