

On the Front Lines

By Bob Young

Over the last 50 years, the ways in which wars are waged has changed considerably. War is now high-tech, impersonal, sterilized, even glorified. Nonetheless, combat is life-threatening. If being on the front lines involves less personal, face-to-face, hand-to-hand combat, the threat of IEDs and a variety of explosive devices has increased the danger. Being on the front lines means the loss of human life. On the front lines, one comes face to face with how the battle is going, the loss of life, the ebb and flow of the conflict.

Today the church is in a battle for its very existence. The war exists in almost every place and is waged in many different ways. In some places, the church has a relative strength numerically and assembles in secure enclaves that allow life to proceed with little interruption. Christians who live in such locations may not correctly assess how difficult the global battle is. In other places, where the church is not as strong and Christians are fewer, the church's army is rapidly decreasing in number, despite periodic successes. It is not fun to be on the front line. On the front line, one becomes painfully aware of the losses, the challenges, and the lack of troops.

Across 40+ years of ministry I have generally participated in the battle for Christianity in secure and fruitful places. A majority of the churches Jan and I have worked with and attended experienced growth—sometimes in unbelievable ways. We have been blessed to witness hundreds of people turning to the Christ as they found forgiveness, newness, purpose, and genuine life. We have seen the joy of mission work that carries the gospel to the far corners of the earth to receptive people. More recently, we have personally participated in effective mission works. We ministered in two churches that have a special place in our hearts—in one church, a dozen years of ministry during which the church doubled; in the other, 8+ years of ministry as the church grew by more than 50%. I am grateful to those two churches for the blessing and insights of those 20+ years of ministry. They helped make ministry easy and fun and productive.

During our years in Christian higher education, we were relatively isolated from the battle. While we were active and involved as members of a local congregation, we were also away a great deal as we accepted responsibilities in interim ministry and guest preaching appointments. We visited and preached in a lot of congregations. That schedule meant that we did not participate in the daily battles and ebb and flow of Christianity in those local congregations, primarily small mission congregations throughout the Northeast, New England, and the Atlantic seaboard.

For the past eight years, I have observed the battle in a different light. Working in a smaller community which has two congregations of the churches of Christ, over two tenures separated by four years in Christian higher education, we have seen the reality of the struggle firsthand. Let me describe what I have seen “on the front lines.” From 2002-2004, we worked with one of the two congregations mentioned. During those years, the two congregations had an average combined attendance of about 500. After four years in higher education, we returned to the

same congregation we had worked with before, now significantly smaller. The factors that contributed to the decline in number do not matter for this article, except to say that much of the loss occurred as people transferred to the other congregation. One would expect that such would keep the average combined attendance about the same or growing.

Let me share with you the reality I see. Last week the two congregations had barely over 300 in combined attendance. On a good Sunday, the two congregations may have a combined attendance of 400. That represents a loss of at least 20-25% of the “troops” over only a few years. Some of that has occurred because of the graying of the church and the death of older members, especially visible and felt in smaller, rural communities. Some of it has occurred because of the continuing stream of young people who move away from the community and do not return. Unfortunately, some of it has occurred because members have dropped out of active involvement in Christianity. Some of it has occurred because former members now attend community and denominational churches. These factors, which promise only to accelerate, do not bode well for the future of the church, especially in small communities.

The purpose of this article is not only to suggest how acute the potential decline may become in coming years, but to suggest what the church must do to reverse the experience and once again participate in the battle in the ways and places that matter.

The church must restore its focus. We must remember the God-given purpose of the church, that is, why the church exists. We must preach Christ more than church. We must establish genuine community more than social networks. We must define Christianity through meaningful relationships more than rules to be kept. We must quit trying to meet the needs of consumers and tell people clearly about the involvement demands of discipleship.

Meaningful worship. As we focus on God, seeking him and making him visible, the church must genuinely worship him, both corporately and individually.

Share the Good News. As we see our community and world, we must care about our community and world with the heart of God, and focus afresh on the purpose of the church to share good news. Restoring the biblical focus on sharing the gospel with the goal of making and maturing disciples, the church must seek cultural relevance for the unchanging message of God.

Redefine church. The redefinition of the church involves multiple factors. The church must become less self-centered and less concerned about church “for us”. Looking outward more than inward will result in less focus on issues, traditions and protecting the past. The church must redefine Christianity as something Christians are involved in 24/7, with high levels of involvement throughout the week. This will require that local churches rethink the number, kind, and timing of activities. It will also require a people-releasing view of church rather than a people-controlling model, so that the every-member ministry concept of the New Testament can be realized.

Fellowship. The church must get out of its comfort zones and touch people that are not like us, sharing a fellowship that includes all kinds of people who are distinct ethically, socially, and economically.

Leadership. The church must seek biblical leadership patterns within the church that develop leadership by influence and not by control. Such healthy, biblical leadership patterns will provide models for how we will seek to lead others to Christ and in Christian living.