

Voices: Keys to church revitalization, Part III

July 12, 2017

This is my third post in a series focused on the findings from my doctoral research at Dallas Baptist University on revitalization in seven previously declining, established Baptist General Convention of Texas-related churches.



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The fourth finding showed each of the seven churches positioned itself so that its contemporary worship service or services became the primary focus in terms of musical selection, musical accompaniment, time of service, and how they “branded” themselves to the community.

For clarity sake, here are the definitions I used:

- Contemporary worship style: “A corporate worship service that primarily sang newer songs and used a band as musical accompaniment. The service was also defined by a more relaxed dress style.”

- Traditional worship style: “A corporate worship service that primarily sang hymns and used a piano and an organ as musical accompaniment. The service was also defined by a more formal style of dress.”

For most of the churches, the shift from focusing on a traditional worship style to a contemporary worship style was an important part of their revitalization. All of their contemporary services were growing. The churches did not present themselves to their community as a traditional church in terms of their musical/corporate worship style and methodology. As one pastor said about their brand shift, “The Southern Baptist church today is modern music.”

Traditional worship



Four out of the seven churches maintained a traditional worship at an earlier hour on Sunday morning. The primary purpose for keeping the traditional worship service was to maintain unity and relieve some of the frustration at attempts to provide a service blended with both styles.

It is important to note the focus on maintaining unity was essential for the pastors. They did not view the traditional service as a way “to throw a bone” to people. They wanted to do each of their services well and knew having such a service was important to the people who went to that service.

One pastor noted the people were relieved to have a service that could be uniquely traditional. While the traditional services were not necessarily growing, they served an important role in maintaining unity within the

revitalized, established Baptist churches I researched.

Blended worship

Only one church was close to embracing a blended worship service, which combined both styles in one worship service. Nevertheless, for this church, the services were heavily slanted to contemporary worship.

Most everyone, especially the pastors, were critical of attempts to do a blended worship service. I was told by one pastor concerning a blended worship service or, as he called it, “multi-generational worship”: “Multi-generational worship is a farce. Multi-generation worship means you’re not gonna upset the old people. You don’t have children in the adult choir. You don’t have teenagers reading Scripture. You don’t have the youth minister preaching it. It’s not multi-generational. It’s, it’s, it’s ‘We ain’t gonna change.’”

While this was the most critical assessment of a blended worship style, it did represent an overall consensus that blended worship seems to make few happy and is more about not confronting/deferring needed changes.

Conflict and change

If you are a part of an established Baptist church, you know how much conflict is generated by discussions and proposed changes around worship styles.

In my 13-plus years as a pastor, the issue that has generated the most complaints and anxiety from church members has been associated with frustrations about musical accompaniment and selection. In other words, I know from personal experience and have the scars to prove that this is a topic that touches on deeply felt understandings/concepts about worship.

Three ideas

In light of my research and my personal experience, I'd like to propose the following:

- If churches aren't already, they are going to need to be clear about their identity in terms of corporate worship/musical style. Churches also will need to understand there are potential positive and negative consequences to these decisions in terms of their "branding" within the community.
- One of the questions I'm still struggling with is whether there is something unique with contemporary worship styles that touches on Baptist churches in all locations—rural, urban, etc.—or whether the growth associated with a contemporary worship style is more about meeting the expectations of people in growing, suburban communities. That is, how important is the external factor of where these churches were located in relationship to the expectations of the majority of the people located in these growing, suburban communities?
- This conclusion doesn't mean worship styling was the cause for the decline or the growth. It does mean worship style selections are part of a process associated with either decline or growth.

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- *To see his first Texas Baptist Voices column, "Keys to church revitalization, Part I," [click here](#).*
- *To see his second Texas Baptist Voices column, "Keys to church revitalization, Part II," [click here](#).*