



## TWO THAT DO

**P**rof. Lovett Weems is widely quoted as saying that the UMC in the US needs “more people, younger people, and more diverse people.” Your editor recently attended two churches, though not United Methodist, which seem to be succeeding wildly at this very thing. Curiously, however, it was nowhere apparent that these two churches had a stated goal of accomplishing Dr. Weems’ imperative. Perhaps some observations about these may be useful for other churches, so this month’s issue will be a personal reflection rather than the usual more quantitative analysis.

The first church is City Church, located in Seattle, and though only 20 years old, it is now one of the largest churches in the state. I was in the neighborhood to participate in my stepson’s wedding festivities. This church is where he, his new wife, and most of their friends attend. They have been part of a young professionals’ ministry numbering in the hundreds. I did not attend the service intending to wear my research hat, but found it kicking in anyway. Even in the parking lot at 9 a.m., I quickly noticed that most of the people walking towards the sanctuary were much younger than myself and were very diverse. This church was in a relatively upscale suburb with demographics that did not mirror the congregation which assembled that morning. The congregation was younger and more diverse.

Several characteristics about this church could contribute to the size and makeup of the congregation. The worship service was, in Methodist parlance, very contemporary. No order of worship was handed out. The sanctuary resembled a movie studio auditorium, which in fact it was. The service is broadcast to two other campuses simultaneously. The music was high

energy and of professional quality. The musicians did not appear to be about performance however, with their focus on worshipping God. Stewardship was obviously a big emphasis at this church. The founding pastor’s widow gave a well-thought-out stewardship message prior to the offering. The current senior pastor is her son. His message did not use notes and was all over the stage. No pulpit was in sight. He preached for over 40 minutes and was highly engaging. The entire service was an hour and a half, precisely.

One distinction of this congregation is a strong emphasis on faith. This is evident in the preaching and likely in the congregants, at least those I met. This is a faith that believes that God does and will continue, even in greater fashion, to make a difference in their lives. In contrast, many mainline churches believe, in practice anyway, that God does not do much, but rather leaves the work to God’s people. Another distinction, though not apparent in worship, is their disciple-making process. This church has an extensive small group ministry that bears fruit. Those showing sufficient progress in their faith development and indicating leadership potential are invited to participate in the church’s leadership-training program. This process is lengthy and well designed. Those completing it receive recognition in a service with all the trappings of an ordination service, except the ordination. They can then serve as leaders of small groups themselves, or in other capacities.

The second church attended within 10 days of the first was the Brooklyn Tabernacle; in particular, the Tuesday night prayer service. This service had about 2,000 people in attendance and lasted over an hour and a half. This church was originally a white church

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of around 25 people with a white pastor. This pastor is now the senior pastor of one of the largest, if not the largest church in New York. They have started many daughter churches. Their choir has won six Grammys for its albums. Those assembled for the prayer meeting only appeared to be around 10 percent or so white, with many of those being out-of-town guests. While not as youthful as City Church, those present formed a much younger profile than The UMC averages.

Though a prayer meeting where prayer was emphasized and certainly took place, this service resembled a worship gathering. No bulletins were to be seen. An outstanding group of musicians aided in a time of worship in song. There were announcements, an offering, and a sermon. Of course, there was prayer. This took place from the pulpit. It took place in an altar call time. It also took place when prayer request cards were distributed to everyone present and then all were invited to pair up and pray with a neighbor of like gender. A notable characteristic is that this was done out loud. In contrast to many mainline churches, these lay people were quite comfortable and competent in praying out loud. The buzz in the place was electrifying. After the prayer, the sermon was done by what appeared to be a staff pastor. While a pronounced pulpit was present, he spent little time behind it. He was animated, clear, and gave a message both challenging and comforting.

Distinctions of the Brooklyn Tabernacle are in many ways similar to City Church. They include the importance of faith and the expectation of God working in the lives of those gathered, lively worship, disciple making, and similar preaching styles. To differentiate, the Brooklyn Tabernacle style is much influenced by the large African-American portion of their membership. Also, prayer is emphasized much more than in most churches.

Much more could be said of these. It should be noted that in this time of stress on vital congregations, these two are undeniably vital. Both just felt alive, very

much so. The congregations were not just sitting there as though attending a performance, but participated, often standing and moving. While measuring the “presence of God” is certainly subjective at best, a strong case can be made for this key component of vitality in these churches.

Of course, with any lifting up of successful churches, the resulting concern is that while the particular methods used may work there, they may not in other contexts. Obviously, not every church that would do all in its power to be like these would grow to be a megachurch. Small churches just cannot do what large ones do in resource-intensive aspects of ministry. Furthermore, some will raise objections over the theological orientation of these two churches. Nevertheless, there are some takeaways here. Faith can be lifted up and encouraged. Preaching can be more dynamic than is so often found. Prayer can be greatly increased. Disciple-making processes can be improved. Prof. Weems has stated that what draws people to these churches is stronger than what pushes them apart from each other. Churches doing these things may find they have more people, younger people, and more diverse people.

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