

Guest editorial: Is Sunday the most segmented day of the week?

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With honor for and apologies to the legacy Martin Luther King Jr., I would like to ask a different question than the statement he made around 50 years ago about churches, Sunday and segregation.



George Bullard

Is Sunday the most segmented day of the week?

Let me suggest a few topics surrounding churches, Sunday and segmentation. Congregations seeking to target specific demographic groups often slice and dice their prospect and attendance databases like a mechanical kitchen chopping machine.

This is not necessarily bad. It often has some positive benefits, both for congregations and for the people in their database. Yet there is a downside to this marketing segmentation.

For example, Christian congregations believe in the traditional, nuclear family unit right until people walk through the door of the church. But then we send them off to their various corners, compartments or classrooms.

Church marketing segmentation

We have worship services for people who like worship that is “traditional”

within a certain denominational family. “Contemporary” worship services are held for those who want a more lively performance or participatory worship. If liturgical worship is not necessarily part of the heritage of a congregation, they still may hold a regular or periodic worship service with communion or Eucharist for those from a more mainline Protestant background. Then there is the Sunday afternoon or evening Taizé worship, the James Taylor-Carole King style worship, jazz worship, Celtic worship, the alternative emergent worship and the rock band worship.

We have so many worship services and styles. People often do not understand or appreciate the worship style and content of other worship services in their church or in the church down the street. Some styles are so different from how certain target groups praise and worship our Triune God, they are not sure what others do is truly worship.

For centuries, congregations have segmented the seating patterns in their sanctuaries or worship centers. Rich in front. Poor in back. Older adults in the front. Younger adults in the back. Whites on floor. Slaves in balcony. Men on one side. Women on the other side. Deacons and ushers on the front row. Praying people in the side pews. A couple of rows of youth in the front, or back, or side, or balcony. Nursing mothers and crying children in a room at the back or side where they can see worship through a glass. What others would you name? There are many more.

Segmenting entire congregations

We also segment whole churches. I am not necessarily talking about the typical segmentation often discussed around race, ethnicity and culture. I am thinking of a different type of segmentation—socio-economics.

One Sunday 35 years ago, I attended The Church on Brady in East Los Angeles, Calif. This is the church that later morphed into Mosaic with Erwin McManus as pastor. At the time I attended, Tom Wolf was pastor. In

a very demographically diverse community context, The Church on Brady, with Tom's initiating leadership, had become a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural congregation of Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans, among others.

Based on this, The Church on Brady was called by some outside the congregation an important example of the heterogeneous congregation. Tom often sought to correct this misconception. He indicated that although the congregation had people from various backgrounds, essentially the congregation was composed of people of the same or similar socio-economic capacities. They actually were a homogeneous congregation organized around similar socio-economics.

Subtle elitism

Tom certainly was not saying this was ideal. Nor am I. This candidly is a more subtle elitism pattern of segmenting congregations than we realize. Often economics is a more significant driver of church segmentation than are racial, ethnic and cultural factors.

One form of analysis of classism in North America suggests there are nine socio-economic classes. The sociology of churching tells us congregations significantly composed of more than three socio-economic classes are highly likely to have conflict and even to experience a split. The socio-economic norms are so different, they interfere with the spiritual formation and cultural practices of congregations. Decision-making often is conflictual.

What happens is people of lower socio-economics leave the congregation, or people of higher socio-economics leave the congregation, or they all stay because they enjoy fighting for the church they want their congregation to be. Is anything ideal about this? Is anything desirable about this? Is anything Christ-like about this? No. It simply is the reality of humankind

that ultimately must be overcome by a commitment to the unconditional love of God.

Sadly, it is also what makes Sunday the most segmented day of the week.

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