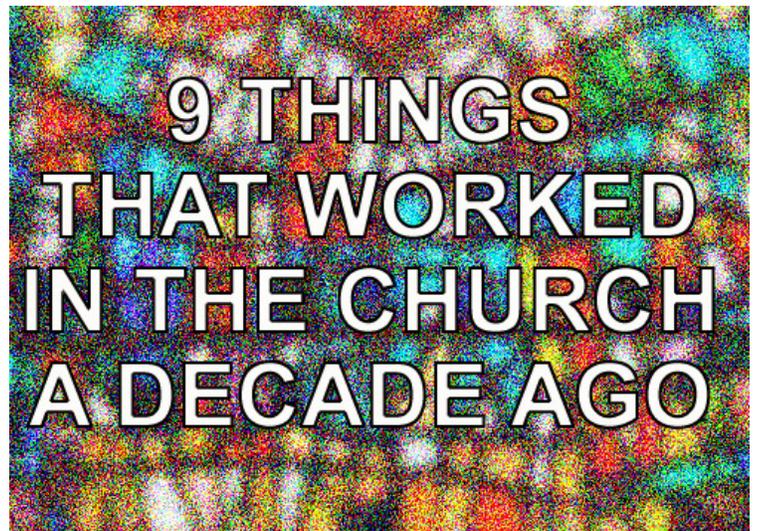


9 Things That Worked in the Church a Decade Ago That Don't Today

By Carey Nieuwhof, churchleaders.com

Culture is changing faster than ever. As a result, the shelf life of ideas is shorter than it has ever been. So you entered into church leadership full of enthusiasm and fresh ideas. And for a season, a lot of those ideas worked. You saw your ministry grow, people come to faith and the mission advance.



But times change.

And—these days especially—culture is changing faster than ever before.

As a result, the shelf life of ideas, assumptions and approaches is shorter than it has ever been. What used to work, doesn't. Not anymore.

The challenge is to know what's stopped working and what hasn't. Not everything that worked a decade ago in the church was great. But the truth is many churches saw growth anyway.

And that's changing and will continue to change. What got you here won't get you there.

Here are nine things that used to work in ministry a decade ago that aren't nearly as effective as they used to be.

1. Relying on an automatic return to church

There was a day when you could somewhat safely assume that once young adults got married and had a child, they would automatically come back to church.

Those days are gone or largely gone. The average unchurched person doesn't think about going to church any more than the average Christian thinks about going to synagogue. It just doesn't cross their mind.

Having an exceptional next generation ministry that reaches out to the community is critical.

The Orange strategy (see www.whatisorange.org) is the strategy we use, and our kids' ministry is the fastest growing ministry at our church. You can't assume families will reach out to you, so you need to reach out to them.

2. Appealing to people out of guilt or obligation

The number of people who feel guilty about not being in church on Sunday shrinks daily. Ditto with the number of people who will serve at a church because they feel they should. Interestingly enough, Jesus never appealed to people out of guilt or obligation. He invited people. The future church will as well.

3. Simply being better than other churches

When people went to church, being a better church than other churches got you mileage. Most people no longer go to church.

Saying "we have a better church" is kind of like saying "we have better, organic, locally grown watercress" at a burger cook-off. Most people just aren't going to buy. Better isn't going to get you the mileage it used to. Different will.

The church is an alternative. And an alternative, clearly and effectively presented, will do far better than simply saying we're better than something you weren't interested in in the first place.

4. Gimmicks

So true confession. A decade ago we drove a car on stage to get people's attention. We also built elaborate sets for every series hoping it would captivate people. And all of this did. For a season.

But I also came to realize that whatever you use to attract people is what you need to use to keep people. ‘Gimmicks’ every week get old fast.

If you play the ‘next Sunday will be better than last Sunday game,’ you eventually end up losing and lying (because it can’t be). In addition, eventually people ask, “So what? So what if next Sunday is a little bit better than last Sunday? What’s this all about anyway?” Don’t get me wrong. We still have fun moments, powerful moments, surprising moments and memorable moments, but they’re moments. We’ve stripped down our services and moved back to more of the basics: the Gospel, engaging moments and engaging messages.

We can sustain that. And the basics, done really well (with a little extra from time to time), really do engage people. Why? Because Jesus, authentically and clearly presented, engages people.

5. Inauthentic leadership

People’s fake detectors are set at a higher level than ever. In a culture that markets everything to death, people are longing for authenticity. Fortunately, that’s at the heart of the Gospel.

What has to die, of course, is the leader who acts like he or she has it all together: the plastic veneer we put on hoping nobody sees the real us.

Well, none of us has it all together. And while there shouldn’t be any gaping unaddressed character holes in your life, letting people see the real you (even if it scares you) is essential. These days, letting people see you’re human is a prerequisite for ministry to fellow humans.

6. A self-centered mission

You have to be careful not to make the mission about your church. When your church has had a little success, it’s easy to become self-centered.

The people you’re trying to reach aren’t interested in your church. What they’re interested in (whether they realize it or not) is Jesus. And his mission. Churches that are obsessed about how big they are, how many programs they offer and how much better they are than other churches have a limited shelf-life.

The true mission isn’t about your church. It’s about THE church. THAT resonates.

7. Random programming

The bigger your church, the more you will be tempted to add programs and ministries. Why? Because people demand them.

Leaders—afraid to disappoint people or lacking an alternative strategy—cave and allow dozens (or hundreds) of random programs to emerge in their church. These programs can be counterproductive for numerous reasons:

- They compete for money, time and attention.
- They lead nowhere in particular.
- They cause more division than unity (ever try to shut down a women’s ministry or men’s breakfast?).
- They become their own mission and compete with the overall mission of the church.

Why does random programming not work? Simple: because random programming pleases insiders but rarely reaches outsiders.

Instead, be strategic and focused. Do whatever helps move people the most clearly and deeply into a growing relationship with Jesus, and do whatever advances your mission into the city.

Make no mistake: What people become involved in becomes the mission. So choose carefully. Make the mission your mission.

8. Assuming people know what their next step is

A decade ago, in a more churched culture, it was commonplace to assume that most people knew what they needed to do to become a Christian or to grow as a Christian. That era is gone.

Now the average unchurched person arrives knowing almost nothing about Christianity, what to do to become a Christian or how to grow as a Christian.

To understand how radically things have shifted, imagine you converted to Hinduism. How would you know you’ve actually become a Hindu? What’s your next step? Exactly.

Just remember that the next time a completely unchurched person begins to attend your church.

At Connexus Church, where I serve, we reorganized our approach to new people around two key phrases: “I’m New” and “Take a Step.” We’re doing everything we can to ensure

people understand how to become a Christian, how to engage in spiritual growth and what steps they can take to help them grow.

We even set up two hosted kiosks in the foyer under the phrases “I’m New” and “Take a Step.” Our trained guest services people help orient guests around what step might be best for them to take next. Leaders, if you’re not clear, no one else is clear either.

9. Relying on what you’ve learned in the past

I suppose at one time there was a day when seminary adequately trained church leaders for what was ahead. That day has long since passed.

The basics—biblical knowledge, theology and the likes—don’t change dramatically. And shouldn’t. That foundation is reliable years, even decades, later. But there’s a growing gap between what leaders need to know about the culture and what they actually know. Some seminaries are catching up, but with change happening faster than ever, every leader needs to become a self-learner.

So how do you keep up?

Here are three ways I keep up and try to help you stay current, both as a fellow learner and a content creator.

1. Podcasts

Eighteen months ago, I started a Leadership Podcast ... largely because the conversations I was having with key leaders were changing how I approached leadership and ministry. (see The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, free in iTunes.)

First, I wanted everyone to be able to hear what key leaders were telling me. And second, I wanted an excuse to have more great conversations with key leaders. Hence, the podcast.

The podcasts are an interview format in which I interview top leaders about church trends on a weekly basis to stay sharp personally, but also to help you.

Other leaders also have their own leadership podcasts: Josh Gagnon, Craig Groeschel, Andy Stanley, Perry Noble, Rich Birch and the great people at Church Leaders. I personally listen to ALL of these podcasts. They help me stay sharp.

2. Conferences

Conferences that really dissect practical leadership are also essential. “Rethink Leadership” is a brand new conference in Atlanta I’ll be a part of April 27-29. You can sign up now for an intimate, senior-leaders-only gathering with today’s top leaders like

Andy Stanley, Pete Wilson, Reggie Joiner, Jeff Henderson, Leonce Crump, Jon Acuff, Brad Lomenick and more live and in-person.

(You can register for Rethink Leadership at www.rethinkgroup.org)

3. Current Reading

I read a lot of books. Many are timeless in nature (great leadership is). But there are also few that can help you digest changing trends in leadership. That's exactly why I wrote my latest book, *Lasting Impact: 7 Powerful Conversations That Can Help Your Church Grow*. It's all about what's changing in the church and how to respond.

Bottom line?

However you decide to stay current, you have to stay current.

Carey Nieuwhof is founding pastor of Connexus Church and is author of several books, including his latest best-selling work, *Lasting Impact: 7 Powerful Conversations That Will Help Your Church Grow*.