

RESPONSE TO OBSERVATIONS OF THE EVANGELISTIC METHODS OF WILLOW
GLEN BAPTIST CHURCH + CITY CHURCH BY KEVIN PATAO

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Introduction

Kevin Patao is a beloved member of our church and ministry. I have enjoyed working with him above all others. I have met with him nearly every week for over a year working through his growth in faith in Jesus Christ. I myself, once did a similar assignment while attending Denver Seminary when I was a member of Bear Valley Church in Lakewood, CO. It is a bit daunting to attempt to describe the approach to ministry of an entire church. I am appreciative of his efforts to provide a critique and know that we will be a stronger church because of it.

On Our Philosophy

One remark should be stated overall about his critique. His critique is essentially based upon a single sermon I preached in late January of 2011. I am flattered that it made such an impression on him. He did accurately capture the heart and spirit of the message, to not withdraw from the city but to engage it with a faithful Christian presence. However, it is an inadequate and incomplete picture of our ministry philosophy. It was designed to challenge a church culture that has had a tendency to withdraw and be isolationist. Nearly every message we preach contains encouragements to evangelize. In fact, our summer series that paralleled Mark Driscoll's *Death by Love* was designed to broaden people's perspective of the gospel to a variety of real life issues for the purposes that they can better communicate the gospel to their friends and neighbors. Simply put, one sermon does not represent our view.

Our actual philosophy of evangelism is more accurately stated to be a missional model of ministry that places a premium on relational evangelism predicated on our own individual and corporate commitment to live in light of the gospel. The constitution

would not contain any statements on the philosophy for evangelism and never will for obvious reasons. Motto of “One church in two locations” is a short-term commitment to promote the unity of merging what was two separate churches. It is not our vision statement. The members of our church who ran the event known as the Tuesday Night Dinner was occurring prior to them attending our church. I disagree that the event was evangelistic in nature. It was fellowship in nature considering very few who attended were non-Christians. It was a fantastic ministry and I encouraged and challenged them to get more non-Christians to attend.

On Our Effectiveness

It is true that for many Christians their evangelism strategy is inviting people to church. It is a gross overstatement to say it “never has been and will never be an effective way to evangelize people.” It has been, and will continue to be an effective method as long as the gospel is preached. The *real* issue is between exclusive reliance on attractional methods characterized by the church-growth movement vs. the contemporary emphasis on missional methods. “Inviting” has not been working at Willow Glen Baptist Church because many no longer have significant relationships with non-Christians. This is also true for those among the “SLO” group at our downtown city Church.

However, there are many people in our church who do have significant relationships with non-Christians. I would say our strategy is working very well for them. We have seen more and more non-Christians attending our church and Christians who lie on the “margins.” By margins, I mean they are self-professed Christians but whose

lack of commitment to Christ and lifestyle suggests otherwise. This has been an encouraging trend and fits what we are trying to do well.

He is probably largely unaware of our efforts through an amazing couple, Justin and Victoria Nelson, who recently started a church service using our sermons in a intensive medical care facility for children born with severe physical problems. They have done great work in proclaiming the name of Jesus and embodying it in their care for the families there, all because they have had to trust God greatly through the medical problems of their own daughter.

We have no requirements or expectations that people live in particular neighborhoods. We advocate people connecting with and reaching people their immediate neighbors. I do not consider where people live to be an effective strategy in itself. It must be combined with explicit and clear proclamation of the gospel.

On Suggestions

It would be very beneficial for us to have more people in the immediate vicinity of our church locations. This will take some time to develop because Willow Glen and Downtown are in two of the hardest demographics for us to reach presently - very wealthy and predominantly spanish speaking lower income families. In America, we will always battle problems with a consumeristic mentality but this does not necessarily mean we adopt a modern urban monastery as a strategy.

Conclusions

Kevin has rightfully identified many of the hurdles we need to jump in order to effectively equip the saints to proclaim the gospel. We struggle with the same things many churches do - consumerism, isolationism, shallow understandings of the gospel,

shallow application of the gospel, emphasis on social justice and neglecting explicit preaching of Jesus death and resurrection for *their* sins, and an overall lack of significant and meaningful contact with non-Christians. It is clear that we need to do a better job of communicating our foundational principles. Part of this is something I personally aim to resolve in the membership class I teach, as well as efforts to equip the leaders of our Gospel Groups. But Kevin also undersold his own contribution to our evangelism. He is a gifted and natural evangelist whom we constantly praise for his courage to lead the way in living among non-Christians, and boldly proclaiming the glorious riches of God's grace to us through Jesus Christ. It is the work God has done in his personal life, and his humility in it, that has been the greatest spark to evangelism in our church. His own life is a testament that we are at least getting something right, personal transformation naturally leads to better and more effective evangelism.