

INVITATION LEADS TO GROW[©]

by
Peter Rudowski
December 2014

Reflections On Congregational Life is a service of the Southern Ohio Synod, ELCA

Recently I had conversations with two pastors. The first asked,

How many congregations are growing in the Southern Ohio Synod?

Every year Dr. Ken Inskeep, Director of Evaluation and Research for the ELCA, prepares a composite from the Parochial Reports of a synod. According to the 2013 Parochial Reports of the Southern Ohio Synod:

- 26 congregations or 13.19% of the Synod's congregations had numerical growth over the last 5 years, 2009-2013. Of that 26, 21 had numerical growth less than 10 worshipers per weekend.
- 19 congregations grew by more than 5% over the five years. One had numerical growth of 1. Their worship attendance rose from 13 in 2009 to 14 in 2014.
- 54 congregations or 27.41% are categorized as stable meaning they grew by less than 5% or declined by less than 5% in worship attendance.
- 124 congregations or 62.94% congregations declined. This means worship attendance declined more than 5% in the last 5 years.

In the last five years, worship attendance in the synod has declined from 23,883 to 21,192 or by 2,691 (11.26%). In the last 10 years, worship attendance has declined from 26,259 to 21,192 or by 5,067 (19.29%).

The short answer to the pastor's question is five congregations have grown by more than 10 individuals in worship attendance over the last five years.

I shared the above statistics with another

pastor. After hearing the statistics the pastor asked,

What is one thing that a congregation can do to reverse the trends cited in the statistics above?

A number of years ago Sam Leonard, a presenter at an Alban Institute workshop, stated that up to 86% of those who visited a congregation for the first time did so because a family member, friend, neighbor, or colleague personally invited them to do so. This statistic is supported by research conducted by LifeWay Research reported by Ed Stetzer:

- “• 67% of Americans say a personal invitation from a family member would be very or somewhat effective in getting them to visit a church.
- 63% of Americans say a personal invitation from a friend or neighbor would be very or somewhat effective in getting them to visit a church.
- 63% of Americans are very or somewhat willing to receive information about a local congregation or faith community from a family member.
- 56% of Americans are very or somewhat willing to receive information about a local congregation or faith community from a friend or neighbor.”

Based on this information, I would recommend that a congregation be intentional in including an invitation component to all of its ministries and especially in its ministries to those who are not current members.

Following are three stories about intentionally inviting non-members to visit and

then join a congregation.

There is a story about a congregation that was active in a softball league. Unlike most congregations which require team players to be members of the church, this congregation required 20% of its team be non-members. The reason was the congregation wanted non-members to experience Christian fellowship. They wanted to eliminate negative stereotypes about Christians. During and after the season, non-members were invited to congregational picnics, couples groups, etc. Many of the team's non-members eventually joined the congregation.

Vacation Bible School is another ministry that provides opportunities to invite non-members to experience a congregation. Most, if not all, VBSs have many non-members attending. Some belong to another church. Some are there because VBS is a positive activity for children during the summer. And, some are there because VBS is a convenient babysitting service. I know of one congregation where 50% of its VBS students were non-members. The Monday after VBS ended, the director emailed the parents of every non-member student. She thanked the parents for sending their child to VBS. If they were members of another church, she encouraged them to take or send their child to their church's Sunday School. If the parents did not belong to a church, she encouraged them to bring their child to this congregation's Sunday School where the child would have a positive experience. The invitation to non-members was repeated two weeks before Sunday School began. Six non-members brought their child to Sunday School. Two months later, three families joined the church.

Ministries to the homeless and hungry provide another option to extend an invitation to experience a congregation. I know of an inner city church that has a breakfast for the homeless and/or hungry every Sunday morning. Serving breakfast begins at 8:00. At the end of the meal, when all have eaten, an invitation is extended to attend the 8:30 worship service. There is no requirement to do so. The results are as follows: one week, 121 hungry

individuals were served and 42 worshiped. What is remarkable about this congregation is that it goes one step further than extending an invitation to worship. It also extends an invitation to participate in its outreach ministries. At breakfast, an offering basket is on a table. The offering purchases chickens and pigs through the ELCA's Good Gifts Program for the hungry families in Africa. Some of those who have eaten put pennies in the basket, others a nickel, a few put in a quarter. The amount does not matter. What matters is that the homeless and hungry are invited to be more than recipients of ministry; they are invited to participate in ministry. They now belong to the congregation with a sense of pride. The homeless raised was over \$600.00 during the last six months.

All of the stories above are invitations to attend a non-Sunday, non-worship ministry. The reason is that non-members are much more comfortable accepting an invitation to a non-Sunday ministry where they do not have to know when to stand up or sit down, if they are welcome at the communion table, or need to know if the person greeting them is a long-time member or a newbie like them. Also, current members are more comfortable extending an invitation to a non-Sunday ministry than to Sunday worship.

In summary, if I had to recommend only one thing a congregation could do to reverse the decline stated above it would be to be very intentional about inviting those who are already recipients of ministry or who attend a congregational program to attend another ministry or program of the congregation. At some point the invitation includes worship and membership. In my opinion, without intentional invitation, a congregation will not grow.

Peter Rudowski served as a parish pastor for 33 years. In this capacity, he developed knowledge and skills in parish administration and organizational systems. He now serves as a consultant to pastors and congregations. He is also the author of CONNECTING THE DOTS: Ministering To Your Congregation Through Its Organizational System published by Xlibris - order via the internet at xlibris.

He can be contacted for a consultation at: phone 513-791-8920 or e-mail address: prudowski@fuse.net