

Who or What Is Driving this Congregation?

Is the Goal for Church Members to be Happy?

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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This past year has been a difficult one in ministry for me. Several people I like very much have chosen to leave the congregation I serve. People coming and going is not an unusual occurrence in a larger church. Even though I know I am not supposed to, I took the departure of these people very personally. They were close friends in whom I had invested much time and energy, and who I cared about deeply. Each one, for different reasons, left the congregation because they were no longer happy.

I fully realize that the conventional wisdom of the American culture says that the ultimate goal in life is happiness. The general sentiment seems to be that if I am not happy then the world is out of kilter and this profound wrong must be righted immediately. It is our constitutional right to pursue happiness. It is God's job to make sure we live lives that are comfortable and problem free. God's job is to make sure we are happy. If we do business we all know that the company's responsibility to make sure I am a satisfied customer; that I am happy. Everyone knows that the customer is always right. This also applies to the church.

The Church, during the 50 years I have observed it, seems to follow right along with the cultural norm. If someone in the life of a congregation is unhappy about anything, all they have to do is bring their unhappiness to the attention of the congregational leadership and then stand back and watch the show. Apologies are immediately extended. The congregational machinery cranks up to make sure that whatever change is needed is made, and any unacceptable changes that are being proposed are stopped from being pursued. No one rests until everyone is happy.

It never seems to occur to anyone that this is an incredibly senseless approach to doing ministry and being the Church. I would propose to you that your personal happiness is not the goal, is not the driving force, of the Church. Though this idea may run contrary to some of the teaching of some of the largest churches in America, my proposition is that the mission and goal of the Church is much larger and far-reaching than our personal gratification. I believe the Church is on a mission from God. And that mission is not to get rich, safe, comfortable and happy.

I am also convinced that congregational transformation will not happen, cannot happen, until we are embraced by God's mission and vision for the church. Until we do, we will just continue with the status quo of maintaining our facilities, maintaining our programs and maintaining our members. The heart of our ministry will continue to be making sure everyone is happy and nobody is rocking the boat. It is a happy, comfy, safe way to do church. It is also an ungodly way to do church. I further believe that, ultimately, it is a deadly way to do church.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament will serve to completely debunk this ludicrous concept of church. The church's marching orders are found in the gospel of Matthew: "*Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'*" (Matthew 28:18-20) There it is; clear and concise. Go and make a difference in this world. Spread the amazing news that God loves you and there is a healthier, godlier way of living; now and forever.

Our job is not to please every whim of every person who wants something from us. We are going to have to get a white-knuckled grip on God's mission for our congregation and decide that we won't let go of it for anything. When we are being driven by a Godly vision we do not divert the ship because someone isn't

enjoying the cruise. Can you imagine a U.S. Navy ship being diverted from its mission because one of the sailors didn't like the way things were going? Can you imagine someone in the first century church complaining and threatening to leave a church because they do not like the music or because someone changed the order of worship? Instead we are to do our very best to do worship in a way that honors God and attracts unbelievers into the presence of God. Whether the present membership enjoys the worship or is comfortable in worship is a secondary concern – if it is a concern at all.

The question for congregational leadership changes from, "Is everybody happy?" to "What is God calling us to be and do as a congregation and how best can we get that done?"

Like I said, we of the Church are going to have to do some radical thinking from a completely different perspective if we are going to bring transformation and new life to our quickly dying institutional churches. A little paint-up, fix-up touching up how we do church is not going to bring transformation. Transformation must begin at our very foundation. One of those foundation blocks is deciding what drives us as a congregation.

Questions for your consideration:

1. Who or what drives your congregation?
2. When someone complains about something in your congregation, what happens?
3. In the past few months, have there been complains voiced by church members? What were they and how were they dealt with?
4. If a new idea or ministry is proposed in your congregation, how easily is it derailed? If that happens often, who or what group is usually responsible?
5. When you think back on recent church board meetings, what were the most important topics of conversation and consideration?
6. Would you describe your congregation as a maintenance-driven church or a mission-driven church? Why?
7. In a sentence can you describe the mission of your congregation?

Important Things to Know

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