



3 Ways Attractional Church Needs to Change To Reach the Next Generation

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In an era in which everything is changing so fast, it can be really difficult to discern what's next. That's doubly true in church world. While the mission stays the same, the expression or model keeps changing.

The dominant model for growing churches over the last two decades is what many people call attractional church. Often (but not always), attractional church takes the form of a little less worship (3-4 songs), hosting that explicitly welcomes unchurched people into the room, running everything through a filter with the guest in mind, and often (but not always) includes topical preaching. Over the last few decades, that approach has helped thousands of churches reach hundreds of thousands—or millions—of previously unreached people.

But as culture changes, the church needs to adjust. When what used to connect doesn't connect anymore, you either change, or you settle for reaching fewer people. So what exactly is changing?

For several fascinating reasons, attractional churches aren't growing as quickly as they used to and churches with a more charismatic expression seem to be on the rise. These trends are borne out by Barna's research that shows Millennials are the most likely generation to lean toward charismatic worship and more contemplative forms of expression. To take the dialogue further, there are three pivots attractional churches can make to help churches reach more people.

Historically, churches reached unchurched people by doing a little less on Sunday morning. Less worship. More careful language. Less intensity. And for a decade or two, that was effective. The changes that need to happen to reach people all focus on this surprising but challenging truth. In today's changing culture, unchurched people don't want less of God. They want **more**. Here are three adjustments attractional churches can make to reach today's post-Christian culture.

1. Less Presentation. More Presence.

There is something really powerful about the Christian church that's hard to deny: It's a dance between what we do and what God, in His sovereignty, does. Augustine phrased that tension

this way. “Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.” It’s good advice. But as flawed humans, most of us tend to lean one way or the other. We either do nothing because we expect God to do everything. Or we do everything because we forget God has something invested in this too, not to mention the power that we do not possess on our own and can’t generate.

When attractional church struggles, usually we struggle on the side of doing too much and discounting the role God plays. To be responsible, and perhaps as a reaction against people who use spiritual language to mask human weirdness or incompetence, attractional church leaders often erred on minimizing the role of God in the service—pointing to God but not relying on him.

We explain, teach, point out and hope people ‘get it’ or ‘understand.’ But if that’s all we do, we miss the boat. It’s like we’re presenting people the tour brochure, not the experience and adventure it points to. A decade ago, that was quite effective at leading people to the adventure—to authentic faith. But with the rise and ubiquity of smart devices, constant bombardment by social and mainstream media, the polarization of politics, opinion, and dialogue, and the sheer exhaustion people are feeling from the weight of it all, people aren’t looking for more information. They’re looking for presence, not just presentation. For an experience of God, not just more information about God. They’re longing for a touch, for something real. In an era where most people feel numb from the pace and insanity of life, people are looking for a hint that they are loved.

It’s hard to put into words, but if you think about it long enough, I think you’ll know what I mean: people want presence over presentation. They want to feel something—Someone—who is real, who knows their name, who loves them. And services that usher people into the presence of God will, I think, be more effective with this generation than churches that simply give you yet another presentation about Christianity.

I fully realize that it’s so easy to mistake a great worship leader, dotted eighth notes, and a full room with good lighting as the presence of God. But you also should not dismiss the fact that we have a God who longs to be present with his people and people who (whether they know it or not), long to be present with their God. As someone who has been involved in leading an attractional church for over two decades, I always want to be sensitive to first-time guests, and I agree we should assume they’re in the room. A first-time guest today is more hungry, hurt, and open than a first-time guest a decade ago.

2. Less Noise. More Space.

So what does all of this exactly look like? First, one change to weekend services that can help is simply this: less noise, more space. Most who show up for a weekend church service haven’t stopped for more than ten minutes all week. If you look at many church services, they’re characterized by quick announcements and/or really upbeat songs followed by an energetic message. Add lights, production, and timed-to-the-minute run sheets into the mix, and there’s almost no breathing room in the service.

I was in the UK last year and attended Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican Church reaching thousands of young adults. Even though they're meeting in 18th and 19th-century facilities, their services are about as contemporary as most in America with a relevant message. What's different is what I'm also seeing in the next generation of growing churches: More time for prayer and an expectation that God will move in people's lives through it. A real expectancy that God is present and will change people that day.

A greater sense of lingering in music...not a rush just to start the next click-track. Music that takes people somewhere spiritually...super talented musicians, but fewer I'm-singing-this-for-you (or at you) and more I'm-helping-us-sing-together. And yet none of this is weird or insider... it just ushers everyone more into the presence of God, not just a presentation of him.

If I had to summarize the personal application for me, it would be a reminder that worship and preaching is something you do with God, not for God. You're not performing. You're partnering. I know you know this. I know I know this, but it's so easy to forget. On my worst days, I can behave as though the message is something I do to present God to people. I can simply pray a summary of the message at the end rather than asking God to move in our hearts and lives. I can think of the songs we sing as either effective or not effective, awesome or not awesome.

But on my better days, I remember that while my preparation is important, God is very present in the delivery, and in the service, and He is moving and wants to move far beyond anything we say or sing. He has a vested interest in meeting the people he loves. And I can cooperate with that, or I can compete with that. So I need to slow down. And remind myself I get to do this with God. Not for him. And, of course, any power to change anything never rested with me anyway.

Churches that are increasingly effective in reaching the next generation realize this and design their weekend services accordingly. Love has a speed, and it's slower than you are. Love has a volume. And often, it's heard best in the quiet. Your whole service doesn't need to be slow, but if it never slows down, people may attend and never hear, let alone experience, God.

3. Less Head. More Heart.

Another key shift that's happening in churches that are reaching the next generation involves creating experiences that engage the heart, not just the head. The next generation doesn't just want to know what's true, they want to feel what is true and experience what's real. Real is deeper than just an idea—real is an experience.

When crafting the welcome...don't just blanket people with information and the promise of a free gift. Connect with them emotionally. Tell that if they're looking for God (why else would you be at a church today anyway?), he's already here. He knows their name, and we believe He wants a relationship with them. Tell people that God cares about them. Set a warm, emotional tone.

In your prayer time, take more than 30 seconds just to clear the stage. Pray for people's real

needs. Obviously, you won't take prayer requests from the floor, but you can pray for specific situations people are facing and ask God to move.

I've also been trying to pay more attention to preaching, not just teaching. It's always hard to define the exact difference between the two but simply put, preaching speaks more to the heart, and teaching speaks more to the head. Preachers facilitate an experience. Teachers convey information. I think the best pastors do both well.

Preaching without solid teaching can become emotionalism. Teaching without preaching can become intellectualism. Preaching leads people to say, "That's right. I need to change." Teaching can lead people to say, "He's right. That's a good point." Confession: Uncorrected, I default to the head, not to the heart, every time. So this is a learning and reminder for me. Try to find an under-40 influential pastor of a growing church who's more into teaching than preaching. There really aren't that many.

A final word. Let people see your heart when you teach, preach, lead worship, or host. When people see your heart, it becomes easier for them to see their own heart. It also becomes easier for them to see God's. All of this is as much a posture shift as anything. Still, I think as your heart opens up, you become more open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your ministry, and you slow down long enough to let God speak into the quiet, you'll see a new generation respond in a surprisingly positive way.

Remember the People You're Trying to Reach

The attractional movement has done a great job reminding all of us that we have guests in the room. And while the foyer may have moved, someone's first Sunday is still a huge deal. So that's no excuse to be self-indulgently weird. Authentic doesn't mean weird.

The church is still one of the few organizations that exists for the sake of its non-members. The attraction model has helped many people become Christians, and it has a lot to teach us. The biggest lesson? Our services should be designed with non-Christians in mind. None of that has changed. It's just that what unchurched people are looking for is changing. So we need to adapt.

You need to care for the people you have, but never to the exclusion of the people you're called to reach. Churches that over-focus on the needs of insiders will eventually only have insiders. And when that happens, you missed the mission.