

5 REASONS CHARISMATIC CHURCHES ARE GROWING (AND ATTRACTIVE CHURCHES ARE PAST PEAK)

By Carey Nieuwhof

Think about how churches were just before the pandemic hit.

Notice this?

If you looked at almost any growing church led by younger leaders, it definitely tended toward the charismatic—expressive worship, more emotional delivery in preaching, an openness to the work and activity of the Holy Spirit, and generally a warmer, more enthusiastic and expressive gathering.

And...a lot of the churches that leaned toward a more charismatic expression of their faith were filled with young adults and Millennials.

Meanwhile, many leaders in attractive churches were finding it harder and harder to reach new people. While not universally true, some had stopped growing, or at least seen a slower growth rate than say 5 or 10 years ago.

Post-pandemic, that trend may be even more accelerated.

Please hear me. This is not “we’re right you’re wrong”. This is a *learning together* post. Actually, both the charismatic and attractive movements have contributed massively to reaching millions of people. There is much to learn from each other.

Critics have no place here, but learners do.

So, what’s happening? Well, culture changes, and what people respond to changes, too. The church should change with it. While you should never change the mission of a church (it’s eternal), you should definitely adapt the method.

Churches who love the method more than the mission will die. It happened in the 1950s, in the 1970s, in the 1990s and it’s happening today. What was effective a decade ago isn’t always effective today. Leaders who live in the past end up dying to the future.

While you could argue that there’s a major difference in theology between charismatic and non-charismatic churches, I don’t think the differences are that big for the purposes of this blog post anyway.

The big shift is happening in how churches *express* themselves on the weekend and conduct their weekend experiences, moving from:

- anonymity to a sense of belonging

- engagement of the heart, not just the head.
- more variety of services than three songs and a message
- more passionate expressions of worship
- additional space during the service for prayer
- more thought in the service to the engagement of emotions beyond “hey we’re excited you’re here” (welcome and upbeat music) and “here’s something to think about” (the message).

Churches that miss cultural change become irrelevant. After all, the gap between how quickly you change and how quickly culture changes is called irrelevance.

Personally, I’m behind *any* church that’s doing a great job leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

So, in the interests of learning and growing together, here are 5 reasons more charismatic churches are growing, and attractional churches are moving past peak in the current culture.

1. THE FOYER MOVED

One of the great (and helpful) assumptions behind creating attractional churches is that *Sunday morning* is the first experience with church.

Guess what? That’s no longer true.

Now, almost everyone who attends your church for the first time has already been to your church...*online*.

That’s the case whether you have a completely amazing online experience, a killer website and an on-point social media presence, or whether you have a website from 2008.

Trust me, people who are interested in Christianity or your church have already checked you out long before they visited you. And if you have an online service, they’ve been with you for at least a week, and sometimes months or beyond.

Not convinced they’re checking out your channels? Well, there is the internet. Trust me: if they have spiritual questions, they’ve googled their way to spiritual answers (good *or* bad answers) long before they set foot in your door.

The pandemic has only accelerated this trend.

All of which means...the foyer moved.

I had a great discussion about this with the senior leadership team at CrossPoint Nashville. We talked about how attractional church isn't as effective as it used to be (both CrossPoint and Connexus, where I serve, have been changing along the lines of this post for a few years now), when CrossPoint's Creative Arts Director, Drew Powell, simply stated that the foyer had moved. That completely crystallized something I was trying to put my finger on for years now. Thanks, Drew, for the clarity.

So yep, that's it: the foyer moved.

The implication? When someone shows up at your church now, they're likely to want a little *more* than they did a decade or two ago when their first visit was truly their first exposure to your church or to Christianity. They're ready to go a little further somewhat faster because they've already taken their first step.

Will you still end up with some people at the back with the arms crossed wanting to hide out in the dark? Of course.

But you likely have more who want to sample something real, who want to experience something different, who are ready to engage faster.

That doesn't mean you should bring them into a complete insider experience that's impossible to understand or access. But it does mean they're likely hungrier for more than they were a decade ago.

2. PEOPLE WANT TRANSFORMATION, NOT INFORMATION

Attractional church has seen thousands, probably millions, of people move into an authentic relationship with Jesus. Please hear that.

But sometimes what we've done (I say "we" because I've done this) is we tend to share information *about* Jesus or Christianity when we preach or host services. There was a day when that was really helpful, and that's still not an entirely bad instinct. Who, after all, wants to lose people completely?

But remember, we now have the full-on internet that swallows daily life whole. We are drowning in a sea of information.

Fast forward to church, and guess what? People aren't looking for information. They're looking for transformation.

When people come to your church these days, fewer are looking for information *about* God; they're looking for an experience *with* God.

Today, information is everywhere. Transformation is scarce.

Too many people who have been to church know about God. Not enough know God.

3. TRANSCENDENT IS CONNECTING MORE THAN IMMANENT RIGHT NOW

Both the digital explosion and the cynicism of our age have left people hungering for a transcendent touch. Think about the explosive rise of porn. People are looking for intimacy, but of course, in porn, get just the opposite. They're looking for more.

People are hungry for true community, deeper experiences, and authentic transcendence.

Which is why churches that are growing are focusing more and more on creating *experiences* that engage more than just the head on a Sunday...but also engage the heart and relationship.

In short, people don't just want to know what's true, they want to know what's *real*. And what's real is deeper than just an idea—it's an experience.

They come looking for something bigger than themselves, and something frankly, bigger than us. They come looking for God.

It's a shame when people come to church looking for God and only find us.

God, in his nature, is both immanent and transcendent. A few decades ago, as the culture slipped away from church, focusing on the imminence of God brought many back.

But the cultural shifts of the last decade and a half have left people (especially younger people) longing for the transcendent.

This should be no surprise because of course the heart naturally longs for God. Sometimes we just long for God a bit differently than our parents.

I think the best future churches will have content that leans toward the immanent—practical, helpful and digestible. Again, being completely obtuse and incomprehensible or insider-focused helps no one. And future churches will also offer experiences that feel transcendent...a sense that you had to be there to experience what happened.

The best churches will offer both because that reflects the character and nature of God and the character of the Christian church at its best.

4. DOWNLOADABLE EXPERIENCES HAVE BECOME RESISTIBLE EXPERIENCES

Church online is new, so we're all trying to figure it out. Understood.

I think online provides a HUGE front door to everyone you're trying to reach. Everyone you're trying to reach with the love of Christ is online.

So how do you navigate that tension of having everything you do available online and in-person? Why would people bother to come at all, is the question.

Fundamentally, the consumption of content is also leaving people hungering for greater community, greater experience and greater transcendence.

So, here's what many growing churches are doing: offering experiences that, when watched online, leave you longing for the real, in-person thing.

How? Running through that list we started with, growing churches design their in-person experience to:

- move people quickly from anonymity to a sense of belonging
- focus on the engagement of the heart, not just the head, both in the message and the music and overall experience.
- offer more variety of services than three songs and a message
- facilitate more passionate expressions of worship
- create moments and additional space during the service for prayer
- put more thought in the service to engaging a variety of emotions.

If everything your church does in the future feels downloadable, probably all you'll get is a lot of downloads, not a lot of gathered people.

If what your church does touches the soul, people will continue to gather.

People are coming to church expecting to meet God. Don't let them settle for meeting you or something they could have half-listened to while working out.

To put it simply, if people feel like they missed nothing when they missed church, they'll keep missing church.

5. PASSION'S BEATING POLISH

If you've been around church world for the last few decades, it's easy to think that you need polish to pull off effective ministry. Another \$50,000 for lights or sound and you'll be good.

To be sure, charismatic churches have some amazing production.

But if you're sitting there thinking that you need a better soundboard, some new LEDs and a much better band to reach people, think again.

Passion is free. And passion beats polish.

The effective churches I've visited and seen recently by no means had the best lights, stage or production. Some had almost no stage and no lights, while others had a pretty decent setup, but not nearly the level you see at some churches.

What did they all have in common? Passion.

When it comes to reaching the next generation, passion beats polish.

It's not that polish is bad (I'm all for great environments and seeing people fully use their gifts to create amazing experiences) but I think polish falls flat unless accompanied by a raw passion that exudes from leaders who love connecting people with God.

In some of the growing churches I've personally visited, smaller facilities and stage sets were more than compensated for by preachers, worship leaders, and team members who exuded passion for the mission.

One caveat: don't fake passion—people can smell fake from a mile away. And don't exaggerate it. Different people have different levels of passion.

But if yours has faded, rekindle it. Pray about. Evoke what's in there, and bring it to church.

In an age where nothing seems real anymore, people are looking for authenticity. Church, we have it.

A FEW REMINDERS

A few notes before we finish up.

WEIRD IS STILL WEIRD

The attractional movement has done a great job reminding all of us that we have *guests* in the room. And while the foyer may have moved, someone's first Sunday is still a huge deal.

So that's no excuse to be self-indulgently weird. Authentic doesn't mean weird.

EMOTIONALISM WON'T WIN THE DAY

Another trend I've seen is that the next generation of preachers (under 40s) seem to preach more than they teach.

It's always hard to define the exact difference between the two but simply put, preaching speaks more to the heart, teaching speaks more to the head.

Preachers facilitate an experience. Teachers convey information.

I think the best pastors do both well.

Preaching without solid teaching can become emotionalism. Teaching without preaching can become intellectualism.

Preaching leads people to say ‘That’s right. I need to change.’ Teaching can lead people to say “He’s right. That’s a good point.”

I default toward teaching so this is a challenge for me.

REMEMBER THE PEOPLE YOU’RE TRYING TO REACH

The church is still one of the few organizations that exists for the sake of its non-members.

Doubt that? Well, aren’t you glad someone didn’t decide the church was done before you were introduced to the love of Jesus?

For sure you need to care for the people you have, but never to the exclusion of the people you’re called to reach.

Churches that over-focus on the needs of insiders will eventually only have insiders. And when that happens, you missed the mission.