

Comparing Friendly's Restaurants and Churches

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We live in the hometown of the Friendly's Ice Cream Restaurants chain. It began as an actual ice cream stand run by two Brothers in downtown Springfield. Over the decades they have had the usual ups and downs as time and the culture change. It is now reorganizing under new ownership, after going through Bankruptcy. That means new menus and decor, but also a new business model. From the beginning the main entree and attraction has been wonderful varieties of ice cream. Even though they also offer sandwiches and other typical restaurant fare, Friendly's has been a child oriented and family focused business. It is a place where kids bring their parents. The new model will be a place where parents might bring their children. This means they will now, it is said, offer beer and wine and food like many other mid-range restaurants like Applebee's and NinetyNine. This is a model that they hope will increase business. They will apparently make the product that made them famous, their specialty, ice cream, secondary- just a desert- not the main attraction. Attracting children with families is not working, so they will go for the adult market. This is all the conjecture I read in the local paper.

You can see the parallels with churches. Declining attendance, setting aside the traditional, going contemporary, downplaying their specialty and uniqueness to become what they think today's public wants and all under new management. The big issue is "What are we?" Are we in the restaurant business and thus must do whatever it takes to make that business successful or are we purveyors of ice cream and a place that is family friendly? The choice must be made. The chain recently closed 100 locations.

Churches must decide what business they are in: a generic religious organization or an organization that offers its own unique religious product. I am an Anglican. Would the church I worship in, though declining in "customers", lose its identity and purpose if it stopped "selling" Liturgical and Eucharist Worship in an effort to attract greater attendance (and money)?

To use a non-church metaphor, Friendly's will be ditching the girl they brought to the dance for someone else. Some suggest they might want to change their name from Friendly's to Friends- the original restaurant will become a memory. Hey, whatever works, right?