Losing weight at church

By Colin Mathewson
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It's hard not to feel a bit envious. Saddleback Church recently launched the Daniel Plan, a church-based diet regimen that includes small group accountability sessions, expert opinion, recipes and exercise classes before Sunday services. The program appears to be working: so far, some 15,000 participants have lost a collective 260,000 pounds. What can mainline churches learn from the Daniel Plan's success?

These days, it's common for mainstream culture to coopt Christian rituals and symbols. Christmas is a shopping season; apocalypse is a blockbusting movie moneymaker; Jesus appears on Saturday Night Live to chide Tim Tebow's embarrassing public displays of piety. The Daniel Plan inverts this fomula: Saddleback has sidled into the $60 billion weight-loss market with ease and influence.

The Daniel Plan recognizes that everyone knows how to lose weight—eat better and exercise more—but few do this on their own. People need a community—and as public spaces decline and socializing moves online, church is one of the last bastions of honest-to-God community left. A church-based program exists within an accountability and meaning-making system that can transform lives (an insight Alcoholics Anonymous came to decades ago).

Another important point: Saddleback incorporated expert medical opinion into its program design, a welcome example of the usefulness (rather than danger) of science vis-à-vis faith.

Christians have long done outreach in mainstream cultural arenas. But a lot of recent efforts, impressive though they may be, don't point back to a particular faith community. Bono's work, from ONE to (RED), is deeply informed by his Christian identity, but it doesn't necessarily fill pews. Saddleback, however, has managed to pull off a ministry that both reaches out and draws in: the Daniel Plan is integrated into the church's worship and community life. Its success appears to be empowered by bonds formed across pews—even as the diet plan knits new relationships that

further strengthen community.

Most churches I know are reaching out but stop short of inviting in. There are countless ways that smaller churches can't be like megachurches and shouldn't try. But why don't more of them have small-group ministries? Why are there still churches in which the organ is the only instrument allowed to sound inside the sanctuary? And why do so many churches run their own sparsely attended programs—Vacation Bible School, for example—instead of getting together with other churches to create more enticing programs on a more substantial scale?

As an Episcopal seminarian, I sometimes have nightmares featuring upbeat, guitar-strummed worship music sung with the help of projector screens hiding centuries-old stained glass. I wake up in a cold sweat to remind myself that the Episcopal Church boasts liturgical content rich in meaning and sonorous in tone. Our embrace of reason alongside scripture and tradition keeps us open to scientific knowledge. But the sheer *weight* of what we do together—the seriousness with which we carry out our worship life—can leave Episcopalians (and some other mainliners) flat-footed at a time when nimbleness reigns supreme. Programs like the Daniel Plan—chances to exercise cultural savvy and imagine new ways to be church—could be good for us.