

# WORSHIP AS EVANGELISM



**Two years ago I taught my last seminar focused solely on worship.**

**A year ago I disbanded my worship**

**resource site, Sacramentis. My colleagues were concerned. How could I leave the work I'd begun? Did it mean I no longer believed worship was important? Who was going to take up the torch of worship evangelism? Was I just going to waste my legacy? Was I crazy?**

Maybe I was, but a storm had been brewing in my soul for five long years. I remember meeting with the worship leader of a well-known church in the fall of 2000. He had followed my work and respected many of my viewpoints. When we met over coffee, he shared a concern he'd had for a while over my book *Worship Evangelism*. In his view, *Worship Evangelism* had helped to create a "worship-driven subculture." As he explained it, this subculture was a sizeable part of the contemporary church that had just been waiting for an excuse not to do the hard work of real outreach. An excuse not to get their hands dirty. According to him, that excuse came in the form of a book—my book. He elaborated. "If a contemporary worship service is the best witnessing tool in the box, then why give a rip about what goes on outside the worship center? If unbelievers are coming through the doors to check us Christians out, and if they'll fall at Jesus' feet after they listen to us croon worship songs and watch us sway back and forth, well then, a whole lot of churches are just going to say, 'Sign us up!'"

To be honest, I wasn't surprised. The attitude he described certainly didn't fit every congregation out there in contemporary-worship-land, but

# SALLY MORGENTHAUER RETHINKS HER OWN PARADIGM

it matched too much of what I'd seen. The realization hit me in the gut. Between 1995 and 2000 I'd traveled to a host of worship-driven churches, some that openly advertised that they were "a church for the unchurched." On the good occasions, the worship experience was transporting. (I dug a little deeper when that happened. Invariably, I found another value at work behind the worship production: a strong, consistent presence in the community.) Too many times, I came away with an unnamed, uneasy feeling. Something was not quite right. The worship felt disconnected from real life. Then there were the services when the pathology my friend talked about came right over the platform and hit me in the face. It was unabashed self-absorption, a worship culture that screamed, "It's all about us" so loudly that I wondered how any visitor could stand to endure the rest of the hour.

Were these worship-driven churches really attracting the unchurched? Most of their pastors truly believed they were. And in a few cases, they were right. The worship in their congregations was inclusive, and their people were working hard to meet the needs of the neighborhood. Yet those churches whose emphasis was dual—celebrated worship inside,

lived worship outside—were the minority. In 2001 a worship-driven congregation in my area finally did a survey as to who they were really reaching, and they were shocked. They'd

thought their congregation was at least 50 percent unchurched. The real number was 3 percent.

By 2002 a few pastors of praise and worship churches began admitting to me that they weren't making much of a dent in the surrounding non-Christian population, even though their services were packed and they were known for the best worship production in town. Several asked me to help them crack the unchurched code. One wanted to invest in an expensive VJ machine and target twentysomethings. The others thought a multisensory, ancient-future, or emergent twist might help. However, when I visited their congregations, it wasn't hard to see that the biggest barrier to reaching the unchurched had >>>>



little to do with worship technique or style. It had to do with isolation and the faux-worship that isolation inevitably creates.

No, what my friend shared with me wasn't news. He'd simply confirmed my worst fears. How ironic. When I wrote *Worship Evangelism*, I'd had no intention of distracting people from the world outside. I only wanted to give them another way of connecting to it. I certainly had never meant to make worship some slick formula for outreach, let alone *the one* formula. I'd only wanted to affirm that corporate worship has the capability to witness to the unchurched if we make it accessible and if we don't gut it of its spiritual content on the way to making it culturally relevant.

But those were different times. To witness through worship, the unchurched actually need to show up. And back then, this was happening. Those were the days when a church start-up could simply put up a billboard sign, send out several hundred glossy mailers, and the unchurched-curious would come to check it out. The contemporary, user-friendly spin may not have been as factory fresh as it was in the '80s, but it was still interesting. To the religiously allergic who hadn't been to church since grade school, it looked like religion had come of age.

And maybe it had. In the mid-90s, the community church section in the yellow pages was awash with self-conscious logos and catchy taglines, all competing with each other for that upwardly mobile, savvy church shopper. Strip malls and school gyms were bursting with "churches-on-wheels": shiny-faced set-up crews towing two-wheeled storage trailers, each chock full of sound equipment, Plexiglas podiums, informational handouts, plastic plants, name tags, and nursery toys.

But by 1998 something had shifted. The set-up crews weren't looking quite as fresh as they once

were. Why would they, playing "portable church" 52 weeks a year, year after hopeful year? Of course, they were waiting for the "promised land"—the gleaming megaplex their pastor had envisioned on those 20 farm acres south of town. The savviest start-ups reached that promised land. Most did not. By 2000 there were only a few trailers backing up to warehouse doors. The start-ups had thinned out. It was as if the "if we build it, they will come" game had suddenly grown stale. Like last year's action toy, the bright outfits, plastic plants, oozy choruses, and pink-shirts-with-Dockers-slacks went into culture's garage sale bin. Contemporary church plants that hadn't reached critical mass (300 to 400) by the end of the '90s were in deep trouble.

But there was a conundrum. The contemporary congregations that were well-established by the turn of the millennium—with 1,000 or more attendees and with the founding pastors still at the helm—seemed to grow exponentially, and they kept growing. These mega-survivors were invariably congregations with visionary, talented leaders and the determination to do whatever it took to grow. Many of them became the largest congregations in their cities and have developed significant ministries that are still impacting the face of American religion.

Who they were and who they were growing by, however, is a crucial question. As negative attitudes toward conservative Christianity among the unchurched increased in the late '90s and early 2000s, most large-congregation growth efforts became more focused on the churched consumer, even as their written and spoken vision remained focused on the unchurched. And these star performers became masters at what the churched wanted. They raised the bar several times over for what could be expected out of a Sunday morning experience, and they worked tirelessly to develop the high quality, practical programs the churched now demanded. Having excelled at making theirs the best churched experience on the market, they were perfectly positioned to absorb the windfall of disgruntled attendees from dwindling mainline congregations and failed, contemporary start-ups.

Some counter this view that growing churches have increased primarily by the churched. They cite situations where a large congregation has indeed attracted a high percentage of non-churchgoers. Or they point to the well-advertised fact that both the number and average size of megachurches increased between the early '90s and



**For all the money, time, and effort we've spent on cultural relevance—and that includes culturally relevant worship—it seems we came through the last 15 years with a significant net loss in churchgoers, proliferation of megachurches and all.**

early 2000s. Between 1994 and 2004, church attendance in congregations between 1,000 and 2,000 grew 10.3 percent. Congregations over 2,000 grew 21.5 percent.<sup>1</sup>

According to a Hartford Seminary study titled “Megachurches Today 2005,” there are 1,210 Protestant churches in the United States with weekly attendance over 2,000, nearly double the number that existed in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, according to The Barna Group, the number of adults who did not attend church nearly doubled in the same time period.<sup>3</sup> In a parallel trend, pollsters were charting the lowest ratings for religion in 60 years.<sup>4</sup> With both numbers and attitudes of the unchurched going in the opposite direction, where was all the growth in these big-and-getting-bigger churches coming from?

Location just might be a clue. Nearly 72 percent of churches with average weekly attendance of at least 2,000 people are found in a swath from Georgia and Florida across Texas to California...roughly the Bible Belt and the most churchgoing sectors of the Sun Belt.<sup>5</sup> It’s hard not to see the correlation.

As influential as they are, megachurches aren’t the whole story of American religion. To get a complete picture of church growth in the 1990s and new millennium, we need to look at overall church attendance patterns. Traditional pollsters conduct telephone interviews and expect people to be honest about their religious practices. According to the numbers gathered this way, we’re still at a 40 percent attendance rate. But pollsters who actually do seat counts and take exit polls tell a different story. The average weekly church attendance when measured by actual “bodies present” was at 17.4 percent in 2006, down from 20.4 percent in 1990.<sup>6</sup> David Olson of TheAmericanChurch.org remarks, “You’d have to find 80 million more people that churches forgot to count to get to 40 percent.”<sup>7</sup>

The upshot? For all the money, time, and effort we’ve spent on cultural relevance—and that includes culturally relevant worship—it seems we came through the last 15 years with a significant net loss in churchgoers, proliferation of megachurches and all.

## Let our deepened, honest worship be the overflow of what God does through us beyond our walls.

In 2003 the film *Saved* debuted at the box office. Many evangelicals were horrified and panned the movie. The fact that the film was produced in the first place should have tipped us off that something was afoot. The fact that it opened in theaters nationwide should have provoked a sizeable dialogue among contemporary church leaders about attitudes among the unchurched. But no such dialogue ensued.

Was the film exaggerated? Yes. It’s satire, and that’s what satire does. Was it slanted? Yes. But then, wasn’t that the point—the chance for non-Christians to reflect back to us how some of them perceive us? Truth hurts. Here was a film that depicted the smug, self-absorption of an evangelical school culture—complete with narcissistic praise and worship. I wondered if the dozen or so who walked out on it were Christians who didn’t want to face themselves on the screen. If it hadn’t been for my colleague drawing me aside in 2000, I could have been one those.

The question is, should cultural and missional realities have anything to do with worship? Perhaps not. It would appear that we’re more than capable of creating our own view of the world, and we tend to promote and perpetuate that view in our sanctuaries and worship centers. Somehow, the show goes on...even if most of the unbelievers we thought we were reaching either weren’t there in the first place, or they left the building some time ago.

Early in 2005 an unchurched journalist attended one of the largest, worship-driven churches in the country. >>>>



<sup>1</sup> [www.theamericanchurch.org](http://www.theamericanchurch.org)

<sup>2</sup> Hartford Seminary, “Megachurches Today 2005,” <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2005-summaryreport.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Barna Group, [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org), May 2004, “Number of Unchurched Adults Nearly Doubled Since 1991”

<sup>4</sup> George Gallup Jr., [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com), January 7, 2003, “Public Gives Organized Religion Its Lowest Rating”

<sup>5</sup> Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Megachurches Today: Faith Communities Today Project,” 2001. Updated 2005

<sup>6</sup> [www.theamericanchurch.org](http://www.theamericanchurch.org)

<sup>7</sup> “The American Church in Crisis” by Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, *Outreach* magazine, May/June 2006

Here is his description of one particular service:

"The [worship team] was young and pretty, dressed in the kind of quality-cotton-punk clothing one buys at the Gap. 'Lift up your hands, open the door,' crooned the lead singer, an inoffensive tenor. Male singers at [this] and other megachurches are almost always tenors, their voices clean and indistinguishable, R&B-inflected one moment, New Country the next, with a little bit of early '90s grunge at the beginning and the end.

"They sound like they're singing in beer commercials, and perhaps this is not coincidental. The worship style is a kind of musical correlate to (their pastor's) free market theology: designed for total accessibility, with the illusion of choice between strikingly similar brands. (He prefers the term *flavors*, and often uses Baskin-Robbins as a metaphor when explaining his views.) The drummers all stick to soft cymbals and beats anyone can handle; the guitarists deploy effects like artillery but condense them, so the highs and lows never stretch too wide. Lyrics tend to be rhythmic and pronunciation perfect, the better to sing along with when the words are projected onto movie screens. Breathily or wailing, vocalists drench their lines with emotion, but only within strict confines. There are no sad songs in a megachurch, and there are no angry songs. There are songs about desperation, but none about despair; songs convey longing only if it has already been fulfilled."<sup>8</sup>

No sad songs. No angry songs. Songs about desperation, but none about despair. Worship for the perfect. The already arrived. The good-looking, inoffensive, and nice. No wonder the unchurched aren't interested.

Truth may hurt, but if there's something leaders do, they tell it. In 2000 I didn't have all of the numbers I have now, but I had seen enough to know what was happening. The contempo-

rary church—including the praise-and-worship church, the *worship evangelism* church—was in a holy huddle, and I began to talk about it. It was excruciating. It was career suicide. But from pastors conferences to worship seminars to seminaries, I began challenging leaders to give up their mythologies about how they were reaching the unchurched on Sunday morning. Yes, worship openly and unapologetically. Yes, worship well and deeply. (Which means singing songs that may include anger, sadness, and despair. Have we forgotten that David did this? Have we discarded the psalms?) But let our deepened, honest worship be the overflow of what God does through us beyond our walls.

Conference organizers were confused. They wondered what had happened to me. Where was the worship evangelism warrior? Where was the formula? Where was the pep talk for all those people who were convinced that trading in their traditional service for a contemporary upgrade would be the answer? I don't have to tell you this. The 100-year-old congregation that's down to 43 members and having a hard time paying the light bill doesn't want to be told that the "answer" is living life with the people in their neighborhoods. Relationships take time, and they need an attendance infusion *now*.

I understood their dilemma, and secretly, I wished I had a magic bullet. But I didn't. And I wasn't going to give them false hope. Some newfangled worship service wasn't going to save their church, and it wasn't going to build God's kingdom. It wasn't going to attract the strange neighbors who had moved into their communities or the generations they had managed to ignore for the last 39 years.

As I pulled my Sacramentis site off of the Web, I posted this statement: "Sacramentis has been a pioneer site on worship and culture for seven years. From the beginning, it has been a gathering spot for the most helpful worship ideas and resources we could find. Sacramentis has also been a place where church leaders could go deeper into what classic Christian worship is and does, and where they could re-imagine worship for communities where churchgoing is no longer the norm. But as culture has become incessantly more spiritual and adamantly less religious, we at Sacramentis have become convinced that the primary meeting place with our unchurched friends is now outside the church building. Worship must

finally become, as Paul reminds us, more life than event (Romans 12:1-2). To this end, we will be focusing on the radically different kind of leadership practices necessary to transform our congregations from destina-



**God's work may not be "all outside," but if we look at where Jesus spent his time, I think we can safely say that most of it is.**


tions to conversations, from services to service, and from organizations to organisms.”

In January USA TODAY featured an article titled, “Can the ‘E-Word’ [evangelical] Be Saved?”<sup>9</sup> I think we need to ask a parallel question. “Can the W-word [worship] be saved?” Saved from the definition that it’s just what goes on inside the tent? From the lie that worship is a place you go, not what you do or who you are?

JCPenney stores adopted a new motto a few years ago: “It’s all inside.” That may work well for clothes and housewares, but it doesn’t work so well for spreading the gospel. Ah, but aren’t buildings important? Yes, they are. Jesus himself spent crucial time in synagogues

and the Temple. He affirmed that the worship of God is central to what it means to be a disciple. But here’s the catch. He did not make the building—or corporate worship—the destination. His destination was the people God wanted to touch, and those were, with few exceptions, people who wouldn’t have spent much time in holy places. Jesus’ direction was always outward. Centrifugal. Even in death, he was broken and poured out for the sake of a needy world. God’s work may not be “all outside,” but if we look at where Jesus spent his time, I think we can safely say that most of it is.

I am currently headed further outside my comfort zones than I ever thought I could go. I am taking time for the preacher to heal herself. As I

exit the world of corporate worship, I want to offer this hope and prayer. May you, as leader of your congregation, have the courage to leave the “if we build it, they will come” world of the last two decades behind. May you and the Christ-followers you serve become worshippers who can raise the bar of authenticity, as well as your hands. And may you be reminiscent of Isaiah, who, having glimpsed the hem of God’s garment and felt the cleansing fire of grace on his lips, cried, “Here am I, send me.” 

**SALLY MORGENTHALER** speaks about leadership in a “flattened” world. She is a contributor to *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, edited by Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Baker). She may be contacted at [info@trueconversations.com](mailto:info@trueconversations.com).

<sup>8</sup> Harper’s Magazine, May 25-26, 2005, “Soldiers of Christ: Inside America’s Most Powerful Megachurch” by Jeff Sharlet

<sup>9</sup> USA TODAY, January 23, 2007, “Can the ‘E-Word’ Be Saved?”

## INSTITUTIONAL VS. MISSIONAL MINISTRY

### KEY PARADIGM SHIFTS

Church as a place you go, a destination point	▶	Church as body of Christ released into the waiting world
Church produces programs for people to consume	▶	People of God live out the gospel for people to see and experience
Worship as event: It all happens inside	▶	Worship as whole life: Romans 12:1,2
Corporate worship as image management (Public worship becomes a carefully presented persona)	▶	Corporate worship as reflection of reality (Public worship is an overflow of who we are the rest of the week)
Received spirituality: We believe because we were raised in a certain faith	▶	Reflexive spirituality: We believe because we have encountered, wrestled with, and tested revealed truth
Organization as a machine with interchangeable, disposable parts	▶	Organization as an organism: a living system where every member is vital. There is no superfluous membership.
Top-down structure; vision by edict	▶	Flattened structure; leadership as influence, not power and authority
Closed Source—vision, ideas, resources, strategy come from CEO, leader, and staff	▶	Open Source—the priesthood of all believers in action: vision collaboratively owned; grassroots innovation the norm
Micro-managed process	▶	People-releasing process
Excellence = quality of performance	▶	Excellence = level of engagement and transformation