

Set Up/Tear Down... Portable Churches



My Weekly Tabernacle Experience

by Bob Franquiz

There's this scene in the classic '80s film *Brewster's Millions* where the interior designer has created every possible scenario to please Montgomery Brewster. In frustration, he finally shows him his last creation, and Mr. Brewster says, "It's perfect." Then the designer proceeds to break it all down, having finally pleased his client. I feel like this interior designer every week. Every Sunday at Calvary Fellowship, servants arrive at the crack of dawn to create the perfect environment for our guests and members, only to break everything down minutes after the service has concluded. This is the life of a portable church, and there are thousands of us scattered throughout the United States seeking to honor God with our very best, while living within the parameters of meeting inside someone else's space.

Set Up/Tear Down

The latter chapters of Exodus and the book of Numbers provide those of us meeting in a portable setting with some comfort. Here, we find the first portable congregation, the children of Israel. Whenever the cloud moved, they moved. While setting up and tearing down certainly isn't easy, I do know we have it easier than them. I mean, after all, we have everything on wheels and in cases! Yet the thing that people walked away with at every tabernacle meeting was an experience with God. Every inch of their portable meeting place spoke of their relationship with the true and living God. Talk about making the best out of your current situation! So how can we as leaders make lemonade out of the proverbial lemons we've been dealt? I believe there are five essentials necessary for a church to succeed in the process of doing ministry in a "set up/tear down infinitum" setting.

Build People

People don't care about a building if you spend your energy building them. A few years ago, I had a conversation with a Pastor from the Northeast who told me the worse thing about his ministry was his church's building. I said, "How can this be? Most pastors would kill for a building like this!" He said, "Yes, but this building is all we do. It consumes our resources and our time. After that, there's not much left for church." This exchange has stayed with me after all of these years. He saw my situation as something to be desired; he saw a portable church having the ability to focus on building people and not building out space. Churches that do a great job with building people, find that they need this flexibility because they cannot house the number of people trying to get in.

Biblical Ecclesiology

People don't go to church, they are the church! Too many of us have equated the church with an address, when the church is a community of people. I think this value has to be shared regularly if your ministry is going to be taken seriously in your community. Honestly, unchurched people don't really care if your church has a building or not. They simply want to connect with God and if your church can do that in whatever setting you're in, you won't have a problem reaching them. I believe it's those that have some type of church background that may find calling a portable church home somewhat of a challenge. This is because they see the church as a building with an address, not a group of people called by Jesus to take His message into the entire world. This hurdle can be overcome through teaching the Scriptures and focusing on what the Bible calls the church. Many of those truly committed to following Jesus will let go of their preconceived notions and join the mission of being the church.

Don't buy into the thinking that being a portable church is less than "real" church.

Innovative Leadership

If you can't think outside the box, stay away from meeting in spaces that aren't square! Being a portable church takes innovation from the top leaders down to its volunteers. We have met in several locations in our six-year history and none of them has been "plug-in and play." Instead, we have had to learn to make the space our own. That innovation can come in a variety of ways: well placed plants, curtains and lighting (or the lack thereof) can work wonders to make any facility look and feel like your ministry. What are some places that can inspire you to be more innovative? Really, I don't find information on church building to be that helpful, simply because I need ideas in making everything I do collapsible and portable. On the other hand, when I go to a concert, I'm taking notes. These guys are setting up and tearing down every night and understand the intricacies of creating a mood and how to tear it down 30 minutes after the show is over. There are men and women pushing the innovative envelope as they hold church services in movie theatres, schools, hotels and roller skating rinks. They meet the needs of those in their community by transforming their environment into a place where God and people can meet.

Transforming Environment

Once you show up, it's no longer a movie theatre, it's a church! The same goes for wherever you worship on Sunday mornings. Your Sunday gathering place may be a community center six and a half days a week, but when you show up it's transformed into a place of worship where God and men commune. Think about the tabernacle; there was a sense of holiness about it because God was there. People knew when they entered that giant tent they would be touched by God. Your locale has that same opportunity if you are willing to transform the environment and be creative.

Committed Servants

There's no easy way to say this: If you don't have committed servants, you don't have a church. It takes sweat to hold church services in a rented facility. This cannot happen without a group of people who believe in the vision of your church and are willing to give of their time and

energy to make that vision a reality. What does this require of your church's leadership team? It forces every leader to teach what it means to be a servant. I know this word isn't one that we use much in church, but I believe that without a proper understanding of what it means to serve God, you will have a group of people who are willing to "help out" but not willing to commit to sacrificing themselves for the cause of the kingdom. This can be done in a variety of ways. We have to teach it, and most importantly, model it. It shouldn't surprise us that Moses never had a problem getting servants to commit themselves. Why? Moses was called "The servant of the Lord" over and over in the scriptures. He modeled what a servant was and that communicated the pattern for the rest of the children of Israel.

At the end of the day, people want to connect with God. Our job as church leaders is to create the kind of environment where God is free to work in the hearts of those who gather. Don't buy into the thinking that being a portable church is less than "real" church. The truth is, the church isn't a building, it's people. Sometimes, the hardest people to convince of that fact are those that lead the church. When

I compare the tabernacle and the temple, I notice a couple of things. Those who worshipped Him in that portable tent were given unique experiences; in comparison to those who worshipped in the temple, of whom it was said, "If you've never seen the temple in the time of Herod, you've never seen a beautiful building." The tabernacle had manna falling all around it. The temple did not. The point is the children of Israel experienced God in unique ways, not in spite of their building, but because of their building. I believe the same can be true of your church. The people who call your church home can know and experience God uniquely because of the environment you create in that school, movie theatre, community center or hotel. After all, the best lemonade comes from real lemons. ❖

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