

Mainline Congregations Can Grow!

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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Recent research suggests that an astounding 70-80 percent of mainline congregations are in the last quadrant of the congregational life cycle! The statistical news from mainline Protestant denominations has generally been so bad for the past two or three decades that some wonder whether mainline Protestant congregations *can* grow or whether they are all doomed to “twist in the wind” on the way to a slow painful death. The fact is that there are congregations of all kinds that are growing; including those in the mainline. There are growing mainline congregations that are theologically conservative, moderate and progressive.

However, there are certain characteristics that growing mainline congregations typically demonstrate, regardless of their theological perspective. These include the following four:

- 1. Lively worship.** The primary issue is not whether the worship services are either traditional or one of the many varieties of contemporary. The issue is whether it feels like *worship of the living God*, or whether it feels like *sleepwalking*, or *just going through the motions*. Many mainline congregations would do well to juice up the amperage on worship of whatever style. For example, those who are praying public prayers in worship should pray as though there is Someone listening. Those who read scripture should read with feeling and as though they have looked over the reading in advance rather than as though they have never seen the passage before. The sermon should be preached as though something important is at stake (since there is). The singing should suggest that Someone is listening. The offering should be taken for the sake of ministry and mission, not simply to “pay the church’s light bill.” Yes, worship is all about God.
- 2. A clear sense of mission to real people and a heart for carrying out that mission.** That’s why all mainline congregations are started originally. But, somewhere along the way, many get sidetracked into secondary agendas.

For example, the institution may cease to be a *tool* of mission and become instead an *end in itself*. This is particularly common in congregations that are comprised primarily of people born before 1945 (the Builder and Silent generations) because they started so many of the currently existing mainline congregations for the specific purpose of having a religious institution to which to belong. Later generations are less interested in the *institution as a means of belonging* and more interested in what it makes possible for them to do in self-actualization and mission. Once the survival of the institution becomes the mission, it ceases to be of much interest to people born after 1945, and especially to those born after 1965.

- 3. Numerous small groups in which participation is emotionally significant.** A very small single cell congregation must be such a small group itself. But larger congregations must have numerous such small groups. A rule of thumb is seven small groups in which participation is emotionally significant for each 100 people participating. Some of these small groups will focus on the needs of those who are already members, while others will focus primarily on the needs of those who are just recently members or not yet members. These groups will embody a wide range of interests and meeting times and places. Some may be focused on clearly spiritual issues such as personal spiritual growth or mission (local and or global). Some may be committees that involve worship music or may focus on the needs of the institution (such as a property and grounds committee), though most committees I have seen do not provide an

emotionally significant connection with others. Small groups provide a relatively non-threatening way into a congregation as well as helping people connect in new and deeper relationships.

4. A clear sense of vision for the future. Every congregation, like each individual Christian, is called to a journey. As with any journey, it is much easier when you have a clear idea of where you are going. I am constantly amazed at how many congregations just wander around hoping something will turn up. Some kind of visioning process that includes most of the membership should be undertaken about every five years. The Spiritual Strategic Journey, utilized by The Columbia Partnership, is very effective if a congregation is truly ready and willing to engage it and follow the resulting discerned path. But there are also other good processes available. You may want to use a coach and consultant to facilitate a visioning process, or you may want to lead the journey yourself. The point is to keep a fresh vision before the congregation.

May God bless you as you seek to lead your mainline congregation forward into God's future for it!

Important Things to Know

Dick Hamm is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is also executive director for Christian Churches Together in the USA. His most recent book is ***Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Post-Modern Era***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a leadership development emphasis of The Columbia Partnership. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.