

Resort/Leisure Missions Stimulate Church Growth

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Yes, it is true! Resort and leisure missions can stimulate church growth. By resort and leisure missions I am talking about the total ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ using whatever means, tool, or method that may be needed to speak to people who, because of residence, employment, or temporary presence, are in a setting devoted mainly to leisure and recreational activities. Frequently in conferences that I have led, I have suggested a simple outline of resort and leisure missions strategy. Through prayer, hard work, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit:

1. Get to know who and what is in the area.
2. Discover the unmet needs and aspirations.
3. Envision ministries that will speak to these needs.
4. Determine priorities.
5. Consider resources.
6. Consult with missions administrators.
7. Structure ministry with flexibility.
8. Assemble materials.
9. Train workers.
10. Execute ministries.
11. Provide follow-up.
12. Evaluate.
13. Do long-range planning.

Those of us in resort and leisure missions are probably perceived as being okay in terms of evangelism and ministry. Most resort and leisure projects I know anything about are highly committed to proclamation of the gospel in whatever idioms are necessary for clear communication. We major on the tools of ministry and proclamation. We have been pretty open to trying new approaches in resort and leisure evangelism.

Let us face it—folk concerts, puppet shows, day camping, coffeehouses, street and beach witnessing are all a far cry from the traditional two-week revival service. But they are essentially sound evangelism methods. I think there is a wide spread acceptance among the “brethren” for these innovative means of proclamation.

And we do an excellent job of ministering in resort and leisure settings. We meet the needs of hurting and seeking persons through many effective ministries that validate the reality of the good news in all sorts of places.

However, in the area of congregationalizing, those of us in resort and leisure missions are not perceived as doing nearly as well by many who judge the effectiveness and validity of mission ministries.

Perhaps this is largely due to the highly mobile nature of the visitors in resort and leisure settings, including overnighters, one-to-two week vacationers, and seasonal employees. Perhaps this has led many to feel that stable congregations cannot be built in essentially resort and leisure settings.

Maybe it is because few people who are permanent or long term residents in resort and leisure communities come from old-South traditional Southern Baptist backgrounds. Instead, they tend to be people whose different life styles, traditions, values, ethnic roots, and religious orientations may well seem to be very poor ground for building self-sufficient Southern Baptist churches.

Consciously or unconsciously, this has led some mission strategies to place resort and leisure settings in a low priority when allocating ministry resources, even though great numbers of people in these areas need to be reached with the gospel.

Every resort and leisure setting is unique. However, basic characteristics are commonly found in most leisure-oriented settings in our contemporary society. And if these do not seem to be the most likely places to grow evangelical, New Testament congregations, it is important to remember that neither was the Gentile culture of the Greco-Roman world of the first century.

1. The culture is totally secular. Spiritual and religious considerations have very little visibility.
2. The getting or holding onto things is of major concern. Materialism is a driving force in the typical value structure of this culture.
3. The pursuit of pleasure or hedonism is another predominate force or concern.
4. Institutional organizations and activities are frequently viewed in the same light as the plague. There are many people, even professing Christians, hiding behind their pine tree or sand dune in most resort and leisure areas.
5. Pantheism or the worship of creation and nature is the frequent spiritual orientation of many in resort and leisure areas.

The composite resident of the typical resort and leisure community (whom and where you probably will never find) is a 28-year-old male, single or divorced, living with a person to whom he is not married, a college graduate in business administration, part owner of a small resort/leisure-related business, up to his eyeballs in debt, and who jogs, skis, plays golf and tennis, backpacks, drinks frequently, and uses drugs occasionally in social settings. He is an agnostic whose parents were nominal Catholics. He attended a couple of years of parochial school, is turned off to what he thinks is the institutional church, knows more about Krishna consciousness than he does about the Spirit-filled life, and thinks of the natural setting of the resort and leisure area as having a mystical presence. And on we could go.

I am well aware that there are often more women than men in many resort and leisure areas; that some areas are predominately populated by senior adults; that other areas have a high percentage of school dropouts; and I also know that there are some fine Christians to be found in most resort and leisure areas. But, the overall situation still holds: secular, materialistic, hedonistic, non-involved, and pantheistic.

Let us face it, the Southern Baptist preacher trained to have a standard Sunday School and to parse the Greek will probably feel not any too comfortable around our typical, though hypothetical, resort and leisure resident.

But keep some other things in mind. The typical resident of most resort/leisure settings is also very likely quite lonely. He is likely consumed with self and with image, and is very insecure. He wears the mask of a beautiful person, but inside he is empty and frightened. He finds it very difficult to maintain meaningful relationships. He is cynical and suspicious of the motives of others.

Other types of people in a resort and leisure oriented community feel the same: the college drop out following seasonal employment, the retired couple living in their camper, the family that has lived in the community since before its was discovered as a resort or leisure paradise, the Forest Service or National Park ranger, the new divorcee and her three kids who have no supervision while Mama works as a cocktail waitress at the lodge, and many, many more.

How can the resort and leisure missionary break through all of this? How can he or she bring these people into a meaningful relationship with Christ? How can a congregation be developed in which new Christians out of such backgrounds and lifestyles will find nurture and fellowship? By sensitively responding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

Ministering to the people who are found in resort/leisure settings, introducing them to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and bringing them to maturity in a family of faith is what resort and leisure congregationalizing is all about.

In all honesty, some of us who serve in leadership capacities in resort and leisure missions have contributed to the problem of poor resort/leisure congregationalizing concepts. In some areas, resort and leisure work and congregationalizing have not historically been related.

Occasionally resort and leisure ministry activities have been carried on by state conventions or associations apart from the local churches in the area. The churches in those settings may have been established for a long time and they might resent the intrusion of the seemingly godless vacationers into their community. Therefore, any resort and leisure ministry is carried on completely separate from the local churches rather than as an integral part of their ministry.

I am not saying this is necessarily wrong. It may not be possible for the long-term resident of these areas to effectively communicate the Christian gospel to the affluent, urban, secular vacationer or new resident. And so, in such places as this, it may be seem that separating resort/leisure missions and congregationalizing is necessary in order to reach the leisure-oriented part of the population. (However, I personally feel resort and leisure mission projects should be based in a local church.)

I fear that frequently the separation of congregationalizing from resort/leisure missions has been projected as the norm. However, as it has been discovered in the West, the two cannot and must not be separated. There are no old, established, traditional local Southern Baptist churches in western resort and leisure communities. If a church or mission exists at all, it is likely to be young in age, small in membership, struggling for its existence, and perhaps uncertain of its identity. If resort and leisure work is to be done in such a community, congregationalizing must be a major part of its focus.

Nevertheless, there often seems to be an insistence on separating the two. A mission leader may say, "We have to build a strong congregation before we can become involved in resort and leisure ministries." Some resort missionaries say, "I'm not here to build a church, I'm here to do resort and leisure work." However, they are both wrong! You cannot build a congregation in a resort and leisure community without ministering to resort-related people, which means resort and leisure ministries. But neither can resort and leisure ministries effectively be carried on in a resort/leisure-oriented community without establishing the base of a New Testament congregation.

There may be some isolated western resort or leisure settings, i.e., Carlsbad Caverns, Mesa Verde, or Glacier National Park, without any year-round community directly adjacent in which a

congregational base can be established. But even in such cases as these, there is usually a nearby support community. However, even lacking this, a ministry needs to be conducted by Christians oriented toward New Testament congregational life as the norm for Christian experience or the result of the resort and leisure mission work will not be true to New Testament principles. But that raises a very important question. If resort and leisure missions are going to stimulate church growth, what exactly is it going to stimulate the growth of? What is this church in the resort and leisure community going to be? If any denomination ought to know what a church is, Southern Baptists should be the one. However, sometimes we do not act like we do.

Many early Southern Baptist churches in the West were begun by people who wanted churches like the ones they remembered back home. In my wanderings I have encountered some of those “back home” churches. Some of them have strange ideas about what the church is. For some the church is a building, usually brick, frequently with white pillars and some sort of steeple. For others, the church exists primarily as a place to bury people. And for still others, the church is largely a family tradition. Its members were practically born into it. Nearly everyone who is a member is related by birth or marriage to everyone else in it.

I am not saying these are biblical definitions of the church. I am just reporting that a sizeable number of people in some cultural settings see the church these ways. I doubt if many here would insist that such concepts of the church be imposed on any western-or eastern-congregation. For even as ethnic churches must be permitted to assume their own ethnic expression of church form and operation, and just as a church in a military community or an inner city setting must have its own unique expression, so too must a church in a resort and leisure community be allowed to be distinctive.

Individual growth and church growth can take place only in those situations where both the individual and the church have the freedom to become the distinctively unique creation that God wants each of them to be in the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in order for its members to be properly nurtured into maturity, it is important that each resort/ leisure congregation be permitted to grow and develop in such a way as to become whatever God wants it to be.

When folks like most of those typically found in resort and leisure settings come to faith in Christ, they do not need the you-all club that someone remembers from First Church of a county seat town back in the South. They do not need a church that is like someone thinks it was 30 years ago in Missouri or North Carolina. They do not need anybody else’s anything.

Resort and leisure missions can stimulate church growth if and only if the church is free to find distinctiveness of expression in each resort and leisure setting. I am not talking about digression from Baptist principles of ecclesiology. I am not talking about permitting deviation from Biblical doctrine. I am not talking about tolerating attitudes of non-cooperation with other Southern Baptist churches.

However, how much of what we do is determined by tradition, habit, or culture? Can a resort/leisure church be a cooperating Southern Baptist congregation and meet some time other than 11:00 a.m. on Sunday? Is a free form of worship okay? Must the congregation always meet in an auditorium setting? I am not saying that no resort/leisure congregation should ever meet at 11:00 a.m., nor that an auditorium setting is always inappropriate, or that free worship forms are always the best. But can’t there be some latitude? One missionary who met at 8:00 p.m. on Sunday evening

in a Ramada Inn hospitality room for prayer, singing with a guitar, Bible study and sharing was told that this could not qualify as a beginning step in congregationalizing.

Another resort church I know about chose to be very traditional at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings. There were a number of people in that congregation who came from very traditional backgrounds. They needed and wanted a dignified, well-planned, structured, formal service. The Sunday evening service, on the other hand, was a happening. Extremely casual dress, free worship forms, a lot of serendipity with no two services ever the same was the pattern. In that particular setting, this blend, along with the employment throughout the resort season of appropriate resort/leisure ministry programs, produced the right atmosphere for impressive church growth.

Now what worked in that setting at that time is not the final formula for resort/leisure church growth, but it does teach a valuable lesson. At the beginning of the resort and leisure ministry effort at Lake Tahoe, there were three churches and one mission around the 80 miles of lake shore. Different blends of tradition and innovation were used in each of the congregations. Different expressions of congregational style have been attempted from time to time. The important thing has been that each congregation could express itself in healthy ways that bore testimony to the entire Tahoe community of Christ's relevancy in a leisure setting.

Today there are a number of ministry points around the lake. Church growth has taken place. It is my opinion that when resort/leisure ministry tools were used in that resort and leisure setting, church growth accelerated. When resort and leisure tools and ministries were ignored, church growth declined.

Church growth is not just a growing of an organization, of buildings, of a denomination or an institution. There are three Greek words that express what the church must be. Beyond these I do not feel we have to fret much about what form of expression is taken.

1. *suma*, the word for body, the concept of the church as a living, vital organism with Jesus Christ as Head and Lord. The individual members relating to the lordship of their common Head, each giving expression to their unique function within the body in a cooperative way.
2. *ekklesia*, the congregation of called out ones assembled or gathered together. This points out a prerequisite of new birth and of entering into a lifestyle of obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ. Congregationalizing does necessitate the coming together of the members of the body from time to time for mutual upholding, enabling, equipping, and for group expression of common faith and commitment.
3. *koinonia*, the participating together with one another. Congregationalizing does not mean just the joining of the same religious organization or fraternity. Nor is it simply the tolerating of other people who call themselves Christians while I do my own thing. Rather there is the absolute necessity for involvement together toward common goals under the headship of Christ.

Whatever forms are used to give expression to the *suma*, the *ekklesia*, and the *koinonia* are not matters of supreme importance. The resort and leisure church should find the forms, the tools, and the ministries that will best enable them to be the church in their setting.

Yes, I believe the New Testament gives us direction, and is the authority against which we need to check what we understand Christ's lordship to be. But I find a whole lot more diversity in form, practice, and even church government than we are frequently willing to admit.

Resort and leisure ministries can stimulate church growth if:

- They are designed to reach the people who are there, rather than the people who exist somewhere else.
- They say to the people, we Christians love you, care about you, and accept you.
- They say the faith we proclaim is alive, vital, and relevant.
- They meet real needs that actually exist.
- They are operated on God's timetable.
- They do not isolate the pastor or missionary from the established Christians who need nurturing and growing, too.
- And most importantly, if they are biblically sound, Spirit directed, prayerfully executed, and Christ centered.

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