

A "Self-Service" Church is a Contradiction in Terms

Time magazine's March 24, 2008, cover article, "10 Ideas That Are Changing the World," showed that we live in a world where self-service technology trumps the need for customer service. Listen to these words:

Consider the last time you rang up your own purchase at Wal-Mart, checked into a hotel at a kiosk or bought a ticket from a machine in the lobby of a movie theater. Companies love self-service for the money it saves, and with consumers finally playing along, the need to interact with human beings is quickly disappearing.



It is that last phrase that most alarms me: *"the need to interact with human beings is quickly disappearing."* Think about it—we can carry out our business at the store, the ATM, the gas station, the movie theater, the hotel, and the airport without direct contact with another human being. The Internet also makes it possible to shop for Christmas, take a class, sell a car, and visit a library—again, without interaction with other people.

Now, I fear that this trend is influencing the church.

I tread somewhat softly here because I am not one who is generally opposed to innovation in the church. I think screens and videos and PowerPoint presentations can be utilized well in the service of the church. I am comfortable with using instruments other than a piano and organ in a worship service, and I enjoy praise choruses. I strongly affirm Sunday school, but I also see the value of off-campus small groups. I am not opposed to most multi-site approaches, and I do not believe that increased size is automatically a hindrance to being a New Testament church.

What I fear, though, is that we have forgotten the importance of *each other* in the process of fighting for relevance in a changing world. We promote anonymity so that guests are not

intimidated (and I do not disagree entirely with this thinking), but we too often allow anonymity to continue into church membership. What usually begins with a public commitment to a local congregation is seldom united with intentional discipleship and deliberate relationship building. Small groups are available, but attendance is optional. Many prayer concerns are more an unrecognized name on a prayer list than the name of a Christian brother or sister for whom we care. Accountability among the body of Christ is assumed to be judging at best, and invasive at worst. Fellowship is reduced to a perfunctory "Hi!" when the pastor encourages greetings during a set time in the worship service. The result may still be a gathering of people – but it is a gathering I can join without *really* interacting with other human beings.

Maybe I fear this trend because I recognize my own tendency to be a loner. I am, in the words of my favorite country music star Reba McEntire (who is, by the way, the most talented singer out there), "a survivor." I learned early how to take care of myself, and it is easy for me to rely on my training and abilities to reach my goals. "I can do this on my own," "I can take care of myself," and "I don't need anybody else" are common mottos for those of us who rely too heavily on self. Interaction with other people only slows the process, consumes our energy, and risks failure.

How grateful I am that God continues to show me differently! I did not realize it then, but I needed that uneducated deacon in my first church to show me how to really love God. The Sunday school director who gave me a love for teaching God's Word changed my life. The young preacher who saw me as a role model challenged me to walk holy in all areas of my life. Accountability partners have pushed me in my spiritual disciplines. Even the angry church member who not so gently (in fact, not so "Christianly") confronted me over a disagreement taught me something about communicating better.

Today, my pastors challenge me with the Word, and my students test my faith with their willingness to go anywhere for the sake of the gospel. I learn every day that God graciously intersects my life with *people* whose influence I need—believers who love me enough to correct me, check my arrogance, teach me, and join me in the work of the Great Commission.

What is the application to biblical church growth? Simply stated, participation in a small group cannot be optional. It is in the small group—regardless of the size of the church or the number of the church's locations—that we build relationships, apply the Word, share concerns, and develop accountability. Through healthy evangelistic small groups, we also

learn to see non-believers as sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36), ever seeking to invite them into a relationship with Jesus and His followers. Small groups are the place where we interact intentionally with the Word *and with people*.

Take away this interaction with other human beings, and the local church is somehow no longer the church. Indeed, a "self-service" church is a contradiction in terms.

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