

# Jim's Tool Box

## In Some of Our Churches It Seems Like 1959

In my hometown there is still one of those small neighborhood grocery stores. When I was growing up, there were several of these markets all over town. When I walk in this store, it is like I have stepped back in time. There are three aisles in the store. Each aisle is only about twenty feet long. The small shelves hold a limited number of products and selection of items. Shelves also line the two side walls of the store. The back of the store features a meat display case from which one of the grocery employees gathers your meat/poultry selection and packages it for you from the case. Located next to the meat case, there is a small counter where another store clerk checks you out (there is no self-check out here, nor is there a check out with a conveyer belt). Of course there are no grocery carts either. Generally you carry your items in your arms or just place them on the counter while you shop. This is the kind of grocery in which you get personal service. They cut the meat for you. During the Christmas season, the store features bulk candies. At the counter where you check out, the clerk writes down the items you are purchasing, and then adds them up on a calculator.

Today that little store seems so out of place in the mass marketing and wide selection of more super markets – Kroger Market Place, Meijer, and of course the grocery department at the Super Wal-Mart. I find a much wider selection of items there and most likely I find lower prices for those items. But I miss the personal attention and the intimacy of shopping in the small grocery.

I have been thinking about that little store recently after visiting some churches in our district. On any given Sunday morning, I am usually out in some congregation around the district. Occasionally, I am asked to preach, but more often I visit. The visits help me to understand better what is going on in the churches around the district.

Recently, I have been in some of the congregations that are located in rural areas or villages in the district. During my visits, I have been warmly welcomed (whether I was identified or not). I have met a lot of folks who really seem to enjoy the experience at their church. I have heard some good preaching and experienced warm fellowship. Most of the services have been very casual. Almost always there is a time in the service where announcements are made. Many times the announcements include working out the details of an event or activity. There is almost always an extended time of sharing joys and concerns at which persons lift up needs they or their family members or friends are experiencing. There is also celebration of a birth, or a birthday, or the return of a member who has been absent for awhile.

The worship experience is primarily informal and traditional. Occasionally a praise chorus is sung. Some churches use a few songs out of *The Faith We Sing*, but for the most part the congregation sings out of the hymnal. Some of these congregations have installed a projector and screen, and the words to the hymns and announcements are projected on the screen.

I find that in most of the services that I have attended, I have the same kind of comfortable feeling that I found in the small corner grocery store. I have felt after worshipping in these places that it could be 1959 in most of these services. Except for the use of the projector and screen and the occasional praise chorus, very little has changed in these churches over the years.

The same songs are sung that have been sung for years. The order of the service is practically unchanged from earlier times. By definition of their size and facilities, these churches are limited in the kinds of activities and services they provide to those who attend. For example there is no gym or multipurpose space for children or youth activities except for the Sunday School classroom space. These congregations offer a small number of activities from which members can choose. That is not to say these congregations are not active because many of them are very active in their communities/neighborhoods.

It is clear to me that those in attendance in these congregations enjoy what they experience there. They are getting what they want and expect from the worship experience. The fellowship and the one to one interactions among the regulars demonstrate the warmth that these folks have for one another and for their church.

However, I am haunted by a troubling question? Will that casual and “comfortable as an old shoe” feel cut it with what folks are looking for in a worship experience? Will that “family” style of fellowship and service attract and keep folks who can also go down the street (or at least within a comfortable driving distance) and find a church that offers a first rate worship service with a band and praise music that folks are hearing on the radio? Can these congregations compete with churches that offer a wide selection of activities and programs for children, youth, and adults?

As you can tell by my questions, I’m not sure. In last month’s tool box, I shared an article by Dick Hamm entitled “Mainline Congregations Can Grow!”. In that article, Hamm shares four characteristics of growing mainline congregations:

1. Lively worship.
2. A clear sense of mission to real people and a heart for carrying out that mission
3. Numerous small groups in which participation is emotionally significant.
4. A clear sense of vision for the future.

You can read the full article by clicking [HERE](#).

For the most part these are not the characteristics of many of the congregations across the CAS District including several congregations that I have visited. If you have read this far, I would appreciate hearing from you:

1. What is the style of the worship in your church? Do you find it satisfying? Are new persons in your community/neighborhood attracted to your congregation? It is because of the worship or other factors?
2. Does your congregation reflect the characteristics of a growing mainline congregation that Hamm describes in his article? Which one(s) is the strongest in your church?
3. Do you think folks in the congregation you attend are willing to adapt their worship service style to what Hamm describes a “lively worship” whether it is traditional or contemporary?

Email me your responses at [jwaugh@wocumc.org](mailto:jwaugh@wocumc.org).