



MentorNet # 81

IS IT TIME FOR YOUR CHURCH TO ADD A 2ND TRACK?

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Is the average age in your church or denomination climbing ominously? If so, then it's probably time to do what others have done to reverse the trend that leads only to decline.

Sandra timidly enters a worship meeting. She is feeling ashamed of last night's escapade, and is hoping God can forgive her. Hoping desperately! She tries to sit out of sight, but two elderly ladies spot her and whisper. Sandra wonders, "What are they saying? Is it my dress? Hair too mussy? Rings in the wrong part of my body?" She waits until no one is watching and slips out of the meeting.

In another part of town, Walter admits to his friend, "I'm growing weary of our selfish lifestyle; it has no purpose." His friend sighs. "Me, too. Let's try church. Maybe God can fill that vacuum in our souls." They enter a meeting and praise music begins. Walter grimaces and whispers, "They must think God enjoys that ugly noise!" His friend replies, "No wonder. Nearly everyone's geriatric." The sermon begins, and Walter mutters quietly, "Why does that guy hide up there behind that huge pulpit desk? Maybe he thinks it gives authority to his dogmatic assertions." Walter's friend answers, "I have questions I'd like to discuss about his topic, but he only does monologues without discussion. Let's go get a beer."

When such things happen, it is time to launch the second track. But why a second track? Why not simply adjust the first track? Church history, ancient and recent, shows that it is normally easier, and it causes less friction, to let a few venture into new territory, than to force all the believers in an older church to abandon their cherished, conventional ways.

If a Western church's name has any of these four words in it, then it's probably in decline (we grant the exceptions): *Memorial*, *First*, *Saint* or *United*. All four names look backwards to something that happened in the past. Looking back is helpful when you want to examine a church's roots, but looking back can paralyze a congregation by keeping it from initiating new ventures that God requires in His Word.

Here are steps that can help start this second track:

- 1. Let those on the second track simply do what Jesus and His apostles require of any congregation, without forcing them to do anything else.**

It's so easy! There's nothing novel about it. Throughout history, God has launched godly people on a new path: Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Ezra, Christ Himself and Cornelius. The apostle Paul provided a striking example of a radically different track among New Testament churches. In Galatia he severely

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reprimanded those who were being circumcised, yet just a few miles away “he (Paul) took him (Timothy) and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts” Acts 16:3. In both cases in order to respect local culture, Paul provided separate tracks. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “Where the Spirit is there is liberty.” To apply this today, simply free up church workers on the second track from any rules that keep a new church or cell group from obeying Jesus’ commands, especially his commands to baptize and to serve Communion.

2. Never vote on whether a church will obey Jesus’ commands; just obey.

Since Jesus exercises “all authority in heaven and earth,” to put His command to a vote would give a “majority rule” authority above that of our King of Kings. That would be a form of apostasy.

Take the joyful plunge, and let your brothers who prefer to stay on the first track lie beside still waters. Bless them; don’t argue; just let them know gently that you’re obeying Jesus.

3. Let those who shun institutional church gather to worship in a New Testament way.

What many folk are looking for in a church is exactly what the New Testament describes. They want...

Experience. Let seekers meet the living, present, powerful Christ, as the apostles helped folk do. Many want more than to have you teach them abstract ideas about Him.

Interaction. Meet in groups that are small enough to heed the New Testament “one another” commands. These include teaching, edifying, strengthening, correcting and consoling *one another* instead of sitting as passive hearers of monologues.

Connection. Praise God with songs that everyone can easily sing that say “we” and “us” instead of the excessively individualistic “I” and “me.”

4. Go out looking for the receptive folk whom God has prepared to meet you.

Your church members will probably have to step outside of their usual social venue to befriend folk who are poorer and less educated, as both Jesus and His apostles did in many ways.

5. Invite believers in your congregation to learn to make such a second track.

You might say to your church members, “If others won’t come to our church with its beautiful traditions and forms, then we will take our church to them”. Then do so. Invite them to come as volunteers to hold small start-up meetings as a kind of beachhead among receptive people.

Orient these new “workers” by gathering in a home or restaurant where the people live that you plan to serve. This will accustom the workers to serve in that new environment.

Let younger believers plan activities that create a party atmosphere. Provide food, games or whatever will make a festive gathering such as Zacheus and Levi did when they invited their friends to meet Jesus. Most seekers enjoy such a gathering. Avoid it becoming a mere Bible study.

6. When new folk get involved and want to bring their friends, let them start a new group.

Your objective should be to see hundreds, eventually thousands, of new folk come to faith in Jesus. Most will never want to come and sit in your chapel or auditorium, so you should guide them in starting many new, little gatherings wherever their friends or relatives will feel comfortable. In order to absorb 1000s of new believers, the early church had them gather from house to house to enjoy the sacraments and loving interaction. Some 35 years later, God arranged to have the temple torn down, so that His people would adjust to the second track of that time.