

Aspects of Evangelism: 4

The Demise of the Middle-Sized Church

When I was growing up we used to do our grocery shopping at the local Four Square store. We used to walk there and back because the store was just on a hundred metres from our house. Mr Dunlop the store owner, probably knew - by face if not by name - most of the people who shopped there regularly. The greengrocer was in the same group of three shops. Very rarely would we shop anywhere other than these two stores for our groceries or greengroceries. Our hardware came from another local store, where nails were measured out for you in pounds rather than being sealed in a bubbled *Convenience Pak*. We never received Mitre Ten catalogues in the mailbox.

Ah the halcyon days! (Some might say!) But where do you shop today?

If you're like 90% of Australians you shop in a supermarket or shopping complex at which you can purchase all your regular home requirements - and, in addition, pot plants, motor vehicle requirements, furniture, fabrics, clothing etc, etc. You don't even need to go to the bank - because electronic funds transfer (EFTPOS) lets you access your account from the checkout.

Why have things gone this way? It's because the market research people employed by the shopping chains have detected a continuing change in our society. Once people used to be limited to their local area and often had to be content to accept a kind of 'what you see is what you get' approach to shopping. Gradually, over the last thirty or so years, all that has changed. Today people are very mobile and increasingly are looking for a high degree of choice and (simultaneously) high quality - in goods, service and environment. This high choice/high quality expectation is especially marked amongst people under 45 years of age. The shopping complexes, the department stores and the supermarkets provide this. They provide high choice (that slack-jawed vague stare observed most often on the faces of men in supermarkets is actually a symptom of overchoice!) and simultaneously they provide high quality - high turnover means that their goods remain fresh, managers ensure that their personnel are well trained and courteous, their facilities are clean, well lit, soothed by soft music and have adequate parking and good toilet facilities. Let them neglect any of these things and they soon hit a downturn.

What has all this to do with evangelism? Just this, the same desire for high choice *and* high quality which directs today's shoppers also affects the way people look at churches - *and the local church is still the prime organisation for evangelism*. (I'm not saying that there is no place for denominational agencies or para-church organisations in the work of evangelism but it needs to be said that they cannot and will not replace the local church and for one reason - they cannot offer that authentic community which is essential to and an expression of faith in Jesus Christ.) This demand for simultaneous high choice/high quality faces most local churches with a radical decision - ***to grow larger or to grow smaller***. Let me explain.

Small churches (30 - 70 people average Sunday attendance) can do some things very well.

- ✓ They provide a close knit fellowship which, though it may be hard to break into initially, offers faithful and genuine care for its members.
- ✓ They can offer one well (sometimes very well) executed worship service. This service can provide a good basis for evangelism amongst people who are attracted by that form of worship - whether traditional or contemporary.

- ✓ In that they can be well served by one priest and one part time secretary they can offer an excellent standard of personal pastoral care.
- ✓ They can function as an excellent auxiliary to mission organisations - such as CMS, ABM, the Magdalene Centre or St. Luke's Whitmore Square.

All this means there is a place for smaller churches. But to return to my shopping analogy, smaller churches function like boutique stores - they can offer one product to a select group of people. If the product is what people are looking for then they can do very well and fill important needs. Smaller churches can provide for the discovery and exercise of faith in the context of close community. In many ways they're like large families - and many people today are looking for and need this sense of family.

Smaller churches however, cannot provide the high choice/high quality option which today many people expect - smaller churches cannot simultaneously provide, high quality children's and family ministries, three choices of worship style every Sunday with a supervised creche, well structured ministries for evangelism and faith development among young people, counselling services, crisis support etc, etc, all taking place in or through facilities which meet or exceed current community standards. Only larger churches can do this. I consider that it takes a church having an average attendance of 400 or more to meet the high choice/high quality expectations held by the majority of today's under 45 year olds.

Smaller churches provide a sense of family and can offer one style of worship done well.. Larger churches can provide for the high choice/high quality expectation of the generations presently missing from our churches. *The real rub is this. Middle sized churches do neither very well. They provide neither the intimacy of a large family nor the high choice of a larger church.*

If this is correct it means that many of our churches in the Diocese are faced with a critical decision - to grow larger or to grow smaller. Unfortunately I suspect that most parishes will make the decision by default - slow decline will bring them to a point of no return.

What are the implications of all this. Here are just a few.

For middle sized churches which decide to grow it requires long tenured clergy (I would suggest at least ten years) who can provide ongoing visionary leadership, it requires tenacity and teamwork, it requires an orientation of all the church's assets toward a future in which the church can have a vastly increased impact for the Kingdom of God. Turning around a parish is akin to turning around an oil tanker - it takes a long time and huge, continuing energy.

For the Diocese it requires encouragement and incentives to churches which decide to grow (as a Diocese we do need both larger and smaller churches). Some of our Diocesan structures are helpful and encouraging - others function as disincentives to growth. Little of this structural dysfunction appears to have been addressed as part of the Decade of Evangelism. Another implication for the Diocese (and for parishes - will we pay for it?) involves training of clergy. Just as the medical community has recognised that, in the complexities of the modern world, General Practitioners must have specialist training, so clergy involved in the leadership of change in parishes should have specialist training - not short courses but a well organised and recognised post graduate course which can be undertaken in tandem with parish ministry (such a course is, in fact, soon to be available through the Doctor of Ministry programme being set up by the Australian College of Theology).

Where does your church stand. What decisions are you making (intentionally or by default) about your future?

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