

Reinventing the Closed System Model

By Bob Young

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The health and well-being of the churches of Christ in the U.S. is increasingly in doubt. Recent articles and signs indicate that the decline is certain, even if not evident in some congregations or pockets of (temporary?) numerical strength. About 85% of our congregations are either plateaued or declining over the last decade. To evaluate your congregation, you must understand what it means to be plateaued. Is your congregation at least 20% larger than it was 10 years ago? If not, you are probably plateaued (or declining). Were at least 12% of the members of your congregation not Christians 10 years ago? (The population grew 12% over the last 10 years.) If not, you are probably plateaued or declining.

The operating model of most churches of Christ is not compellingly evangelistic or sustainable. We have developed safe-haven congregations primarily for ourselves. We have employed a system of church growth that is largely a “closed system” model. We are increasingly not evangelistic—not reaching the lost. In most places, we have sought to grow primarily by seeking those who move in (transfers to a city or from other congregations) or through passing faith from generation to generation. The latter process is clearly in danger as more and more of our youth leave the church as they leave home. Some (receiving) churches may continue for a time in relative strength sustained by those who move into an area, but the rural (feeder) churches are facing difficulties and lack of sustainability as never before. The receiving churches will also dry up and be gone when the feeding stops—and the feeding will stop when the feeder churches cease to exist. Many small churches can no longer afford a full-time minister. I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but the closed system model that has brought us to the present time has increasingly failed and does not appear to be a viable model in the 21st century.

The previous century was a “Christian” century in the history of our country. Reaction against the “Gay ‘90s” had a sobering impact on our nation, as did two world wars separated by the Great Depression. By the time WW2 ended, our nation had Christian faith and church firmly implanted as a part of the social fabric. There was an explosion of new churches across our nation after WW2, and we in churches of Christ benefited dramatically from the renewed interest in religion. In one sense, we were in the right place at the right time with an appealing message that focused on “truth”. In the view of the Enlightenment mindset, this truth would deliver us from a repeat of the devastating wars and economic stress.

The exalted place of religion (and truth) in our society did not last long, and within a few years the turbulent ‘60s and another war in Vietnam questioned authority, objective truth, and organized religion. That journey has continued and perhaps even accelerated so that at the beginning of the 21st century, Christianity exists on the outskirts of Western society. We are not at the center; we are on the periphery (barely). We are not the majority; we are the minority. The mission field is not across the seas; the mission field is across the street. The impact on us is unmistakable. In almost every state across the nation, we have fewer churches. In most places, we count fewer Christians. We are a dwindling percentage of the population.

The truth is that the churches of Christ in the U.S. have as a group been plateaued for about a quarter of a century. We have had about the same number of churches (13,000) with about the same number of members (about 1,300,000). In the same period of time, the U.S. population has increased from 238M to 306M. Put another way, if your church has not grown by 29% over the last 25 years, you have declined (devalued) as to influence and place in our nation. Are you concerned about the 29% decline in your investments over the past few months? Are you equally concerned about the devaluation the church has experienced? Such a decline in our spiritual relevance in our society ought to drive us to tears and sackcloth, asking what we can do to change the trend!

We are thus face to face with a perplexing and pivotal question. Our ability to answer may well determine whether we are still around as a viable voice in the 22nd century. We must redefine church as a missionary endeavor in our own country rather than focusing on maintaining what we already have. What we currently have is rapidly disappearing! We must shift from the stance of preserving our closed system to an open system that allows the salt and light and leaven of the gospel to permeate the lives of the lost everywhere around us. We must reorient from serving self and maintaining our own to serving others so they too can experience the redemptive power and presence of God. We must understand that when we leave our buildings, we are missionaries entering the mission field. “Every heart where Jesus dwells is a missionary; every heart where Jesus does not dwell is a mission field.”

In the words of Jim Collins (*Good to Great*), God’s people must confront the brutal facts. Brothers and sisters, we are at a watershed in our history. The decisions we make may well determine the destiny of millions of souls yet unborn. We must decide if we are so entrenched that we cannot change for the sake of the salvation of countless souls we touch every day. We must decide if our traditions are more important to us than souls. We must confront our complacency; we must restore our passion. We might relight the fire in our souls.

Some among us are trying with all our might to transition to an “open system” approach. As I look at our meager efforts, I often think that we better just jump in and swim rather than testing the waters little by little. Those who have jumped in find the biblical relevance of missional living incredible, even intoxicating. (Who wouldn’t conclude that Ron Babbitt was a little drunken on the Spirit on Sunday night!) The living hand of God is actively engaging lives. He is showing up in unexpected places, ways, and people. His presence is at times more apparent in those who are not his than those who are his (according to our definitions).

We are seeking to understand not only what it means to be missional as we are sent forth into the world. We are also trying to understand how we honor the presence of God in the lives of those we touch. God has always been at work in the corners of this world long before we show up. He invites us to join him in his work; he is not honored when we do our work instead of his work. May God give us wisdom as we seek to understand his will!