

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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June 2005

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Welcoming New People: God Is in the Details

"She's a real detail person," we remark in a respectful tone. We appreciate this kind of talented person in every work, volunteer, or family setting.

Effective congregations are also detail-oriented. They pay attention to who stays, who leaves, and who visits. And the payoff for paying attention is substantial.

If we talked with new worshipers in congregations across America, what details would surface? Who are they? What are they looking for? Why do they come back? Do some churches have an advantage in attracting new people? What are some revealing details about new people?

A random-sample survey of 300,000 U.S. worshipers gives us some clues. (Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004])

Detail #1: In the typical congregation's worship service, one-third of the worshipers have been attending for five years or less, and 2 percent are visiting for the first time. High turnover rates are a common feature in congregational life today. And the increased geographic mobility of the U.S. population signals a continuing stream of new people in almost every community.

Paying attention to this detail. Each of these new worshipers visited the congregation for the first time at some point. What happened when they did? For more than a third of these worshipers—nothing! Thirty-eight percent of first-time worship visitors did not receive any type of follow-up telephone call, letter, e-mail, or personal visit. (Deborah Bruce, "New People in U.S. Congregations: Who Are They and Why Do They Come?" Paper presented at the Religion Research Association, October 2004).

Why not? Possible reasons: They didn't know the people were visitors. They thought visitors wouldn't appreciate a contact. The church had no system in place to respond.

What do growing congregations do to welcome and attract new people? Their worshipers invite others, especially people they already know. Half of all new people said they visited for the first time because someone they knew invited them. Growing congregations make themselves visible, too. Many new people say they came for the first time because the church was easy to locate.

Churches with many new people do more of the follow-

ing than other churches: encourage current members to invite others, send materials to worship visitors, distribute flyers or letters to people in the community, hold community events, telephone visitors, visit visitors, and create new small groups designed for new worshipers.

Acting on this detail. Ask visitors to sign a card or a pew pad, or find some other way to register their attendance. Since some visitors will not sign anything, identify an appropriate number of zones in the congregation's worship space. Ask regular attendees to take responsibility for a zone and to greet every person in their zone that they do not know. When possible, have these volunteers find out the name of visitors and where they live. Have zone leaders give this information to the church office for follow-up.

Detail #2: New people are *not* like longtime members. We assume our congregation always attracts a certain type—people who think and act like us. Not So!



Paying attention to this detail. New people don't attend as often, participate less in church activities, and give smaller amounts to the church. But they are more likely to invite someone to worship and to say that the pastor inspires them to take action.

Mainline Protestant congregations have more "returnees" than other kinds of new members. These worshipers say they dropped out of attending any congregation for awhile, or even a long while, before coming back to church. Nationally, almost one in five new worshipers fit this returnee profile.

In contrast, Conservative Protestants have more "switchers." These attendees report they attended another congregation of a different denomination before coming to their present church. Compared to other types of new people, "switchers" attend worship services more regularly, participate more in small groups, and take on more leadership roles. They support the congregation with larger gifts and invite others to worship more often. These behaviors indicate switchers are attracted to something that they found missing in their former church. Thus, they make a greater investment as they enter church life.

All churches have some "transfers"—those new people who choose a new church that is the same denomination or faith tradition as their former church.

The last category of new people, "first-timers,"—those who have never regularly attended church—is also found in churches of all denominations. Many observers believe Conservative Protestant churches have a better record of attracting first-timers or the unchurched. However, *the percentage of first-timers is roughly the same across theological groups*—around 7 percent of all worshipers.

Acting on this detail. Interview or survey people who began attending your congregation in recent years. Identify the various types of new people. In collaboration with new members, provide support for and implement activities that would best meet the needs of these various groups.

Detail #3: What new people experience in worship makes all the difference! Many features of the church draw new people, but the first and most important magnet is the worship service.

Paying attention to this detail. Regular worshipers have a backup-experience catalog to help them evaluate each Sunday's worship experience. But first-time worship visitors experience the service as a once-in-a-lifetime event. They have no way to evaluate whether this particular service is unusual in some way.

Unfortunately, this means congregations get only one chance to make the worship service a meaningful experience for first-time visitors. Worship must hit a home run on a weekly basis. Some elements of the service are especially important: the quality of the sermons, the friendliness of the other worshipers, the sense of God's presence, and the leadership style of the pastor.

Acting on this detail. Continuously evaluate the overall worship experience. Listen carefully and non-defensively to all comments about the services. Consider how the unchurched and others in your community would experience your services.

Act courageously to make the worship services more meaningful. Involve all ages and types of people in worship planning and leadership. Consult the many invaluable resources about worship music and liturgy for creative ideas.

A Final Big Detail: Small churches can welcome new people and grow. Research reveals that meaningful worship happens in congregations of all sizes.

Paying attention to this detail. The majority of America's churches (63 percent) have fewer than 125 worshipers in a typical service. About one-third of those attendees are new in the last five years (the same percentage as in larger churches). While the absolute *number* of new people is bigger in a larger church than in a smaller one, the *percentage* of new people remains the same.

Three factors strongly predict numerical growth in congregations of all sizes: (1) doing a good job of caring for children and youth; (2) promoting high levels of participation in small groups, leadership roles, and financial giving; and (3) using intentional efforts to meet the needs of new people.

In some ways, small congregations have the advantage. They excel in helping worshipers grow spiritually, use their gifts and talents, and develop leadership skills. Members in small churches are more likely to invite others to worship and to talk about their faith.

Acting on this big detail. Because size does not determine a congregation's success, we must direct our attention elsewhere. Stop saying, "We're just a small church!" Start saying, "Because we're small, we can do ... extremely well!"

How do congregations of all sizes learn what God is calling them to do? They pay attention to the enduring detail questions: What do we do best? What are our unique strengths? What would it mean for us to build on our current strengths, allowing us to be even more effective in ministry and mission?

New thinking in congregations leads to new congregational actions. Think team efforts, not one-person rescue missions. Think innovation, not replication. Think multiple options, not limited choices. Think building on strengths, not fixing weaknesses. Think abundance, not scarcity.

Think God is in the details.

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