

Drive-In Churches: Brilliant Evangelism or Gospel Compromise?

Growing up, I loved drive-in movies. There was something adventurous about sitting on top of the car and eating popcorn while Luke Skywalker battled Darth Vader.

Retro drive-ins are back en vogue in some cities, even as newfangled drive-in churches are also emerging in others. No, I'm not talking about drive-through prayer services that offer petitions on the go. I'm talking about full-blown drive-in churches where cars park on the lawn of the church.

Could this be the answer to church decline? A way to woo the lost to church? Or is it just another gimmick that's distracting from the gospel? Are we focused too much on making churchgoers comfortable? Or should we do whatever it takes—even offering a drive-in church—to keep attendance up?

NPR this week reported on Daytona Beach Drive In Christian Church, explaining that people park in rows on the grass facing an altar on the balcony of an old drive-in theater. They turn their radio on to listen to the sermon.

The church's senior pastor, Bob Kemp-Baird, was admittedly skeptical of the idea when he was first approached about it two years ago. Now he's come to the revelation that the worship style works for his congregation.

"Is there a feeling of the presence of the holy in this place?" Kemp-Baird asks. "Is there a feeling that Christ's presence is made known? I do know: It lives here."

The Disciples of Christ denominational church is part of a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. The church's

vision is “to be God’s faithful people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, evangelizing and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, respecting diversity and working in community with other faiths.”

Located in a spring break party town, services at Daytona Beach Drive In Christian Church last about 55 minutes. “You are welcome to come dressed as you like,” the website reads. “We offer indoor worship in the Friendship Hall located in the center of the property. There are several outdoor seating areas for you to worship outside of your vehicles in the comfort of the shade.”

Parishioners, including those battling Stage 4 cancer and legally blind believers, love it. Parents with antsy kids and pet owners are also taking a liking to the concept. Dogs get treats during Communion. And instead of clapping and offering an “Amen,” the congregation honks their car horns.

Members say it’s a safe place for people who need privacy and healing. But you can still fellowship face to face and, as the NPR article points out, “Today, it offers a Christian tradition that transcends even locked cars: doughnut hour.”

So, again, could this be the answer to church decline? A way to woo the lost to church? A method to get millennials to return to local assemblies? Or is it just another seeker-friendly gimmick that’s distracting from the gospel? Sound off.

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