

Reflections On Congregational Life

CONGREGATIONAL VISIBILITY[©]

by
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A pastor asked me about the visibility of her congregation. Her congregation was located on a back road in a rural setting. She knew visibility of congregation's building was important in attracting visitors, so she wondered what she could do to make her congregation more visible?

The pastor knew that in the 20th century, visibility of a congregation's building was one way to attract visitors. But, in the 21st century visibility goes far beyond people seeing a church building as they drive by it. Today, a congregation's visibility is measured by how well it is known for difference its ministries make in the community in which it exists.

Church pollster and consultant George Barna states that up to 80% of a typical church's neighbors do not know the congregation exists, even though they see it on a daily basis, because its ministries are irrelevant in their lives. Therefore, a key component in making a congregation visible is to communicate the difference its ministries make through a theme line, advertising, the pastor's visibility, technology and social networking, and the appearance of its building.

A theme line

One way to connect a congregation's name to its ministries is through a theme line. A theme line is not to be confused with a purpose statement which defines why a congregation exists. A theme line is a very short statement that describes how a congregation wants to be known. For example, congregations whose ministry portfolio emphasize spiritual formation and Christian education may use the theme line, "First Church, a church where you grow in your faith." Congregations that emphasize contemplation, meditation, and Taize worship may use the theme line, "Second Church, a place where you feel God's presence." Congregations that emphasize 12 Step programs can use the theme line, "Third Church, a church where you are accepted." Congregations that emphasize efforts to eliminate poverty and discrimination may use the theme line, "Fourth Church, a church that helps people." When I think of a theme line for the church I serve, it would be, "A church for those who want to give back."

There are two important components in the theme lines stated above. First, there is a description of how a congregation wants to be known. Certainly every congregation wants to be a community where individuals grow in faith, feel God's presence, experi-

ence love and acceptance, and strive to make a difference in the world. But a congregation differentiates itself from other congregations when it emphasizes one ministry over other ministries. A theme line draws attention to the differentiation between congregations.

The second component is the word "you." Most congregations center on who they are in their welcoming material. But, the question for those reading the welcoming material is, "What does this congregation have for me?" The word "you" in the theme line communicates that a congregation takes seriously the needs of the one being addressed. For example, this congregation is for YOU if you feel the need to grow in or deepen your faith. Or, this congregation is for YOU if you yearn for a mystical closeness with God.

Advertising

In the middle of the 20th century, conventional wisdom expected a congregation to advertise on the church page of a local newspaper. In the 21st century, conventional wisdom reverses itself by counseling against advertising on church pages because of the drop in newspaper readership. This does not mean that advertising in a newspaper should be eliminated altogether. Money previously used for a weekly ad can be allocated for larger seasonal ads when people are looking for a church. Such seasonal ads are the beginning of Sunday School, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter.

Many congregations offer presentations and workshops for their members which can be beneficial to non-members as well. Such presentations might be: *Financial Peace* for those struggling with money management; *A Third Option For Marriage: your way, my way, a third way* for those who want to make a good marriage even better; or *Finding Purpose In Life After 50* for those searching for meaning in the second half of life. Once a congregation decides to offer a presentation, the question is, "How does it make such a presentation visible?" One option is through yard signs placed in the lawns of the congregation's members and the congregation's building. Political candidates, those advocating for the passage of a school level, and congregations sponsoring a Church Festival have learned the value of yard signs.

Pastor's visibility

Right or wrong, a congregation gains visibility through its pastor(s). When a pastor is visible in the community, the congregation's visibility rises.

Following are ways a pastor raises the visibility of his or her congregation.

If a congregation is located in a small town with its own newspaper, a pastor can offer to write, for free, a weekly column containing commentary and perspectives on current events and/or ways to build a meaningful life. A shorter version of this strategy is to write a seasonal commentary on Christian festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

Every newspaper and local radio station has a reporter who covers religion as one of his or her assignments. If a pastor makes an effort to know this reporter, that pastor can be a resource when his or her denomination or local synod makes news. In reporting the story, a congregation becomes visible when its pastor is quoted by name; i.e., "Pastor Fred of First Church explains..."

A congregation's visibility rises when its pastor makes himself or herself available as a public speaker. Pastors can also speak at the weekly meetings of the local Rotary, Lions, or a Kiwanis clubs. In such a setting a pastor may note that national polls reveal that Americans are not going to church but they are deeply interested in spiritual issues. Therefore, such topics as "The Bible vs Science" or "The Issues Behind The Homosexual Debate" are appropriate.

Technology and social networking

The majority of people looking for a church today use the web as their primary information source; therefore, quality and aesthetics are a must on a congregation's web page. The page must be up-dated regularly with all links functioning. Many profit and non-profit organizations have learned that when describing a particular aspect of their organization a video clip is a powerful connector between the organization and the viewer. Congregations can use a video clip of its pastor in welcoming the viewer, the music director talking about the impact of music on the worshipper, and a Bible study participant sharing the transforming experience a particular text had in his life.

Bloggging connects a pastor with the members of his or her congregation. Bloggging provides an opportunity for a pastor to share and invite comments on what is currently happening in the congregation, the pastor's feelings about current challenges, and as a way to test thoughts and ideas about future ministries.

Bloggging can reach audiences beyond congregational members. A pastor's blog on the congregation's web page is directed at members. But members may talk about the pastor's thoughts and perspective to their friends who in turn read the blog. Therefore, blogs are as much for sharing good news to non-members as it is for informing the congregation about current celebrations and challenges.

Blogs can be used to report the difference a mission trip makes in the lives of members and those they are serving. For example, the youth group is going to Appalachia to help refurbish a church camp. Group

members take turns bloggging about their experiences on the congregation's web page so members and friends can hear immediately about the difference this ministry is making in the lives of those serving and those being served.

Congregations can use Facebook to tell their story. Through pictures, video clips, and testimonials, viewers can discover the difference that congregation makes in the local community and the difference a congregation can make in their personal lives.

It needs to be remembered that technology and social networking are never ends in themselves. Technology and social networking provide a means for a congregation to tell how the Gospel of Jesus makes a difference, to connect members to other members and even members to non-members, and to encourage a response because of what God has already done. As such, technology and social networking are tools which can be helpful or abused. To use these tool in a healthy manner, three questions are asked; 1. Does the information provided communicate the message the congregation wants to send? 2. Does it connect people and give them a chance to talk with each other? 3. What actions or behavioral changes does the message recommend?

Appearances

Appearances in building aesthetics and maintenance make a difference in visibility. From the outside, people subconsciously appreciate seeing well kept grounds, flower beds, and clean walkways. From the inside, people notice if the sanctuary is clean, hymnals are in their racks, and floors are free from litter. They notice if chairs and tables in gathering spaces and meeting rooms are set in order. They also notice the dress of those working in the church office. There is a major difference between business causal and playground casual dress. If a congregation dismisses the importance of appearance, it will soon become invisible to those who visit it as well as its neighbors.

Conclusion

Visibility is an important component in attracting visitors to worship and ministry programming. Therefore, the planning of every ministry program needs to include the question, How are we going to make this program visible to our members and the community in which our congregation exists?

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