

# Disneyland and the Church

by Frank Wooden

I visited Disneyland recently, nothing new for a guy who has lived in California all his life, but the first visit since Disney's California Adventure opened next door. Where once acres of parking existed, there is now a central plaza with shops and restaurants separating Disneyland from California Adventure. Turn to your right, there is one theme park. Turn to your left, there is the other.

It was in this central plaza that I started to see how much like Disney the modern church is like. Walk up to any progressive church today and you come upon the equivalent of a central plaza. Try out the coffee cart, complete with an espresso machine, and then visit the bookstore with the church logo tee shirts for sale.

Here is where it becomes interesting. Don't be surprised if you face choosing a traditional service a la Disneyland or a contemporary service a la California Adventure. Both feature plenty of well-trained people (cast members?) who will make your worship experience memorable. The facilities will be clean and neat and you can fill out a visitor survey on the way out. Smiling people will be happy to direct you to a changing table for your baby or the information rack with the list of small groups. Everything seems to be perfect, or is it?

Disney has discovered that their hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in California Adventure cannot lure the visitors away from Disneyland. So on a Saturday morning, as my family and I stood in a packed line to get into Disneyland, you can walk across the plaza and get right into California Adventure. Few do. There are a lot of reasons why but if you ask people who have been to both theme parks you will hear the same basic answer- Disneyland is better.

In our haste to offer something for everyone, have we fallen into the trap that new is always better and that all you need is aesthetically pleasing facilities and programs to have success in the kingdom of God? If these ingredients have not guaranteed success for Disney, we do not have a right to expect them to work for us in our churches.

This is not a plea to keep things just like they were. Disneyland has made tremendous changes over the years- adding new attractions, updating old attractions, incorporating the latest technology, changing the menus, remodeling buildings and areas that have lost their appeal. Such changes have been beneficial and we would be wise to make changes in our churches as well.

When I came to my church ten years ago, change was much needed. Stuck in the past, many areas required quick attention. We took the liberty to make changes, especially in our services. Most of our changes were good but after awhile, we were making changes just to make changes. We became the church of change. For a fifty-year-old church, we were trying to pretend that we were brand new. We did this because it was cool to be a new church and it was not cool to be an old church. We went from outdated to contemporary but not every change was healthy.

Since then, we have watched how and what we change carefully. Our boundaries have even retracted in some areas. We now sing the occasional hymn in our services and we have a healthy population of senior adults. Are we changing? Absolutely. We replaced the pews with padded chairs, set up a coffee cart (with Starbucks of course), have a website and play the latest worship songs.

In the process I have learned, like Disney, that innovation and money do not guarantee success. The task of making disciples is more complicated than any other period in modern history and it requires prayer, anointing, sensitivity and God's favor.

We have realized that we are to be a multiethnic, intergenerational church. The growth is slower in such an environment but we have come to truly value such diversity. In order not to alienate our senior adults and to teach our Gen Xer's to respect those who have paved the way, we have planned services and events with the senior adults also in mind. We are teaching the worship team how to play and sing some of the old hymns (Sometimes in a new way). We are also teaching our senior adults that we now live in a world that wants images and that not everyone enjoys just hearing the message- they want to see the message portrayed in our services. It is a learning experience for all of us- one that I am proud to see take place.

We have senior adults in our leadership team and twenty-year-olds as well. There is a mix of ethnic groups. We aren't all the same age, we don't all drive the same kinds of cars nor do we all like the same kind of music. But when senior adults tell the worship team, which consists of guitarists and bass players, that they enjoy the worship- now that has got to put a smile on God's face. And when you are greeted by an African-American at the door, observe a worship team that is white and Filipino, have a female single adult lead in prayer, listen to a baby boomer preach and sit next to a Hispanic or Indonesian- you know that this is going to be what heaven looks like.

We are still making changes all the time but we have learned that we shouldn't change who we are; that starting over is not for us. Disney had millions to create a new theme park with only marginal success. We would rather take what we have and make it better, just like Disney has done over the years with Disneyland. It is a success story that still works for them and one, which we believe, works in the kingdom of God as well.

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Frank Wooden is the pastor of Sweetwater Assembly of God in San Diego where his twenty-year-old son leads worship and one of his key leaders is a retired plumber.