

reaching for relevance

The C3 Conference Converts a Skeptic

Reed Arthur

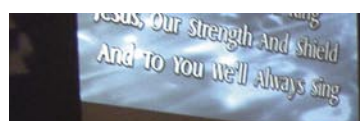
Andy Stanley didn't know when he spoke at this year's C3 Conference (at Fellowship Church in Grapevine, TX) that there was a spy in the audience... or at least, a skeptic. I was afraid this was going to be like so many church growth conferences that are in vogue nowadays – light on the Biblical, heavy on the sociable. “Milk Toast Christianity,” as some critics have called it. And even though C3 was not about church growth, per se, but about church creativity, I thought it might be a mask for more of the same recreational Christianity that crops up at times. I was wrong.

The lineup was solid with lead speakers Ed Young, Andy

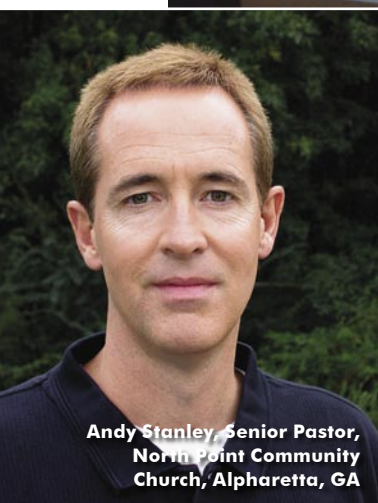
Stanley, and Greg Laurie. I quickly saw that this conference was loaded with substance, while measuring heavily with creative flair. For me, the would-be spy, everything came together when Andy presented his talk, “Be Relevant.”

Andy, pastor of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, GA, convinced me in the scope of an hour that there was room for culturally relevant ministry while maintaining the sanctity of Scripture. I, as a lay preacher in a Calvinist Bible church, had simply disregarded the idea that the two could come together. Or rather, I had not seen both done well in the same setting. I'm the guy who is first to warn of the possibility of error in Christendom and to sound the alarm if anything hints of compromise. Yet, I found myself in full agreement as I began to realize that I had mistaken methodology for theology. When Andy gave examples of outdated traditions taking precedence over meaningful, authentic ministry, he got my full “Amen.” Throughout the entire message, I kept thinking to myself, “This guy gets it.”

The leadership team at North Point has identified what they consider to be the three key elements of rel-



Watch clips of Andy Stanley's talk on VISION ON DEMAND at www.visionondemand.net. Free to subscribers!



Andy Stanley, Senior Pastor, North Point Community Church, Alpharetta, GA



C3 Conference at Fellowship Church (Grapevine, TX)

Three Key Elements to Relevant Ministry from Andy Stanley

Context = Physical environment
Context determines appeal

Key Question: "Is the context **appealing**?"

Presentation = Relational environment
Presentation determines interest

Key Question: "Is the presentation **engaging**?"

Content = Substance
Content determines relevance

Key Question: "Is the content **helpful**?"

evant ministry: Context, presentation, and content. Andy suggested that most of us are good at one of these, many are good at two, but there's usually one element that's missing from most ministries.

Context

Andy suggested that context determines appeal. Context has to do with a physical environment that is geared towards allowing the free work of the Holy Spirit. He gave the analogy of being stuck on the road with a flat tire. You need help. If a bunch of rough-looking guys speaking a foreign language start charging toward you, you're distracted by the context. Even if they're there to help, at that moment it doesn't matter to you. You're uncomfortable. By contrast, he alluded to Fellowship Church's children's department as an example of creating relevant context. I agreed with Andy that the space they use for their children's ministry is incredible. It's in trailers. But if you go inside, you're overwhelmed. It's colorful, vibrant, engaging - perfect for kids. My first thought during the tour was that my wife's family who lives nearby would love bringing their kids here. Yet, the Bible wasn't even opened during the tour. I experienced first-hand that context does determine appeal.

Andy observed, "We don't meet in tents or buildings that aren't air-conditioned ... We don't have a place outside to tie up a horse ... We don't sit on wooden benches." (OK, he hasn't been to my church.) It's obvious why. These things no longer fit the context of our culture. Here is where I had to admit that even my own church (doctrinally heavy and traditional as it is) has conceded to culture. And yet, are we worse off for it? Of course not. With that in mind, it seems wise to take a fresh look at the physical surroundings where we worship. What stuff do we have around the church building that may just be relics of a bygone era? Will unchurched people step into an uncomfortable, unap-

pealing environment when they do decide to try church? I knew that for my church, there were plenty of things we needed to re-think.

Presentation

The next key to a relevant ministry environment is presentation. Andy pointed out that presentation determines interest, no matter what the subject. "There are dozens of ways to do chicken, and it's the presentation that creates the interest, it's not the chicken! There's Chick-Fil-A and then there's \$29.95 chicken at some uppity restaurant. A chicken is a chicken; the presentation makes all the difference." He suggested that so many of us have been content to serve cold, tasteless chicken to our communities and then expect them to come back for more. "David kills Goliath no matter how many times you read it," Andy said. If we're being honest, some teachers bore us to tears when they teach a story, while others have us on edge, hanging onto every last detail. It's not because the "chicken" is different. It's because the presentation is different.

If presentation determines interest, what can you do when you realize that your presenters are not interesting? While Andy was in youth ministry, he noticed that some of the adult teachers were just plain boring. He decided to let the kids grade their teachers. When Andy evaluated the grades, some teachers had to acknowledge that they loved kids, but were terrible presenters. It was time to find other areas of service for those folks, and leave it to the good pre-

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senters to do the presenting. He recommends that the church leadership give the good presenters the material to teach and let them teach it. We all have to work through the implications of this idea, but we have to recognize the fact that there are some people who lack the talent to match their responsibilities. It's not enough to just hide behind the fact that material was covered. We have to be concerned that the material is covered effectively.

"The lesson that most of us learned in Sunday School growing up was this: 'Church is boring; God is boring; the Bible is irrelevant. Come back next week!' The problem wasn't the Truth. It was the presentation of the Truth," Andy said. In other words, chicken was served, but it was cold and unappetizing.

Content

The final element is dear to my heart – content. Only content determines true relevance. At that point, the other two elements became more meaningful to me. I realized that what he said about being good at one or two elements and not all three applied to me. I am a content junkie. I am good with the cold chicken. Interestingly, Andy said this was his area of strength, too. Yet, he's known for his great communication skills. I acknowledged right then and there that uncompromising content had to ally with a seasoned presentation. It doesn't mean you're more spiritual if you're dry, it just means you're dry.

Bottom line on delivering relevant content: "Is it help-ful?" (To get the full impact, Andy repeatedly dragged the word out: "Helllp - ful.") If the church isn't being help-ful, then we're no better than a comedian who has entertained an audience for an hour, or a dry academic who's loaded with the cold facts, but doesn't offer the "so-what?" of the facts.

Are you touching someone's felt needs? With all the current fashionable talk of people's "felt needs," it was refreshing to hear Andy acknowledged that felt needs



Photo courtesy of Fellowship Church

are only one type of need that every person has. There are also "hidden needs." Andy asked the simple question, "What do they need to know that they don't know they need to know and how can I convince them that they need to know it?" Bravo. We used to call that "meeting people where they are, then leading them where they need to be." Both are important. If there's no rapport, there will be no next step. If there's no frank talk about eternity, it's no better than a self-help speech. Ah, balance.

So why do well-meaning, Bible-believing churches sometimes fail to reach people effectively? We may be good at two of the three elements needed for a relevant ministry, but leave off the third.

How many times have individuals pointed out that our facilities need updated and stimulating visual elements, but we have disregarded it as unnecessary? Maybe it's because we're attached to certain things that were very relevant in another era but no longer are. Maybe we think that being "separate from the world" includes being blind to otherwise neutral features of our culture, such as contemporary musical melodies, multimedia reinforcement, or theatrical lighting. Whatever it is, Andy challenged all of us to take these thoughts back to our leadership and "wrestle them to the ground."

So, in the space of an hour, the critic was converted.

I realize now that the challenge is not in downgrading our principles. The challenge is in upgrading our creativity. Relevance is not an affront to uncompromising Bible teaching; it is a requirement in order to effectively reach the communities in which we live. **V**

Obstacles to Relevant Ministry

- **Lazy Leadership:** It's always worked before, why should we change now?
- **Fear:** Being more concerned about who you are going to keep rather than who you are going to reach
- **Bad Theology:** Confusing methodology with theology
- **Dead Architects:** Worship space that was built so inflexibly, it can't change to accommodate new needs