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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Surviving the Rapids of Change?

What is the most significant single change in congregational ministries in American Protestantism since 1970?

Is it one of the following? Do you see evidence of one or more of these changes in your community?

--The emergence of hundreds of nondenominational megachurches?

--The arrival of at least three successive generations of new Christian music?

--The new records being set in the total number of people worshipping with a Protestant congregation on the average weekend?

--The replacement of the resident pastor preaching the sermon in person during worship with the message delivered by projected visual imagery?

--The replacement of the small neighborhood congregation by the large regional church that attracts worshippers who live fifteen to fifty miles away?

--The recent increase in the number of multisite congregations that meet in three, seven, or a dozen locations?

--The gradual shrinkage of congregations in five or six mainline Protestant denominations?

From Producer-Driven to Consumer-Driven

Perhaps the most subtle change since 1970 is one that began to emerge back in the 1950s: *the shift from a producer-driven economy to a consumer-driven culture.*

The Great Depression of the 1930s, followed by the scarcities of World War II during the early 1940s, taught people, "You have two choices. Take it or leave it!" Examples:

--In 1942, healthy nineteen-year-old Americans were told that they had two choices. Enlist now or wait until next year and be drafted.

--The manager of the five-and-dime variety store on Main Street offered customers a limited choice of merchandise.

--Students enrolling in college in 1955 or 1970 usually were told the required courses they must take during the first two years.

--The producers of goods and services decided what to offer people, as well as how and when to make it available.

--Churches posted on the bulletin board outside the building a sign that announced Sunday school at 9:30 a.m. and worship at 11:00 a.m.

--The responsibility for finding a vacant parking space on a street near the church rested on people who chose to drive, rather than walk, to their neighborhood church.

By contrast, today's most common marketing slogan is, "The customer is king!" Placing a high value on customer service, producers conduct numerous surveys and spend money on a variety of efforts to retain customer loyalty.

From Inherited Allegiance to Personal Choice

To understand the congregational implications of that shift from a producer-driven economy to a consumer-driven economy, we must add a related and significant change that happened simultaneously: *the shift from inherited allegiance to personal choice allegiance.*

As recently as the 1960s a common pattern in American culture was that children inherited institutional loyalties from their parents. As they grew into adulthood, children followed in the footsteps of their parents in choosing (a) their state of



residence, (b) their occupation or vocation, (c) their religious affiliation, (d) a physician, (e) a lodge or service club, (f) an automobile manufacturer, (g) a college or university, (h) a retailer of groceries, (i) a funeral home, and (j) a cemetery.

Today, most institutions find themselves competing for the allegiance of consumers. In every new generation, customer loyalty must be earned and re-earned! Examples:

--In the 1960s the number of Americans reared in a Protestant home who subsequently left to join a Roman Catholic parish greatly exceeded the number of Catholics who left to join a Protestant congregation. For the past several years the Catholic-to-Protestant migration has exceeded the Protestant-to-Catholic flow.

--When the pastor of a Protestant congregation departs after a twenty-year tenure, the successor often arrives to discover that many members have decided to shop for a new church home.

What Are the Consequences?

The combination of these two trends has produced several consequences. One is when the Jones family moves to a new community. Instead of transferring their membership to the closest church affiliated with their denomination, they visit five-to-ten different congregations and choose the one that comes closest to fulfilling their expectations.

Often, high on that Jones family expectation list is (a) conveniently located parking spaces, (b) the type of music they prefer, (c) sermons that speak to where they are in their personal faith journey, (d) an attractive ministry with teenagers, (e) a weekday Bible study group that welcomes newcomers, and (f) the mutual support group that they need at this point in life.

Many of these church shoppers also are looking for *choices* in (a) the worship format and/or (b) the music and/or (c) the hour when people gather for worship. One pressure toward a time choice: the growing number of Americans whose employers require them to work on Sunday.

Choices Generate Conflict

The most divisive consequence often surfaces when a tradition-driven congregation, in which most of the influential leaders were born before 1950, seeks to attract adults born after 1960. Those leaders hope that those younger adults will come and help perpetuate the traditions, values, practices, and priorities that have been at the heart of this congregation's ministry for six or more decades.

One common behavior response: *those younger generations decide that they would prefer to help pioneer the new.* They attend a new mission congregation that meets in the local high school on Sunday morning, which soon grows into a sizeable church in a new building.

Their departure replaces that painful "status quo versus change" conflict with lower-intensity but longer-lasting "blame-game conflict." Year after year, the tradition-driven

congregation's members *target responsibility for declining worship attendance* on (a) the pastor, (b) influential lay leaders, (c) governing board decisions, or (d) all of the above. Result: the church continues its cherished traditions, with a gradual membership decline, a rising median-age of attendees, and a slide toward extinction in two or three decades.

A different behavior response surfaces when the aging congregation's new pastor *does attract* scores of newcomers born after 1960. Some of that response pattern's most prominent features:

--Together, the new pastor and a coalition of older leaders and newcomer young adults agree to replace the organ music with a band and replace the cloth-bound hymnal with praise music projected on one or more screens.

--Instead of sending money to support missionaries, they use those dollars, plus thousands of additional dollars that attendees joyfully give, to build a continuing relationship with a sister church in Poland or Peru. Every year nine or ten members go as short-term volunteer missionaries to work in ministry with fellow Christians in that sister church.

--The traditional teacher-centered adult classes in the Sunday school are replaced by peer-led relational groups.

--Five years after the new pastor arrives, the average attendance at worship has more than doubled: from 120 to 260. Three-fourths of the regular attendees are people who came following the arrival of the new pastor.

--A few of the long-tenured members have died. Others have moved away. But most of the members who departed left to join another tradition-driven congregation. One big exodus came when the Sunday morning schedule was changed from (a) Sunday school at 9:00 a.m.... with worship at 10:30 a.m. to (b) worship at 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 o'clock with learning communities meeting during the middle period.

The Big Picture

Four sentences summarize the whole scenario:

First, millions of Americans born and reared in a producer-driven culture view the current wave of consumerism as somewhere between (a) betrayal and (b) proof that the Devil is alive and at work in this world.

Second, the most effective way to reach the generations born after 1960 is to be sensitive and responsive to their concerns.

Third, changes in procedures produce conflict.

Fourth, church leaders choose between (a) allowing their congregations to sink and disappear and (b) thoughtfully negotiating the rapids of change.