

All that jazz: A disputed approach to outreach

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

"How do we do effective evangelism? All our 'outreach' events are just another excuse for fellowship!" Our new associate pastor looked around at the outreach committee, but nobody answered him. He pressed his point. "I mean, how do we actually reach nonbelievers, not just believers?"

Eventually a discussion got under way, and a lot of ideas were brainstormed, then jettisoned. Finally one idea stuck. East Bay, a university town, was known as a "jazz town," with a couple of jazz venues that were always crowded. We hatched the idea of Jazz Night. We'd advertise on local radio and hire a name-brand jazz artist (not necessarily a Christian) to play at the church on several Saturday nights. A wealthy member would cover costs. We'd convert the sanctuary into a coffee shop atmosphere, put church brochures on the tables, and have me, the pastor, greet people and make some kind of religious-philosophical statement about Christ and the arts. Then we'd "let it rip." What could go wrong?

The outreach committee set it all up with careful advance planning. A top-notch jazz artist agreed to come for a good price. The announcements were made by the radio stations. Members put up posters in supermarkets and distributed brochures.

Then, with only one week to go, a dozen members were sitting with me in a Sunday evening prayer meeting. We were praying for our missionaries, for Bill's aunt who was undergoing chemo, for the new members class. And then Sam (whose name has been changed here) began to pray.

"Lord, please stop Jazz Night! You know I hate this idea and you know that if it goes forward, I and a bunch of us are leaving the church. Besides, why can't we have the Circuit Riders? They're a good Christian group."

By then I had looked up, unsure if Sam was praying to God or talking to me. His eyes were firmly shut, so I supposed he meant his words for God.

"This music is terrible and belongs in the bars! I never thought I'd see the day when our sanctuary was desecrated like this!"

"Ah, Sam, I think I need to interrupt here," I ventured. I had never interrupted somebody's prayer before and wasn't sure of the protocol—I hadn't learned it in seminary. But this prayer was rapidly going south. "Sam," I whispered loudly. "Sam!"

He ground to a stop and looked up, as did everybody else.

"Sam, is that a prayer or is there something you want to say to all of us, maybe to me in particular?"

Yes, he had more to say. The committee had no authority to authorize a jazz concert, he complained. . . . Nobody knew about the concert until it was too late to object. . . . Jazz is not Christian music. . . . A dozen of the seniors would leave if we went ahead with it.

So this is why they pay me the big bucks, I thought. And then I tried to reason with Sam.

"Sam, the proposal was in the council minutes—you were at that meeting. The outreach committee has the authority to plan outreach [for Christ's sake! I wanted to add]."

"Nobody asked us [seniors]. This just isn't our church anymore!"

I was tempted to call his bluff. His family had been members for 50 years—surely they wouldn't leave? I resented his bullying and his attempt to direct the process by threat and intimidation. What would happen to the various committees if they could not carry through on their mandates without approval from each and every church group? How could he not have known? Didn't he read the minutes or the newsletter? What happened to counting on the mature members in the church to demonstrate grace and act unselfishly? Did he really think that an old-time country Christian group would bring in non-Christians?

Instead of saying these things, I realized just in time that formal decision making (a vote in the council) is not the same as real decision making (the congregation processing an idea and nodding its approval). If I encouraged a confrontation now, it would severely injure the congregation. I said, "OK, let me talk to the committee."

As I conferred with church leaders that night, we decided that on the one hand, we could not go ahead given the distress level of members opposed to the concert. On the other hand, we had a contract with a professional jazz artist, and we needed to honor that contract. Then someone said, “Let’s just move it off site!” And so we did. The wealthy member set up his yard, and we changed the event address on the signs. Saturday night the member’s yard was full, in part because neighbors wandered over when they heard the music. I never got to give my Christ and the Arts speech, but many commented on how wonderful the music was, and asked how it had come about. Our church people sat around and chatted with the nonchurch people. Some began to smoke (the latter, not the former) and a few wine bottles appeared. That would not have happened in the sanctuary! Sam and the seniors stayed in the church.

Twelve years later, the church has grown, changed location and changed pastors a couple of times. One Sunday night I was back and the church was having a great party. A rock band played in the narthex and a hundred teens were standing, jumping and ready to “mosh” if the adults didn’t stop them. The lyrics were indecipherable because the noise level was deafening.

What a difference a few years make. I guess pain in a congregation can be a good teacher. The Jazz Night incident was certainly painful. Sam was in distress because he genuinely cared about the church and saw Jazz Night as an unholy encroachment of the secular into the sacred. Sacred space needed to be protected. The seniors felt marginalized. This was not their music; for them jazz was connected to smoky dives and all kinds of vice.

The outreach committee felt disempowered by the reversal of the decision. When ministry teams are given tasks to do, they must know that their authority will be respected. These people felt that they had communicated carefully and well, and were baffled that so many did not seem to know about their plans.

I too hurt and was hurt. In spite of all my training and seminary preparation and my understanding of systems, I had ignored one of the most powerful and precious groups in the church. How could I have overlooked the senior members? Sure, they had “heard” about the concert, but reading about it in meeting minutes or in the newsletter is never the same as “knowing” or being included. I should have talked this proposal over with them as a group long before the decision was made. Maybe they would have tolerated the decision, maybe not—but we might have avoided the

cutting prayer meeting diatribe. I also felt that this group had missed the point of the event's evangelistic outreach. We need to do more work on what it means to engage the world *out there*.

In the end, under duress and amid hurt feelings, the church moved its witness out into the neighborhood—with great results. Nobody came to Christ that night and nobody connected Jesus to jazz. But some connected the event with a church, and with new friends who were members of that church. We began to see how the mission can be moved outside the church.

Given time, preparation, prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, the church culture does change. What will happen next? Heavy metal in the narthex? Hip-hop in the sanctuary . . . or in the town square?