

CHURCH: WHO WE ARE IS MADE VISIBLE BY WHAT WE DO

By Bob Young

Being seems simple! Being: our shared identity in the church. Who are we? What is our nature? What is our essence? What is the core, the center, of who we are?

Being is difficult! We struggle to know who we are. We multiply our doing, hoping that something we do will confirm our being, or at least give us a clue about who we are. We measure what we have, thinking that our resources may help us understand something about who we are.

The questions are valid. Are we church? Are we being church? Are we doing what God's church does? Does our shared life reflect what it means to be church?

In many places, the church suffers from "program-itis." When identity becomes hazy or is unclear, a normal response is to multiply programs with the hope of finding some way to assure ourselves that we are being church, that we are what Jesus had in mind when he promised to build his church with power to overcome all opponents.

The problem with "program-itis" is that programs, once begun, die painful deaths. And many of the church's programs give minimal or no help in establishing identity, proving that we are finally being church. Some programs need to be terminated. Some activities that now exist among many programs and ministries need to be prioritized as THE purpose of the church, incorporated into church personality and culture.

What is at stake is our understanding of ourselves—our being, our identity, and how our identity is established. Allow me some examples. That we are being church is most visible when our doing lines up with biblical descriptions of what the church does. Our actions should correspond to the biblical dimensions and dynamics of church.

Small groups provide a way of being church—but only when they connect to the continuing faith search, a vital dimension of the faith community. Small groups must not be allowed to become just another program that a church runs, hoping that more people will get involved. Groups that share spiritual pursuits, Bible study groups, and accountability groups – all are potentially ways of being church.

Bible classes are a way of being church when the classes allow the faith community to consider how it corporately lives out faith. Caution is necessary. Education "programs" easily become mental exercises, another add-on in the effort to be church, rather than an essential part of what it means to be church.

Mission work is a way of being church—if the work being done reflects God's purpose for the church, to seek and to save the lost. The outreach dimension is ultimately what makes clear that this group of believers are functioning as part of God's people.

Gathering is a way of being church, but the activities shared in gathering do not speak as clearly to being church as the things done as the church goes forth. Going forth and sending are more telling ways of being church. Being church depends on whether we are doing church!

Every time we seek encounter with the world with the purpose of sharing God's saving message of Jesus, we are living out a way of being church. The church establishes its identity as it recognizes and seizes opportunities to be church to the world—as individuals and collectively. The identity of a church that is genuinely church is never limited to its gathering or assemblies. The church is most clearly church, and most capable of being church, in its going.