NEITHER INCARNATIONAL NOR SEEKER-SENSITIVE BE

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As is the case for wider society, so for the church; trends come and go.

A decade or two it was very popular to talk about churches and services being seeker-friendly. The idea was that everything that happened during the service would be aimed at non-believers. The gospel should be presented simply and clearly using a variety of media to ensure that people were able to follow. Rather more recently, incarnational church has been a thing. This is basically the opposite; the purpose of church is to prepare and equip people for mission and the main focus was on people reaching non-believers in their daily life, rather than on normal church activities.

I've simplified both approaches, but the general principles stand.

I think that there is much to commend both approaches, though I think that both are, to some extent flawed. The great thing about both is that they are focussed on evangelism. The churchÂ *does* exist for the benefit of its non-members and we forget that at our peril. We need to be focussed on mission to our towns, our country and the world because that's what Jesus commanded us to do. Incarnational and seeker-friendly churches were approaches to doing just this.

Let's take them each in turn. The seeker friendly church has a real strength in focussing on clear communication, of making Christianity easily understandable. However, there is a problem, because (dare I say it?) Christianity isn't always easy to understand. The triune God is, by his very nature, mysterious and beyond our comprehension. One of the weaknesses of evangelicalism, which is even stronger in the seeker friendly approach, is that we have focussed so much on the imminence (the real presence of God amongst us) that we have lost sight of his transcendence (his mystery, majesty and distance from us). People don't just need to get a cognitive grasp of the facts of Christianity, they need to get a vision of the high and awesome God who is three times holy.

The real strength of the incarnational (sometimes called missional) church movement is that it places a stress on intentionality; on equipping people to reach their friends and neighbours at work or in social settings. However, it shares a similar weakness to the seeker sensitive approach in that it doesn't fully appreciate the importance of people getting a sense of the grandeur and holiness of God.

The thing is, Christians worshipping together and reverently celebrating the Lord's supper is an important witness to the nature and mystery of God. Church services, conducted properly, are evangelistic in and of themselves; they don't have to always have a 'gospel message' or an 'appeal'.

Ideally, a church that seeks to reach out to its local community will learn from these two approaches, but won't go to either extreme. The first thing is that people do have to be trained and encouraged to reach out to their friends. We can't expect people to do this if we don't equip them and then encourage them. Secondly, church services need to be accessible to outsiders; we have to drop the jargon, we need to make sure that the welcome is real and that people will want to come again. However, we don't have to simplify everything. We need to be prepared to say that some

things are mysterious and that Christians don't have it all sussed.

Equally, this doesn't mean that all evangelism has to happen in church, nor does it preclude having the odd seeker friendly service or event. However, the regular rhythm of church life needs to convey both the facts of the faith and a sense of awe and wonder at our amazing God. The problem is that we tend to focus on the former to the exclusion of the latter.