

Insights

A SERIES OF THOUGHT-PROVOKING ARTICLES
ADDRESSING THE KEY ISSUES OF COMMUNITY OUTREACH
IN NEW ZEALAND IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THINK THE ATTRACTIVE CHURCH MODEL IS HISTORY?

IT IS ALL THAT HAS EVER WORKED

BY HOWARD WEBB, DIRECTOR LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR TRUST

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NEW ZEALAND IS A NATION OF EARLY ADOPTERS and that goes for church too. We are voracious readers and if we like an idea we are willing to give it a go because our churches are generally small and light on their feet.

A lot of our reading material comes out of the States and we need to recognise that many of the books we read were written to address issues in an American church culture that are quite different from ours.

I have seen a lot of material recently that tries to pitch 'attractional' church against 'missional' church as though one is the failed past and the other is the hopeful future. This transcript from a video clip promoting a book by a pair of well-known American authors is a case in point:

Sometimes we need to shatter the old, even if it's all we've ever known. For years many churches have adopted the attractional model, where 'if you build it, they will come'. We sang that it only takes a spark to get a fire going, and our fire was the church. So we break the bank to prop up our buildings and programmes, but the lost still aren't coming. So now, we must live among them – in our neighbourhoods, our schools, our workplaces... everywhere. It will require much more of us. More than friendly smiles for an hour on Sunday. It is about being a missional church – releasing incarnational people into the world. Yet it's also about coming together to refresh, to regroup, to renew our collective calling to change the world. As Jesus encouraged us to imagine like a child, we need to reclaim the courage to be scattered. It's time to explode the status quo, to break free from religion, to discover the adventure of missionary life, to learn how to fly – and together to build a gathered and scattered church.

There is a lot to agree with in these words. Being the incarnational people of God indeed requires more than friendly smiles for an hour on Sunday and we each certainly need to

discover afresh the adventure of living a 'missionary life'. The rhythm and cycle of being the church gathered and the church scattered is important. However, the polarising of 'attractional' and 'missional' church is disquieting.

TAKING SOMEONE ELSE'S MEDICINE CAN BE BAD FOR YOU

[THE WEALTHIEST NATION ON EARTH](#) is also one of the most generous on earth.

Additionally it has the highest church attendance rates in the western world. Church ideas that capture the imagination find the resources to be implemented and widely disseminated - and there are sometimes unintended consequences.

The good-idea-gone-wrong in this instance is the peculiarly American model of attractional church. Its beginnings were well-intentioned, but the problem it has become is outlined in the blurb – churches pouring money into buildings and programmes, believing 'if we build it, they will come' without any sense of personal mission on the part of the folks in the pews.

[WHAT IS THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT?](#) The great majority of church-goers attend churches of modest means with a membership of under a hundred. We have never seriously imagined that the community will be flooding through our doors to enjoy our worn carpet, chipped formica benchtops and shoestring budget programmes. For years we have been preoccupied with how to carry Christ into the community, not how to get the community to come to church.

What we need to understand is that the backlash against a very narrow 'build it and they will come' model of attractional church is not aimed at us. However, if we get caught up in the disdainful rhetoric around attractional church without discerning the true object of that rhetoric we are in danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

LABELS ARE NOT THE CONTENT OF AN IDEA

['ATTRACTIVE CHURCH' HAS COME TO BE A LABEL](#) for a particular failed model of church that has turned out to be neither attractive nor truly church. The label is misleading.

Labels that are inappropriately used can be confusing. For instance, in New Zealand we have a power company called 'Contact' and a telecommunications company called 'Spark'. These

labels make for an interesting marketing strategy but would be completely misleading if taken at face value.

However, labels are merely evocative of a bigger idea, they are not the idea themselves. When it comes to 'attractional church' what I am seeing is not just a rejection of the narrow model of church given the label, but a rejection of the whole big picture idea that church must be attractional. This overcompensation blinds us to some important truths.

GATHERED AND SCATTERED CHURCH

THOSE OPPOSING THE FAILED MODEL OF ATTRACTIVE CHURCH could conclude that the fault lies with an imperfect understanding of what it means to be attractional. After all, the early proponents of 'attractional church' such as Bill Hybels were indeed being missional. If we are having conversations in the world about Jesus with a view to growing His church, how do we make church more accessible and 'user-friendly' to those seekers who are on the journey with us? This was and remains an important question.

However, where the conversation seems to be going is that the concept of attractional church is itself wrong and should be abandoned. For the critics of attractional church, the direction of the mission arrow points the wrong way. Ministry happens out in the world where we live, work and play, not here in church with us. As church, we gather to scatter; we come to church to 'refresh, regroup and renew our collective calling' for the real work of individual mission in our weekday world.

I would like to suggest that the 'gather to scatter' approach is not particularly biblical and is impractical as a model for long-term ministry. The only model of church that has a track record of success over millennia is an attractional model, in which we scatter in order to gather.

SCATTERING TO GATHER

In this model the gathered church is called to be a witness to the world. The purpose of the gathered church is to glorify God and to be a living demonstration of the power of the gospel to its neighbours – to be a 'kingdom hotspot', if you will. On my own I can show how

a citizen of the Kingdom behaves and I can demonstrate my allegiance to the King, but to truly model the kingdom takes all of us.

We make disciples by immersing others in our body life. Their spiritual formation comes from both what is taught by us and what is caught experientially from us. In other words, the locus of mission is not primarily 'out there' when I am on my own; the bigger part happens when we are all in together.

GATHERED CHURCH IS MEANT TO BE ATTRACTIVE

WHAT JESUS SAID

In Matthew 5, Jesus says to his gathered disciples *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. .. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."* The 'city on a hill' metaphor makes it plain that we together we are the light of the world.

Jesus also said that the watching world would know that we are His disciples because they will observe our love for each other (John 13:35). He anticipated that onlookers would see the gathered church being church and be drawn to it.

WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH DID

There is no finer example of the power of gathered, attractive church than in Acts 2:42-47. It is worth quoting in full:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Note the emphasis on gathering:

- The believers didn't just want to meet for an hour once a week. They wanted to live together.

- There is a cycle between the temple courts (where they gathered, worshipped and performed miracles in full view of the not-yet-believers) and their homes, where they gathered to offer radical hospitality.
- This powerful demonstration of the kingdom in action saw daily conversions and the body growing.

GATHERED, ATTRACTIVE CHURCH WROTE OUR HISTORY

How did Christianity become the official religion of the Roman Empire? We are told that a turning point was how Christians responded to a great plague of Rome. While everyone else ran for the hills, Christians banded together to care for the sick and dying. They demonstrated what civic duty for citizens of the kingdom of God looks like.

Through the Dark Ages it was gatherings of Christians in monastic orders that provided for the poor, offered shelter to the traveller and were centres of medicine and education.

Organised Christianity, motivated by the love of God, built hospitals, schools, universities and so much more we simply take for granted as part of civilised life.

ONLY A FAMILY CAN ANSWER OUR SOCIETY'S GREATEST NEED – ALONENESS

I speak of aloneness rather than loneliness because you can be alone despite the people around you and your many friends on Facebook. While we all recognise that loneliness is a bad thing, we are sometimes blind to the way our individualistic culture and our values push people to aloneness.

An article in *The Listener* (July 2016) is entitled '*The Lonely Society: The Last Taboo*' and points out that we have an epidemic of loneliness in our society. We all crave deep connection with other human beings but we live in a self-focused, attention-deficit world.

The lonely people in our world need a family where they can belong and be loved unconditionally. Who other than the church is willing to offer this kind of radical hospitality? This is perhaps the greatest missional opportunity of our age.

MISSIONERS NEED MORE THAN ENCOURAGEMENT. THEY NEED TEAM.

The 'gather to scatter' model tends to imagine us as lone rangers in our individual worlds, each contending for the gospel. This perpetuates aloneness in mission, which God never intended for us as our primary mode. We were always intended to be part of a body, part of

a team; and though first encounters will inevitably find me alone with someone whom God has sent across my path I need to know that my church stands behind me in a substantive way.

Mission involves initiating and developing relationships, which are hard work. They sap your energy and drain your time. All of us have only limited capacity to add new relationships to our lives, especially if they are 'high need'. On the other hand, there is a seasonal tide to relationships – I don't need to connect with everyone in my life all at once!

The only sustainable way is to be able to share our relationships with others. I may not have enough open bumps on my Lego block to sustain new relationships being clipped onto me, but if we all push our Lego blocks together there will be enough open bumps between us to befriend many more people and share the load. This has the double benefit of immediately introducing seekers to a wide network of Christian influence, making it far more likely that they will be willing to take the leap of faith.

There's also a bigger question. Should someone come to Christ with me, what's next? Ahead lies a lifelong process of discipleship. Am I expected to undertake this process alone? I need my church to be a welcoming attractive place where my new disciple can be introduced to the rest of my support network and enjoy the spiritually formative reality of being part of the body of Christ.

What if my church has not thought about the needs of me and my new friend and how to support us? What if I know deep down that he may not be warmly welcomed and engaged appropriately? My only choice is to build nurturing spaces outside of my church for him. Having to build an alternative 'church' requires huge effort from me and undermines the credibility of the wider church to my friend.

WHY ANY OF THIS MATTERS

That we have competing beliefs that the primary locus for mission is either 'out there' or 'in here' is not trivial. Your church and mine will try to gear and structure itself for success based on what it believes.

We need an integrated vision that brings these two poles together. How do we shape our church to both help everyone be a missionary in their world and also itself be a missional agent by welcoming and supporting the new friends their missionaries make?

Nevertheless, if I have to pick a side it is the church gathered rather than the church scattered that has the most profound missional impact. The end point of mission is to draw people to be 'in here' with us so that we **all** can grow, contribute and become fruitful. It's not a one-way street. The seeker grows through exposure to kingdom-lifers and we the church grow through practicing hospitality and forbearance, learning to see through the eyes of the seeker. The seeker among us is a catalyst that helps us experience body life to the fullest.

Strategies for mission that only point 'out there' leave open the possibility that church can be a comfortable bubble of homogeneity for me and my Christian friends. Taking seriously the radical hospitality and personal involvement required to also be missional 'in here' is less comfortable, much more rewarding and ultimately the only way we advance the kingdom of God.



HOWARD WEBB IS A DIRECTOR OF LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR TRUST AND HAS BEEN HELPING NZ CHURCHES ENGAGE WITH THEIR COMMUNITY FOR 20 YEARS. SEE MORE AT WWW.LOVEYOURNEIGHBOUR.NZ