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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Church Members and Community Residents: Match or Mismatch?

“When the neighborhood changed, we didn’t!” Marge declares as the committee’s conversation reaches frequently revisited territory.

Thomas knows that Marge’s exclamation signals the beginning of a lament that he is weary of hearing. Marge is about to add some variation of these two sentences: “Our congregation no longer draws worshipers from the local neighborhood! Without these people, how can we hope to reverse our several years of declining worship attendance?”

Thomas understands Marge’s concern, but he thinks it is unnecessary.

Church leaders across the continent line up behind two different viewpoints regarding that issue:

- *People in Marge’s camp firmly believe that congregations are healthiest when two demographic profiles—the church’s members and the neighborhood’s residents—are similar.* Marge’s view finds support in a well-known church-growth theory; namely, a close *match* between (a) the congregation’s membership profile (median age, race or ethnicity, and income characteristics) and (b) the profile of local residents increases the likelihood of numerical growth.

- *People in Thomas’s camp believe that features other than a demographics-match more accurately define congregational effectiveness.* After Marge finishes, Thomas replays for the committee an equally familiar conversational tape: “But our church has so many positive qualities! Our preschool children’s ministries are the best in the area. Doesn’t that mean our congregation is fulfilling its mission to the community?”

Who is right—Marge or Thomas?

The mirror in the Snow White fairy tale could only tell the truth when asked a question. When a congregation’s members “mirror” the composition of its nearby population base, does that resemblance truthfully predict that congregation’s effectiveness?

True Reflections

Recent research has surfaced several slices of new information regarding the manner in which congregational membership compositions match and do not match the de-

mographics of their communities.¹ A few examples:

- ◆ The majority of American congregations match their surrounding community with regard to the percentage of people in middle- and high-income brackets.

- ◆ Many congregations draw a larger percentage of traditional families (married couples with children living at home) than expected, given their community’s demographic profile.

- ◆ Most congregations have a far larger percentage of older worshipers (65 years of age and older) than the percentage of older people in the community.

- ◆ Compared to their communities, congregations tend to have more people with a college degree or more education.

*Congregations are **least** likely to match their neighborhoods when it comes to the percentages of people who are between the ages of 18 and 44.* In only 15 percent of all congregations does the current percentage of worshipers (ages 18 to 44) match the percentage of that age group in the community.¹ This means that 85 percent of



all congregations do **not** look like their community on the ages 18-44 demographic of their church profile.

The ability to match the 18- to 44-year-old demographic appears more frequently among conservative Protestant churches than in Catholic parishes or mainline Protestant churches. Yet even for conservative Protestant churches, only one in four manages to attract the same percentage of worshipers from this important age range as reside in the local community.

As late as 1950, children five years of age and younger numbered more than any other five-year slice of the U.S. population. But due to declining birthrates and increasing age spans, that is no longer the case. Now, people age 44 to 48 (born at the end of the Baby Boom, between 1960 and 1964) outnumber those in every other age group.

Worshipers between the ages of 18 and 44 represent the post-Baby Boomers—Generation X and Y—whose religious behavior and values are central to the church’s future.

Which Match Counts Most?

Does congregational vitality soar or suffer when worshipers differ substantially from people in the community?

Both Marge and Thomas are correct. Some church-community differences matter, but others do not.

*A close match between the percentage of adults age 18 to 44 in the community and the congregation’s percentage of young adults yields vitality.*² Churches that mirror their neighborhood’s 18- to 44-year-old demographic profile soar in many ways. These congregations are far more likely to (a) see dramatic results in spiritual growth, (b) have a strong sense of belonging among worshipers, (c) offer worship that is more meaningful, (d) invest in children and youth, (e) invite others to worship, (f) welcome new people, (g) commit to a future vision, (h) have leaders who inspire others, and (i) help parishioners use their gifts. Those qualities are highly valued among the 18- to 44-year-old age demographic; thus, they are a key to developing a sustainable, effective ministry in that location.

In 1972, Dean Kelley published his controversial book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. He argued that theologically conservative churches grew because they made strict demands on their members. In contrast, he wrote, liberal churches were declining because they made few demands on their members and tolerated more than one theological view. Kelly’s charge that “the churches are dying today, not because they are merely religious, but because they are not very religious at all” incited some mainline church leaders to near-riot responses. But his arguments were more complex and nuanced than his book title suggested. Kelley later said that he should have titled the book, “Why Conservative Churches are Strong.”

More than thirty years later, leaders still argue about what makes churches strong. Thanks to new research, we can now make two statements with assurance: (a) Identifying a

single factor as the one reason for strength or growth leads nowhere—because church vitality is much more complex than that. (b) But congregations that match their community in *one important demographic group*—people 18 to 44 years of age—are onto a powerful facet for successful ministry. Attracting worshipers in this age range says that mission, programs, and leadership are in tune with the community’s future—and the congregation’s future.

How to Look in Your Mirror

Find four numbers about your community by visiting the U.S. Census Website (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>). Click on “People,” then click on “Age and Sex,” and then see “Selected Age Categories.” Or obtain from other public data sources. (Percentages are shown at the city/town, county, or zip code levels.)

- ◆ *What percentage of people are younger than 18?*
- ◆ *What percentage of people are between 18 and 44 years of age?*
- ◆ *What percentage of people are between 45 and 64 years of age?*
- ◆ *What percentage of people are 65 years of age or older?*

Using your congregational records or membership directory, calculate those same four percentages among your church’s worshipers.

Now compare the two sets of percentages and answer these questions:

- ◆ *In what ways are our worshipers similar to or different from people in our community?*
- ◆ *Which of these similarities and differences surprise us the most?*
- ◆ *What implications do these similarities and differences have for our congregation’s future?*

Bottom line question: If our congregation wants to be alive and thrive in 2025, into which ministries should we invest significant energy and resources? *Clue:* Which ministries are the most likely to attract and retain the age 18 to 44 adults in our community?

¹ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

² A difference of 10 percentage points or less between the congregation’s percentage and the community’s percentage is considered a “match.” Differences that exceed 10 percentage points constitute a “mismatch.”