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and Me

Problems with conferences

I have organized several conferences in Korea and attended several conferences in the US. It is true that conferences are still popular in any country. It's kind of funny, but I've been to conferences where there was a famous foreign speaker, but the speaker didn't actually show up, but showed a video, and hundreds of pastors sat and watched, and I thought, 'This is the reality. Some of the pastors who attended thought that the American trainer was coming in person.

In hindsight, I realise that while the conference was necessary, there were some things that could have been improved. For example, at conferences, participants are completely dependent on the main lectures and workshops to give them direction and vision for their churches. In other words, they borrow from others and model their own ministry, and in doing so, they give the impression of 'copying' to their congregations.

Conferences are necessary anyway, so I don't think there is a problem with them per se, but afterwards, when people attend conferences and copy the visionary ideas presented by the lecturers, the result is a bit problematic.

The Korean church, as well as African churches, seem to have a similar desire to copy the big American churches.

Of course, it is a good thing that a church grows with a good programme and wants to share its know-how with other churches. It is also true that they have helped many pastors to advance the kingdom of God.

But if the hidden intention of their conferences is to 'copy' what we do, I don't think that's a good intention. Sure, the speakers tell attendees not to 'copy' their model in its entirety, but they seem to be selling their programmes to hundreds of churches, and it sometimes seems like a business. Go to one of these conferences and you'll see hundreds of pastors at their resource tables, scrambling to buy books, videos, audios, and other materials for their 'ready-to-go' programmes.

The irony is that what is taught and promoted at the conference may not be as effective in the local church as it should be, or in some places, the opposite. So pastors spend years tinkering

with programmes that work, taking bits and pieces here and there.

Conference organisers who present examples of successful churches have gone through the 'necessary process of self-understanding and original thinking' to make their unique ministry model work. Instead of helping churches go through that process, the conference organisers are seen as selling a commodity that can be made in a short period of time. Perhaps it's a stretch to think that it's because the whole process requires 'relationship, creativity, and energy' that they don't buy the product!

On the other hand, some churches confess that their staff and lay leaders are more confused after attending a conference than before. They say that the various conferences have confused them rather than clarified them. When you walk into churches, you'll notice that there are so many different banners that you can tell which conference you've attended. The success of the big churches is quite tempting to other churches who want to replicate them. I'm not against studying good ministry paradigms; I'm just concerned that in the process we might make the mistake of taking the organisers at their word. It's worth asking ourselves whether much of what is presented at conferences is just a sales pitch or a way of leading us into a more complex maze.