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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller and Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

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Growth or Decline? 10 Key Questions about Worship Attendance

Three out of four congregations attract the same number of or even fewer worshipers than they did five years ago. Review the following questions to determine if your church could take steps to attract and retain more newcomers.

1. Does your newcomer rate exceed your departure rate? Churches lose members each year—through death, transfers to other churches, members moving out of town, or people becoming less active participants. To maintain a stable and active membership, churches must offset any losses by welcoming new members. The average congregation loses 7 percent of its members each year. Therefore, for every 100 members, a church must add 7 newcomers annually for the church to remain the same size.

2. In any given year, what percent of your worshipers are visiting for the first time? On average, 2 percent of attendees in any given worship service are attending that congregation for the first time. Without first-time visitors, congregations shrink in membership over time.

3. What prompts someone to visit your congregation for the first time? Half of new members say they found out about the church they eventually joined because someone they knew mentioned the church or invited them to attend worship. More new members in conservative Protestant churches—two out of three—say they visited a church for the first time because of this personal invitation.

One out of four first-time visitors said they decided to attend services because they noticed the church building when they passed by. A small number—one in ten—said they were actively looking for a church associated with a particular denomination.¹

What other factors increase the number of first-time visitors? Visible signage informs potential visitors about the kind of congregation it is and when services are held. Additional signage should designate directions if the church is set away from major

roads, building entrances, parking, the nursery, and other important areas of the church. Adequate signage signals to visitors that you are expecting them.

Additionally, an increasing number of people now “see” your church for the first time through the church’s website. Your website should be designed to meet the needs of both visitors and current members. On the home page, give visitors the essential information they need—the times of worship services, the church’s street address, a map showing the location, and how to contact the pastor and other church staff. Don’t make your potential first-time worshipers click through your site searching for basic information.²

4. What percent of your first-time visitors return for a second time, and again and again, until they become members? About one in three new members say they visited *one* other congregation before attending their current church for the first time. An equal percentage visited *two or more* churches before attending the present one. On average, congregations can expect about 10 percent of their first-time visitors to become future members.



ACCORDING TO YOUR WEBSITE, THIS CHURCH IS CURRENTLY “UNDER CONSTRUCTION.”

In a few fast-growing churches, as high as 30 percent of first-time visitors eventually join. Increasing both the number of first-time visitors *and* the percent that return is essential.

5. Why do first-time visitors decide to return?

Research shows that newcomers name three factors that most impressed them as worship visitors and made them want to come back again: the friendliness of the people (40% mentioned it), the overall worship experience (36% gave this reason), and the quality of the sermon or homily (34% said this played a role in their decision to return).

Visitors often report that they were only greeted by the official greeters posted at the door and the pastor as they exited. Divide the sanctuary seating area into sections and station additional undercover greeters to look for visitors. If a fellowship time or study group follows services, ask the pew greeters to invite visitors to go with them. Having someone show the way is another demonstration of generous hospitality.

6. How does your church follow up with first-time worship visitors?

Surprisingly, one in three new members said they were *not* contacted after their first visit to the church. Asking visitors to complete a visitor card is the first step in gaining the information for a later contact. Design a strategy that involves multiple methods (letters, postcards, emails, phone calls, or personal visits) based on the number of times someone has visited. A first-time worship visitor would receive a different kind of follow-up than on subsequent visits.

7. What percent of your attendees are between 18 to 29 years of age?

The aging profile of current members strikes many young people when they visit for the first time. That is because the average worshiper is 54 years old, 10 years older than the average American. Often the largest age group among attendees is worshipers over 65 years of age. In the average congregation, one in three worshipers is 65 years of age or older. Attracting 18 to 29 year-old visitors is not impossible. Congregations with a high concentration of emerging adults offer multiple points of entry into the life of the congregation such as non-traditional worship times and formats, study groups and age-specific adult education, opportunities to volunteer in community service, and social gatherings. An expert on best practices for young adult ministry argues that congregations should pay more attention to the church's identity, not less.³ Even congregations

with small numbers of emerging adults can provide opportunities for worship leadership and ministry in the church or community.

8. What percent of your current attendees are not yet members?

On average, one in ten worshipers regularly participate in a congregation but are not yet members. Most of these nonmembers are not involved in any church programs or activities beyond attending worship services. Nonmembers tend to be younger than 45 years of age. How does your church construct a bridge that helps attendees cross over into membership? Are new-member or adult programs aimed at explaining tenets of the faith and a call to discipleship?

9. How is your congregation known in the community?

If a dozen random people in your area were approached and asked, "What do you know about [fill in the name of your church]?" How many would say they have never heard of it or that they know nothing? Every community is different and every congregation has the opportunity for unique ministry that fits their location such as quality children's ministry or school-age programs, senior services, outstanding music or promotion of the arts, or advocacy for marginalized groups of people. Identify and build on your congregation's distinctive strengths to better serve God and others.

10. Do the worship services help people connect to God?

Long-time members grow accustomed to the liturgy, music, and pace and find meaning in the familiar. Ask the last 10 people who joined the church how they experienced the services when they first began attending. Also contact recent visitors and ask them about their reactions to the service. Listen carefully to these reflections and share them with worship leaders. Newcomers often provide good insights into the ways services can be more effective in meeting attendees' spiritual needs.

1. Statistics in this issue come from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (www.USCongregations.org).

2. See the free download, *Church Effectiveness Nuggets: Volume 8, How to Attract First-Time Worship Visitors* (www.TheParishPaper.com).

3. J. Roberto and M. Hayes, "Best Practices in Young Adult Faith Formation," Lifelong Faith Associates (2007).