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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How to Maintain Church Health in a Declining Population County

World War II's financial transfusion healed the Great Depression of the 1930s. But World War II also ended rural America's Norman Rockwell era.

When 15 million people took off military uniforms in 1945, many of them put on wedding rings and began revising America's population distribution. Halos of suburbs filled with young families and small children began ringing U.S. cities. Simultaneously, during the next three decades, more than 75 percent of America's agricultural population began "moving to town."

School districts in the newborn suburbs grew rapidly. Small businesses grew. Churches grew. Thousands of new congregations scrambled to build Sunday school space for history's largest crop of children, soon called the baby boomers.

The financial income of those thousands of suburban congregations also grew. Multiple staffs became more common. And those multiple staffs grew larger as some suburban congregations—born at exactly the right time and place—moved toward mega-church status.

Meanwhile, the rural and small-town churches in population-vacated counties changed radically. The median age of their members rose as their attendance declined. They grew older and smaller.

Today's Picture of Small-Town and Open-Country Churches

1. Countless Sunday school classrooms for children now stand empty—silent, musty tombstones of a noisier time.
2. Diminished financial resources make the heating/air-conditioning bills increasingly difficult to pay.
3. Shrinking offerings amputate many of the community-service and missions ministries.
4. Many elementary Sunday school classes are consolidated—grouping together eight grades into three classes that had once been eight individual classes. Joining junior and senior high youth groups leads to mostly negative results, according to the kids.

5. Elementary Sunday school teachers are harder to recruit. "I've already done my part—when *my* kids were young!" people say.

6. Many of the committee chairpersons hold office for several consecutive years. They defend this practice by saying, "Nobody else will take it."

7. Creative programing has decreased. "We've always done it this way" becomes the sound of inflexible concrete.

8. The church treasurer has served for twenty consecutive years. The governing board increasingly bows to his wishes regarding "how we should spend the church's money."

9. The median age of governing board members is in the stratosphere; the youngest one is now age 65. New ways of thinking regarding challenges are less and less respected.

10. Saving money has become the church's highest goal, leaving mission and ministry opportunities blowing in the wind. Restroom signs say, "Please turn out the lights," while governing board meetings discuss at length how to better achieve this goal. Important ministry issues are seldom discussed.



"ACCORDING TO OUR RECORDS, YOU'VE CHAIRED THE COMMITTEE TO REINVIGORATE THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CURRICULUM FOR 37 YEARS."

11. As the staff size shrinks the former professionals are replaced by volunteers who lack experience and training.

12. A long-term church secretary now makes many decisions that were previously handled by the pastor and the program staff.

Counteracting This Fading-Effectiveness Pattern

1. Find a genuine human need in the community and develop ways to address that need. Example: One small-town congregation filled a large, unused classroom with exercise equipment and opened it for use by citizens of the community.

2. Work with other community churches to meet human needs. Examples: (a) Organize an annual fund-raising event that addresses a particular human hurt. (b) In one small town, several churches work together to provide volunteer staff for a used clothing store in an empty building on Main Street. Members of all the churches contribute the used clothing, which the store sells at extremely low prices.

3. Keep the church governing board small—five to seven people—and restrict board-member tenure to three consecutive years. This prevents a short list of people from running everything and reduces the tendency of a few individuals to exert more and more control over the church's future.

4. Don't allow committee chairpersons to hold office for more than two consecutive years. Staying too long in a chairperson role (a) feeds the desire for power and control in some personalities, and (b) reduces the committee's creative thinking ability regarding activities that best serve people in the congregation and the community. Develop a rule by which the vice-chairperson of each committee serves for two years and becomes the chairperson of that committee for the subsequent two years.

5. To address the building's janitorial needs, develop a rotating team system in which a different family unit handles the vacuuming, dusting, and cleaning each week.

6. Schedule an annual breakfast on a Saturday for volunteers, followed by an all-church cleaning day. Tip: In order to increase attendance, assign specific aspects of the building to specific committees, organizations, and adult classes. Avoid saying, "everyone should come and help out." That type of invitation reduces the number of people who show up and builds resentment among those dedicated people who begin to feel like, "We do all the work around here!"

7. What if your congregation is a childless church in which no regularly attending families have children in

elementary or high school? Develop an education task force of two or three regular attendees who stand ready to teach an impromptu class or classes in case worship visitors with children unexpectedly appear.

8. If your congregation has only one or two high school students and only a handful of elementary students, don't ask the high school students to serve as teachers or nursery attendants. Teenagers are in a time of life when Bible study with kids their age facilitates character development. Don't steal that opportunity from them!

9. Long-term members who love their congregation may have willed endowment monies to ensure that their church continues its ministry with future generations. You may be tempted to use some of that permanent endowment to balance the annual operating budget each year. Don't do it! Diverting that money to the operating budgets strangles the golden goose and discourages generous financial stewardship among members. Use the endowment accounts only as directed in the endowment.

10. Create a separate endowment board or committee. Do not make the church's regular governing board responsible for both its endowment monies and its operating budgets. Otherwise, bad judgment often drowns the appropriate use of endowment funds.

11. Limit the terms of church treasurers to three consecutive years. The church's treasurer should present written reports at each meeting. Without this kind of official oversight it is easy to slip into a situation where the treasurer neglects to bring the report and financial meetings become more like conversations among friends.

12. Always require an annual audit of the church's finances. Inappropriate use of church funds can happen if the governing board fails in its due diligence responsibilities. Contact the appropriate denominational office for a set of instructions regarding how to conduct an annual audit.

The Bottom Line

Declining county population leads to declining membership in its religious congregations—which lead to rising median age levels in those counties and congregations. That rising median age of a church's members often leads to bad habits, ill health, and the congregation's eventual death. To build better congregational health, begin by building better habits.