

BigBox God

From Collaborative Writing

Act 1

Outside

CYNTHIA

Hi, thanks for coming out today. My name's Cynthia.

RICHARD

Richard. I represent the church here. Hi.

CYNTHIA

Sorry for the last minute nature of this meeting. I'm a consultant. Specializing in transforming churches. I've been brought in by the church to help them transform into a more viable entity with a focus towards the future. We've asked you here today to talk to you about the changes happening here at Hyde Park United Methodist Church. Get the buy-in of the neighborhood. As you may or may not be aware, Hyde Park has been seeing a drop in attendance.

RICHARD

Pretty much since 1960.

CYNTHIA

But church attendance has been dropping in all of the main protestant denominations since then.

RICHARD

With the exception of the Baptists.

CYNTHIA

And Islam.

RICHARD

That's not-

CYNTHIA

Churches have been in neighborhoods forever. This church has people who've been attending for over fifty years. They used to walk here every Sunday, their whole family walking to church through the rain, the heat.

RICHARD

The snow, the toads. *(Notices lack of laughter)*The plagues? In Egypt? Ya'll need to go to church.

CYNTHIA

It's a Norman Rockwell. But it's just that - a picture. One that's starting to fade and get discolored with age. There are fewer and fewer of those committed members and many of the small neighborhood churches like this one are struggling to stay relevant. They have to compete with newer big box churches in the suburbs conveniently nestled between a CiCi's Pizza and a Luby's. You know there used to be a Marrimont Cafeteria just down the road?

RICHARD

It's gone?

CYNTHIA

Not enough business.

RICHARD

I didn't notice.

CYNTHIA

No one did. But that means that even retired people are not going to church. The stalwarts. The bellwethers. Not enough of them between the baptists and you guys to keep a cafeteria restaurant in business. That restaurant had been there since 1976. It's gone. Do we want our churches to do the same? Churches have got to change. People don't walk to church anymore. Even in Hyde Park. They drive. They drive to their mailboxes. They drive to the grocery store. They drive to the mall.

RICHARD

But they can drive here. We have a nice big parking lot. That sounds like an opportunity to get more people through the doors.

CYNTHIA

It is. But why would they pick your church, Richard? What's in it for them? There's no Walmart on the way. No McDonalds. No OldNavy, Petsmart, Borders, Babies R Us, or Home Depot. We're trying to make this a one stop shop for all their social and religious needs, but what about their material needs?

RICHARD

Ok, sure. That makes sense. See, she's got lots of great ideas. She's come up with some great stuff. That's why the church leadership asked us to get together and create a plan to get the neighborhood back into the church.

CYNTHIA

This church already has a lot of great programs. You have child care. You have programs to promote social justice and missions work. You host concerts and theater. So you've really got all the important pieces in place. We just need a way to get people in the door. Which is why we've come up with a mixed use plan to reach the unchurched. I notice that (none|only a few) of you have coffee.

RICHARD

Coffee sounds good. I should have gotten coffee before I drove out here.

CYNTHIA

The nearest coffee shop is over 6 blocks away.

RICHARD

I know. The nearest independently owned coffee shop is even further.

CYNTHIA

But it wasn't on the way, was it?

RICHARD

So obviously first on our list. Coffee.

CYNTHIA

You're asking people to sit still in a chair for an hour and you're not providing a high quality caffeinated beverage?

RICHARD

We're out of touch with the times.

CYNTHIA

So a Starbucks.

RICHARD

No not a Starbucks. A local store. We'll talk to local stores. Like Flipnotics.

CYNTHIA

No their Baristas are petulant.

RICHARD

Petulant?

CYNTHIA

Petulant.

RICHARD

They're an institution.

CYNTHIA

No one wants to deal with Petulant people on Sunday morning. Maybe we can get them to hire some cheerful Baristas since they would be located next to a church.

RICHARD

We wouldn't require them to be Christian.

CYNTHIA

No, just cheerful. I mean, I realize some people leave church with the hangdog look of a Flipnotics barista (*glances towards HPBC*), but that's not the culture we're trying to cultivate-

RICHARD

We don't have to bring the Baptists into this. We aren't competing with them.

CYNTHIA

We're not? I disagree. I think you guys have got start seeing it as a competition. Look at their parking garage. Look at their steeple. Which church would you want to attend? Which church is successful? They've created a massive fuss in the neighborhood over putting in that parking garage and yet that parking garage stays packed week after week. All those people can't be wrong, can they?

RICHARD

Can we drop it?

CYNTHIA

Fine. I can compromise, we'll look for a local coffee shop. If we can't find anyone else we'll put in a Starbucks.

RICHARD

We'll try for Flipnotics. It'll be great, we'll draw a lot of foot traffic from across the way.

CYNTHIA

Drink coffee and see what the other half believes. So we'll have a coffee shop. And condos. Right above there (*points at the main section of the fellowship hall*). 6 stories of brand new industrial lofts. Affordably priced from the low \$300s.

RICHARD

(*Sees looks of incredulity from the audience*)It's pretty low for the neighborhood.

CYNTHIA

We're trying to make a place where artists and urban professionals will want to live, hopefully bringing youth and vitality to the church. Across the street there'll be a parking garage to provide parking for the church, the residents, as well as customers of the businesses.

RICHARD

So we're leaving the parking across the street? It's kind of difficult to cross...

CYNTHIA

The city won't let us close this section down. Even if they let a certain university. Hey. Have any of taken IH-44 up through Oklahoma? Have you seen the McDonalds that goes over the road? (*Waits for it to sink in*) That's right. A bridge. From the parking garage to the Church.

RICHARD

With a McDonalds?

CYNTHIA

With a McDonalds. Your children will beg you to come to church. Beg. There won't even be an argument. Just shiny washed faces, smiling as they're strapped into their child safety seats in the back of the Subaru.

RICHARD

I wouldn't mind being able to get a hot breakfast on the way into church.

CYNTHIA

We're even working with McDonald's to get religious themed toys in the happy meals.

RICHARD

Really?

CYNTHIA

We're not trying to bring the moneylenders into the temple. We're just trying to make them as convenient to the temple as possible. And with merchandising tie-ins. We want church to become as associated with McDonalds as bibles are with Holiday Inn nightstands.

RICHARD

I don't know if we want our church tied that closely with McDonalds.

CYNTHIA

We can discuss it after the presentation. The level of synergy is completely up to the church of course. But enough about external changes. Let's look at the inside.

The Choir Room and Nursery

CYNTHIA

I love the smell in here.

RICHARD

Reminds me of growing up.

CYNTHIA

You grew up Methodist?

RICHARD

Yeah

CYNTHIA

Me too! This church has been preserved in time. You could bottle this and sell it. "Religious Nostalgia".

RICHARD

Intoxicating.

CYNTHIA

But part of the problem. We don't want nostalgia. We want the future.

RICHARD

So here's the nursery. We're keeping it.

CYNTHIA

Nurseries are a great outreach to the community. You have your Mother's-Day-Out, PreSchool-

RICHARD

We have a Babysitting Coop-

CYNTHIA

You bring in the kids. You get them hooked on the fun. They're going to want to come to church and they're going to bring their parents with them. You'll have a batallion of insistent hyenas hunting church like a wounded gazelle.

RICHARD

But is that enough? My health club has a nursery. What would keep them from spending Sunday morning working out?

CYNTHIA

They could spend Sunday morning working out. In fact we'd encourage that.

RICHARD

So we're adding services?

CYNTHIA

No. They work out here. In our new state of the art health club.

RICHARD

So there's no excuse to go anywhere else!

CYNTHIA

That's the name of the game.

RICHARD

Wow.

CYNTHIA

But wouldn't it be inconvenient to have to shower and go to church in the middle of a really good workout?

RICHARD/C>

SURELY THEY CAN TAKE FIVE MINUTES TO SHOWER AND PUT ON-

CYNTHIA

See you're making assumptions again. You've got to look at the cost-value proposition from their point of view. That 60 minute workout on Sunday might be the only time all week that they have to work out. To say that they need to get dressed and shower? Remember we're trying to be inclusive.

RICHARD

But you have to draw a line.

CYNTHIA

I don't think you can afford to draw a line.

RICHARD

If we bring unshowered people into the sanctuary after a hard workout we're going to drive out everyone else.

CYNTHIA

Then don't bring them into the sanctuary. Bring the sanctuary to them. We put the exercise machines on risers. Stairsteppers in the back. Leg press in the front. A special morning service in the health club. Perhaps even some Praizercize! (*starts doing some sort of jazzercise move*) Oh, can you feel that burn? It's hard to get up on a Sunday morning. But this reminds me why I get up. The endorphin rush. Sort of like how following Jesus can be hard. It can be easier to do nothing, but then you get up and do it and find it's immensely rewarding. Even if it's hard. (*Wipes sweat off her brow*)

RICHARD

Wow. You should lead that class.

CYNTHIA

I should.

RICHARD

Praizercize. I love that idea.

CYNTHIA

And a big stained glass window with Jesus lifting barbells attached to sheep. Cliff bars and tropical punch gatorade as the communion hosts.

RICHARD

No that's too much.

CYNTHIA

It's a detail. We can discuss it.

RICHARD

It goes too far. (*To the audience*) Just forget about that part.

CYNTHIA

I think they like it.

RICHARD

We'll discuss it later. Out of curiosity where are we putting the choir? Don't they practice in there right now?

(Cynthia pushes play on the boombox she's been carrying. It's a praise song. On repeat.)

CYNTHIA

Where are we putting the choir?

RICHARD

I don't remember what we decided on that.

CYNTHIA

Then follow me.

The Balcony

RICHARD

You going to explain the music Cynthia?

CYNTHIA

One sec. I love this song. I can listen to the same song on repeat for months. It's just so good.

RICHARD

I'm glad I don't have to take car trips with you. So is the choir going to rehearse up here?

CYNTHIA

Right, the choir. We're done with that.

RICHARD

How's that?

CYNTHIA

We'll still have the choir, it's just that we're asking the entire congregation to be the choir.

RICHARD

We're transitioning all the music to the congregation?

CYNTHIA

Right. We've got a whole list of very popular songs.

RICHARD

Oh yeah. We listened to those during the planning process. They're really nice.

CYNTHIA

And simple. There's some math or something behind it, but basically they're very easy for anyone off the street to pick up. No more 4 part harmony. No organ and piano part. Just simple contemporary songs.

RICHARD

But they're really nice. And the sanctuary? What everyone's been waiting for.

CYNTHIA

I do love the fifties. Such clean lines.

RICHARD

This church has nice bones.

CYNTHIA

So let's expose them. Draw out the modern aesthetic. Highlight the retro feel. We're suffocating it with tapestries, red carpet, and painted wood. We need to sand and stain the wood. Rip out the carpet and dye the concrete. Add some audio visual capabilities. Perhaps a few par cans up there, maybe a follow spot for the minister. A quick trip to Ikea for some accessories. And of course the pews-

RICHARD

You think we should get rid of the pews?

CYNTHIA

I thought that was obvious.

RICHARD

You didn't bring that up.

CYNTHIA

Who wants to sit in an uncomfortable wood chair? We have ergonomic chairs in our offices and overstuffed couches in our media centers at home, yet we're expected to come to church and sit on a piece of poorly carved wood for an hour?

RICHARD

So modern seating too. I don't know. That's a lot of change.

CYNTHIA

You don't want to give up the pews? You're going to fight me on the pews?

RICHARD

But it just doesn't seem like a church without the pews.

CYNTHIA

The pews have to go. How does this work without getting rid of the pews? Here's the church. Here's the steeple. Open the doors and see all the empty pews that no one wants to sit in!

RICHARD

We can...

CYNTHIA

No Richard. Your church asked me to come here and make drastic changes. You said you wanted to save the church.

RICHARD

I do.

CYNTHIA

Then the pews are out.

RICHARD

We can talk about it later.

CYNTHIA

Fine. C'mon people. That concludes the tour. What did you think? Nice? They think it sounds nice Richard.

RICHARD

I do too.

CYNTHIA

Do you guys want to go sit in the pews for a little bit? Should we detour over there and take a seat? No? No one likes your idea Richard.

RICHARD

Fine. We'll take out the pews. All of it. It'll be wonderful. It will be modern. With all the change we'll probably be losing all the people who love the pews anyway.

CYNTHIA

That's always been part of the deal. We know that the people here can't keep the church going without bringing in more people. We're doing our best to bring them along with the church as it changes, but the leaves have to be open to change. Otherwise the entire vine dies.

RICHARD

I know.

CYNTHIA

It's your choice.

RICHARD

I know.

Conclusion

CYNTHIA

Well that was upbeat. In any case thanks for coming out tonight. Pews notwithstanding this will be a great change for the church and for the neighborhood. Remember this is a difference between a dying way of life and the future. We can't save the neighborhood church as it is. It has to change. Otherwise in a few years it'll be knocked down and replaced with another parking garage for the next-door neighbors. People say that they want to affect change. They want to oppose Walmart in their neighborhood. They want more public transportation. But each weekend you'll see them driving down to their neighborhood Walmart. Just for a quick trip. Going after the saints isn't going to fill the pews, because there's not enough of them. We have to go after the idealists who just can't quite make their ideals manifest in their day to day lives. We have to make it easy. We have to take away all excuses. I think this plan does that. I think this plan will draw the neighborhood out of their homes and back into the church. Thanks for you time. Hopefully we'll have your support when we go before the city council on the twentieth. Richard has fliers explaining our mission a little bit further. Thanks.

RICHARD

Thanks. Flyer?

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- what do people love about the church
 - are churches going to be something like organic food that only the rich can afford

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