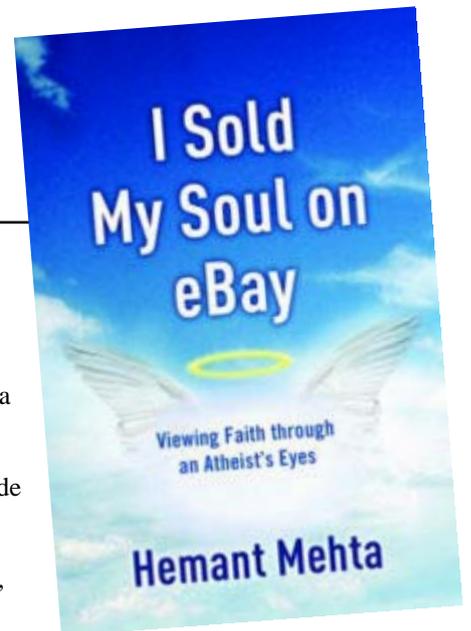




FRIDAYFAX 2.0

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How friendly outsiders experience “church”

Everyone who goes anywhere in business knows it: if you don't know your customer, you simply won't sell. Knowing the market to whom you want to sell a product is essential, Business 101. Although it is not at all the core of its divine task, there is an aspect in which many Christian churches promote their message and products – themselves! - on the religious market as well. They wish to provide services to the religious consumers, and seek to attract future “customers”: unbelievers of all kinds, including atheists.

Many are now realizing that church is not an event that you go to on a given day, but a permanent lifestyle, sharing life with God and others 24-7. However, Christians who still hold on to a sanctuary-centric view of church are understandably curious how “non-churchgoers” view their religious events, typically happening on a Sunday morning. This led to an idea. As you have probably heard, there are folks out there who “sold their soul on Ebay”. In this edition of the FridayFax we focus on how church outsiders - atheists and ex-pastors alike – view and experience church in the US. Looking at church-as-we-know-it through the eyes of people who are definitely outside of Churchianity may prove to be an eye-opener, to say the least.



The idea started with self-declared atheist Hemant Mehta (see his blog at www.friendlyatheist.com) posting an auction on the Internet based marketplace known as eBay. In January 2006, he offered “an open mind” and was ready to visit any church for the highest bidder, something the media later branded as Mehta “selling his soul.” In February 2006, the auction ended with a final bid of \$504 from Jim Henderson, a Christian pastor from Seattle. Henderson asked Mehta to visit a variety of churches and write about the experiences on Henderson's website, www.off-the-map.org. Nearly a month after the auction, an article about Mehta's experiences appeared on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, leading to a flurry of media coverage, and ultimately a book (“I sold my soul on Ebay”) that came out in 2007.

Jim & Casper Go To Church

But the story continues. Jim Henderson, who won the auction on Mehta, “rented” another atheist, Matt Casper and took him on a nationwide trip visiting a dozen of America's churches, including some well-known (such as Saddleback, Willow Creek and Lakewood) and some little-known, including a housechurch. The resulting book, “Jim and Casper Go to Church” tells of the adventure of Henderson and Casper. Each person is interesting in his own rite. Jim Henderson has been a megachurch pastor and is the director of a ministry called Off-the-Map, which stimulates spiritual discussions among people from all corners of the faith universe. Jim wanted to document the “first impressions” of a non-believer entering “church”. The book offers an intimate and frank dialogue between an atheist and a believer, helping us to see church anew through the eyes of a sceptic, and tracks the development of an amazing relationship between two men with diametrically opposing views of the world who agree to respect each others' experience. Matt Casper is no stranger to the Christian world, having worked for one of the leading Christian outreach ministries, although he was an avowed atheist even then. Engaging and articulate, Matt agreed to the process, knowing that Jim's intention was not to convert him, but to understand him and his perceptions. Matt gamely entered each of the churches Jim designated for the journey and agreed to describe his experience, akin to being a foreigner entering places unknown.

On their journey across America's churches, Matt Casper saw it all: light shows, fog machines, worship bands, extended offerings, traditions observed. At one point, his incredulity broke through, as he asked, "Is this what Jesus told you guys to do?"

A mystery shopper in church

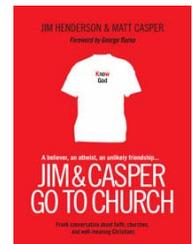
In his foreword, US-pollster George Barna says: "Many people think of the United States as a Christian nation, and journalists proclaim America to be 'the most religious nation on earth.' But an enormous number of Americans—one-third of all adults—are unchurched. In part, that figure remains prolific because of the large number of young people who abandon the organized church as soon as they are no longer held responsible for their daily choices by their family of origin. Historically, Americans have been attracted to Christian churches. Why the seemingly sudden change in behavior? It certainly is not because of a lack of churches: There are more than 335,000 Christian churches in this country. It cannot be attributed to the indifference of church leaders, since the primary measure of 'success' used by churches is the weekly attendance figure. Well-attended seminars discuss methods of reaching the unchurched, and churches spend millions of dollars every year attempting to attract people who are not connected to a faith community.

As our society changes, so do the reasons for the growing number of church dropouts and church avoiders. For instance, postmodern thinking over the past two decades has resulted in a growing number of Americans that are shifting away from conventional church experiences and gravitating toward alternative expressions of faith. For instance, the recent jump in house-church involvement and the growing experimentation with online faith experiences are reshaping the field of options that are available.

Marketers sometimes use a 'mystery shopper'—an unannounced, anonymous observer, who is secretly sent into a client's environment to note what the experience is like for a typical outsider. In a sense, Casper was sent as a mystery shopper to examine the church environment in America. As someone for whom this whole 'church thing' is new—someone who does not even believe that God exists—Casper brings a fresh pair of eyes to an environment that most of us can no longer see objectively. His reactions and observations are invaluable."

Buildings, budgets, butts...

Jim Henderson, introducing the new book with Casper, writes: "I spent twenty-five years as a pastor feeling like a failure. Using the conventional standards of measurement most pastors live with (buildings, budgets, and butts in seats, a.k.a. the Three Bs), it was more than a feeling—it was true. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out how to get people to come to my little church. I tried 'seeker sensitivity,' 'servant evangelism,' 'cell church,' and even becoming a 'contagious Christian.' Nothing worked. Like Steve Martin in the movie, 'The Jerk', I would later discover upon leaving my closed spiritual community that things weren't exactly as I had been led to believe. I thought I looked like everyone else, but my seven years in the group had made me into something of a religionist. I had started on the path with Jesus but had come out on the other side of what is commonly called the discipleship process thinking more like a Pharisee—the exact group of people Jesus had most of his difficulties with. I call such people religionists: people who have bought the lie that Christianity is supposed to be in the religion business when a simple reading of the Gospels reflects nothing of the sort. In fact, what Jesus talked about looked more like a grassroots movement with no official hierarchy but lots of leaders; no offerings, but enough money to get the job done. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God.



It's said that desperation is the mother of invention, which probably explains why I eventually decided to pay people to come to church. That's right, I hired people—gave them cash—to come to my church. This may sound extreme, but bear with me. We refer to what we do each Sunday as a service. We open our doors to the public and hope outsiders notice the **Everybody Welcome!** sign flickering in their peripheral vision as they speed by our building on their way to work, school, or play. If we were in direct competition with other businesses, we would be considered part of the service sector. So wouldn't it make sense to mimic the practices of other businesses that regularly hire mystery shoppers or focus groups to help them better understand the needs of their prospects and customers? So I tried out a new, untested approach and started hiring unchurched people to attend services at twenty-five dollars per service. The people I hired were the kind of people I wished would come to my church. The idea was to (1) pay them, (2) ask them to tell us how we could improve, and (3) pray that someone just like them would voluntarily come. Makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? I gave my unchurched/unsaved visitors something official to do while they sat through the service—a survey (see www.churchrater.com.) I assured them that this would not be a bait and switch; I wasn't trying to trick them into attending another meeting. They were not prospects for conversion, nor were they obligated to return to the church: They were simply, well, consultants.

In my mind, humanity is divided into two groups: (1) people who follow Jesus, and (2) everybody else. It doesn't matter to me whether you call yourself a Christian, a Buddhist, a humanist, an agnostic, or an atheist. If you aren't following Jesus, you're in group two. You might think that my including Christians on that list was a typo, but it wasn't. Jesus frequently—one could argue always—singled out 'religious' people as examples of insincere or even fake followers. The same is true today. In my opinion, some professed Christians are not

actually following Jesus but are instead following religion. These people should more accurately be called religionists. Atheists are more honest about their unwillingness to follow Jesus, which is one reason I now enjoy interacting with them so much.”



And how did Henderson (see picture left) meet Casper? He writes: “Jason Evans, a friend of mine in San Diego who leads what is called a missional community that has successfully blurred the lines between us (Christians) and them (non-Christians) got wind of our contest and told me I needed to audition their favorite atheist— Matt Casper. Casper (37) is a copywriter, musician, a husband, and a dad of two young kids. So Casper and I spent the better part of the summer of 2006 travelling and visiting some of America’s best- and least-known evangelical churches. We sometimes squeezed four churches into a weekend. We did most of our visits anonymously. The majority of churches we’ve included in this book have no idea that they are being featured. As a Christian, I was overwhelmed by the experience of seeing something I took for granted, through the eyes of an atheist. It was simply life changing. I wasn’t going to use this

experience to convert Casper. Instead I was hiring him to help convert Christians, to provide us with the information we need in order to see how important it is for us to become more ‘normal’ if we hope to truly connect with the people Jesus misses most.”

Jim & Carter glimpse into Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church

Jim continues: “Here we were, at the mecca of mega, the foremost outpost of contemporary Christianity. But most everyone calls it Saddleback. ‘I heard they let first-time visitors park up front,’ said Casper. ‘I also heard, though I doubt it’s true, that if you’re saved here you get a T-shirt. . . .’ ‘So, how does it feel to be standing at the vortex of evangelical innovation?’ I asked. ‘Vortex is right; I feel like I’m spinning a bit.’ We parked our Saturn amid a sea of SUVs and joined the exodus of people moving from the parking lot to the pews. ‘Smiles everywhere. Good policy,’ said Casper while we made our way through an unusually happy gauntlet of greeters. I told Casper we were going to play a little game called Rate a Church. ‘I’ll ask you to rate a few aspects of their performance today. Let’s start with the music. On a scale of one to five, how do you rate the music?’

‘Two stars,’ said Casper. ‘That’s all I can do for you here. They’re world-class players, they’re not missing a note, the singers are in tune, the music is upbeat, and they move seamlessly from one song to the next. For presentation and professionalism, they get a four or a five, but the music is too contrived, too slick, too professional, really.’ ‘But that’s a good thing, no? That should attract people, right?’ I said.

‘Maybe people who like American Idol,’ Casper said with a smile. ‘I mean, don’t get me wrong. I see the entertainment value, but when it comes to music, I like it pure. Too much polish and you lose the heartfelt power, you lose the soul of the music, and you’re not gonna move anyone.’

‘Let’s get into something more pertinent,’ I said. ‘What about the congregation, the people—what do you give them on a scale of one to five?’ ‘Well, it’s pretty unfair to judge a roomful of people, but since you asked, they get a 2 as well, maybe a 2.5. I mean, they’re paying attention and all, but based on some conversations we’ve overheard, I get the impression that this is something simply on most folks’ schedules—Saturday: cookout. Sunday: church. . . .Case in point: The preacher asked everyone to ‘greet the people around you.’ Well, I don’t mean to throw cold water on your church thing, but frankly, I thought that was lame. Why do you have to tell people to talk with each other anyway? Why didn’t someone voluntarily approach me? ‘Hi. Welcome to Saddleback.’ Maybe if the church weren’t so huge, there’d be a better chance to really connect with people. Is this what it’s all about, Jim? Is contemporary Christianity driven by the ‘bigger is better’ maxim?’

‘So, let’s play Rate a Preacher,’ I said. ‘I give the preacher at least a 3.5, how about you?’ ‘I give him a two,’ Casper said, looking a little sheepish but knowing he needed to be honest if he hoped to keep his job.

‘Well, I guess maybe we should make a distinction between presentation and content, Jim. He’s a real good presenter, but when it comes to relevant content—the meat of the matter, the words that give meaning to the obvious passion on display—I think he comes up a bit short.’ Here we were at Saddleback—the Super Bowl of churches—and we were only giving a 2.5.

‘What’s missing for you?’ ‘Well, where is the call to action?’, Matt asked. ‘The challenge to make this world a better place? The message was that you don’t have to do anything as a Christian. Just say a prayer, use the magic words, and you’re in.’ ‘Are you saying that you would prefer that the pastor tell you directly what followers of Jesus are doing rather than what they believe? Would that be more interesting and compelling for you?’ ‘Exactly,’ he shot back. ‘That’s what’s missing for me.’ The service was ending, and someone asked us, ‘Are you guys spies?’ He turned out to be the only one in Saddleback that approached us on his own...”

TIP: Buy those books. And, if you like a personal encounter with Jim and Casper (as well as Jason Evans, the missional housechurch planter from San Diego) - they will be speaking at the “Organic Movements Conference” 8-10th of February 2008 in Ontario, California (see www.cmaresources.org).