



Church for the Broken: Reaching the Sinners and the Skeptics

By Derrick-Lewis Noble

“PASTOR NOBLE, YOU HAVE GOT TO SEE THIS!”

The man calling out to me is normally rather sedate, so I can't ignore this expression of rare and inexplicable personal energy.

I continue to greet our first-time guests as well as many of those who have already committed to being members of Impact, our nontraditional new church start in the heart of Port Arthur, Texas, an often maligned, economically-strapped, crime-ridden city southeast of Houston. But the voice of our finance team chair sounds both exultant and uneasy.

I briefly turn my eyes away from a first-time guest and steal a glance at this object of amazement that apparently must be seen to be believed.

And there it is: *a bag of marijuana—in the offering plate!*

I suppose I should not be surprised. After all, I have just completed preaching a series of messages in which I encouraged everyone to “give God your worst in order to experience God's best.” Apparently, someone has taken me quite literally.

This clear, plastic bag of...um, controlled substance has been left in the offering plate by an anonymous worshiper who has attached to it a two-word message, hastily scrawled upon the bag: “No more!”

He or she is sitting in the pew with marijuana on his or her person, perhaps planning to partake of it upon receiving the benediction, but something—or rather, Someone—causes this unknown worshiper to believe that he or she no longer needs it. Talk about change we can believe in!

The finance team and I get busy exchanging high-fives with one another. One of them—a young lady who had not seen the inside of a church for many years until the Holy Spirit drew her and her young family to Impact—quips with an ever-so-slight hint of sarcasm, “So, is this the type of story we should share with the bishop or do we just celebrate this one amongst ourselves?”

At our next worship gathering, I relay the “pot offering” episode to the congregation and I conclude my remarks with this joyfully spontaneous observation: “I'm proud to be the founding pastor of a church in which people feel comfortable enough to come with marijuana but feel uncomfortable leaving with what they brought!” The congregants explode into a boisterous, raucous standing ovation.

Impact UMC of Port Arthur is my second appointment in the Texas Annual Conference and my first new

church start; but my eleven years in youth ministry (which began when I myself was just a teenager) and now my ten years as a pastor have all revealed a similar pattern: this is the type of crowd my ministry always seems to attract. The groups most church growth experts agree are the toughest to reach—from urban teenagers to the “twenty-something/thirty-something” crowd commonly referred to as the hip-hop generation—are the very ones who seem most at home in the churches I pastor.

The vast majority of those who call Impact “home” have either never been in church before or are those who often label themselves as ex-Christians or ex-churchgoers who discovered that Impact is indeed a different kind of church. Impact is a church that intentionally speaks to those for whom traditional church settings are uncomfortable but who have not totally given up on God. They have discovered that Impact is a welcoming, nonjudgmental place; a church that aims to be a haven for people just like them...a church for the broken.

Facing the Challenges

Being a church that is intentional about ministering to people where they


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are, with all their baggage, carries with it both joys and challenges. The “marijuana offering” and the many professions of faith we have seen in only one year of existence are just two examples of the joys which certainly outweigh any challenges or difficulties we have faced. We recently baptized sixteen new Christians on one Sunday, and that is without an infant baptism or even a confirmation class! At the same time, any ministry that seeks to bring about healing amongst the broken people of our world must be willing to answer the tough questions, grapple with the doubts, and honestly attempt to abate the fears that broken and disillusioned people bring with them.

We must wrestle with these issues just as they do: Where is God when thousands of babies in the United States will die before their first birthdays? Where is God when thousands of young people commit suicide each year in America? Where is God when hundreds of thousands of babies are born each year addicted to crack cocaine? Where is God when many young people are graduating from high school and cannot even read their diplomas? Where is God when people are afraid to leave their houses at night, children do not have safe places to play, and millions of our students are suspended from school each year? Is God listening? Does God care?

Almost innate within the collective heart of broken people is a yearning to make sense of an often abject reality. Long-held assumptions of right and wrong, good and evil, and who the real enemy is are no longer accepted without debate. Broken people are searching for some sense of stability, and the church has a unique opportunity to walk people through their very real valleys of the shadow of death. We can be oases of hope in the midst of deserts of despair.

Translating the Gospel

I strongly disagree with the notion that we need to make the gospel relevant to unchurched or dechurched people: the gospel of Jesus Christ is perpetually relevant. I believe the real question is, “How do we translate the already relevant gospel into the language—both verbal and nonverbal—of this generation and culture?”

1. Begin by having an authentic desire to intelligently engage people who may be different from you. Too many churches engage in a “we/they” mentality of ministry that reeks of insincerity. Whether they are part of the hip-hop generation or disillusioned 50-year old alcoholics, people by and large would much rather be viewed as potential partners in changing the world for the better rather than be regarded as a special project target-group.

2. Even if people seem skeptical at first, challenge them with sound, relevant teaching that emphasizes substance over style. I cannot count the number of times church members my age and younger have said to me, “I actually learn something when I come here; something that I can immediately apply to my life and put into action.” Contrary to popular belief, people will sit for teaching longer than your typical hour-long, fast-food, “McWorship” experience if they know that value is being added to their lives.

3. Make clear to everyone our biblical mandate to make a permanent, positive impact upon our world by reaching younger generations. Ultimately, a life of self-service is an unsuccessful life. God has given us each the responsibility of leaving this place (in our case, Port Arthur) better than we found it. I have learned that once you dare to give people a vision bigger than themselves, you just might be surprised at how quickly their commitment can and will deepen and grow.

Look beyond the smell of marijuana, the backwards caps and sagging pants, the tattoos, the scowls that hide countless hurts and insecurities. Whatever our issues, we all just want our lives to matter. The body of Christ remains the best vehicle for moving people from collective confusion to enduring relevance. □



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