



If the level of significance of church services doesn't match the challenges of the real world, then some people will seek alternatives.

Ralph D. Winter



Dear Reader,

Only when something is terribly important do we stretch a theme across two successive numbers of this bulletin. Last time it was "Why do people lose their faith?" This time it might be "Why people don't keep their faith." Those questions are almost the same, although being repulsed by the church, not drawn in and held, is clearly different from being drawn out of church.

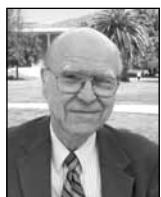
Pastors and their churches come in many different flavors. It could be said that some pastors (and their churches) are like ticket salesmen, others, magicians, still others coaches. Not many are military officers fighting a war.

Of course, a congregation of people not fighting a war outside the church may find themselves fighting a war inside the church. But that is a focus in my article on page 6, "When the Church Staggers, Stalls, and Sits Down."

The Ticket Salesman

Let's go back to the pastor as *ticket salesman*. In one of my six different college and graduate school experiences I attended a little church led by an earnest pastor whose small congregation was almost never visited by anyone who was not already "saved."

This pastor's seminary training had apparently ingrained in him the vital importance and priority of giving an "altar call" every Sunday. Thus, every sermon ended with "Now, if there is anyone here who is not sure of going to heaven, this is the time to come forward and pray through." Something like that.



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His concept of his job was to get as many people as possible into heaven. That can't be bad!

The Magician

Some pastors, in contrast, have the knack, and have developed the skill, of speaking very entertainingly—putting them in the magician category is not meant to be demeaning. I once had a pastor, now deceased, whose sermons Sunday after Sunday were the most impelling I have ever heard.

He had actually worked his way through college and seminary as a magician. He had been in front of all kinds of audiences, from nightclubs to PTA meetings. What a great sense of timing and build up! All of my children, even my eight-year-old, were on the edge of their seats every minute.

However, I'm sure you don't have to literally be a magician in order to be a *magician pastor*. Lots of pastors just have a very engaging gift of holding our attention.

Okay, think megachurches. In some cases, it apparently does not take long these days to build a megachurch *if you can be entertaining* in the pulpit. Lots of people flock to that kind of thing.

Why? Because other churches may not entertain them—but does this describe the people more than the church? Some people don't need entertainment. They want to serve.

The Coach

For people who want to serve, the coach-type pastor may be just the thing. The Sunday morning meetings in the largest church in the world don't seem to me to be very entertaining. I've been there. The founding pastor simply strung together about fifty Bible verses.

The secret of this 800,000-member church in South Korea may well be something rarely mentioned. Can you

imagine 60,000 midweek home and local small meetings? At these there is no escape from personal seriousness. To see change and progress both personally and in this world, people need to be coached as they move forward, to grow, to accomplish things, to be appreciated, well, to be held accountable for even their own goals.

Some pastors coach from the pulpit, especially in smaller congregations. Christian bookstores are bulging with self-help books which can coach people both in their personal lives and in their service to God and community. This is one reason for the vast popularity of Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*.

However, a recent study by the famous Willow Creek megachurch near Chicago pointed out the fact that while an exciting Sunday service can bring multitudes out to church on Sunday, such an achievement in itself does not ensure steady, ongoing growth in character and service. To do that is something different.

Perhaps one accomplishment of the megachurch phenomenon is to prove the existence of the unmet need for personal growth—the need for coaching, pacing, and accountability on a personal level.

Church Members Drawn Away

According to George Barna's studies, many people today are not abandoning the church or losing their faith because of unhappiness at church, but are drawn away from church meetings by the excitement of some sort of Christian service activity which seems more significant. It has been said that hardly anyone goes to church expecting to hear something they don't already know.

It is truly ironic, in any case, if people discover in Jesus Christ (quite possibly in church) a new angle of vision, a personal challenge, an insight into Christian service that actually leads to their absence at church services.

Of course, if this is true, and the world outside the church becomes more engaging than what goes on in church, people will leave church, some also actually leaving the faith—Ruth Tucker's article, p. 12, describes the latter. If the level of significance of church services doesn't match the challenges of the real world, then some people will seek alternatives.

Suppose a person has been blessed by all three kinds of pastors—he or she

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has “been there, done that” in all three cases. Something is still lacking if the church service itself is the central concern. It can be the center, but it must not itself be its own central concern.

People want the help of church to be assured that heaven is ahead of them. They don't mind being entertained at least a bit. They want church to be a guide and coach.

But I heard one pastor say that we get together and talk and talk, and even argue and disagree, about how to “do church,” when all the while God wants us to get out into the world and “be church.” Just as we expect the supermarket to carry strawberries in more than one form—sliced, diced, smashed, whole, frozen, fresh, etc.—we may end up with two or three different kinds of church services in order to try to please everyone.

People attending church can easily constitute a religion, an art form, in itself. When that happens it may seem that anything goes.

In contrast, Leighton Ford quotes a pastor of a church in an urban area of Minneapolis as saying, “How many kids have to die while we go home still talking about churchy stuff? How many homicides have to happen before we stop playing church and become the Kingdom of God in the streets? Kids are dying and we are in church.”

The Military Officer

What about the kind of pastor who assumes those who come to his church are showing up for military duty? Rick Warren says he wants “to turn his audience into an army.” And his church has endless different ministries in which 7,000 of his members now participate. Some of these tasks are glorified church chores, like on Sunday, directing traffic in the acres of parking spaces that feed the church. Some tasks require travel across the Atlantic to Rwanda to serve in special ways.

I don't see anything wrong with the expectation that we are saved to serve, and that we should actively pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus talked of building a church which would breach the gates of hell. And 1 John 3:8 says simply that “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil.” There is enough suffering, corruption, and violence to fight.

But, I don't see how an army of *individuals* can deal effectively with the major, angry evils in this world. When those are addressed by nonbelievers but not by believers, it brings disrepute to God and His slumbering church. We don't merely need individuals. We need armies of organized battalions. Mission agencies, existing and not-yet-existing, could take aim at a hundred truly major evils. The world would take note. God would be glorified. Our evangelism would be empowered.

That is one of the themes of my article on page 6. It is the theme of the upcoming issue of the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (see www.ijfm.org). f

