

## Marketing Division

by Dan Adler

I recently heard a quote that stuck with me. This person said, “The world divides us in order to sell things to us”. I guess in many ways that sums up modern day marketing pretty well. There are “Madison Avenue” type people whose full time jobs are to study demographics and figure out how to advertise and sell things better. They realize that if you can break people down into narrow sub-groups, you can more easily target that group of people for what you want to sell them. You can package your product in such a way that this group of people will want to buy it. You’ll notice that there’s a growing amount of advertising right now that’s marketing aging, wealthy, baby-boomers because that is a large, influential population that makes a great potential source of sales. Did you see the recent ad with “Easy Rider” actor and former hippie, druggie, cool-guy, Dennis Hopper, talking about how this group of “retirees” isn’t going to be like the others before them? He talks about how they still want to be active and ride motorcycles, etc. Great marketing, great representative and hey, a pretty hopeful message too.

The thing about focused marketing when you’re trying to sell things, is that it works. The more focused your message and the narrower your audience, the more you can hit your target and get a response.

So the organized Christian church has noticed these realities over the past few decades and has adapted many marketing and business practices for the church as well. After all, churches are business organizations of sorts – with budgets and expenses and what you could call “markets”. The result of this focus for many large churches has been more organized and professional management of church business and procedure and some big results in numerical growth. Good stuff right? How can you argue with numbers? Well, let me share some thoughts from another angle.

In the 1970’s, the Church Growth Movement began out of Fuller Seminary in California. This movement was really the result of observation and statistics. These leaders observed that homogenous churches (churches of one ethnic, socio-economic, generational group) grow faster and are more successful than heterogenous churches. Basically, it drew the conclusion that the more similar people are to each other in race, class, and age, the more the church will grow and draw others like themselves into it. So out of that observation, the idea basically was birthed to target demographic groups and plant churches for each of them. On the positive side, the result of that movement has been thousands of newly planted mostly white congregations that have grown and prospered, but on the negative side of that, I believe that we have perpetuated division in the church. I believe too that we have not called the Church to a real Biblical view of discipleship. We have marketed to intolerance and self-seeking – and lots of people want to buy that version of Christianity. But I don’t believe it’s Biblical.

Last year I heard a pastor friend of mine talk about his trip to South Africa. As you know, the horrible, racist system of Apartheid has only recently been banished in that country. But what shocked me was that he spoke of how Apartheid actually started in the Church! The Dutch were the colonizers of South Africa and with them, came the Dutch

Reformed Church. According to this pastor, in the 1800's, there was a period of time when Blacks and Whites attended church together. But somewhere along the way, some of the white "Christians" noticed that there was a sense of equality when they were in church together whereas they didn't function that way in the rest of society. And instead of seeing that as a good thing, they thought it was a bad thing and decided that they must be separate from each other in church as well. So, racially separate worship services were imposed. And this began what became the Apartheid system! It came from the organized church! What a travesty! But you know what? I bet it was actually good marketing if you were to look at numerical growth. I bet that the "White" church started to grow in larger numbers and I wouldn't be surprised if the "Black" church didn't grow as well. After all, now we're all with people just like us and we don't have to put up with any other ways of saying or doing things than we want to. We can retain our lack of love and embrace our prejudices without even having to think about the fact that we're doing so. And so, if the Church Growth Movement were to observe those churches at that time, they might have observed numerical growth and concluded that it was a good thing! Yet, over a hundred years later, after decades and decades of racism and injustice, this numerical growth stands as a gigantic stumbling block to Christianity and as a massive distortion of the Gospel – now seen worldwide! How much better to have had small, counter-cultural growth amongst a small group of racially diverse Christ followers who stood in the face of racism even though it was rampant in their culture. What a testimony even a small group of believers like that would have been to the world now in light of history, instead of this horrible, racist group-think that happened in the name of Christ!

A few years ago I was speaking with a pastor about the need for congregations to be multi-racial and the need for reaching into the urban areas of the city. He said, "I can plant a church in a suburb and market to 30 to 45 year old Caucasians and have the church grow to a couple of hundred people in a short period of time. If I try to do the same thing to a multi-racial group in the city, the growth will be much slower and we'll basically be throwing our investment away." I sort of shuddered at hearing that. Yet what he said is true. But I have to beg the question, even if it is true and we can get more numbers this way, is it the way of Christ? Are we breeding true Christ-followers or more likely self-followers in the name of Christ?

A few years ago I was also talking with a Christian radio station about the need for more racial diversity in the music format of their station. They were sympathetic to what I had to say, but they said that they would get unhappy emails and phone calls whenever they played more racially diverse music. And they said that every time they had a consultant come in to talk with them about their music format, they were told to narrow the style even further if they wanted to gain more listeners. So they've done that and that station's listenership has grown. But I again have to ask the question, what is being modeled through that format? What's the subtle message of division and even racism that's being sent out with every same sounding song? What prejudices are being coddled instead of confronted? Shouldn't we, as Christians, seek to be leading the way and providing an example of what should be - instead of what is? Shouldn't we be the pioneers instead of those following the fickle trends, prejudices and selfish ambitions of society? Shouldn't we be leading a counter-cultural movement that calls people out of being followers of

themselves and worldly thinking to become a multi-racial community of true followers of Christ instead?

As I wrote recently in the article “Reformation without Separation”, now we are doing this same marketing of division between generations within a single congregation amongst white church goers. This marketing breeds numbers, but it also breeds a very sad distortion of what Christianity is.

I like to plant a vegetable garden and when I do, I always think about all the teachings of Christ about seeds. Seeds are amazing little things that produce miraculous results when they die and are buried in the ground. But different seeds produce different things and at different rates of speed. If you plant corn, that little seed is going to pop up into a seven or eight foot plant with two or three ears of corn on it in just a matter of weeks. But it’s also going to completely die out in a few weeks after that. You get fast results and a very short life. But if you plant an oak tree, it grows really slow and really strong and it keeps on growing and lives for a very long time. In a world that hates delayed gratification and in a society that values instant results, planting corn seems more valuable than planting oak trees. But I fear that we’re planting a lot of churches made of corn instead of oak. They’ll pop up quick and look good for a short time, but the fruit won’t last and won’t be built with lasting spiritual oak. The way of Christ is hard I think. That’s why it’s so hard to follow. The results are slower. The path is narrow, unpopular and costly. But in truly following Christ, there is love, servant-hood and deep community and I don’t want to be sold anything else but the real thing.