

Leadership Lessons: Church in the 21st Century

Little Johnny made his first trip to the principal's office with a note from his classroom teacher explaining that he had refused three times to follow her instruction. Surprised by this misbehavior from this newly arrived student the principal asked for clarification. The teacher then explained, "Every time I asked he responded 'I don't care to'". Puzzled the principal asked the student "Will you do what you've been asked to do?" "Of course," he replied. "I told her I didn't care to."

For the teacher "I don't care to" was interpreted to mean "I don't want to." For the student "I don't care to." meant "I don't mind".

Church language can often be just as confusing. The days are long past when the community at large or visitors to a worship service would understand and translate such code language as VBS, SS, WMS or many of the other shorthand expressions that are easily understood by the church crowd.

To make the ancient message of the gospel relevant to the 21st century we need to give careful attention to language and worship habits.

Avoid the code words. Especially in printed bulletins and verbal announcements the codes need to be explained.

Use modern language. For two generations now the most popular English translation of the Scripture has been the New International Version. The New King James Version has been gaining ground recently and may be the most popular English translation nowadays.

Explain some of the language used in hymns. Ebenezer shows up often in the standard hymns. When explained in the context of I Samuel 7 this obscure name takes on quite a significant faith connection. The same could be said of Zion and its usage in the Psalms.

Invest in user friendly worship. How does a visitor know it is time to stand? Because unbelievers are unfamiliar with the Bible, why not announce the pew Bible page number of the selected text? Make the worship services interactive by using an outline for the morning message with a few blanks to be completed during the message, adding a greeting time, or using an occasional worship song done in an echo style where the congregation responds to the leader by repeating a refrain or line of the music.

Distinguish between large group and small group. Small groups like Sunday School classes and departments should be very people centered. The large group worship service should be more God centered containing those elements that are of interest and focus for the large group. Birthday recognition, most announcements, and most prayer requests for the 'extended' church (i.e. my cousin's mother-in-law's friend who lives in Wyoming) are small group events and should be celebrated there. Large group worship should focus on the Worship of God with announcements (if made at all) kept to a minimum and prayer concerns that are of vital importance to all.

Avoid dead time. Special musicians can be ready to move promptly to the platform. The next person to lead the service can immediately step to the pulpit rather than waiting for the previous participant to move all the way to a pew. Music can be selected in advance and selections printed in the bulletin or at least copied for the musicians so pages can be marked and quickly located in the flow of the service.

Plan for joy. The Worship of God should always be a joyous experience. Joy is contagious. The lack of joy is also contagious. This key element of a joy filled worship experience will be absent in 100 percent of dying churches but it will be present in those churches ready to relate to the dying hurting world of the 21st century. It is a joy-filled proclamation heralded by the angels "to you is born a Savior". It is a joy-filled ancient yet modern message that Jesus Christ by the grace of God tasted death for every one!