
KINGDOM - CULTURE CHURCHES

GAIL M. NEAL *PC(USA) Synod of Mid-America Kansas City, Missouri*

“Down-sizing” was forced upon the church by the economic realities of declining membership and decreasing funds. Many predicted this would be the harbinger of the death of the church. What we forget is that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). And God is certainly bringing good out of that which we, with our limited vision and pessimistic imaginations, could only conceive of as bad.

The good news is that we have been forced to stop presuming that we know what God wants the church to be. It has been too long since we have examined the assumption that the church is a place where we do for. This do for model seems to be based on the idea that every organization, including the church, exists for the purpose of answering the question, “What can you do for me?” As members of a consumer-oriented culture, we have accepted without question the proposition that the church should operate as a free market enterprise, which exists to do for its members and the world. Many today conceptualise the church as being in the business of marketing a product, producing a program, and/or providing a service. It doesn’t take an extensive survey of the current literature to realize that many church folks are using the language of capitalism these days.

The problem this cultural mindset creates for the church is two-fold. First, the Biblical concept of discipleship has more to do with obedience than with acquisitiveness. While a market economy is motivated by profit, discipleship is found only by giving ourselves away. This ‘take up your cross and follow me’ message of the gospel doesn’t

correspond very well to the notion of building bigger and better ‘mousetraps’ in order to achieve success.

Second, Christians are neither producers nor consumers. Christians are folks who experience divine mercy through not receiving the wages our sins have earned us. Instead, we receive by divine grace what we could never, ever, afford to buy or acquire for ourselves. Not receiving what we have

earned and receiving that which we could never earn isn’t high on a consumer-culture’s list of values. But it is high on God’s agenda for the world. It is, in fact, an integral part of what it means to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. The bad news of downsizing becomes good news when we begin to understand

That the church should not operate just like every other business in America is a radical departure from what many perceive to be sound church administration policy and practice

that the church is called to be something other than a do for agency. That the church should not operate just like every other business in America is a radical departure from what many perceive to be sound church administration policy and practice.

Each year, frequently in the fall, we Christians hear about raising funds to meet the operating budget and balance the books. Some may use words, which sound more ‘churchy’, words like stewardship, mission, charity, faith budget, etc. But, the bottom line in most congregations is the bottom line. The real concerns are: What is our overhead? What are the operating costs? Where can we cut the budget to make ends meet? Inevitably someone will say, “The church has to balance its budget just like any other business.” And yet another will say, “We need more members so that we can meet the budget.” In effect, regardless of the words used, the real concern

The issue is,
should the church
be market-driven,
consumer-oriented,
and business-minded?

becomes how the church can, as cheaply as possible, merchandise its product in order to acquire a larger share of the market and increase its 'profit margin' which is usually defined in terms of 'mission' projects and activities.

Which is not to say that financial realities aren't of concern. Obviously, they are. The issue is, should the church be market-driven, consumer-oriented, and business-minded? Or, should the church be Kingdom-driven, mission-oriented, and Christ-minded?

Granted, these two 'realities' are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, we must pause before too quickly leaping to the conclusion that sound judgment and practical wisdom indicate the necessity to focus on a worldly agenda. Remember, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). The church needs to realize that economic concerns are of

paramount importance only when production and consumption are among its highest priorities.

Some churches are experimenting with alternative models of how we can be a church, which is identified more closely with the Kingdom of God than with the marketplace. Some are even claiming that, if Christianity is not called by God to be a market-driven, consumer-oriented, business-minded do for organization, it is called by God to be a Kingdom-driven, mission oriented, Christ-minded cross-cultural existence.

Culture is a word used to describe the ways in which people are formed and melded by the social, religious, political and physical environment, which surrounds them. It describes 'the way things are done around here.' As the world has grown smaller, we've found that nations are patch works of many cultures. Thus each of us actually lives in multiple cultural contexts. Take America for example. While we speak of the 'American way of life,' there are actually many ways of life within

our nation. The culture of inner city ghettos is very different from the cultures of suburbia or small-town rural America.

Racial/ethnic differences increase cultural diversity. The culture of Hispanic migrant workers in the onion fields of Southern Colorado is as different from the culture of Hispanics in the New York Barrio as it is from the cultural experiences of African-Americans in Harlem or Anglo-Americans in Hollywood or Scandinavian Americans in Minnesota. Each of these is a unique cultural variant within the overall context of our American way of life.

When members of one culture live within the confines of another culture, they experience a cross-cultural existence. The television situation comedies *Green Acres* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* are humorous examples of the difficulties faced when one culture confronts another. In *Green Acres* an Anglo-American couple from upper class New York City move to small-town rural America. He ploughs fields in a three-piece business suit while she tries to cope without a maid. In *The Beverly Hillbillies* an Anglo-American family from an isolated community in West Virginia move to Beverly Hills where they keep livestock in their mansion. These are obviously cultural caricatures. But they do portray the multi-cultural nature of America and suggest some of the problems, which occur when one culture interacts with another.

By virtue of baptism, Christians are born into a culture the Bible refers to as the Kingdom of God. And the culture of the Kingdom of God is very different from any other culture in America — or around the world, for that matter. Like members of any culture, citizens of God's Kingdom, are expected to look at the world in particular ways, behave in a prescribed manner, think and act and value certain things, hold particular beliefs, give primary allegiance to aspects of that culture, etc.

The Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God is not of this world, i.e., it is non-geographic. Christians are members of a culture, which is not identified with any place. Rather, it

is identified with the norms of people who live according to its particular cultural standards.

The Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God is ruled, not by any person or people, but by God. The Kingdom-culture expects Christians to give allegiance first, last and always to God worshiping and praising, obeying and serving nothing and no one else. Christians are also encouraged to develop a personal one-on-one relationship with their Ruler-God through prayer, worship, service, Bible reading, and the regular exercise of other Christian disciplines.

Christians are members
of a culture,
which is not identified
with any place.

The Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God culture has certain characteristics. These characteristics were evident in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ who taught citizens what it means to be members of the reign of God. The meek will always come out on top, the hungry go to the front of the food line; the powerful wash the feet of the homeless, the resources of the earth are conserved and all its creatures are preserved, children are protected and life is cherished. It is inhabited by citizens who work for justice, seek shalom, give themselves away in service to others, love their enemies, give more to the thief than the thief would have stolen, show respect to the elderly, honour one another, work for the good of others rather than self.

The Bible tells us that the Kingdom of God has no military to protect it, no international alliance to promote it, no commander-in-chief to lead it. Rather, members of this culture have faith that, regardless of external obstacles, communal persecution, personal hardship, political legislation, the Kingdom of God will thrive only

and always by the power of God through the Holy Spirit. Because it believes in the resurrection of the body to eternal life through Jesus Christ, this culture embodies absolute trust in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Learning to live according to the unique cultural expectations of the Kingdom of God does not come naturally. It is learned behaviour that is integrated into each citizen through the power of the Holy Spirit. This learning occurs within the community, which the Kingdom-culture calls the church. Thus the first role of the church is enculturation, passing the Kingdom-culture from one generation of citizens of the Kingdom of God to another. A second role of the church is to equip its citizens to live as strangers in a foreign land (Hebrews 11: 13 -16), witnessing to the world that 'this is what it means to be citizens of God's Kingdom.'

This model of the church as Kingdom-culture community is in marked contrast to that of the church as a do for organization or agency. Instead of producing a pro-

Each congregation becomes a Kingdom-cultural community within a foreign land where cross-cultural existence is a way of life and each member is an ambassador for Jesus Christ

Learning to live according to the unique cultural expectations of the Kingdom of God does not come naturally.

duct for members and/or non-members to consume or providing a service for them to utilize, the church becomes a community which lives and witnesses to the Christian culture within a foreign land. "This is what it means to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" (Psalm 137:4), each congregation declares.

In international diplomacy, it is the work of ambassadors and their representatives to witness to foreigners what it means to be American in Somalia or Japanese in Tibet or Kenyan in Saudi Arabia. According to Scripture, every Christian becomes an ambassador (, be a representative) upon baptism. Each congregation becomes a Kingdom-cultural community within a foreign land where cross-cultural existence is a way of life and each member is an ambassador for Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

But, like any cultural enclave, the church cannot stand alone against the dominant culture, which would dilute, absorb and destroy it. Just as Little Italy and Chinatown need relationships with the 'homeland' to

maintain their unique cultural identities, so, too, does the Kingdom-culture-church require the support of other Kingdom-culture churches to remain faithful and obedient citizens of the Kingdom of God.

These connections are provided by ecclesiastical embassies variously called presbyteries, conferences, synods, districts, conventions, associations, classes, dioceses, and councils. Kingdom-culture communities rely upon these ecclesiastical embassies to provide them with the nurture, support and resources they need. These ecclesiastical embassies don't do anything for their ambassadors; they are, however, the connecting tissue, which binds them together for the common good. They link all Kingdom-culture churches with one another, helping them build relationships, provide mutual support, develop resources and gather together to address common concerns. They facilitate corporate critical thinking, which guides and supports the body as it seeks to determine how to live and witness as Christians in a foreign land. They provide encouragement and strength, which enables Kingdom-culture churches and their ambassadors to present an accurate witness to other cultures which surround them. They supply the corporate power to influence and impact the dominant culture so that it is persuaded to adopt policies and procedures which are more just and closer to the biblical ideal of shalom.

[Reprinted from *the Gospel and Our Culture*, 11:2, June 1999]