

OBSERVATIONS OF THE EVANGELISTIC METHODS OF WGB / DT CITY CHURCH

A Paper

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By

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Introduction

This written assignment is hereby presented to the Elder Board and Pastoral Leadership of Willow Glen Baptist Church / Downtown City Church as a course requirement with the ultimate desire and intent to help further the Kingdom of God by making disciples and proclaiming His Gospel to the City of San Jose and beyond. Here within contains my humble observations regarding the philosophy, practice and effectiveness of the evangelistic techniques of the church as well as some suggestions for greater impact.

Philosophy

Having never read the constitution, I am unsure what the previous official philosophy of evangelism was for Willow Glen Baptist Church. In regards to Downtown City Church, the official philosophy on evangelism comes from Jeremiah 29:5-7 which states: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Downtown also adopted a set of values that were developed for community groups (gospel groups) that revolve around three simple ideas: communion, community and mission. In all aspects of fellowship, whether in Sunday service or gospel group settings, the philosophy was to practice communion, in community with each other while on mission to the world. The expression of this was and continues to be done at the discretion of the gospel group leaders.

When both locations united in August of 2010, Willow Glen adopted a motto that is currently painted in the foyer: “One Church, Two Locations, For the World.” This motto has not been officially stated or presented to Downtown. At the same time, Willow Glen adopted the “communion, community and mission” values of Downtown as well as converted the majority of what were formally

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small groups into gospel groups. There have been no changes to the official philosophy of Downtown and I am unaware if the philosophy based on the above referenced passage from Jeremiah was adopted by Willow Glen.

Practice

During my time working in ministry at Willow Glen, there has been only one true application of evangelism at that location: inviting (as in, inviting people to come to a church function). Another identifiable application of evangelism, frequenting (as in, frequenting certain establishments to gain favor with fellow patrons or workers), cannot be put into its own category because ultimately this technique ends in inviting. The previous youth group was a perfect example of this method. Surprisingly, the shyest members of the group became effective participants in inviting their friends from school. Likewise, participants in the college and career group were known to invite friends and colleagues from school and work to church events. Because Willow Glen has been around for many years, certain events such as VBS and Harvest Carnival have remained as the community comes by the droves to participate in them yearly.

As for Downtown, inviting also seems to be the same basis for evangelism. The only difference between the inviting done with Willow Glen and Downtown is that most people being invited to Downtown are already believers. This would be expected since most church plants lack the resources necessary to provide opportunities for evangelism. Without a solid core of believers in a congregation, there would not be enough manpower to help with evangelism. Nonetheless, Downtown has been provided many opportunities to evangelize the community, mainly because the Sunday services are held in an elementary school cafeteria. Staff members from Downtown have actively participated as yard duties at recess with the kids at school and other school festivals. Lastly, a short-lived evangelistic opportunity was created by some members of Downtown called Tuesday Night Dinner (TND). This was done in conjunction with some of their friends who were participants in another local

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church. TND was initially used to provide an atmosphere for new believers and non-believers. As them members from Downtown running TND became busier with their careers and school, they ultimately abandoned the dinner altogether.

Effectiveness

To state that the evangelistic techniques are ineffective would be an understatement, but to use the numbers of new believers as a litmus test for that effectiveness would sell the mystery of the Gospel short. The fact of the matter is that although the philosophy of evangelism seems good on paper, the practice of evangelism does not reflect the philosophy and is thereby rendered ineffective. Inviting people to church has never been and will never be an effective way to evangelize people. I speak from my own experience and can say from my testimony that I am the only person to remain working with Willow Glen / Downtown City Church that has been “invited” in the last six years.

If we analyze Jeremiah 29:5-7, we can see that there was an effective trend with Willow Glen when they were first established. Reading Jeremiah 29:5, we can see that the history of Willow Glen reflects building and working in the community by some of its own elders. Some families have faithfully remained even though the hardest economic times. Continuing with verse six, we also see marriage and growing families as part of the history of Willow Glen. However, many of the only people remaining in the neighborhood are the older saints. All of their children have either moved away to other parts of San Jose or do not participate in church anymore. This seems to be the main disconnect in evangelistic philosophy. Verse seven brings everything to a close. It has been the tendency of the majority of people of Willow Glen to seek their own welfare instead of the welfare of the city. This has been reflected in the mentality of all of the people who have left Willow Glen because of their personal dissatisfaction with the church. Although there have been some opportunities working with other churches and community outreach, this has never been established regularly.

The problem with doing the same analysis with Downtown is that the church is too young to

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see any true application of the Jeremiah 29 philosophy. However, it is clear that many of the younger, single individuals that have been coming to Downtown tend to have the same habits of the children of the older generation spoken of at Willow Glen. Other than one family that lives a block away from the Downtown location, seven of about 35 members live in downtown, all of whom are on the staff. I have had conversations with some of the singles attending Downtown about possibly renting a house together, but they have expressed the fact that they essentially like living where they live. The disconnect that they have with the neighborhood that they live in and the church location that they attend is further exemplified by their relationships. Many of these people know nothing of their own neighbors and know nothing about the surrounding neighborhood at Downtown.

Suggestions

One of the hardest things for me to do is to offer suggestions when I have never truly proven myself as an effective evangelist. Therefore, if Willow Glen and Downtown are truly going to adopt the philosophy of Jeremiah 29:5-7 and then apply their three-fold values of communion, community and mission, we need to bridge the philosophy and practice of evangelism to render it effective.

First and foremost, we need to encourage any and all able-bodied members of both locations to live and establish themselves in the neighborhood to which each church is called. If we do not show ourselves as people willing to be “in the world” but not “of the world” we cannot effectively be salt and light in the world. We need to encourage people to leave behind the American way of thinking for effective communal living. The city of San Jose has been effective in producing a large city with urban living. As San Jose continues to develop, the tendency is to spread to the far reaches of the city to build huge houses with large lots and tons of privacy. We need to realize that to effectively share the Good News with people means to give up privacy and be uncomfortable. Jesus gave up His privacy and his throne in heaven to come down and live among us. It is the least that we can do as followers of him to humble ourselves and do the same.

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Secondly, we need to encourage fellowshiping with our neighbors. As a single guy, I have had many opportunities to provide dinner for my downstairs neighbors and even share a beer with another fellow single in my building. It is understandable that many of us come home from work and school with a desire to rest, but we give up these chances to rub elbows with people on a day to day basis. People live their lives on weekdays when they have to work. In fact, if as a church we lived in tighter communities, we could effectively do this with our neighbors together. When Jesus interacted with his disciples, he found them at work fishing or collecting taxes. We should be willing to meet with people in the middle of their days or during their break hours in order to share the Gospel. Case in point, just last evening as I was coming home from work I had a conversation with a neighbor of mine that found out she had diabetes. This provided me with an opportunity to talk to her about my experience with diabetes, minister to her and pray for her that I would never done if I did not stop to talk to her.

Lastly, it needs to be explicit that in all aspects of evangelism we need to seek the welfare of our city that includes the welfare of our gospel community. This does not mean that we neglect our families or our own needs. However, this does mean that when we see a need, we provide for it. Gospel groups can be an effective way to provide for our community when one cannot do so on an individual basis. My gospel group has provided for those in our community as well as those in our group on more than one occasion. This practical application of showing love for one another is essentially how unbelievers see an expression of the Gospel as stated in John 13:35.

Conclusion

As this paper is only an observation and evaluation of the evangelist methods used by Willow Glen and Downtown, this is not meant to be a critique as much as it is meant to be as a basis as a guide to understanding what we should do to integrate our evangelistic philosophy with our evangelistic practices. Ultimately, test of time will tell as to whether or not any evangelistic technique can actually

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help bring forth the Gospel message to the world. However, to reduce evangelism to a technique is to sinfully miss the point of the Good News that is meant for all to hear.