

What Is Going On In Those Other Churches?

[The local pastor often wonders what is happening in the other churches of his community. David Marshall is the pastor of Hamilton Reformed Baptist Church in New Zealand. Recently he needed to take a break from the rigours of pastoral ministry and so was granted a month's leave. It was not convenient to go away for a holiday and so he chose instead to potter around the house and garden. At the suggestion of a colleague he decided to have a complete break and not even attend services at his own church. He took the opportunity to visit other evangelical churches in the city. He did not seek out the more radical fellowships but visited a selection of the more conservative evangelical churches. This is his report of what he witnessed.]

Several trends quickly emerged. I noticed that standard equipment in most of New Zealand's evangelical churches includes a band, consisting of piano, electric guitars and drums, an overhead projector and a series of praise chorus overheads. Services begin with an attractive young woman leading the congregation in worship. She clutches a microphone and sings with passion (repeating each song at least once in case we missed anything) while staring with eyes half closed at the ceiling.

Interestingly only some of the congregation actually sing. This is not a problem because there are several people either on stage or in the front seats with microphones to augment the output of the instruments and the service leader. Everything is very informal.

Casual clothes are the order of the day. The service leader squeezes her eyes closed every now and again and utters a short but zealous prayer asking that God will help us to worship and serve Him.

The Scriptures are not read. There is no discernable pastoral prayer and especially no corporate confession of sin.

The Lords Prayer is not used, let alone any of the Creeds of the early church.

In most of the churches I visited no traditional hymns were sung. However I was frankly surprised to find that evangelical churches now have the religious equivalent of commercials. These are known here in New Zealand as promos, that is, promotions. Coming activities are brought to the congregations attention by use of skits and puppets. Anything aimed at young people is described as 'awesome'.

In one church we were treated to a video promoting a national Alpha Program outreach. Nicky Gumbel himself urged us to support this worthy cause.

The sermons we heard varied in the degree of fidelity to Scripture, but I was pleased to find that all were based on a Biblical passage. Few contained much by way of

doctrinal content. All were delivered in a conversational tone of voice and stressed personal application.

The Notice Sheet in one Open Brethren church I attended informed us that the (male) elders had decided to recognise two women elders. These were the first women appointed to this position in this church's history.

I had noticed that apart from the preacher, the man who rode a unicycle through the church as part of a promo and one other male youth leader, everyone who appeared up front was female. The pastor spoke on the Letter of Jude but apart from the first four verses which he read during his message no part of the letter was read to the congregation (1 Timothy 4:13 notwithstanding). The message was warm and full of meaty application, but he did not attempt to explain the central section of the letter and his application, though good, did not actually arise from the text.

In another Open Brethren church I happened to be reading the church Mission Statement on the front wall when a young girl bounced down the aisle on a pogo stick as part of a drama segment. One statement made in the Mission Statement struck me as very good. It said, 'As a church - we will worship reverently.' I was not sure what the drama piece was trying to say, but the speaker apparently realised the problem and explained it to us. It had no relevance to the sermon or anything else in the service.

The pastor of a Baptist Union church told me that his church was committed to implementing the principles of Rick Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Church." This book claims that a church can grow without compromising its message or mission. I attended an evening service at this church. The service was clearly directed to youth and I estimate that about ninety percent of the congregation was under 25. I could not help but be impressed. Most churches do not draw anywhere near this number of young people. It might seem mean-spirited to be critical and I would be the first to acknowledge that this church seems to be being used by God to win and build young people.

However I was not impressed with the lack of content of most of the choruses. At one point in the service I was not sure if the musicians on stage were singing to us or leading us in congregational singing. As I looked around the church it dawned on me that it was supposed to be congregational singing but that less than a third of those present were actually singing. Most of the young people were listening to a concert not engaging in congregational singing.

Here we had entertainment, not Christians at worship. Some of those who had not been singing were visibly impressed by a very good expositional message and so I would assume that were believers. Upon reflection I was also saddened to realise that the older people in the church have largely abandoned the evening service. The old Keswick motto "All one in Christ Jesus" simply does not apply here. A new dividing wall has been erected not between Jew and Greek, but between the

generations. This is not as it should be.

One of my fondest memories as a new Christian when in my mid twenties is of talking to teenagers and elderly folk and finding that we had so much in common because we shared a common faith in Jesus Christ. Before my conversion I had seldom spoken at length to anyone more than three or four years older or younger than myself. But as a Christian age, occupation, gender and other differences simply did not matter. Galatians 3:28, was wonderfully true.

I was also saddened to realise that these young people were not even being exposed to the richness of the church's hymnology. Hymnbooks are never used in this church and many others. The wonderful words of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley are never sung. If it is not contemporary it is not sung. And so a generation of believers is being impoverished in the name of cultural relevance.

My overall impression of the evangelical churches in Hamilton is that they are entertaining themselves to death. Music and performance dominate the public face of many fellowships. While the Bible is still preached, Scripture reading and prayer no longer have the place they once did. A sense of awe and majesty in the presence of God is missing.

By David Marshall