

10 Unsettling Characteristics of a Concert-Driven Church

Worship and music have always been an integral part of both the Christian and Jewish faiths. The fact that we have 150 Psalms as part of sacred writ in Scripture demonstrates this point. Truly we were created by God to love and enjoy Him (by implication worship and adore Him) forever. That being said, some in the modern church movement have gone a step further and made the performing of worship music the central point in their Sunday services.

Some popular movements have even branded their name more on their worship than their preaching and teaching. In one respect, this is nothing new, as I found out decades ago that many churches put more priority into funding a choir leader than a youth pastor; and many churches are more known by their gospel choir than by any other component of their congregation or movement. This shift towards music has created a new phenomenon that I am naming in this article “The Concert-Driven Church.”

Many in this movement have built up such branding based on their amazing worship performances that they can open up a church and have thousands in attendance in a few months (of course, most of it is unfortunately transfer growth from other smaller feeder churches.) This ability to build a church solely on branding means that these churches do not have to do the hard work of contextualization and incarnation (learning the nuances of the surrounding culture and allowing the community residents to get to know them and their leaders before they launch a church plant) that most other churches have to do in order to become a gospel centered congregation or church plant.

This new phenomenon has discouraged many church planters who

are wondering if they should pay the price to put into practice the incarnational approach. As an example on why the “concert-driven church” model frustrates many pastors, I will now give a typical scenario practiced by a large contemporary church movement. (I am intentionally leaving the name out of this movement from this article for the time being so as not to exacerbate or illicit a judgmental attitude towards them.)

They will start off by having Sunday evening concerts in a major city that will be promoted all over social media. (Sunday evenings are chosen because their target audience—other Christians—are already committed to attending other churches on Sunday mornings.)

They will have huge crowds of Christians attending these weekly inspirational concerts. (Perhaps they first start off with monthly gatherings to build momentum.) After about six months, or when they perceive they have reached a tipping point, they suddenly make an announcement (to the thousands of concert-goers) that they are opening a church, and they encourage all the concert-goers to come to their services starting next Sunday morning.

They repeat this process in other major cities and have garnered huge crowds with some having multiple campuses with more thousands in attendance in a short period of time. (Hence, huge church growth through branding without the process of contextualizing their community.)

Unfortunately, while their church movement grows, the kingdom is not initially enlarged because they plant churches with attendees of other churches (without the input and cooperation of the pastors affected by the migration of their people to this megachurch movement). I am stating the facts as I have seen it done in New York City and heard from others regarding the same things done in other major cities. (I am not trying to judge the motives of the leaders of these kind of church movements—but I have every right to compare their principles

to biblical models.)

Characteristics of the “Concert-Driven” Church

1. They build a church through attracting other Christians.

As was already mentioned, their target audience is initially not the unchurched, but the low-hanging fruit of those already in churches who are already listening to their worship music.

2. They build megachurches through branding.

Since these churches already have years of successful branding behind their name, they can usually just open up a church and thousands will flock, knowing they can expect a great worship experience.

3. Believers are initially attracted through the visceral experience of the concert.

People primarily flock to these churches for a visceral experience—not primarily to hear a sermon and assimilate and serve in a church body (unless it’s to join the illustrious worship team). Hence, they are attracted to a powerful musical experience (along with the presence of Christ) more than to learning and growing in the knowledge of the person of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

4. The program is the focus more than discipleship.

Although these kinds of churches may have some small affinity groups, the effective discipleship that comes from one-on-one mentoring is not generally systematized in these large church movements. (They usually grow too large too quickly to keep up with the scale that a discipleship-focused church demands.) To be fair, some of these churches provide theological training and/or teaching in mid-week services to which a small percentage of their church usually attends (I base this opinion on conversations with other leaders familiar with the “concert-driven church” movement).

5. The teaching is meant to motivate more than to mature.

Usually, the messages are less than 30 minutes and are geared more toward encouraging people. Hence, much of the Sunday teaching is Pabulum to accommodate the mixed multitudes present in the large crowds. (Most don't attend for the teaching anyway; however, after a year or so, those really hungry to grow in the Word may decide to look elsewhere for spiritual meat.)

6. There is much turnover in attendance.

Generally, any church or movement that grows rapidly will also have a high rate of transition and/or a change in attendees and staff because it is hard to provide enough shepherds and/or small group dynamics to meet the needs of all the people.

7. The standards for serving are not generally high.

To keep up with the scale of growth, generally it will be a challenge for these churches to properly vet those who serve in the ministry. Consequently, it is usually not as difficult to volunteer to minister in such a church unless it demands a certain type of giftedness (like being on the worship team or being a pastor).

It would not be a surprise to myself and others if the percentage of those who serve in these churches who indulge in immoral lifestyles is higher than other churches with a different approach to ministry (the incarnational model, the parish model, the missional model and the New Testament apostolic model, to name a few).

8. The focus is the franchise.

In order to keep a tight rein and protect the DNA of the "concert-driven church" movements, the mother church often controls all the finances, major leadership decisions and a strict system of assessing the performance of the lead pastors

and churches under their umbrella (in some ways similar to a McDonald's hamburger franchise).

Hence, the focus is the franchise—more than the uniqueness of each individual church campus or their community. (Although of course there must be some adaptations in order for these movements to break ground in foreign nations with a different language, economy and culture.)

9. There is rarely a stand taken on cultural issues.

The pastors of these campuses will rarely, if ever, take a stand on a controversial cultural issue (like same-sex marriage, abortion, homosexuality, transsexuality). They will not often give a direct answer to a question regarding these hot topics but will usually say something to the effect of “We take each case on an individual basis.”

10. There is little accountability.

I know of believers who do not want to be held accountable and/or mentored because they do not want anyone correcting them or speaking into their lives. Often, these believers will go to a “concert-driven church” where they can enjoy the presence of God without being accountable to the personal lordship of Christ (I am not saying that every attendee in “concert-driven churches” is like this).

In conclusion, do I think the “concert-driven church” is the best biblical model? Obviously, anyone who reads my writings or read my book *An Anthology of Essays on Apostolic Leadership* knows the answer to this question. I am especially negative regarding the way many “concert-driven churches” start their churches on the backs of other churches based on their branding.

However, despite my concerns, I do believe God is using them to spread the gospel, expose many unsaved to the love and presence of Christ (especially after a church they launch

grows large, creates a buzz and garners much attention with secular media). They also can bring many cultural elites and celebrities to faith. Of course, the big question is whether those who attend the “concert-driven church” will actually become mature Christ-followers who will adequately represent Jesus and positively affect this world.