

Voices: Keeping church from becoming a show

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About a year ago, a friend, who only recently moved to the United States, was asked by an acquaintance if he wanted to come to “a concert and a speech.” This was how the invitation was worded.

As you may have guessed, he was tricked into going to church.

The person who invited him was certainly being coy with the sneak-invite. But I wonder if he felt he gave an accurate description of a church service.

Church as a show becomes church as a commodity

Churches certainly seem like performances sometimes, with ministers taking the role of performers on a raised platform and congregants acting as the audience watching the performance. Elements of the service, like music and preaching, are determined by what the audience wants to see and hear.

In short, the mentality that church is just “a concert and a speech,” which just happens to be religious in nature, makes church become a commodity like any other. Church offers goods and services of a spiritual nature for consumption as desired.

When church becomes a commodity, we shouldn't be surprised when people stop showing up. Whatever spiritual commodity the church can offer them—inspiration, comfort, moral guidance—can be attained from a variety of other places.

The “concert and speech” church, in other words, is church that will inevitably lose to better concerts and better speeches.

Involving the people: Communicating the purpose of the church

How do we keep church from becoming a show to be consumed rather than a community in which to participate?

First, as I wrote about in my [last column](#), we must think hard about why the church exists.

What does the church offer that no other institution or organization can offer? What do people gain from being a part of the church that they can't gain from being a part of anything else?

These are the questions we need to answer if church is to avoid becoming a product like any other.

Beyond developing and communicating these answers, those of us in the ministry should avoid making church seem like a show. If the congregation never participates in what is happening in the service or feels like their role doesn't have the same significance as that of the pastor, why wouldn't they think church is a type of performance or show?

Ways my church engages the whole congregation in worship

I think my church does exceptionally well at engaging people in the service. The congregation is literally essential to what happens on Sunday mornings.

We have two separate responsive readings every service, with a third in some services. A lay person leads the first reading and then prays a prayer they have written.

Our service also includes three Scripture readings, two of which are always led by lay people in the church.

We periodically stop for moments of silence or wordless music, taking the focus temporarily from the stage area and directing it back to the individuals in the pews.

As a Protestant church, the sermon is naturally the “high point” toward which the service builds. The structure of the sermon places it in the work of the congregation. The sermon isn’t especially long, it is based on a passage read earlier in the service by a church member, and it echoes themes and images found in the hymns we’ve sung during the service, which the music minister chooses in conjunction with the pastor’s message.

The examples above aren’t necessities of the faith or requirements pulled verbatim out of the Bible.

My primary aim in sharing these practices is to suggest what a church service might look like by aligning our convictions about the nature of the church with what actually happens when we gather.

Our gathering is—or at least should be—focused on Christ, who has gathered all of us.

Moving worship from performance for us to praise of God

Music that is difficult for untrained musicians to sing leaves the impression that the music is more a concert than corporate worship. Similarly,

preaching—occupying the center of the service and clearly reflecting the personal beliefs of the pastor—makes the sermon appear to be a motivational talk or political speech rather than a space where the work of God is remembered and experienced.

What if we made accessibility one of the criteria for how we choose music for worship? Would it be a bad thing to have a stable selection of a few dozen rotating songs rather than a constant influx of new music with which the congregation is likely unfamiliar? In other words, what would it look like to actively consider the congregation's role in proclaiming God's works through song?

Similarly, how might our preaching be affected by thinking in this way? I imagine it would draw us to sermons that are more condensed and pay closer attention to the life of the congregation, with the pastor taking on the role of one who speaks for the congregation rather than one who teaches them during the worship service.

The American church is at a crossroads as our relevancy to contemporary society is called into question. Moving forward requires us to consider what the church is and to adjust our practices in light of this.

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