

What's the main attraction?

By Dean Merrill

Pretend that you've never darkened a church door. You've gone along without a spiritual connection. But now a small discomfort has started to rumble inside your soul, and you decide to slip into a Sunday morning service down the street. You don't know what to expect; you only hope you won't feel awkward this first time.

What would you be looking for most?

We who have grown up on church pews probably don't know the answer to that question. We can't remember what it's like to be uncertain, rootless, God-less. We erroneously assume that such people will want what we're seeking — such as the following:

- *Fellowship, friendliness, conviviality, warm smiles, handshakes.* While these are nice, they're not the core of the search. The average unbeliever can, in fact, find a livelier social scene at a bar or country club.

Besides, the church is too multigenerational — people from 8 to 88 and beyond. And they gather mainly in the morning, not after dark. It's just not the

ideal context for

an unbeliever's notion of a good time.

- *Entertainment, humor, a polished production.* The trouble is that competition from today's media is formidable. What pastor is as witty as David Letterman? Even the greatest church musical is hard-pressed to match the Hollywood extravaganzas that can be seen on TV.

- *Great music.* Again, the competition is stiff. By the time the average American clicks off his home surround-sound theater system and walks into the average church sanctuary with us amateur singers and players (yes, I'm one), the chances of making an impression are almost nil. Plus, musical tastes are widely fractured. One person wants easy listening; the next, classical; the next, country.

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Then what will attract the seeking person? What light will draw him/her out of the shadows?

I believe it is something divine, something majestic — in other words, God himself. Unchurched people aren't all that interested in slick performance and jolly socializing; they already know where to find those horizontal things. What they yearn for is something upward, beyond themselves and their dead-end existence.

How many of our services would pass what I call "the Bethel test"? When Jacob stopped for the night at a place he later named Bethel, he had no great expectations. He thought he

was just camping until the sun came up. But he got the surprise of his life when a powerful dream revealed angels moving up and down a staircase to heaven, and God spoke a piercing word to his heart. Jacob gasped the next morning: "Surely the Lord is in

this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place!" (Genesis 28:16,17, NIV).

How many people leave my church and yours saying, "That wasn't just a bunch of people doing a religious ritual. That wasn't just showtime. God was in that place. I need to go back there again"?

A minister who had successfully planted six

churches over his lifetime told me, "In the early days, I realized what my true drawing card had to be. I didn't yet have a great-sounding choir, a fully developed children's program or a handsome building. All I had to offer people was Jesus. In fact, that was the best offer I could extend."

In the early days of Pentecost, we didn't have fancy programs or impressive sanctuaries or polished music. All we had to offer was the power of an up-close and personal God.

When will we realize that only God can get people's attention and hold it? That is what changes lives, anyway. The most important thing about a church service must be that "God is in this place," leading young and old, saved and unsaved to an encounter with Him. ■

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