

THRIVING CONGREGATIONS IN CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS

Northeast Community Lutheran Church
February 7, 2009 - © David Raymond, ChurchFuture

Actually...

Healthy congregations

nurture conflict (open debate)

and avoid consensus

Major Study of Congregations:

- Teams of sociologists and students led by Professor Nancy Ammerman.
- Examined 300 churches in nine communities.
- Looked for significant differences between thriving churches and declining churches.

Eight "Habits" found in congregations that thrive in a changing environment.

- Which habit does NEC have down pat?
- Which ones are you making progress on?
- Which habits need attention?

1. An ambitious vision for the congregation's future.

- Clergy and lay leaders who know where they want to go.
- Leaders who see the connection between the congregation that exists now and what it might someday become.

2. Conflict (debate)

- **All** of the declining and stable congregations were basically conflict free.
- **All** of the thriving congregations had gone through conflict. They learned how to discuss and debate issues in the congregation.
- Respectful debate is necessary for...

3. Change

- Declining and stable congregations resist change.
- Growing churches change and adapt.

"Willingness to change is the most important variable between thriving and declining congregations."



"The message must never change, but the methods must change with each new generation."

Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church

4. Open decision-making

- A decision structure that breaks out of past patterns...
- ...that involves broad sectors of the congregation instead of just an elite.
- A structure that involves people and reinforces new leaders.

"But we've always done it that way."

Open decision-making does not always mean **consensus**.

If you require consensus on every decision you give veto power to the grumps.

5. Leadership

- Members who are energetic.
- Willing and able to serve.
- Experienced in leadership, or able to be guided to develop leadership skills.

6. Shared Food

Food that is shared inclusively (breaking bread together).

"Adapting congregations create opportunities for different constituencies to eat together."

7. Appealing Worship

- Worship that is comfortable and engaging for the *people who you want to reach*.
- Worship that is understandable.
- Worship with quality.

8. Real estate resolution

- Churches cannot thrive in high-maintenance, under-utilized buildings, regardless of sentiment.
- Buildings should support the congregation—not suck up its time and resources.
- The building has to be appealing to the people who you want to reach.

Non-variables:

- Money
- Giving and consistent attendance
- Ideology, theology, denominations
- Evangelical style

Factors not found in the study but nonetheless important:

- Priority on youth (Some thriving downtown churches in the study had few if any kids)
- Culture of caring (A number of non-thriving congregations have active social ministries)

Minneapolis Area Synod "High Performance Congregations" Study



Lessons from these churches

- 4 of the top 5 churches faced serious difficulties or catastrophe
- 4 of the top 5 churches have new gathering spaces outside their worship space
- 2 of the 5 have no Sunday School
- The five churches have at least 13 distinct styles of worship
- All are very intentional about who they want to reach

Gathering spaces instead of a narthex

Worship

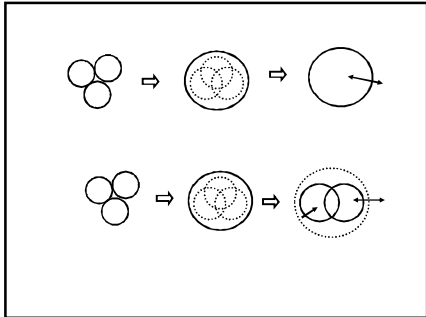
Billy McLaughlin—Alternative Service

The paradox we face

A church that exists to serves us	A church that exists to give itself away
Promises to long term members	The vision of a community church
"It's all about God"	"It's all about me"

Some suggestions

- Go back to the Town Hall Meeting reports
- Experiment and get feedback instead of permanent changes
- Look for crossover appeal
- Love your members



3 Fastest-growing ELCA churches in the US in 2006

What Kelly Fryer found in these churches

- God is real to people
- The Bible provides the framework for everything they do
- Deep commitment to the priesthood of all believers

- The people, and especially the leaders, are pragmatic. They are willing to do what ever it takes to connect with new people.
- They believe that God changes lives, and they expect something to happen!