

Synergy And Space:

Breathing New Life Into Worship

I'll never forget that day under our "big top." It was the third year of our church's Neighborhood Festival. After a full day of family activities on Saturday—including our annual Craft Fair—we decided at the last minute to move our regular Sunday morning service outside under a big red and white tent with open sides. The tent had been set up from the previous day's entertainment venues so we all said, "Why not? Let's dare to be different!"

There was only one major concern—other than the weather. Our "tabernacle in the wilderness" would seat 200 max—packed closely together like the sardines in a can. Our normal attendance was usually more than that but because our church auditorium held 600, its size allowed our regulars and visitors ample room to sit at arm's length from one another all over the sanctuary—and they did. How would our church handle having to sit close together—shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow? What if some couldn't find a seat, would they get upset and leave?

Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the podium that Sunday—when I got up to open the service, every seat was taken and there was standing room only—and nobody left. Our singing that day had never been so vibrant—our worship never so . . . well . . . worshipful! We hugged and smiled and sang from the top of our lungs and laughter came easy—and nobody nodded off during the sermon. We all agreed, it was one of the best church services we ever had. Two years later those who were there still talk about that day with a huge collective smile and excitement. Some have even suggested more than once that maybe we should do it again—and again!

What happened that Sunday that was different? Could it have been the novelty of being outside and the festival atmosphere? Perhaps. But I believe what we experienced that day was the biblical dynamic of synergy and space—people worshipping together in consort, in high energy and close proximity, with one heart and one spirit. The Bible speaks of this in several places. "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend

can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Eccl. 4:9-12). We multiplied that biblical two by a hundred or so and you can see why our exuberant service was so powerful that day. We were getting a good return for our worship—because we were together—and keepin' warm!

Leviticus also describes the dynamic of synergy and space as indispensable when waging spiritual warfare, "Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you" (Lev. 26:8). Two hundred of us praising God in unison? The Bible says we put twenty thousand of our spiritual enemies to flight that day. Wow!

The word synergy comes from the New Testament Greek verb *sunergeo*. It literally means, "to work together, cooperate, be a co-worker, a fellow laborer" (1 Cor. 16:16; 2 Cor 6:1). It speaks of a high energy level that is produced when people come together as a unit to accomplish a combined purpose or goal. They develop critical mass. Together they can produce an effect that is greater than the sum of their individual efforts. Mark's gospel uses the word to describe the dynamic effect of the disciples preaching—combined with miraculous signs from the Lord working together (*sunergeo*) to fulfill the Great Commission (Mk. 16:20). James echoes this truth while describing the working together (*sunergeo*) of Abraham's faith and obedience, which was "credited to him as righteousness" (Jas. 2:22).

In the case of our worship service under the tent that day, 200 people sitting, standing, singing, laughing, and worshipping God—shoulder to shoulder and elbow to elbow—were able to create more spontaneous and enthusiastic worship and joyful praise, than those same 200 people could ever generate in our much larger setting.

I believe the relationship between synergy and space is

greatly overlooked by churches that want to develop and maintain dynamic worship and church growth. Many of our largest and fastest growing churches understand this principle—those that have plateaued or are in serious decline do not. Let me further illustrate.

Recently, while on vacation, my wife and I attended a Sunday service at a growing church in a neighboring state. They were in their third move in five years and met in a rented building that had space for about 150 people—a little larger than their membership at the time. When we walked in the door all we could see were wall to wall people. It gave us the immediate impression that God was really doing something special in this group of believers—and He was. We could feel their excitement. When it came time for the service to start almost every chair was filled and people stood at the back. We gladly squeezed together at the pastor's request to make room for everyone. We hugged and smiled and sang from the top of our lungs and laughter came easy—and nobody nodded off during the sermon. Sound familiar? It was a wonderful service—a common occurrence we were told. The reason? This church had purposely planned for synergy and space and their worship service and spirit reflected it.

It is estimated that more than 4000 new churches open each year in America—at the same time more than 7,000 close their doors forever. There are a lot of reasons for the closures, of course—moral failure of a leader, lack of finances, poor decision making, contention within the church, a small number of people exercising control—but could one reason be the lack or absence of synergy and space?

Let me give you one more illustration of this principle. About ten years ago I started a church with a small group of believers. We met in our home. We experienced sweet times of worship in our tiny setting. People had to sit close together in our den and some had to sit on the floor or stand. It wasn't long before we needed to move to a bigger location. We prayed long and hard about that because we knew what we had was so special. A pastor friend from another church graciously offered to let us meet in his church's chapel on Saturday nights. It held about 50. It wasn't long before we packed that out. When we began to look for a little larger facility we were offered the use of the church's main sanctuary—on the same night. It held 350 and we were excited, until we had our first service there. Our worship, fellowship, prayers and preaching were as flat as a pancake and continued that way until we moved.

What had happened? Our modest group was overwhelmed by so much space. Human nature being what it is, our 50-60 people spread out all over the auditorium. We got lost in the bigger setting and in the process we lost our synergy and our worship became a struggle. Our leadership be-

gan a serious search for a smaller facility and when we found it, the excitement of worship returned and our church continued to grow in spirit and in number.

Maintaining synergy and space may be easier when a church is going from small to big, but what about a church that has plateaued, or has been declining in numbers—but still has a large facility? I know of churches in our association that have experienced the gradual loss of members for years. They've changed pastors, worship leaders, youth ministers and even elders without success. As a church consultant I tell them to consider selling that big building to a ministry that is growing—or to a commercial venture—and move to a new area and build or find a building just a little bit bigger than they are. I know of one large old church located in a downtown area across from a hospital that had lost most of their members because of the crime and drugs in the area. Seeing the obvious they wisely approached the hospital and found they were looking for more space. The church made a deal, moved out into a fast growing new part of the city, built a sanctuary with expandable partitions and created synergy and space once again. The church quadrupled in two years!

What if your church has dwindled in members, and you're stuck in an oversized building but your people won't consider a move? I suggest you "shrink-wrap" your church to a size that will encourage synergy and space. There's several economical ways this can be accomplished. Don't commit the mistake that many churches do by roping off the excess seating area. That gives the impression to your visitors that your church can't fill those seats so you've quit trying. One thing that you can easily do, however, is remove the last ten rows or more of seating. Fill the empty space with plants and shrubs and other creative decorations such as flags, ornaments and furniture. Make the area into a more intimate gathering place for before and after service, where people can talk, pray or just linger and relax. Add a coffee bar with tables. I highly recommend to churches that they consider filling the empty unused space with more permanent partitions and add classrooms if needed, or meeting space for church and community activities. Perhaps that area could become your new Adult Learning Center as you initiate new programs to reach your neighborhood.

Once you've achieved the right size for your congregation, you'll be surprised at the new energy and enthusiasm you'll experience in your worship services. As visitors enter your church for the first time they will see wall to wall people. It will give the impression that God is really doing something in your church—and that He will. That's synergy and space!

So what happens if your church—with its new synergy begins to grow again and you're running out of space? That's easy. Thank God and add a second service. Then the fun will really begin!