

Apathy, Internal Focus, Competition Pose Challenges to Reaching New People

Most United Methodist churches are expanding their program offerings to reach people who may not be interested in Sunday morning worship and classes, a recent survey by *Circuit Rider* found. Despite adding off-site and interest-based fellowship groups to more traditional Sunday school options, pastors find entrenched attitudes of the community and congregation difficult obstacles to overcome.

Asked about the “biggest challenge” they face in bringing new people into their congregation, many pastors of small churches cited their rural location, lack of critical mass or program offerings, and the reticence of older, long-time members to welcome new people. “Few laypeople are comfortable with changing worship times or adding times to accommodate new people,” said one respondent, a pastor in a small church.

“In a relatively small area, the congregation seems to feel that there aren’t more people out there who would like to attend church,” said another small-church pastor. “I think we feel shy about personally inviting others and don’t want to spend money on advertising.”

Many respondents said they have “internally-focused” congregations that do not see the need to reach out or are reluctant to invite new people to church. “Most of the congregation are older and do not really want to meet new people,” said the pastor of a medium-sized congregation. “They refuse to think like visitors to know how visitors might feel here.”

Leaders from churches of all sizes

mentioned a general societal apathy toward the church, especially among younger people. Sunday sports leagues and other forms of recreation vie for people’s time, and churches—especially those with a reputation for being old and stodgy—have trouble competing. A large-church pastor lamented the difficulty of “connecting with a society burning the candle at both ends. . . . How can we offer something so meaningful, something that people want to participate in?”

Others cited competition not just from other activities but from larger, newer churches in their area. Asked how they would feel if a new church was planted within a few miles of their church, most respondents with attendance under 500 expressed concern, ranging from “uneasy” to “discouraged” to “threatened.”

While new churches may indeed cause nearby existing churches to lose attendance, a recent study by Donald R. House and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., found, the area’s overall church attendance will grow. The new church’s growth will be slower if there are other United Methodist churches within a five-mile radius, but a large population base can mitigate the impact each of the churches will have on one another’s attendance.

Most pastors of large churches (over 500 in attendance) and a few small church pastors told *Circuit Rider* they would welcome another church to reach more people in the area. Said one respondent, “There are plenty of unchurched folks to go around!” □

By the Numbers

88% of churches offer Sunday school for adults

77% have a website (and 33% use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter!)

62% have a small group ministry

58% have groups that meet off-site in homes, restaurants, sports facilities, and even nursing homes. (15% have groups meeting in coffee shops)

47% offer hobby-oriented groups like scrapbooking and hiking clubs

41% give visitors a gift such as a mug or baked good

10% ask visitors to wear name tags

Source: UMPH Research, Nov. 2009

Trends in United Methodist Church Plants

- New churches tend to be located where there is significant population growth and existing churches tend to be located where population growth is modest.
- A new church responds more effectively to population growth than an existing church.
- Attendance increases with time, peaking between 15 and 20 years on average.
- Attendance increases with population growth within a 4-mile radius of the new start.
- Attendance is greater in higher-income neighborhoods, all else being equal.
- Attendance growth is higher if the first meeting place is a school instead of another church, home, or retail space.
- Younger founding pastors (under 35) are more associated with higher-growth congregations.

Source: “A Snapshot of New Church Starts Since 1985 in Eight Conferences” by Donald R. House and Lovett H. Weems, Jr.



Circuit Rider asked readers...

In what new places is your church reaching out to new people?

“To respond to the 80% illiteracy in Liberia, we wrote grants to a publishing company. This year we shipped 3,000 books valued at \$90,000 to J. J. Roberts School in Monrovia, Liberia.”

— Dave Hultberg, Pana, IL

“Bible study at Subway sandwich store.”

“A blessing of the animals at SPCA’s Dog Walk.”

“We’re going to try a service on Saturday nights at local truck stop.”

“Our church is hosting a program that helps students who have dropped out finish school and graduate with a diploma.”

“We have begun a midweek worship service with a coffeehouse atmosphere, and are expanding our ministry with our Hispanic-Latino brothers and sisters.”

From the Blogosphere

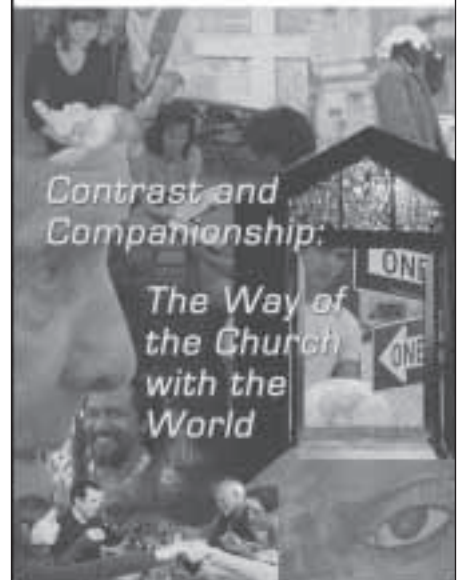
“I will work to connect with the young man and others like him where he is, and that means I will not invite him into the traditional setting, but will expand the setting to meet the person. If our church buildings don’t allow beer, I will meet to pray with people in bars. . . . In every church I have served, I have pastored the congregation to which I was appointed, but I also pastored smaller communities in welfare hotels, prisons, bars, and community centers. Were they “the church”? In my view, yes. In the view of my conferences, no. My own personal sense of failure and limitation is that I was consistently unable to motivate others in the church to join me outside the church. It broke my heart then, breaks my heart now, and is part of why I ask the question, how badly do we really want “new” members? I am not saying it is easy, or even that it will work...UNLESS we are willing to make some huge, fundamental changes in our attitudes about who belongs and who doesn’t; who is acceptable and who is not.”

—Dan Dick

(www.doroteos2.wordpress.com)
responding to John Meunier
(www.johnmeunier.wordpress.com)

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An Impact Community Event
Impact your community on April 24, 2010!

Join United Methodists across the United States as they come together to help change the world. Congregations can impact their local communities or the global community by serving in various ways and making a difference from building homes to providing food or even raising funds for the Imagine No Malaria Ministry. (World Malaria Day is April 25!)

The event will be supported by a Rethink Church media blitz in the United States.

United Methodist Communications will also provide information to help churches attract local media coverage. Find details at www.rethinkchurch.org.