

Reflections

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN?

BY REV. TOM REHLING

I recently came across an article in my files that was written in 1988 by Lyle Schaller, the top church growth guru of the time. Much of what he wrote then still seems to be true for us now.

The most common reason offered to explain why a particular congregation is not experiencing numerical growth is that the population of the area no longer is growing in numbers. More often than not, this is an excuse, not a reason... Among the reasons congregations remain on such a plateau or experience a decline in numbers, ten stand out as both widespread and more influential than changes in population.

1. The natural tendency of institutions, which is reinforced by the passage of time, makes the number one priority in the allocation of resources the care of its members. Typically, the price tag on that goal is a reduction in the allocation of resources for inviting people to come to that church.
2. A serious mismatch exists between the style, gifts, skills, experience, goals, personality, and the priorities of the minister and the needs of that congregation if it is to reach and serve a larger number of people. This can be an insurmountable barrier.
3. The development of an exclusionary congregational culture severely limits the number of people who might perceive this as “a potential new church home for us.”

4. The language, nationality, racial group, social class, or cultural characteristics of the people moving into the community are substantially different from those of the members.
5. The inadequacy of the physical facilities makes it difficult to accommodate and serve more people.
6. A relatively low-quality program, a weak self-image (or both) tend to repel potential new members; these weaknesses often are mutually reinforcing.
7. An erosion of the evangelical zeal of the congregation or an unwillingness and inability to invite people to come to that church or both reduce the flow of potential new members to the number required to replace losses.
8. The program staff is inadequate in size or does not have the level of competence necessary to enable the congregation to serve more people. Sometimes this lack results in a failure by the staff to create new entry points for a new generation of potential members.
9. The shortage of convenient parking discourages potential members from coming to the church.
10. Opposition by members to the changes necessary to reach and serve more people slows the flow of new members. Sometimes this opposition is expressed in the form of “earned complacency.”

These are among the more common reasons for a lack of numerical growth in a congregation when other factors suggest it could and should be a numerically growing church.”

As I reread this article, I heard a song sung by Peter Paul and Mary in the 60's running through my mind, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” and the repeating line, “When will they ever learn?”

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