

How to market God

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In a nation where, increasingly, belief in God cannot be assumed, and where Christianity is losing more and more of its sway in public discourse, what does membership in a church offer? Or, to put it another way, how might we say that church matters?

I'm curious how faith leaders might answer these questions because I recently ran across a very difficult sort of answer. In 1928, United Lutheran pastor Herbert A. Bosch published a book, *Not Slothful in Business*. According to [James Hudnut-Beumler](#), Bosch was part of a movement of that era in which church leaders sought to embrace business practices (sound familiar?). Bosch, particularly, was interested in advertising and marketing.

Also around this time, the popularity of the Every Member Canvas took off. In an Every Member Canvas, teams of church leaders visit every member of the congregation to ask them to pledge money to the annual stewardship campaign. Attempting to find a new way of making "the ask," Bosch suggested this approach as a guide for conversation:

"Mr. X., we are here to see you about the church!

"Yes," said Mr. X., "I knew that and I know what you want."

"What do we want?"

"You want money for the church."

"No," said the worker, "we do not want money. We want you. We want you to come to church, to attend its services, to be an active member always ... You need the church ... The church needs you, and only as you try to value the church, will it mean more to you. The church is interested in you. The church wants you ... Come next Sunday ... And your many friends there will be glad to see you there."

Many aspects of this pitch fascinate me, but I'll draw out only three. First, there is no mention of God. Second, the view of the church is one of institution, perhaps one

needing members, but still certainly members to support the institution itself. And third, while I'm cautious of drawing too many conclusions from such a short passage, I'm also struck that it lacks much description in the way of mission—of God, of the church, and of God beyond the church.

I don't mean to pick on Bosch too much here. Certainly, our theology today is also a product of its era. And so I wonder, how would we—how do we—make that pitch today? How do we explain the value of the church to prospective members in our time?

- Some might emphasize the great programs a church provides.
- Some might speak to the power of God at work amongst the people who attend.
- Some might emphasize social justice and how the church pursues a world more in keeping with God's vision of the kingdom.
- Some might still view church attendance and membership as desirable for positive social status.
- Some might consider the church's mission to save sinners.
- Some might confess the church "makes me a better person," or even "makes me feel good."

I could go on. I'm not sure any of these reasons is a bad answer, though they probably work best layered upon one another rather than emphasized individually. But it does beg the elevator pitch question: if you met with a prospective—or marginal—church member and they asked you, "Why church?" how would you respond?

In my tradition, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in our *Book of Order* we give it our best shot. From "The Mission of the Congregation" section:

Through the congregation God's people carry out the ministries of proclamation, sharing the Sacraments, and living in covenant life with God and each other. In the life of the congregation, individual believers are equipped for the ministry of witness to the love and grace of God in and for the world. The congregation reaches out to people, communities, and the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ, to gather for worship, to offer care and nurture to God's children, to speak for social justice and righteousness, to bear witness to the truth and to the reign of God that is

coming into the world. (G-1.0101)

For me, as a churchgoer and church leader, I find this paragraph quite compelling, but I'm also aware of its insider speak and its institutional location—it is, after all, in a denomination's constitution! So, I still wonder, what language might we best use to "bear witness to the truth" in our time?

Originally posted at [Copeland's blog](#)