

Is Your Church a Cruise Ship or Aircraft Carrier?

10 Ways to Find Out

By Mary Schaller • 08/22/2012

Recently my friend Emily told me she visited a church so big she needed a map to get around. Coming from a relatively small church that meets in an elementary school, she was astounded at this sprawling church campus. The facility housed a restaurant, coffee bar, lounge, escalators, and multiple worship spaces, each with high-tech sound equipment. In the lobby massive concrete columns rose up three stories into a glass atrium and sunlight streamed in to illuminate the hip and modern architecture. But the strangest thing, she said, was that this colossal building, filled with largely affluent congregants, sat in a crowded urban area in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. As far as she could tell, no one from that neighborhood was present. The church reminded her of a cruise ship docked in a third world country! The walls even had round, fishbowl windows, driving home the cruise ship effect.



An “aircraft carrier church” has a clear mission that stems from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

It’s a funny idea to ponder: a church that looks like a cruise ship. However, many American churches resemble cruise ships in more ways than just their architecture. People who attend “cruise ship churches,” much like cruise ship passengers, often come to be entertained and catered to by the staff. Very little is expected of these church attendees. In fact, they tend to rate the quality of their experience—the music, the sermon, and the way it made them feel—much as cruise ship passengers rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their trip.

Cruise ship churches tend to be internally focused on the needs of their regularly attending members. The main goal in these churches, as on a cruise ship, is to keep the “customer” happy and the complaints to a minimum. Leaders in a cruise ship church focus on the existing members rather than pursuing those far from God or encouraging others to do so. Very little of a church’s calendar, training, or communication is spent on activities to reach the lost or help those in need outside the church. Statistically only 5% of most American churches’ budgets are spent on missions and evangelism. Overall, there seems to be little incentive or empowerment of church members to “get off the cruise ship” and use what they learn in the world.

There are, however, churches that are more like aircraft carriers. These churches are designed to empower all members to find their God-given purpose in life, to equip them, and to send them on missions into the world to reach and serve those who don't know Jesus, much like the crew of an aircraft carrier is all about launching military planes and equipping them well to carry out successful missions.

Did you know that an aircraft carrier is the same size as many cruise ships, housing close to 8,000 people? A super-aircraft carrier rises 20 stories above the water and stretches 1,092 feet (333 meters) from bow to stern (about as long as the 77-story Chrysler Building is tall). But what distinguishes an aircraft carrier ship isn't its size; it's the efficiency on the flight deck. The crew of an aircraft carrier can launch a plane every 25 seconds—all in a fraction of the space of a typical landing strip. The mission pervades every aspect of the ship. From the pilot to the person who restocks the ship's vending machines, everyone on a carrier knows his or her particular role and how it supports the mission—to equip, prepare, launch, and receive aircraft back from their crucial assignments.

An "aircraft carrier church" has a clear mission that stems from the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Everyone in the church knows why their church exists and can play a role in the mission. The annual budget, weekly sermons, monthly calendar, insider and outsider communications, and predominant conversation are all consistent with the stated mission of the church.

Is your church more like a cruise ship or an aircraft carrier?

Here are ten indicators that might help you to assess whether your church is an aircraft carrier church:

1. Church leaders have a missional versus attractional mentality: they see their job to equip and mobilize people inside the church to effectively reach the multitudes outside the church. This includes consistently preaching about the importance of the Great Commandment of loving God and others and the Great Commission to make new disciples.
2. Church and lay leaders have non-Christians friends, spend time with them, and engage in spiritual conversations modeling what they want others to do.
3. A sizable church budget percentage (>5%) exists for local outreach and missions.
4. The church has partnerships with existing ministries such as Alpha, Awana, MOPS, and Q Place, indicating a commitment to outreach with proven strategies.
5. People in the church are willing to be sent out and follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.
6. The church and its members are known in the community for making outsiders feel welcome and accepted.
7. Risk-taking is valued in outreach efforts, even when it fails to produce fruit.

8. The church is committed to prayer as a regular spiritual practice and prays for those outside of the church, seeking wisdom to reach them effectively.
9. There is a genuine dependence on God that is reflected in church decisions, activities, prayer, and worship.
10. New believers are emerging and baptisms are occurring regularly.

While these indicators are important, the pastor's desire to become the "captain" of an aircraft carrier church is probably the first step in the transition away from a cruise ship mentality. Without this desire, the natural tendency of both church members and church leadership is to gravitate toward the cruise ship model.

Let's face it, many of us love being pampered and served royally by others. Whether on a cruise or in a church, if the staff accommodates my needs, I am more than happy to oblige them. However, through good leadership, overcoming this tendency is more than possible. And it's not as binary as I've described in which a church is one (aircraft carrier) or the other (cruise ship), but instead falling more on a continuum. Our pastors will need to navigate our congregations in the uncharted waters toward this future of more churches functioning like aircraft carriers, unifying us in the mission of making disciples of all nations and working together side by side to achieve it.

Practical Tip: Visit [Q Place](#), an organization that helps equip people to host small group discussions about God and the Bible.