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The Seeker Service

Evangelism and Worship

Since the mid-1980s, seeker services have generated considerable discussion and debate among pastors and church leaders. Many churches have started services that set aside an established liturgy and church music, eagerly embracing new popular musical styles, the arts, and multimedia communication technology to create what Kimon Sargeant calls “modern liturgies for skeptical seekers.”[1]

The seeker service approach builds on a basic assumption: unchurched people have dropped out of church or have stayed away because of traditional liturgy and music. Seeker churches create instead an alternative environment in which to hear the gospel by using styles of music and communication that the seekers already know. By setting aside traditional styles of liturgy and music, pastors and service planners hope to appeal to seekers through creative communication media—drama and the visual arts, but above all music and nontraditional preaching.

There is, of course, more than one way to design a service to attract seekers. A seeker-targeted or seeker-focused service aims at the unchurched or unbelieving attendee; it avoids as much traditional liturgy and music as possible and adopts a high level of cultural relevance in music and communication. Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago is widely regarded as the birthplace of the seeker service movement. The buildings do not look like typical church structures, the atmosphere inside is informal and casual,

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and the attitude is often intentionally irreverent. "Slice of life" drama sketches, video clips from movies, TV programs and music videos, and message-oriented Christian music (or even secular music) are woven together into a tight thematic package. Different approaches to preaching, often using multimedia visual aids, focus on felt needs of the target audience, rather than on biblical text.

In many cases, a pastor or service planner is reluctant to call a seeker-focused event a worship service because it focuses on the seeker rather than God, and because it doesn't contain many of the elements of worship (such as congregational singing, prayer, and celebration of baptism and communion). A seeker-targeted or seeker-focused service is apologetic in tone and strives to make a clear presentation of the gospel.

Seeker-sensitive services try to incorporate elements of the seeker-focused approach, such as creative communication and appreciation of the seeker's state of mind, within the context of a traditional worship service. Such a service often makes extensive use of contemporary worship music, as well as contemporary Christian music, the visual arts, drama, interviews, and video; it avoids traditional preaching style. Prayers are brief and use contemporary language and a conversational tone. The sacraments may be observed in a simple and contemporary manner, though in many places they are observed at a midweek service for believers.

Both of these approaches attempt to minimize what many believe are the less attractive aspects of traditional worship, namely, uninspiring and uninteresting music, a formalized and ritualistic style of leadership, and too much religious jargon as well as a way of speaking that might confuse or even alienate the newcomer. Pastors and other leaders do not wear robes; they often do not even wear a suit. Attendees are expected to come dressed informally as well. Moreover, the seeker service embraces an emotional approach, making an appeal to the heart as well as to the head, primarily through personal testimony, drama, and music. Clear and practical themes predominate from beginning to end of each service, usually

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focusing a biblical perspective on personal and family issues. Marriage and family issues feature prominently in these mostly suburban churches. Songs that emphasize the lifelong commitment of Christian marriage reinforce a practical sermon on faithfulness in marriage; there may be an arresting title like "How to Affair-Proof Your Marriage," along with testimony from a couple who worked through infidelity, and a time of prayer for couples who want to experience God's blessing for their marriage in a new way.

To understand the seeker service approach as part of the worship awakening, we need to go beneath the surface to examine its historical roots, its theological foundation, and its connection with contemporary popular culture.

The Roots of the Seeker Church Movement

Today's seeker service may seem like an invention of the 1980s, but it comes from a long family history. Its pedigree includes revivalists and evangelists who sought to combine worship and evangelism, going back at least to colonial America. Among them were important figures in American religious history: John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Billy Graham. Advocates and critics of seeker service acknowledge the movement's roots in American revivalist worship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but few understand this history or the impact on today's seeker service. The history and influence are more complex and diverse than many admit.

Camp Meetings and Revivalist Worship

As far back as the eighteenth century, evangelists and revivalists such as Whitefield and Wesley knew how to draw crowds of unchurched people.[2] The beginning of the nineteenth century was a period of religious revival throughout much of the new country, particularly in the hills and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains and out on the frontier of the Ohio and Tennessee river valleys. In this

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wild and untamed setting, the camp meeting emerged as the vehicle for revival and evangelism. These three- and four-day meetings were often modeled on the Presbyterian "communion season," which had been observed in Scotland for more than 150 years.[3] Like the communion season, the camp meeting featured evangelistic preaching from several ministers, often from several denominations and occasionally of other races. On Sunday, usually the final day of the meeting, the pastor served communion and baptized new converts. Increasingly, the services prior to the communion service on Sunday morning became more evangelistic in focus, using new features like popular musical styles, a "mourner's bench" for those "under conviction" of their sins, and a sawdust trail that led the convert to the front for prayer. Many exhibited physical manifestations of repentance and surrender to God: violent shaking, fainting, trances, and "speaking in tongues," which some interpreted as a sign of true conversion.

Methodist quarterly meetings also shaped revivalist worship in early America. These two-day weekend events included several preaching services, prayer meetings, the "love feast" and the Lord's Supper, as well as business meetings and fellowship among the Methodists of a particular area. As Lester Ruth writes, "originally designed as a business meeting to conduct certain affairs of a circuit, these meetings developed—particularly in America—into great worship festivals."[4] As many as ten thousand would turn out for these gatherings between 1780 and 1810. The Methodists coined the term *seeker* to mean a nonsociety member who attended the meeting along with regular Methodists. Although they did not use the term *seeker service,* the early Methodists eventually developed a special evangelistic service for nonsociety members. As Methodists understood it, seekers were those who had some sense of their sinfulness and need for grace.[5] By the early nineteenth century, camp meetings had replaced the quarterly meetings in importance among Methodists, but camp meetings adopted many features of the quarterly meetings, including the distinction between public and

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private service, and worship for believers and seekers. Not surprisingly, Methodists at the time eagerly endorsed and participated in the camp meetings.[6]

Charles G. Finney, a lawyer of the middle nineteenth century who turned evangelist, took the dynamics of the camp meeting to the urban churches of the Eastern seaboard. Worship historian James White calls Finney "the most influential liturgical reformer in American history"; he sees Finney's contribution as "the domestication of frontier practices . . . which soon spread to all parts of the United States and much of Canada."[7] Finney's approach to worship was purely pragmatic; worship is a means to evangelistic ends. He called his approach to worship the "new methods": songs with a simple and familiar melody and lyrics; a dramatic and engaging style of preaching; and the famous "anxious bench," usually the front row of pews, reserved for those who felt God was calling them to repent of their sins and receive Christ.

Finney justified his new methods by claiming that scripture gives no specific guidance on any particular liturgical style. In his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), he wrote that "God has established no particular measures to be used. . . . We are left in the dark as to the measures which were pursued by the apostles and primitive preachers."[8] The pastor should not worry about biblical or historical precedent but should ask, "Will it help lead unbelievers to Christ?" This pragmatic approach differed greatly from the denominational traditions, which claimed biblical support for their distinctive worship styles.

As Finney developed it, revival worship is characterized by emphasis on preaching. Other elements, such as prayer, reading scripture, and congregational singing and choral music (often known as "preliminaries"), are secondary elements and should be related thematically to the sermon to prepare the audience for the message. Unlike established Protestant traditions, which featured either expository preaching through individual books of the Bible or lectionary preaching that was based on selection of scripture assigned

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throughout the church year, revival preaching is primarily topical, focused on the "plan of salvation" and how one can accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The significance of Finney's approach to worship is hard to overstate. Three important aspects deserve our attention here. First, his pragmatic approach emphasized freedom and innovation over tradition. Denominational traditions, particularly in the conservative churches in the larger Eastern cities, held many of the innovations of the camp meeting in check. By pointing out that scripture did not require specific styles and forms in worship, Finney managed to relativize all liturgical tradition and break down opposition to innovation.[9]

Second, Finney developed a new way to relate worship to its surrounding culture. His new measures created an "indigenous" form of worship suited to the emerging American outlook and culture, largely by embracing popular styles and downplaying the importance of clerical authority. Nathan Hatch observes that "Finney called for a Copernican revolution to make religious life audience-centered. He despised the formal study of divinity because it produced dull and ineffective communication."[10] Having shed many of the European trappings of worship, Finney's services were thoroughly American and egalitarian; they freely indulged the "era of good feelings" that abounded during Andrew Jackson's administration.

Third, Finney reversed the relationship between worship and evangelism. Previously, theologians and pastors believed evangelism was a secondary by-product of worship, even in a camp meeting. Saving souls was a high priority to those early camp meeting and quarterly meeting leaders, but worship was a higher priority. For Finney it was the opposite; evangelism was primary, while worship was a secondary concern. Everything that was said and done, sung and prayed in his evangelistic meeting must happen in a way that maximized the opportunity for conversion.

Revival worship spread quickly among all Protestant churches, touching off controversy in one denomination after another. Among Presbyterians, for example, advocates of revival worship were

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known as the New School; its more conservative detractors were called the Old School. New School Presbyterians were less committed to their denominational institutions than were the Old School advocates and were more open to any attempt to simplify difficult Puritan theology. The New School sought to loosen up Reformed worship with new music and evangelistic preaching. The Old School responded vigorously to block this innovation, but the two groups were unable to accommodate each other and they split the denomination in 1837.

Methodists and Baptists, on the other hand, adopted revival worship, mostly because they did not share the Presbyterians' theological suspicion of Finney. Emerging denominations such as the Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church, and the Seventh-Day Adventists eagerly embraced Finney's approach to worship, followed later by the holiness churches in the second half of the nineteenth century and the Pentecostals early in the twentieth century. Together, this collection of groups formed the evangelical movement that continues to this day, held together in large part by a common commitment to revivalist worship.

Sister Aimee and Robert Schuller

Aimee Semple McPherson, the pioneer radio evangelist and founder of the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, is a creative and controversial example of revivalist worship in the early twentieth century.[11] Following the death of her first husband in China, McPherson began touring the United States as an evangelist, quickly gaining attention for her healing ministry and her openness to new forms of music for worship—in particular, black worship music. After World War I, she settled in Los Angeles and founded Angelus Temple as the platform for her ministry. Her innovative services attracted considerable press coverage, as well as the scorn of other church leaders in southern California.

Sister Aimee's Sunday evening service was the prototype for today's seeker service, combining several elements she felt would attract the unchurched. The first was a suitable space. Angelus

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Temple was an architectural marvel, in its day one of the largest church buildings ever constructed. The quality of the visual and acoustic features in the twenty-five-hundred-seat sanctuary was well ahead of its time. Designed more like a theater than a church, Angelus Temple boasted an orchestra pit, one of the first sound systems to be used in a church, and no seats with an obstructed view of the stage. The second element of Angelus Temple's worship was the music. Sister Aimee loved music, and the temple was known for its musical excellence, boasting "the best jazz in Los Angeles." The outstanding choir led some classical hymns, though the church was particularly well known for singing gospel songs with gusto.

The final element was McPherson's "illustrated sermons." Taking her cues from neighboring Hollywood, she used drama, scenery, costumes and makeup, and a variety of props and extras (including live animals). Among the more memorable events was her sermon on Jesus the Good Shepherd, in which she preached dressed as Little Bo Peep. She would preach on the wages of sin astride a police motorcycle, dressed as a traffic cop. She was simply too much for her critics, who complained bitterly about her popular services and messages. Sister Aimee was, however, a passionate evangelist with a flair for showmanship. She understood and used emerging popular culture and broadcast technology as a means to communicate the gospel. As a result, her church was popular with the Hollywood crowd; even Charlie Chaplin attended services (incognito) and loitered in the back alley waiting to discuss trade secrets with her afterward. Although she gained her fame as a faith healer, McPherson was an evangelist at heart. "Angelus Temple," she often said, "is a home for people who don't have a home."

Racked by scandal and plagued by financial irregularities, the Angelus Temple faded from the limelight by the end of the 1930s. After McPherson's death in 1944, the temple and the denomination she founded, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, had no one who could match her creativity and evangelistic energy; the temple and denomination both settled into a phase of retrenchment and consolidation away from the media spotlight.

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But less than twenty years later, the media and pop-culture–savvy approach to revivalist worship she developed would find an unlikely advocate in Robert Schuller, a young pastor in a small Dutch Reformed denomination commissioned to start a church in the new suburbs of Orange County, California.

Sister Aimee's creative illustrated sermons were the focus of her services; Robert Schuller made plain messages about the power of positive thinking the focus of his preaching and services. Early in his career, Schuller found that the message of Norman Vincent Peale hit the mark with his congregation of Orange County suburbanites. The music ministry of the church was intentionally eclectic, favoring traditional choral and organ music while popular entertainers also offered special music. Like Sister Aimee, Schuller made a mark with architecture. His first sanctuary was contemporary by the standards of the early 1960s. But his second building, completed in 1979, is one of the most distinctive church buildings ever built. The Crystal Cathedral, which seats nearly three thousand, is built in the shape of a star and enclosed entirely by more than two hundred thousand panes of glass. A row of fountains occupies the center aisle, and as the service begins a giant door to the right of the sanctuary opens to outdoor fountains and a view of palm trees and the southern California hills in the distance. A massive Jumbotron television screen allows attendees to see the speaker and others on the platform.

The Crystal Cathedral was the first American church to make extensive use of marketing and church growth techniques as a centerpiece of its mission. Schuller's famous door-to-door survey helped him shape his service and message for the audience of 1950s suburbanites. He does not use the term *seeker,* but he does consider his services geared to the unchurched. Schuller's target audience is affluent Orange County executives and entrepreneurs who are skeptical about the relevance of Christianity and its practical benefit for their lives.[12]

Following in the footsteps of the Crystal Cathedral, Willow Creek Community Church is the most recent and probably the most

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successful current version of revivalist worship. Founded in the mid-1970s as an outgrowth of a youth ministry led by Bill Hybels, the church has mushroomed into one of the largest in the United States. In the 1990s, approximately fifteen thousand attended one of five services held on Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday evening as well as Sunday morning. Each service is a creatively and thematically planned and tightly scripted presentation of music, drama, multimedia, and message. This approach places Willow Creek, and the thousands of churches that view it as a model for their worship service, squarely in the tradition of revival worship developed by Charles Finney.

The Church Growth Movement

The seeker service movement also owes much to the Church Growth movement, founded by Donald McGavran in the 1950s. Studying growing churches in India, McGavran noted several important sociological factors, which he described in his early works on Church Growth. One of these factors is cultural adaptation of worship and preaching. Another factor is what he called the "homogeneous unit principle," the observation that people are more receptive to the gospel in the company of their peers. As McGavran put it, "People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."[13] McGavran's student C. Peter Wagner discovered that many of the mentor's principles worked in a North American setting as well. Church Growth theory uses the social sciences of sociology, ethnography, and demographics to understand how people live, think, and feel.

The movement is influential and controversial. Wagner has taught and mentored many of the leading seeker church pastors in his courses at Fuller Theological Seminary, notably the late John Wimber, Rick Warren, and Walt Kallestad. As the megachurch became more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, the church growth movement's practical focus attracted many pastors and church leaders to conferences and courses on how to build a growing church.

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Church Growth theory does not endorse or discourage any particular liturgical or musical style for worship, but it does have a lot to say about what goes on during a service. Because the service is for the unchurched a front door into the congregation, it's important that the service be carefully planned and confidently executed. Relying heavily on sociology and demographic research, Church Growth experts offer guidance on how well many aspects of the service connect with a given group of people, a target audience—from the parking lot to the nursery, from the architecture to the style of music.

As we will see shortly, Church Growth theory has its weaknesses when it comes to worship. But the seeker church movement reveals at least two important contributions of the Church Growth movement to the worship awakening. First, Church Growth advocates helpfully emphasize the importance of the visitor's experience of a service. It is easy for a pastor or church member to overlook aspects of the service that are obvious to a newcomer. Wagner uses the term *church growth eyes* to refer to the ability to see things about our church as visitors see them. Kennon Callahan underscores the importance of valuing a visitor's perception of the service. "The first major component of corporate, dynamic worship is a service that is warm and winsome, welcoming and hospitable, gracious and encouraging."[14] A visitor-friendly service is the mark of a hospitable and welcoming congregation.

Second, Church Growth theory challenges pastors and church leaders to pay attention to the "environmental factors," the details and aspects about a church that are not directly related to worship but that determine how user-friendly a service is. Many ministry experts recommend a congregational study and diagnostic tools to help the pastor and church leaders identify areas of strength and weakness. This begins with the campus, including the parking lot, buildings, signs, and accessibility; it goes on to examine the people worshipers meet on the way to the service (parking lot attendants, greeters, ushers, and others); then there is the architecture and furnishings of the sanctuary, and the ability to hear and see in it; the

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bulletins, hymnals, and other worship aids; the kind of people on the platform leading the service, and how they look and lead; and finally, child care and children's ministry programming. Ministry experts also remind the pastor and church leaders about the importance of quality in ministry. Like it or not, a worship service has plenty of competition for people's time and attention. The quality of the environmental factors is often the reason a newcomer decides whether a service is worth attending.

Seeker Service Issues

Since the mid-1980s, the seeker service strategy has generated hope and enthusiasm among its adherents, and criticism from its detractors. But why do seeker services seem to succeed at attracting unchurched people?

To begin with, a seeker service works because the seeker church has a clear commitment to reaching seekers, a characteristic even the critics acknowledge and applaud. Gregory Pritchard notes that "the idea of a seeker service is a modern adaptation of Wesley's open-air meetings, Paul's discussions in the Ephesus town hall, or Jesus' hillside parables . . . the concept of creating a public forum for presenting the gospel is a wonderful idea."[15] A church that succeeds with seeker service has a laserlike focus on connecting with the unchurched. Outreach and evangelism is not one program among others; it is *the* program.

Second, advocates claim seeker services work because they offer clear communication about Christianity in a culturally relevant way. As Willow Creek's Pastor Bill Hybels explains, people can expect to hear the gospel in a way they can understand. This culturally relevant "creative persuasion" is aided by a commitment to avoid confusing language, symbols, and gestures. Related to this is the multisensory environment a seeker service creates. Architecture, sound, and sight combine to communicate a clear theme at a number of levels. The arts, in particular, play an important role in connecting with the seeker at an affective, or emotional, level. The

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seeker church works hard to understand the likes, dislikes, and spiritual state of the people it tries to attract. It is a sophisticated student of human nature, and a savvy marketer that understands consuming patterns, TV, movie and music interests, and the local community and its worlds of work and leisure. Not surprisingly, people who attend a seeker service usually find it easy to understand and user-friendly.

This helps us understand how a seeker service draws a crowd, but how well does it achieve the stated aim of leading unbelieving and unchurched people to a commitment to Christ, and then to commitment to fellowship and ministry in the church? On the first part of the question, there can be little doubt that seeker churches have done remarkably well in presenting Christ to unchurched people, and presenting a way for them to respond. The second part of the question is more difficult to answer because no studies have been done to measure how effectively converts are assimilated into a church or how deeply rooted their spirituality becomes. The general consensus among ministry experts and seeker church staffers, however, is that seeker churches face a significant challenge in moving people to deeper discipleship.

Some of the reasons for the ongoing problems the seeker church faces are reflected in four issues raised by the movement's critics: the focus of the seeker service, use of popular culture and electronic media, the prioritization of evangelism over worship, and performance versus participation in worship.

Worship for Whom?

Critics of seeker services complain that they are more focused on a target audience than on God. The service does not preserve the centrality of God in worship and the integrity of Christian truth in preaching. In *Room for God?* Pastor Robert Wenz worries that some churches have moved beyond being sensitive to unbelievers, to "accommodating them at the cost of violating biblical truth."[16] This problem is particularly acute for seeker-sensitive services, which seem to be both worship and an evangelism event.

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How is God sidelined in a seeker service? Critics point to several aspects of the seeker strategy that make the unchurched, rather than God, the focus of worship and preaching. First, the emphasis on popular and commercial media has a distorting influence on the Christian message and worship. Use of media and the arts is not direct enough; Pritchard worries about "the potential lack of willingness to upset or confront [the seeker]. If a high priority is placed on providing entertainment rather than on communicating a message, the method will distort the message."[17] In the effort to be interesting, the seeker service emphasizes entertainment over content.

Again, the critics are anxious about the overemphasis on psychological language and concepts, another aspect of the focus on the seeker rather than on God. Unchurched people understand little theology, but they do understand some psychology. Yet by adopting the language and thought-world of popular psychology uncritically, the seeker church trades theological tradition for temporary human trends and opinion. Pritchard argues that "making the gospel relevant can easily compromise it. The unintended consequences of this approach are that Hybels incorporates large chunks of the American psychological worldview into his basic teaching and teaches that fulfillment is a consequence of the Christian life."[18] By relying so heavily on popular psychology, the seeker service runs the risk of confusing the Christian message with the message of secular social science. A focus on the audience instead of God and the willingness to change the content of the Christian message seem to go hand in hand.

Selling Jesus?

Relying on marketing strategies to determine the preferences, tastes, and interests of unchurched people to design relevant services that connect with the seeker is likewise a human-centered quality. Both Schuller and Hybels began their ministries by going door to door, surveying their neighborhoods. Pritchard believes that marketing methods inevitably distort the Christian message: "Willow Creek's

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use of marketing language and reasoning has been adopted wholesale from the marketplace. The problem is that the marketing perspective of needs, research, target markets, market share, target-audience profile, and product inevitably modifies any human endeavor to which it is applied."[19] To capture the attention of the unchurched, critics claim that the seeker church chooses style over substance and entertainment over serious theological content, in a misguided belief that these are what the seeker really wants. Marva Dawn questions the assumption that musical style determines church growth: "What is faulty is churches' assumption that if we choose the right kind of music people will be attracted to Christ. It is idolatry to think our work makes the difference. . . . Worship music is used to proclaim Christ, not to advertise him."[20]

Pritchard further claims that the marketing mentality produces two consequences that are dangerous for a church. First, it exposes pastors and church leaders to the temptation of manipulation; "the ability to identify and massage the target audience's emotions is a large part of the marketing strategy."[21] More than one critic has claimed that seeker service is guilty of bait-and-switch, the unethical business practice of advertising one thing to draw customers and offering another in its place. A church should not stoop to the world's hard and ruthlessly cold way of influence to communicate its message. The second danger of the marketing mentality is what Pritchard calls "fulfillment theology." Because marketing is based on identifying needs and developing strategies to fulfill those needs, those who use it to help shape the Christian message end up distorting the message. American consumer fulfillment, he argues, is vastly different from biblical and traditional theological understanding of personal fulfillment.

Evangelism and Worship

Critics point out that because of its deep roots in revivalism, aided recently by the Church Growth movement, the seeker service movement is bound to confuse the relationship between worship and

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evangelism. In *Worship Evangelism,* Sally Morgenthaler highlights a problem with how the church responds to the seeker church movement: "It is becoming more and more difficult for seeker-driven churches (those who have adopted the seeker-event approach) to establish or maintain worship as their number one priority."[22] Many seeker churches offer a midweek worship service for believers in addition to the weekend seeker service. But many regular attendees and new members usually prefer the weekend service and skip the worship service, thus missing the opportunity to participate in congregational worship.

As long as emphasis on the priority of evangelism continues, churches are likely not only to distort the purpose of worship but also to continue to "deprioritize" worship, as Morgenthaler puts it, treating worship as just another program among others. This confusion about the priority of worship will have a serious effect on a church over the long haul; "Christian maturity and long-term commitment to outreach are ultimately dependent on the worship life of a congregation. What is gained in the short term may ultimately be forfeited when worship is allowed to slip into a number-two or lower position."[23]

Another sign of the confusion about worship is the growing belief among laity (and even some pastors and worship leaders) that a seeker event is a worship service. In the 1980s and 1990s, Willow Creek went to great lengths to emphasize to its members and attendees, as well as to the rest of the Church, that its seeker events are not worship service. They scrupulously avoided using the word *worship* to describe a weekend service and used a variety of means to communicate the contrast between "new community" worship services and weekend events, and stress the importance of attending worship for Christians. Yet the confusion between worship and seeker event continues among many attendees at Willow Creek.

Other seeker churches add to this confusion by calling a seeker service worship.[24] As a result, they are open to critics who worry

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about "dumbing down" worship service simply to draw a crowd, and who see a confusion of means and ends of evangelism and worship. Unfortunately, many churches view a new service first in terms of numerical growth and only secondarily in terms of spiritual growth. Church leaders often say, "We need a new service to reach the young adults in our neighborhood." To Morgenthaler and others, this is confusing the purpose of worship. Regardless of its liturgical or musical style, worship is not for us; worship is for God. Evangelism is a natural by-product of worship; a new service adds new people to a church, but this is not reason enough to add a new service.

Performance or Participation?

The last set of challenges for the seeker service movement concern the issue of performance and participation. A seeker event requires little, if any, active participation from the congregation. This is not a problem for seeker events like Willow Creek's, which are not offered as worship service. But for a church that attempts a seeker-sensitive worship service, the issue of participation is critical. A key assumption of seeker service advocates is that seekers don't want to participate actively in worship. They are uncomfortable enough just showing up, it is argued; to ask them to participate in unfamiliar activities could put a seeker in an unreceptive attitude. Authenticity and honesty are also a concern. Why have seekers say, sing, or pray things they don't believe yet or aren't sure of?

Clearly, many in our society are ambivalent toward traditional Christianity, and this forms a barrier to active participation in worship. In the past, they have dealt with it by dropping out of church. Seeker service has attracted many by lowering the barrier, removing confusing words and symbols and translating Christian teaching into familiar concepts.

As we see in later chapters, this apologetic approach will probably be less necessary in the future as the postmodern generations—Generation X and the Millennials—mature to adulthood. Since

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1995, there has been a slowdown of interest in seeker service, for a couple of reasons. First, apologetic seeker services work well with formerly churched people who have been turned off by church in some way, but less well with people who have no history or connection with a church. Seeker service is most meaningful to those with a residual impression of Christianity. Those who have never attended church do not appreciate the accommodations seeker service makes because these people have no residual experience by which to evaluate it.

Because few members of Generation X and the Millennial Generation were raised in church, there are fewer people with residual experience of Christianity, an important factor in seeker service. At the same time, the number of truly unchurched people—that is, people with no previous experience of Christianity—grows as immigration continues. There is some regional difference at work here; the percentage of adults who dropped out of church is higher in the Southeast and Midwest, and apologetic seeker services will continue to be effective in those regions for some time. The percentage is lower on the coasts, and in large urban areas. Pastors and worship leaders in those areas must take into consideration the needs of those who have little or no exposure to Christianity.

Another reason for the slowdown of seeker service is a rethinking of the assumption that seekers and believers don't mix. Many are questioning this "benign apartheid" approach. Several books on worship and evangelism offer a strong biblical, theological, and practical approach to authentic worship that can also be attractive to the unchurched.[25] Even at the flagship seeker churches, attitudes about seekers and worship seem to be changing. At Willow Creek, for example, the barrier between seeker and worshiper is breaking down. The emphasis has been shifting more toward active participation in worship. According to Curt Coffield, who became the worship leader for New Community services there in early 2001, this new strategy reflects awareness of the changing needs of the

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seeker: "Willow knows that seekers have changed over the past thirty years, and so our approach to connecting with them has to change with them. People aren't coming as much to be convinced of the relevance of Christianity as they are coming with a hunger for God."[26]

There is no conclusive evidence to suggest apologetic seeker services are doomed to fail in the future, but as we shall see later, the experience and participation orientation of the post–Baby Boomer generations raise serious questions about a service that limits active participation.