

Pastor Owen told me the story of planting a new church and being on the verge of failure. Why? He was doing all the things a church is supposed to do, just like the church in which he grew up. No one was coming. He put on a collar so people would know he was a pastor, went door to door in the area around the church and asked people what they needed. He stopped offering them what he thought they should need and began offering them what they said they needed. Soon he had 300 people coming to church, a new campus, additional staff and a church transforming its community through the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had a habit of eating with publicans and sinners. In Luke 15, the religious leaders (Pharisees and Sadducees) condemned him for this. It was far outside their understanding of a very exclusive faith, one only aimed at the law-keeping Jewish insiders. The religious leaders of Israel had little thought or consideration for the sinner or publican other than condemnation. They did not follow the rules. Jesus, though, came to seek and to save the lost, the very ones the Jewish leaders had long since abandoned.

The shepherd adapted to the lost sheep, he did not ask the lost sheep to adapt to him. Jesus adapted to the needs of the publicans and sinners, the sick who needed a physician; he did not ask them to adapt to him.

So, Jesus tells a story, the story of the lost sheep. The shepherd who has 100 sheep, loses one and then expends an enormous amount of energy, refocuses his purpose completely and centers his life around a new goal — a goal of finding one lost sheep. A life that had been built around sitting on a hillside by a babbling brook watching his sheep eat grass was now building around a search for the lost sheep. What had been built became what was building.

Churches that grow, build life around the lost sheep, not the 99 they already have. They search for the least, the last and the lost, not just meeting the expectations of the ones they already have. They are about reaching people they are not already reaching.

- When we have a meeting of any sort, the lost sheep must be part of the discussion.

- When we prepare worship, the lost sheep must be part of the planning.
- When we plan hospitality, the lost sheep must be the center of the process.
- When the sermon is developing, the lost sheep must be considered.
- When we pray, we pray for the lost sheep, not just the 99 we already know and love.

When a building is built, a hallway is painted, pictures are put up, the parking lot is striped, signs are printed, marketing is planned, our prayer life is consecrated — the lost sheep must be the center of the process.

When we build a church around the 1 in 99 — the guest, the least, the last, the lost, the unchurched, the searching and seeking, the broken and hurting — we not only build a church that might reach them, but we impact the 99 others, helping them change their focus from being at the center to putting the lost at the center, refocusing the congregation's understanding of church to building a community whose focus is on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Churches, worship services and sermons that expect those they are not already reaching to adapt to them will fail.

Churches, worship services, sermons that adapt to the needs of the people they are trying to reach will grow.

We ask what the people around us need, not what do we think they need.