

Being Clear is not Consumerism

PHIL CAMPBELL

According to recent reports, global hamburger giant McDonalds is planning to copy the old corner-store strategy of selling newspapers, milk and bread in a bid to attract more customers.

"Our whole strategy is focusing on customers and what customers want," says McDonald's CEO Guy Russo, "and it may not come between two pieces of bun." If the customer wants to buy it, McDonalds wants to sell it.

Now don't get me wrong. Customer-centred marketing strategies have no place in church. But perhaps good old fashioned "other-person-centredness" does. And maybe – just maybe – it might be time to ask some tough questions about how what we do in church is perceived by visitors and newcomers. Maybe it's time to simply stop being selfish?

The last twenty years have seen the growth of a number of "church models" which place a high value on engaging "spiritual seekers." At Chicago's Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels pioneered specialised "Seeker Services" with high intensity music and drama designed to hook the typical "unchurched Harry and Mary." Hybels' worthy goal is to turn "ordinary unchurched people into full devoted followers of Jesus." Meanwhile, established Willow Creek members are expected to attend an entirely separate service for "believers," on the assumption that seekers and believers have entirely different needs.

On the other extreme, more traditional denominations have little or no regard for seekers or newcomers – an issue hotly debated at the recent Anglican General Synod in Perth. Bishop Andrew Curnow was blunt in his criticism of the unwelcoming nature of churches – the confronting rituals, cold welcomes at the door, and the 'undrinkable coffee.' He urged Anglicans to have an open view of church planting and 'have a go at anything that will work'.

But what if you didn't have to go to the McDonald's extreme of "having a go at anything that will work" – but you were prepared to make at least some key changes? What if you could change the "unwelcoming nature" of churches in a few simple steps that were consistent with the gospel? For starters, let's get rid of the undrinkable coffee – if you're saving a few dollars by serving Caterers Blend, Pablo or International Roast, throw it out and invest in a large jar of Nescafe or Moccona. Better still, brew up a great-smelling pot with freshly ground beans.

That's the easy part. The rest require some real change. And it might be painful. But what if we were convinced that newcomers, seekers, and long-term Christians could all grow in the same soil? What if all we had to do was make sure our church meetings made sense – that our teaching was made understandable and clear? What if we did our best to be open to newcomers each week, and made sure they could follow what was happening so they'd feel genuinely welcome? The results may well be revolutionary. And will long-term Christians shrivel under this fat-reduced, jargon-

free diet? Not at all. On the contrary, they'll grow by hearing the bible taught in straightforward, plain English, and they'll learn to be outward looking.

Here are some simple things to work on.

- Be alert. Scan constantly for arriving newcomers.
- Be sensitive. Some people don't want to be swamped with attention when they come to church for the first time. Read their body language, and be sensitive to cues. Respond to their preferences rather than your "prepared script."
- Avoid "in-group" references during the announcements. Explain who is who, even though 99% of the congregation will already know.
- Choose songs that are easy and enjoyable to sing, but understand that un-churched visitors may not be used to singing.
- Use language that's accessible and understandable to the average person, especially in sermons and prayers. Always define theological terms in plain language, though not in a way that's condescending. Never expect that people "should know" what the bible says.
- Don't go on for too long.

Our goal is simply that the average newcomer will say, "Because I understand everything that's going on, I feel that I'm part of this group." It's a goal which echoes the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:23, when he urges the Corinthians not to neglect the newcomer in their enthusiasm for "spiritual expression." What's the point of talking in words no-one can understand, ask Paul. "If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, won't they say that you're out of your mind?"

Phil Campbell leads the ministry team at Mitchelton Presbyterian Church, a church that's trying to be welcoming and understandable to newcomers.