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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Type of Future Are We Building?

Three churches: totally different, yet identical!

The three churches are miles apart geographically. They are oceans apart in other ways. Each church serves a radically different kind of community. Their members have dissimilar backgrounds and life experiences.

Yet the three churches are identical in one way! Their lay leaders made big sacrifices to protect them from sliding into a negative future when they began serving a new generation.

First Presbyterian Church, Osawatomie, Kansas (population 4,488) was founded in 1887. The congregation's sanctuary seats 219. Because of steady worship attendance growth during the last five years, it offers two Sunday morning services. The church's Website describes the early service as "serene and streamlined" and the late service as "robust and lively." The pastor, Leslie King, says that while the older members have long-standing and deep relationships with one another, they joyfully welcome and honor newcomers.

The small town of Osawatomie grew up as a "ribbon development" community—scattered along a state highway—rather than as a suburban bubble on the edge of an expanding city. An hour's drive from Kansas City to the northeast and three hours from Wichita to the southwest, locals and outsiders perceive the town as "out there."

But one of the church's elders developed a partnership with the School of Music at the University of Kansas. Some of the KU students travel more than an hour each week to provide instrumental music lessons to Osawatomie's children. Graduate music students provide music leadership in worship services.

The flourishing youth program stands front and center in the church's mission. See some pictures of the amazing youth group on the congregation's Website (<http://osawatomiepresbyterian.org>). Lisa Hastings, the church's technology director, says, "We do big things here for a small place."

The church recently remodeled its original building, combining it with a house acquired in 2006 to form a single remodeled worship and education facility. Two decades ago, no one would have believed such a facility necessary, or financially possible.

The congregation's current chapter of inspiring vitality follows a challenging period of its history. *For ten*

years, the lay leaders carried the load without a pastor. During that time, few new people joined. The median age of members increased. The lay leaders became increasingly concerned about the congregation's future.

So they decided to "bet the farm" and take a big risk. They spent all of the church's reserve funds to call a new pastor. Sixteen years later, that investment in their church's future continues to bear fruit.

Forty miles to the north, the six-year-old Kaw Prairie Community Church is in a growing Kansas City suburb: Lenexa, Kansas (population 46,822). The Heartland Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) donated eighteen acres for the church site. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America gave the initial start-up funds. A local developer added new roads, a pond, and other improvements. This two-denomination marriage of funding and property creates a congregational model more often seen in the Great Plains and mountains of the Western United States.

Kaw Prairie's leaders decided to construct a community building rather than a traditional church structure.



It's unanimous. Starting next month, we'll offer a second Sunday morning service for people who prefer a worship style in which none of us would want to participate.

The facility includes PlayLand, a two-story indoor climbing-tower play area (think McDonald's) that caters to young children and their parents. Situated next to PlayLand is a Wi-Fi equipped commercial coffee shop that gives parents and other community residents a place to meet. Children and adults can also use the church's gym, which is open to the public daily, except during worship services.

Kaw Prairie focuses on caring for children and youth, looking to the future, and welcoming new people. Worship services offer open communion. Everyone who "truly wants to have Jesus at the center of their lives" is welcome, regardless of their church background or baptism. Yet the church also makes clear its membership requirements. New members are expected to (a) give 10 percent of their income within three years after joining, (b) participate in a small group or a ministry team, and (c) avoid gossip. See the www.kawprairie.org Website for a compelling video overview of how attendees interact with their church.

The congregation attracts numerous first-time churchgoers. Pastor Dan McKnight believes that many of them were not challenged by the church they previously attended. Knowing that most adults receive little biblical education beyond Sunday worship services, he tries to make his forty-minute messages count. The goal is to inspire worshipers to think and to act in new ways. Sermons are posted on the church's Website.

The generous spirit of Dick Frohardt, a lay leader, played a major role in the church's formation. Frohardt offered to work for the new church full-time without a salary. After thirty years in Human Resources Management, he had studied to become a Lutheran Parish Ministry Associate. He dreamed of taking part in a new mission church some day. That opportunity blossomed with Kaw Prairie.

The First Presbyterian Church of Albany, Georgia (population 76,574) is 200 miles south of Atlanta. This historic downtown church's bell began ringing in 1850.

In 2005, when the congregation's membership had dwindled to a few dozen, leaders gravely discussed whether the time had come to close the church and sell the property. But a community leader and committed Presbyterian layman stepped forward. Tom Cousins valued the church's ministry in the community's and in his family's life. He promised to fund a pastor's salary for five years if the members would commit to continuing their service to people in downtown Albany.

A dedicated core of lay leaders rose to his challenge. Today, the lay leaders and members actively engage in efforts to deal with the city's persistently high rates of poverty, infant mortality, and community violence.

This is Pastor Garrett Andrew's first church out of seminary. He was attracted by the church's vision for its role in the city's future. Earlier—during his seminary internship—Andrew served in a predominately African-

American church. During that time, Andrew, who is white, adopted a preaching style often heard in black churches. But that style is a good fit for Albany, which is now 64 percent African American. Lay leaders recognize that continuing service among members of the present generation necessitates moving beyond their congregation's historical roots.

Andrew hopes the church will someday be a vibrant, multicultural faith community. The congregation's vision statement—"Praying to be God's hope and joy"—reveals its desire to shine the light of hope among community residents. The objective: help people to slay despair, address the underlying causes of poverty and violence, and heal long-standing racial divisions.

First Presbyterian Church, Albany, boasts that it is "an old church doing new things." Examples include investment in a Website to help attract new people, particularly younger adults, to the services and programs (<http://1stpresalbany.org>). The Website links to Pastor Andrew's Blog and also provides Podcasts of all sermons. A church social networking site (like Facebook) fosters a sense of belonging—especially important since more than half of the 150 members joined in the past two years.

What do these three extraordinary churches have in common? Three behavior patterns stand out:

1. *Sacrifices by lay leaders.* In each congregation the lay leaders made the type of sacrifice seldom seen in contemporary churches. They moved beyond their own personal comfort zones and preferences and enabled their church to offer Christ to a new generation.

2. *Active involvement by laypersons.* In each church numerous volunteers drive the congregation's various ministries. Leaders challenge members to share their time, talent, and resources to make a remarkable difference for the church and community.

3. *Outward focus.* Each congregation invests funds and staff time to enhance its electronic presence with a great Website. Podcasts enlarge the reach of the pastor's messages. Special events connect with community residents. Mass mailings publicize these events. Members place signs in their front yards and at public intersections. Members make friends in the community and invite them to worship and church events.

Why do the people in so many churches spend so much time looking back at their good old days and so little time discussing how to press on toward the future? Because looking back at the past requires only memories. Looking forward to a great future of ministry with the next generation requires sacrifices!