

# How Full is Your Net

By Dan Reiland

I've never been much of a fisherman. I don't have the patience for it, but I have enjoyed several deep sea fishing excursions. When I was a young boy we did some pier fishing in Oceanside, California and several times we found ourselves doing our best on a lake.

There was one common experience: We always paid attention to the spot where people were catching fish. It was never where we were. When the people left the "hot" spot, we moved to it and fished with great anticipation, but we still didn't catch anything.

Church leaders often seem to "fish" in the same way. Of course, we are fishing for people, but we are fishing. We cast our lines and reel in nothing. We see the church near us casting their lines and pulling in big fish and lots of them. We wish we could fish in that spot, but we can't. So we attend the newest and coolest evangelism seminar to find out once and for all how to fish. Inevitably, stories are told that reinforce the fact that success isn't connected to the latest thing in the fishing tool kit, but more in the heart of the fisherman--stories that compare to an old man with a cane pole fishing in something akin to a mud puddle catching yellowfin tuna. We walk away still wondering, "How DO they do it?"

I don't believe they do. God does. We often focus on the latest method, when Jesus will tell us where to cast the net--where the harvest is so large we would scarcely know what to do with it.

- (1) One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God,*
- (2) he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets.*
- (3) He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.*
- (4) When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."*
- (5) Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."*
- (6) When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.*

Luke 5:1-6 (NIV)

There is a huge assumption built into this article that you are currently fishing, and not for Christians who are looking for a new church, but for people who are far from God, disenfranchised from the church, and desperately need to be connected to Christ.

Before I unpack the main idea of moving from program to power, let me give you five field level observations that came from my six years of traveling to a great number of churches. These churches were of all shapes and sizes, from various denominations, socio-economic backgrounds and geographical regions.

These five field level observations are consistently true about churches not doing well (or not doing anything) in the practice of fishing.

**1. The presence and power of God is not sensed in the worship services.**

You know the difference between "same old same old" and God's anointing on a service. Far too many churches have become utterly predictable. An opening prayer, announcements, three choruses, a hymn, and a sermon. On occasion, when we want to get close to the edge, we'll put the choruses before the announcements. While you are preaching your heart out, hoping for changed lives, the only thing people are considering changing is where they will go for lunch.

I am not suggesting that you light the pulpit on fire and swing from chandeliers. If we ask God to move amongst the people, He will. But as church leaders, we must first be willing to allow Him to move in our lives personally. This always happens before His power is demonstrated within the body of believers. Does this mean something wild and crazy? Not necessarily, and not usually. It most often means good, old-fashioned biblical obedience. It is asking God what He wants of you and then doing it. This ought to be the norm. Practice this obedience month after month and watch what begins to happen in your worship services.

**2. There is no freshness or when it comes to the personal testimony of the majority of the congregation.**

The people love God, are saved and going to Heaven. Let's make this assumption a baseline. But when you ask people what God is doing in their lives right now, there is much silence. Yes, this is a generalization. But try it with your own flock, or perhaps your small group. Ask all the people what God is saying to them today. Ask how they are responding. Asking how they are changing. Ask them to be specific. You may be surprised at what you learn.

Consider these first two points: The lack of power in the worship service and no fresh stories about life change from believers. It makes sense that churches that fit this description are weak in evangelism. Think about it, why would you invite people to a church service that is completely predictable, and people's lives are not changing for the better?

**3. The prayer ministries are anemic.**

This speaks for itself. Much talk, little prayer. The bottom line is that prayer is not the foundation of the church.

**4. Significantly more effort, energy and resources are invested in managing the members than reaching the unchurched.**

We must all be careful about this one. The larger any church gets, the greater the potential to manage what you have, rather than reaching people who don't know God.

## 5. The leadership is not modeling outreach and evangelism on a personal level.

This one gets really personal. Remember, I love the church and I'm dedicated to helping church leaders. So let me ask how well you are modeling a lifestyle of evangelism. It doesn't matter to me how you go about it, only that you do.

Review these five observations. Turn each one into a question and answer honestly. How is your church doing?

If you sense some room for improvement, keep reading. The following thoughts on "filling your nets" will be helpful to you. Remember, filling your nets isn't about how big your church is, it's about your utter dependency on God's power over your own.

- **Filling your nets requires you to reprioritize a program mindset with God's power.**

Let me be blunt. The truth is that you can build a church on your own power or on God's power. It's a scary thought that anyone would attempt to build a church without God's help, but it can and has been done. The sad thing is that such a church never reaches its God-given potential. Rarely do they produce consistent and sustained life change. At best, it's a house of high moral standards; at worst, it's a country club.

I have nothing against evangelistic programming. The discipline and methods often help us develop a lifestyle. The point I want to make is that even with great evangelistic programs, without God's power they will amount to little. The good news is that God has promised and granted His power to all who seek it. (Acts 1:8; 2:1-5; 4:7-31)

Never separate the Word from your evangelistic efforts. This is one of the key links to God's power. We all support cultivating natural and authentic relationships with the unchurched, but at some point, Truth must enter into the equation.

Perhaps this last point is too obvious to say, but let me sound the trumpet one more time. Pray! Pray for those who are far from God. Pray for the harvest to be rich. Pray for full nets!

- **Filling your nets requires you to become a fisherman.**

I remember giving some of the guys a hard time after a day of fishing. They spent ten hours and about \$100 for the day. The results? They had caught only three small fish that were barely bigger than a bait-sized snack. I told them that I could go to the grocery store and get twice as much for about \$25.00 in only 20 minutes.

The difference is that while I may have delivered quick results, they were developing their skills as fishermen and I was not. I may have outdone them that day, but over the long haul, they would produce results far greater than mine.

If you want to become a fisher of men (people) you must go fishing! Ultimately it's not about reading a book or listening to a sermon. It's about being filled with the Holy Spirit, being obedient (Matthew 28:18-20), and getting in the game.

There are a few characteristics that are common among those who fish consistently and see results. First, they have compassion (Matthew 9:35-36) for those who don't know God. Second, they possess a conviction about the truth of God. (Acts 2:38-41) They have a boldness that comes from this conviction. And thirdly, they maintain a connection with God. They understand what we have been talking about. They understand that He is the real source of power that makes life change possible.

- **Filling your nets requires relevant storytelling.**

The characteristic of being connected to God is what keeps our faith fresh and our personal story of what God is doing in our lives alive and real. This keeps us relevant. And relevance connects us with those outside the church. Keep practicing this connection, with specific attention to God's agenda for those outside your church, and in time, your nets will be full!