
Flagship Churches

Churches that Produce Enthusiasts

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One of the propositions behind the Limited Enthusiasm Model of church growth is that churches grow through the activities of enthusiasts, those who are active in the conversion of new believers. Their presence and activity can lead to the rapid growth of a church. This begs the question: what sort of church produces sufficient enthusiasts to enable this growth to happen? An attempt to answer this question leads to the concept of a flagship church. This article is written to promote debate rather provide definitive answers.

What is a Flagship Church?

A “flagship” church is one, by its name, that leads the way. However in the context of the Limited Enthusiasm model of church growth, they are congregations that generate enthusiasts¹. Enthusiasts are people who bring unbelievers into the Christian church and also reproduce themselves by making more enthusiasts, either out of the new believers, or from the renewal of existing believers. Such enthusiasts are generated much faster when a sufficient number, i.e. a critical mass, are together in one place². Thus the flagship church aims for this critical mass, even though an exact number cannot be put to it!

Although an enthusiast is seen primarily in terms of their reproduction of enthusiasts, they often possess other features:

1. They have an enthusiasm for the Christian faith, rather than one who doubts fundamentals.
2. They are willing to communicate their faith to others, especially on a personal basis.
3. They have a personal enthusiasm for Jesus Christ, as one who knows and loves Him rather than as a historical figure.
4. As such they see Christianity as primarily supernatural and identify with the supernatural works of the Holy Spirit.

¹ The Limited Enthusiasm Model of church growth is the main model presented on the Church Growth Modelling website. Its central hypothesis is that churches grow through the action of enthusiasts who make new converts for a limited period, after which they cease to be enthusiasts, though still Christians. .

² This is a result of the Renewal Model of church growth, an extension of the Limited Enthusiasm Model that allows for enthusiasts to be made out of inactive believers as well as new converts.

5. Thus enthusiasts are usually connected with movements of spiritual renewal and revival. They can be seen as renewed Christians, or revived Christians.

Flagship churches are thus centres for renewal, where renewal here means a believer becoming an “enthusiast”. Without such enthusiasts the church will die, as it will not be able to recruit, or convert sufficient people to make up for its losses. Thus flagship churches must be the main hope of reversing church decline in the UK, and re-planting churches in the many places where churches are now ceasing to exist.

Some common features in flagship churches are:

1. The leader is an enthusiast who drives the direction of the church. These are not bottom up movements. The leader is for the most part ahead of the congregation in direction, vision and spiritual cutting edge. They are not trying to hold a congregation back, but lead them on. As such the leaders are not in maintenance mode.
2. Flagship churches have a clear vision for what they are to become and how it is achieved.
3. The congregations have a higher proportion of enthusiasts than most, and usually have been like that for some years before their growth took off. They don't mind “collecting” enthusiasts – people who move from other churches. It all helps build up the all-important critical mass.
4. They have structures that allow enthusiasts to operate as enthusiasts. That is they encourage “lay participation”. Thus enthusiasts are allowed to operate freely, without undue centralised control. This is quite different to the old “preaching centre” churches which gathered like people under one roof, usually to hear a good preacher, but who didn't get involved themselves. The flagship church encourages lay participation.
5. The lay people can go on to become leaders. That is such churches generate new leaders. The congregations themselves have many spiritual leadership roles
6. All are congregations where renewal has come out of, rather than ones where they merely participated in national movements, though some of that always takes place. Thus the flagship churches may have started or had a very large part in some wider renewal movement, renewal days, Bible weeks, and evangelism courses.
7. They have teaching and worship that mean something to the people that attend, which they get enthusiastic about. They know what they believe and do not feel the need to apologise for it!
8. Although strong in their beliefs flagship churches do not generally see their work as “taking on” the wayward part of Christianity, indulging in apologetics as to who has the truth. The church is known by what it is *for* in Christianity, rather than what it is *against*. Even when it comes to the world, their firm hold on what they believe does not stop them from relating to the communities around them, or groups that oppose them.
9. Flagship churches live dangerously and take risks. Their main business is generating enthusiasts, and converts. Although well-organised, good organisation, and maintaining a successful system are not allowed to get in the way of adventure and stepping out.
10. Flagship churches are primarily spiritual, rather than social in their operations. Worship, prayer & preaching are their main activities. Although they often have extensive social action projects associated with them, these are the offshoot rather than the centre of their activities. The church is there to bring people to God,

emphasise the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

11. Flagship churches emphasise *personal* spiritual renewal. Thus not only do they expect conversions, but they also expect believers to interact personally with God, to be baptised with the Spirit, and to seek such encounters repeatedly. Whatever spiritual “stage” a person is at they are never completely “safe” in such a church.
12. The church’s community tends to be through friendship networks rather than geographical location. Thus a person may travel many miles to the church because they happen to work with someone who is in that church. Such distances do not bother the church.
13. Flagship churches seek to “give away” what God is doing among them. This may be through holding conferences for other Christians, but ultimately it would be through planting new churches with similar beliefs and values.
14. Flagship churches are good fun to be in, even if they are often very spiritually and financially challenging.

Measure to Promote Flagship Churches

The following list is not meant to be exhaustive. It is primarily meant to foster debate. Some of the suggestions are no doubt controversial, but they always keep in mind that generating enthusiasts, those on fire for God who can lead others to conversion, is central. Every one of these points will have exceptions. God is God; he does not follow a model!

1. Movements for renewal come out of local congregations not national movements, thus denominations should concentrate resources on congregations where such renewal is taking place. Donald Miller (Reinventing American Protestantism) goes further in the concept of decentralisation, saying (p188) that central offices should be abandoned and the people should be based in these “flagship” churches.
2. Potential flagship churches need to be spotted and targeted for growth, e.g. with an appropriate minister and team. It may mean taking a group of enthusiasts and planting them in a place where their enthusiasm can be channelled into growth – a new church in a different location. It may need to be based around a common network – work, etc, rather than geographical location. It could even be near a university without a local vibrant church.
3. The denomination needs to cut its losses, in a business sense. That is a greater proportion of resources needs to be diverted away from maintaining small struggling churches with no future and targeted at the likely future flagship churches. The counter argument to this is pastoral saying that such churches provide support to people now even though they have no future. But the church has a responsibility to see that it is still there to pastor *future* generations. The current strategy of maintaining everything is abandoning the future to a life without Christianity.
4. Leaders should not be isolated in congregations of no enthusiasts. Either their church should have enthusiasts already, or they should be connected to, perhaps even run/guided by, flagship congregations. Many good clergy are put in the wrong places on the wrong work.
5. This is very controversial. For the generated leaders to be effective and remain enthusiasts they should be brought into formal leadership while staying part of the flagship congregation that generated them. Taking them out of the church that generated them and sending them to college for 2-3 years to supposedly give them experience of “other” churches is a disaster that quenches enthusiasm and often destroys faith. Rodney Stark, a respected professor of the sociology of religion and

neutral observer of church life, once referred to the seminary system as “institutionalised clerical atheism”!

6. Flagship congregations and their offshoots must not move away from personal and congregational renewal as their main emphasis. From recent (2008) church attendance figures and, and personal observation of a range of renewal congregations, charismatic churches and the restorationist movement have softened and moved away from their roots. Often when people from these churches are asked about the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst they usually return a blank stare and then some remark about having become a seeker friendly church so they no longer emphasise that sort of thing.
7. Flagship churches and their offshoots should make concerted efforts to locate and re-enthuse the many who have been associated with renewal in the past, but are now isolated in their own congregations and not contributing to any critical mass whether congregationally, or by renewal days, which barely exist now. This applies to clergy as well as lay people.
8. Flagship churches must have continuity of churchmanship and a large say in their own ministerial appointments. The patronage system that allows strong churches to have their own patronage is a better model than one where they are under central denominational control. .
9. Very controversially. Flagship churches should be based at one building, not trying to maintain services in outlying buildings. Second or third buildings should only exist if there is a full time leader to run them. Thus flagship churches with multiple buildings should close the least successful buildings.
10. Again very controversially, critical mass is about people not buildings. Buildings should be sold to release resources to fund projects now – not when it is too late. There are a number of dying denominations that are no longer short of money, because so many buildings have been sold – but there are no longer enough people of the right age, or ministers, to make use of the money! They have gone below any possible critical mass. The money could be used for salaries of full time ministers in new flagship congregations. The painful summary is: shut congregations to open new flagship ones.
11. Given there is at least a 10-15 year turn around time from starting renewal to seeing denominational growth (a lag-time that gets longer as the church gets smaller), action needs to be now rather than later³.
12. The final point is a more spiritual one. It again comes from Donald Millers book. He says (p 189):

I believe that mainline churches should begin breaking down the dichotomy between mind and body in worship.

For this to occur, some radical restructuring of liturgy may be needed. People must have time to enter into the deep recesses of the human spirit, assisted by the right type of music and liturgy that is not interrupted by announcements.

The bottom line in generating enthusiasts is that church has to be more spiritual, especially its worship. Currently it just doesn't seem spiritual enough – that is what flagship churches need to model and export.

³ This result follows from the Limited Enthusiasm Model.

Many will be aware that there are very few spiritual comments in the above. When faced with church decline we seem reluctant to admit that God will have anything to do with its recovery. We need to admit renewal was, and still is, a move of God, and we pursue it because we are enthusiastic for Him, not for a movement that could bring growth. The resulting growth is merely a side effect!

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References

Donald Miller, Reinventing American Protestantism, University of California Press.

Rodney Stark, Professor of the Social Sciences, Baylor University USA, quoted from the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.