

A banner with a green and yellow background featuring a field of grass. The text is centered and reads: DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH.

## DR. LAMAR E. SMITH CENTER FOR EVANGELISM & CHURCH GROWTH

### ***People Partnering with the Story***

A few weeks ago, I sent out an enote about “The Narrative” as a key to growing a church. I was asked to expound on that idea a little, so I am doing so in this note, and I hope it helps.

When people join a church, they don’t join the building, the denomination, the need to raise a budget, the stained glass or the new folding chairs. They typically join the church’s story and the narrative of that church family.

If we want people to connect with our church after a visit, whether they visit a worship service or some other connected venue, what brings them back?

#### **First**

Why did they come in the first place?

What are they looking for?

What will compel them to return?

What will compel them to take a next step?

If the church’s story or narrative is attractive, available and discernible, they might want to partner with that narrative. Life is a narrative and people want one. When we talk about Jesus, we are looking at the Jesus narrative, who He was, how He lived, what He taught, who walked with Him, what His purpose was and how engaging partnering with His life is to us as Savior, Lord and friend.

#### **What is the narrative of our churches?**

I often visit churches and wonder what their story is. I hear a sermon, see a building, often I find friendly people and hope I can find which door to enter. But I seldom get to hear, see, or read the narrative of the church. Which if I return, is why I’ll return, and if I ever join, the narrative will be the reason and most often is. But for many who eventually unite with a church, it may take weeks or months to figure out the story with which they are going to partner. Is Jesus the center of that story? Are the people in the church community part of that story? Is the story only about the pastor, or is there a living presence and a hopeful future for everyone who partners with the narrative?

A mission or vision statement, if it is truthful, is at least a glimpse of the narrative of the church. It should be an action statement like, "We work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ" or "We sing, preach and share the love of God in concrete ways among one another, in our community and in our world."

Try in every venue and service to offer "why this church exists." This can be written out in a clear, not too long way. This is much more than a mission or vision statement. This can also be seen in pictures on the campus, the worship bulletin, in a preservice video, announcements by the pastor or another, in the visibility of all ages and kinds of people in the worship service, outside, at the doors and even in the campus design. Is the church doing anything? Are the people growing together? Are children and young people involved and growing? Is there a positive impact in continual process?

One church I visited has a narrative to become a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural church. What does that narrative look like and will the visitor know that upon arrival, when they choose to come back and when and if they eventually partner with the church?

Another church's narrative was to form and shape the community in which the church is. They were highly committed to making sure that not just the community was served, but that it was a just, loving, caring and involved place for everyone to raise their families. Does the visitor know that narrative upon arrival, when they choose to come back and when and if they eventually partner with the church?

The early church's narrative was loving each other and God, celebrating the resurrection of Christ every day, waiting for His return, welcoming anyone and everyone, bonding together in the breaking of bread, helping the poor and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. We are the light of the world, a city set on a hill, you know what I mean. We exist to turn the world upside down, and you could see it in what they did, what they said and who they were.

Another church's narrative was about the family, the children, the young people, helping them become disciples, learning how much God loved them, strengthening family dynamics, ensuring children had a secure place to grow in grace, to grow in relationships and to grow in their family life, etc. If you attend that church, you will see and hear that as a vital part of their narrative.

Narratives should be presented on social media, notes, newsletters, on signs around the campus, on pictures around the campus, on the website, what the church and campus look like, the special t-shirts the church wears, the name badges of the staff and volunteers and everywhere we can.

If the story of a church is exciting, engaging, addresses people's felt needs, points toward God, celebrates relationships, has discipleship keynotes and is welcoming, people will often stay with the church because it is what all of us want and need and what the real body of Christ is about.