

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.theparishpaper.com

November 2007

Herb Miller

Turnaround Strategies for Small Churches: Which Ones to Use?

Approximately 175,000 of America's 350,000 churches average fewer than 100 in worship.

About 50 percent of those small congregations have experienced a gradually declining worship attendance for several years. Another 35 percent of those small churches feel locked on a size-plateau that prevents them from achieving several hopes and dreams.

Implication: at least 150,000 of God's small retail outlets are under-performing.

How can small-membership churches move toward maximum effectiveness? Start with these facts: (a) Church health and effectiveness *always* requires several methods, not just one "silver bullet." (b) Arrival at optimum mission and ministry results is *always* a process, not a one-day trip. (c) The five strategies listed below are not the *only* important methods.*

Strategy #1: Take actions necessary to move past the three classic membership-plateaus. Leaders in most small churches unconsciously resist membership growth. But growth obstacles differ slightly in the three small-church sizes.

Churches with up to forty in worship attendance: The opportunity for positive relationships attracts some people, but the limited programming repels many other people.

- The quality nursery preferred by young couples is often inadequate or understaffed.

- Youth groups are usually impossible to build.

- When the pastor brings in new members, the long-term members may or may not accept those individuals into the "fellowship circle."

- Conflict frequently erupts when the congregation grows beyond forty in worship attendance. Why? Healthy groups of fewer than forty people usually "do everything together." Larger groups need subgroups that provide personal interaction opportunities. When the group that exceeds forty begins to develop subgroups, some church leaders complain because "it seems like we are breaking up the family."

To grow beyond forty in worship attendance: Think infants and children.

- ◆Provide a volunteer nursery attendant who (unobtrusively) steps into service when visitors with small children appear and an adequate room to house that nursery.

- ◆Establish two or three Sunday school classes for kindergarten and elementary age children. The church's leaders must exert considerable energy to reinvent these—by reaching out to unchurched families nearby.

- ◆If only one adult Sunday school class exists at present, add an additional one.

Churches with forty-one to seventy in worship attendance: Most churches of this size resist adding the new classes or groups that allow new attendees to feel part of the church family.

- Adult class members who do not realize that the social climate of their class feels emotionally "closed" to most newcomers often block the formation of new classes and groups.

- A few churches of this size resist membership growth through the dominating over-control of one or two influential laypersons who devoutly believe in avoiding all change.



•As churches grow to seventy in average worship attendance, long-term lay leaders must share authority. As new people participate in decision-making, long-term leaders often react in ways that create congregational unrest.

To grow beyond seventy in average worship attendance: Think new groups and classes.

Institute a junior-high and senior-high youth ministry. Add another adult Sunday school class or study/discussion group for young adults. Employ a paid nursery attendant.

Churches with seventy-one to one hundred in worship attendance: This size church also resists adding new groups and classes, but for a different reason.

•When worship attendance approaches 100, members start having trouble putting a name with all the faces. They feel their family is becoming a crowd, changing its nature in ways that create a sense of personal, emotional loss.

•Some long-term members also feel that new groups damage the congregation's identity and sense of personal belonging.

To grow beyond ninety-five in average worship attendance: Think additional subgroups.

◆Start one or two new adult groups or ministries, such as adult classes, men's softball team, a weeknight study-discussion group, or a community service ministry team.

◆Develop a young-adult fellowship nucleus centered in an adult class, a monthly dinner club, an athletic activity, or a choir.

Suggestion: Read the above transition-point information to the governing board. Discuss by asking, "Which of these observations do you feel apply to our congregation?"

Strategy #2: Fine-tune the worship service toward a format, style, and hymn selection that shows equal respect for the spiritual preferences of all four adult generations. A major cause of small-church attendance decline is the exclusive use of worship style and hymns that spiritually fed young-married adults during the 1950s but do not spiritually connect with the majority of 2000-era young-adults.

Should a small congregation use a blend of traditional hymns and praise songs, even if no young adults attend at the present time? Without congregational singing that includes praise songs, 88 percent of young adults who visit the worship service for the first time make that visit their last appearance. The hymns composed in 1517 to 1870 make them feel like they are attending a funeral service.

Churches that intend to be alive and thrive in 2025 behave as if they have young adults in every service. Otherwise, they will never have many young adults in the service, because first-time visitors never return.

How to make transitions in worship style, content, format, and hymn type: Appoint a four-person transition team (representative of the four adult generations) that meets with the pastor and music leaders for one hour each week for the first four months to (a) critique last week's worship

service, (b) finalize the format of next Sunday's service, including hymn selection, and (c) brainstorm music possibilities for future Sundays.

Strategy #3: Emphasize concern for children through community service ministries. Appoint a three-person task force to investigate the possibility of establishing a Parent's Day Out, Parent's Night Out, Home-Game Child Care (for small towns where football and basketball are high points of community focus), preschool, daycare, or some other ministry to young adult households in the community.

Strategy #4: Remove ministry inhibiting barriers in the church buildings. Facility-quality either lifts or puts lids on church vitality. Long-term attendees are prone to not seeing one or more ministry-inhibiting lids.

□*Over-sufficient sanctuary seating:* A room in which the pews are less than 50 percent filled feels "uncomfortably empty." Placing a few of the back and/or front pews in storage can improve the atmosphere.

□*Insufficient contemporary decor:* Rooms in which long-term members feel quite comfortable may strike newcomers as drab, outdated, or museum-like.

The most important places to begin making improvements inside older buildings: (a) nursery, (b) women's restroom, (c) main entryway, and (d) hallways to the nursery and elementary classrooms.

Strategy #5: Increase the percentage of attendees who pray daily. Prayer is a powerful but often under-utilized resource. Few endeavors increase insights and spiritual maturity in adults more than prayer. Use the procedures outline in *The Secret to Abundant Living: Learning How to Ask*.**

The Bottom Line. Small churches cannot erase the negative elements of their past. But they can create a new future when lay leaders (a) recognize that God is a turnaround specialist and (b) make plans that help it happen.

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*See the 54-page, six-session, study/discussion process for a governing-board-appointed group in *Herb Miller's Nuggets*, Volume #14, "25 Turnaround Strategies for Small-Membership Congregations," which provides numerous additional methods and detailed how-to-do-it suggestions. To to www.theparishpaper.com for a free contents-descriptions and an order form.

**Go to www.theparishpaper.com for a free electronic copy of the prayer education and motivation material titled *The Secret to Abundant Living: Learning How to Ask*.

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