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What Mega-Churches Can Learn From Catholics

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Mega-churches are not very popular among academics, even Christian ones. At a recent conference of theologians and ethicists, my colleague and I found ourselves on the defensive. According to the bulk of the seminar participants, the failure of mega-churches to form faithful disciples was a foregone conclusion.

This perspective was very troubling to us. Since we could vouch for the genuine and sincere faith of our academic peers, we could not simply dismiss their complaints as spiritually vacuous. At the same time, we could not deny that God's Spirit was genuinely present in our mega-church congregation. Formerly-unchurched persons are coming to faith in Christ and being baptized. Yet there was a ring of truth to their charges. As mega-churches grow like wild fire, many pastors rue the accompanying phenomena of church-hopping and passive spectatorship. Surprisingly, the providential fact that we teach at a Catholic university has helped us see this conflict through new eyes.

For Catholic believers, everything is formative because everything is capable of either facilitating or hindering God's redemptive presence. If our Catholic brothers and sisters have a point, perhaps some aspects of mega-church worship that we have typically championed under the name of evangelism ought to be evaluated in the name of discipleship. If everything is formative, we ought to be asking whether everything is contributing toward the formation of Christ-followers. We suggest that at least two things are being overlooked.

Consider first mega-church architecture. Despite the popular belief that mega-churches are marked by robust congregational singing, mega-church architecture may accidentally train us not to sing.

During one of our recent worship services, the sound system temporarily failed while the audience of 1,200 was singing. In the split second before everyone fell silent, we were struck by the lack of volume coming from the chairs. The silence that followed was stunning. Why did the crowd fail to fill up the silence? Perhaps they fell silent waiting for directions. Perhaps they didn't know the music. Perhaps they weren't singing to begin with. Whatever the reason, the architecture made things worse.

Some architecture accidentally undermines Christian worship. The acoustics of many mega-church buildings are intentionally designed to maximize the clarity and volume of the public address system. One architectural assumption seems to be that the on-stage performers are of central importance. The performers must be clear enough and loud enough to override the inevitable errant notes and hesitancy of people who are struggling to learn a new tune by ear.

A second architectural assumption seems to be that, acoustically, the building structure must swallow all the ambient noise that a crowd of 1,000 (or 2,000 or 4,000) generates, so that everyone (including the television rebroadcast audience) can listen to the musicians and the pastor without distraction.

The impact of this architecture on corporate worship is in some cases crippling: the interior architecture ends up forming attenders to be little more than polite spectators. When the sound went out in our mega-church that Sunday morning, the silence emanating from the stage was taken as just one more cue to which attenders in the padded seats must politely respond in kind. Not that the acoustical vacuum could have been overcome had the crowd wanted to do so. But the real point is this: it didn't dawn on them to try, because the architecture had been forming us, over many Sundays, toward the assumption that we the audience are auxiliary to the real action taking place on stage.

Consider, as a second example of accidental formation, the role of the calendar. Early Christians recognized and celebrated many festivals and feasts, even those that did not conveniently fall on the weekend. They not only celebrated Easter and Christmas, they also commemorated important leaders, such as Philip (May 3; see Acts 8), and celebrated significant events, such as Pentecost (May 15; Acts 2). Even weekends were different: Sunday displaced Saturday as the week's highpoint, set aside for remembering the resurrection of the Lord.

Those early Christians organized a whole calendar of feasts and festivals, but not because they had a stubborn impulse to supplant the freedom of grace with rites and rituals. Rather, it was precisely because grace was poured out on every instant of time that Christians thought every day, as well as the ebb and flow between religious seasons, was worth observing. They believed that time itself found its rhythm in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So every opportunity was taken to extend that new order through the joyful celebration of holidays, or more literally, "holy days."

In our contemporary urgency to evangelize the non-churched, mega-churches haven't simply neglected the ancient church calendar, they may be unwittingly "kowtowing" to the secular calendar. This past year, Pentecost fell on the same Sunday as Mother's Day. Millions of flowers were given to mothers exiting mega-churches after hearing sermons on Proverbs 31. Meanwhile, the epoch-making outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first disciples escaped everybody's attention. The irony, of course, is that in the name of being seeker-friendly, we may be in danger of accidentally forming Christians to mark time by the tick-tock of Hallmark.

Some may be surprised to learn that the earliest Christians treated Easter as a season rather than a single day. We don't mean the 40 days of fasting (called "Lent") that leads up to Easter Sunday. We mean the 50 days after.

A week or so after Easter, one of our Catholic colleagues robustly proclaimed "Happy Easter!" To my rebuff that she was about a week late, she exclaimed: "Don't you know? Fifty days of boundless Easter joy!"

Fifty? Fifty! Of course — all the way until Pentecost. My first thought was, "Wow! How wonderful!" My second thought: "Why didn't we think of this?"

Does it matter that Easter is fifty days rather than one? Yes; Easter is a season rather than an event. When we learn to live seasonally, we learn to persevere from one day to the next, despite temporary droughts, rather than hop from one event to the next, or worse, from one church to the next. Maybe we shouldn't be patting ourselves on the back for shunning the liturgical calendar.

We genuinely believe that many mega-churches rightly take seriously the call to go and make disciples. If we in mega-churches are to form faithful disciples, we must begin talking about the process of accidental formation that is happening right under our noses.