

Artizo Discussion Paper – Section: Evangelism

Shopfronts, Pyramids and Franchises

There is not much theology in this ARTIZO paper. Rather it is an expression of a way of thinking. We are in the business of conveying a product called the Gospel. What is the methodology of getting our message across in today's world?

There are many ways in which we can market a product, such as the Gospel. We can use a shopfront, pyramid selling, selling by mail order or running parties in people's homes. If you ponder selling methods that are commonly used today, you will see that some products such as Electrolux vacuum cleaners are only sold door to door with an advertising campaign to back them up. Others, like Tupperware are sold only in small parties organised by locals. Some products are sold in shops such as The Bay or Sears, others only in mail order catalogues, and yet others like McDonalds are sold through a franchise system in shops that are committed only to the quality of McDonalds. Some soap firms sell through a combination of door to door work and franchising and pyramid selling. But what is the way in which to market the Gospel?

Traditionally, churches have used the shopfront approach. You buy a building, put up a sign and invite people to come in and hear the message. St. John's is a form of shopfront selling. We own the building, advertise the meeting through and present the product when people arrive. Group meetings, be they large or small, frequently function in this shopfront mentality. The advantages of such a method lie in the efficiency. By speaking your message once hundreds, even thousands can hear at the same time. It is always easier on a leader to go through his material once than to have to repeat it for each member. There are other side benefits such as group identity, enthusiasm and awareness. However, the shopfront method has got distinct advantages. Its sheer successfulness tends to narrow the perspective so that Christians rarely can think past using this one method. The larger the group the less personal interaction is available. There is very little opportunity to train people in practical skills.

While we must avoid underestimating the power of preaching the Word of God to a group of people, it is worthwhile to see that alternative methods of ministries have great strengths. One of the most powerful forms of ministry is to build a pyramid of personal works. It is a little like pyramid selling or the selling of a franchise. The aim is to train people in order to train people. Notice the aim is not to train people. It is essential for growth that you train people to the stage in which they are able to train others. So in the first six months, you train two people to do a specific task such as sharing the Gospel. However you train them to the extent that they could teach other people this task. In the second six months three of you each train two others. Thus in the third six months session there should be nine trainers and eighteen people learning the skill.

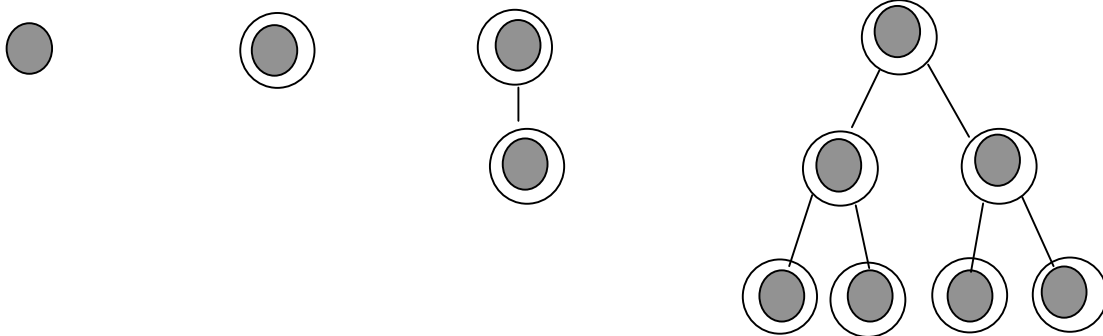
This method is particularly slow at first but gathers momentum. Within a few years there are more people being trained than the original few could even know. However, this system has fairly fatal weaknesses. It is rare for a group to grow beyond the point where the originator of the pyramid is out of touch with the newest members who have just joined. Furthermore, with each successive generation in the pyramid there is a weakening in the quality of teaching. Thus within four or five generations there is a tendency to have watered down the message and method. For example, in a University ministry context the original workers will have left the University before the pyramid has grown to any large size. The whole system assumes that each generation will be as successful as the previous one. You only need to have one of the early members fall by the wayside and a huge gulf is placed in the middle of the pyramid.

Yet some of the problems can be lessened by keeping the originator of the pyramid training new members and therefore starting new pyramids all the time within the overall structure. Furthermore, maintaining a group meeting time can continue to give identity and quality control in the ministry undertaken. This will further enable the leader to stay in touch with future generations.

The pyramid system has several profound strengths. It is built on personal relationships and caring for individuals. It is good in training people in skills. It answers the questions people ask and helps them where they are at, rather than assuming what they will be asking. It enables people to be followed up properly over many years. It is transferable out of the situation in which you first come in contact with it, so that people learning to evangelise and train people in evangelism at St. Johns will be able to do it if they have moved away from Vancouver. It enables the ordinary member to feel like he can make a worthwhile contribution to the ongoing cause. It is not only the preacher that evangelises but each member.

Perhaps the most effective ministry seeks to have a combination of both the public meeting and personal ministry. We do tend to run the danger of thinking in terms of meetings and organizations rather than individuals and people. However, the training in personal evangelism and follow-up should redirect our attention to personal ministry and if we build carefully in a pyramid structure can, down the track, reach as many people as the large meetings are reaching. The keys to doing this lie in the quality of the individual teaching, the continued holding together of the whole ministry through a church or para-church body, and the training of the people to the point where they can train others rather than to the point where they can do the task.

Q: Considering what you have read in this paper, how do you think the following diagrams relate to models of ministry?



Questions

- 1 What 'selling strategy' is your church using?
- 2 How part does training play in a ministry model?