



TWO THAT DO, PART II

Last month we looked at two churches that are reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people. This month will continue this theme, mainly due to unanticipated worship experiences of the editor over the weekend. Three Sunday services were attended. The first was a small urban UMC that is not doing particularly well at any of the foci for reaching people.

Second on the list was a visit to one of the churches mentioned last month, the Brooklyn Tabernacle. Unlike the previous visit, which was the Tuesday night prayer meeting, this was the noon Sunday service. The attendance filled the sanctuary and closed circuit was run into an overflow room across the street. (Estimated attendance at this service, which is one of three: 3,000.) No printed order of service was to be had, though the bulletin was a glossy, full-color tri-fold. Worship singing with overhead projection took the first 45 minutes. Then the centerpiece of the service—the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir—shared two numbers. The power of this presentation reminds me why this choir has earned six Grammys. Superlatives fail me. The choir also did the offertory. A key take-away here is that high-quality music matters. This poses a challenge for the vast majority of United Methodist churches, as they are small and thus are challenged for resources. Hopefully they can find the means to enhance their music.

After the offertory and some announcements, the preacher came on stage. The style was as described last month. He was very engaging and the attendees responded. It is interesting to note that in all UMC emphasis on congregational transformation and vitality, little emphasis is given to preaching. Yet, few strong dynamic churches got there with weak preaching.

Church number three was Redeemer Presbyterian. This ministry is a unique urban ministry in Manhattan, having reached megachurch status (5,000 in worship) after being a new start in the late 1980s, yet still not having its own worship space. And there is no obvious intention of doing so in the future. They meet in two locations in the morning and three in the late afternoon and evening. A morning and evening service is held in the Hunter College Auditorium. Worship styles vary and include classical, contemporary, and jazz. I attended a jazz service in the late afternoon hosted in a Baptist church. The vast majority in attendance were 20-somethings who were highly diverse. The place was packed. The five-piece, accomplished jazz band played prelude music and provided accompaniment for all singing. The service style was blended with a highly detailed bulletin including the order of service and all music printed. Again, the excellence of the music was a defining and highly attractive feature of the service.

Senior Pastor Tim Keller preached. This is not insignificant, insofar as he is not present at all services and the church does not announce where he will be on a given Sunday. The sermon style was very different than the Brooklyn Tabernacle. There was little animation and the content was heavily philosophical with a strong element of apologetics. Nevertheless, the presentation was certainly compelling in its own right. This seems to be a fine match for those assembled. Again, it is clear that the preaching has played a role in the strength of another vital ministry, and that this church has a strong emphasis on evangelism.

Of course, church is more than worship. Redeemer Presbyterian is remarkable in other aspects

of the life of this varied congregation. The bulletin lists staff who can be contacted for those interested in mercy and justice, congregational life, family ministries, fellowship groups, a counseling center, outreach, and stewardship. One of the ministries, The Center for Faith and Word, features fellowship groups in various slices of city work life. Arts groups include an actors group, a dance industry group, and a culture club. Vocational groups include The A.D. Agency for those in Madison Avenue-related fields, and a business fellowship. There is also an entrepreneurs' fellowship. These ministries clearly embody Redeemer's concise mission statement: "renewing the city socially, spiritually, and culturally."

An astonishing ministry of Redeemer is its church-planting outreach, called "Redeemer City to City." Since its founding, the church-planting center has helped to plant over 170 churches in 35 global cities. The ministry model draws from Redeemer's experience as a church in a secular, multicultural, global city. The center provides resources, including funding, leadership training, and coaching, for churches in North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Australia.

Redeemer describes its approach as being strongly based in the Gospel. "Nowhere do we encounter more opportunities to apply the gospel in these ways than in the city. Many modern urban dwellers face loneliness, economic hardship, social injustice, and personal and societal brokenness. The church is to serve all of these needs, including directly serving the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the city. We are dedicated to training leaders and planting churches that are committed to strengthening the influence of the gospel in the city in ways that result in spiritual growth, the flourishing of neighborhoods, reconciliation between classes and races, and the renewal of family life, education, health, and vocation."

The church is currently posting a position called "Church Planting Catalyst for New York City." The job description notes that the church is "seeking an experienced, visionary urban church planting leader

to direct its efforts in New York City, with a goal of facilitating 100 new congregations during the next decade." Congregational developers have long noted the importance of vision and compelling purpose in transforming existing churches and starting new ones. Redeemer does not lack for that.

Some might question why this newsletter, and last month's, did not feature United Methodist churches. There are certainly many of them doing wonderful ministry. Those highlighted here happen to be those I have personally encountered within a short time prior to writing. Of more importance, these churches are doing remarkable ministry in places where others have not fared so well. Seattle and New York are among the least church-ed cities in the US, and yet these ministries have not only done well, they have gone over the top.

Those noted last month—City Church in Seattle, and Brooklyn Tabernacle and Redeemer Presbyterian in New York—are reaching more people, younger people, and more diverse people. They are doing it with excellent music, strong preaching, an emphasis on evangelism, a love for their context, and a driving sense of vision and purpose. All churches can strive to improve in these areas, and may be pleasantly impressed with the results.

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