

The Biggest Blind Spot in Assimilation

by Allen Ratta

Defining Style

A modern term for style is the "DNA" of a church. This refers to the values, attitudes and behaviors that have become so deeply embedded in a church's culture that they are expected of and successfully replicated in newcomers. These are the drivers that, over time, define our style.

Understanding Our Style

"Style," when it comes to a church, is akin to sin. It is easier to see it in others than in ourselves. We can become so acclimated to the way we are that our peculiarities and distinctives become utterly transparent to us. This is apparent from the huge disparity between the way visitors and long term stakeholders view and describe the same church. This is not to say that all peculiarities are bad. The particular way we do things, our history, attitudes and values are the distinctive traits that define us and make us who we are. The key is to gain meaningful insight into our church's style so that we can leverage it to reach, connect and keep our visitors

The Impact of Style

A church's style can have a profound impact on its ability or inability to assimilate newcomers. For example, the casual style of our southwestern USA church with its loud worship band has a highly predictable effect on a significant portion of our visitors. As a habit I am often in our church's lobby where I try to actively engage visitors and connect them. Whenever I see a very well dressed couple enter the front doors I know there is a good chance that our style will turn them off. They have expectations about many aspects of our church's style that are likely to disappoint them. I have watched many such couples bolt out of our sanctuary doors, hurry across the lobby, and head for their car without so much as a sideward glance, after the second or third song. The research shows that the style of a church has a significant impact on whether a visitor will come back.

Playing to Our Strengths

Should all visitors relate to our style? Not at all! What is important is that we truly understand our style. This is a critical step in defining our market, that is, determining the kind of people that will relate to us to the point where we have a reasonable chance of reaching and keeping them for Christ. Many rapidly growing churches across the US have highly distinctive styles that appeal to a particular segment of a community. I have prayed that many of those well dressed visitors fleeing our church campus will find a church with a distinctive style that can effectively connect them to the Body of Christ. The reality is that there are many marketplace niches in most communities that can be strategically engaged by a church that knows its style.

Overcoming Our Weaknesses

85% of the churches in the United States are either declining or experiencing little growth. I have come to the conclusion that style is one of the biggest issues. Walking into many churches is like walking into a time warp. Visitors are frequently ill at ease and looking to see if they can fit. Churches are often oblivious of the many style statements they communicate to outsiders. The greatest single antidote to "style stoppers" is a vibrant community of faith that adopts hospitality and embraces newcomers.

Redefining Our Style

The condition of a building communicates another message. One pastor friend of mine many years ago took a little church in our town that had languished at less than a 100 in weekend attendance for years. He brought in two dump trucks that carted off stacks of old building materials and remnants of assorted bygone dreams. Then he had towed off two broken down

church buses. He put in a church lawn, new sidewalks and painted the building. What was he doing? He was redefining the style of the church. The external appearance was only a small part of his agenda. Some old timers left but the church doubled in a year. The pastor successfully adjusted the style of the church to match a broader spectrum of the community. Today that church inhabits a beautiful first class campus and runs over a thousand in weekend attendance. It began with a dump truck.

Seven Key Elements That Help You to Identify Your Church's Style

As an aside, I would encourage pastors who are considering a transition to another pastorate to consider how well their style relates to the prospective church's style using the style elements below.

1. The Style of Your Worship

There are two styles that are in typical juxtaposition to each other, i.e. traditional or contemporary, but in reality there are many styles of worship in what is a far reaching continuum. Some style variants are southern gospel, country gospel, Hillsong, maranatha music, high church liturgical with pipe organ, classical hymnology, Pentecostal hymnology, Pentecostal chorus, Gaither gospel, jazz, choral, soft rock and hard rock. Some churches are a combination of the above.

2. The Style of Service Structure

Is your church highly liturgical or is there an absence of prayer books and worship service aids. Do you sing out of a book or off the wall? Realize that even churches that pride themselves on being non-liturgical, in the classic sense, can appear to have a highly predictable structure to the unchurched. Ask what structural elements you have to your services and observe how your visitors relate to them.

3. The Style of Your Church Culture

Every church has a dress code. Is a suit or blue jeans the norm for your church? Does the pastor speak while dressed in a three piece suit, a Hawaiian shirt, formal robes or shorts and sandals? How does your dress code relate to the style of most in your community?

4. The Style of Your Values

What values prevail throughout your congregation? Are congregants eagerly awaiting the start of the service with Bibles open and reading the scriptures? Is the emphasis on service with hordes of faithful volunteers rushing about the campus dutifully fulfilling their mission? Is your church heavily focused on foreign missions? Or is there a focus on local community service? Does a heartfelt worship experience take precedence over the sermon? These are all elements of your church's style.

5. The Style of Proclamation

Does the pastor speak with passion and emotive force? Is drama often integrated into a sermon? Are video clips incorporated? Is the message more like a friendly conversation or a motivational talk? Is it intellectual social commentary or is there a whole lot of shouting going on? These are profound parts of a church's style that have a direct impact on visitors.

6. The Style of Participation

Are the congregants more spectators or participants? Do people shout "amen" or sit silently during the message? Is there a conservative decorum or are people dancing in the aisles? Do people raise their hands in worship? Do they clap them? Does the pastor elicit congregational responses? Are public opportunities given for people to come forward for prayer or to raise their hand? Visitors often come with some level of expectation in this area.

7. The Style of Governance

Is your church managed by a congregational form of government? Does your church have lots of committees? Is your church pastor driven where the senior pastor functions like a CEO with wide latitude of power? Is there a strong oligarchy or board that runs the church? The governance of a church has a strong impact on a style that permeates throughout a congregation.

Five Ways to Make Your Style Increase Visitor Assimilation

Know Your Style

Know who you are. Look through the list above and identify as many aspects of your style as possible. Take some time to assess the style of your church and your style as the pastor or church leader. Are they in synch? You have to know who you are before you can effectively leverage your church to reach its community.

Know Your Community's Style

Once you identify your church's style ask yourself how well it matches the style of your community. For example, southern gospel churches generally do not do well in the culture of the northwest or in California. Preaching in a Hawaiian shirt will likely not go over well in Texas. Seek to understand your marketplace.

Improve Your Style

If your church's style is significantly out of step with the community you are trying to reach, then some style redefinition is in order. A church's style is not immutable. It will take time, vision, consistency of message and patience to alter the DNA of a church. This is one reason why growing churches typically have pastors who have long tenure.

Celebrate Your Style

Once you have settled on your style, rejoice in it and embrace it. There are almost always some aspects of a church's style that give it a particular positive distinctive. Discover your strengths and celebrate them. This will increase congregational morale and help provide a consistency of message to visitors and the community.

Market Your Style

Take the time, resources and energy to define a compelling message that accurately reflects your style. It will do you no good to advertise in such a way that the wrong crowd comes to visit you. You are wasting their time and your resources. Drive the people who relate to your style to come and visit.

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