

FIVE CHANGES THAT COULD REVOLUTIONISE THE CHURCH

by Eric Swanson advisor to CitiReach International

For some, it may be a small prophetic cloud on the horizon, for others, it is the Holy Spirit's quiet working: all around the world, Christians are beginning to wonder whether God didn't really mean Church to be completely different from how we know it. It's no longer about success, size, seeker sensitivity, gifts of the Spirit or the number of small groups. It's about making a significant and sustainable difference in the lives of people around us - in our communities and in our cities.

There is an attitude change sweeping through the Church, headed up by leaders who feel at home in changing times and a changing Church. Here are just five points of significant change that are emerging in the Church across the world.

1. BUILD BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

If Christians are 'the salt of the Earth', how do we see ourselves as a church? Are we standing outside society, inviting people to 'come to us', or are we willing to leave our isolation, entering our communities and transforming them? Robert Lewis, pastor of the Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, was content with his 'successful, growing mega-church' until he realised how little influence it had on the city. He asked the mayor how the church could help the community. The answer was a list of challenges facing the city. The church then faced the question of what they could do "that would cause people to marvel and say, 'God is at work in a wonderful way for no one could do these things unless God were with them!'"? And so it came to be that over 100 churches and 5,000 volunteers help their communities in the Little Rock area in very practical ways. The relationship of Christians to the city has been revolutionised.

2. EMPHASIS IMPACT, NOT ATTENDANCE

Two helpful questions are "would the city cry, if your church ceased to exist?" and "would anyone notice if you moved away?" Today, it is deeds, not words, which are the greatest testimony to the reality of Jesus Christ. Effective Christian ministry has always been holistic, connecting good works with the Good News.

Tillie Burgin, for example, founded 'Mission Arlington' to reach people in her city who were not going to church, to be "a church which goes to the people, not the other way around." Today, Mission Arlington is a movement of around 250 house churches totalling around 4,000 people, who help some 10,000 people every week, changing their lives in some practical way. "The question is no longer 'how large is your church?' but 'how much impact do you have in your region?'"

3. ENCOURAGE SERVICE, NOT ATTENDING THE SERVICE

God appointed ministries to 'equip the saints to works of ministry' (Eph. 4:11), not to 'bring the saints to the Sunday service'. Ministry is often misunderstood as being something purely church-oriented. The opportunities to minister are often limited to leading Sunday School, a Bible study group, singing in the choir or membership in a church committee. It is not surprising that pastors complain that only 20% of the members are active. Maybe the opportunities inside the church are simply too limited! We need to communicate and implement 'every-member ministry', the message that every Christian is an ambassador of Christ and has a ministry of some form, whether inside or outside the Church, perhaps to the region's poor and needy, perhaps in some other form.

4. FROM "SERVE US" TO "SERVICE" - FROM INWARD TO OUTWARD FOCUS

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give..." (Mark 10:45) When the Communists took over Russia in 1917, Lenin did not ban the Church, but forbade it to do any good works. Central elements of Christian ministry such as feeding the hungry, teaching and caring for the sick and orphaned were taboo for the Church. Seventy years later, the Church was completely irrelevant. Today, without Lenin, many churches still do exactly that, concentrating only on preaching, with identical results. Take service out of the church, and it becomes irrelevant and weak.

Mary Francis Boley, leader of women's ministry in the First Baptist Church in Peachtree City, Georgia, called on women in the church to keep their eyes open for women in the community who nobody else was reaching: cashiers, hairdressers, single mothers, homeless women, strippers and prostitutes. Her aim is to 'save the women of Atlanta' - starting with the women in the church, because "people cannot become mature Christians without giving themselves in service to others!"

Steve Sjogren of the Vineyard Community Church of Cincinnati has engraved the words "small things done with great love will change the world" in stone above the entrance to the church.

5. PARTNERSHIP INSTEAD OF DUPLICATED SOCIAL MINISTRY

Almost every city or community has social services and morally positive and spiritually neutral groups which are doing their best to care for the needy, such as giving shelter to the homeless and providing safe houses for abused women. There are also church and para-church ministries concentrating on particular groups such as students, youth or businesspeople. Instead of starting

duplicate ministries, why not help existing ministries and services, saving resources and creating synergy?

In Boulder the group Big Brothers Big Sisters of America has a list of two hundred youths waiting for an elder mentor. That is a great opportunity for Christians to become partners. How about listing not only the Bible Study times, but also twenty or more partner ministries in the church newsletter? Many social service agencies need exactly that which churches generally have: willing volunteers, financial support and meeting places. That way, partnerships form around shared care and love for the city or region instead of theology, and Christians have more opportunity to 'love their neighbour' through existing organisations. That way, we all very quickly become the letter 'known and read by everyone' (2. Cor. 3:2)"

Source: Australian Prayer Network