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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Big Ministry Trends for 2014

In his book about underdog strategies, Malcolm Gladwell recounts the biblical story of David and Goliath as a metaphor for the unexpected advantage. He gives examples of what he calls “the David opportunities,” those “occasions in which difficulties, paradoxically, turn out to be desirable.”¹ He claims that there is unexpected freedom that comes when people believe they have nothing to lose. He writes:

You see the giant and the shepherd in the Valley of Elah and your eye is drawn to the man with the sword and shield and the glittering armor. But so much of what is beautiful and valuable in the world comes from the shepherd, who has more strength and purpose than we ever imagine.

People of faith know that challenges for the church, in the long run, have always made it stronger.

David and the Church Face Goliath

For five decades, large-scale shifts in the economy, public values and beliefs, and social institutions have rocked the landscape for congregations and their leaders. What are the most significant trends calling leaders to creatively rethink what it takes to declare the gospel today?

Missing generations in congregations. Worshipers are older on average than the U.S. population. This age gap shows signs of increasing over time—up from an average worshiper age of 51 in 2001 to a projected average worshiper age of over 60 by 2020. The statistics reflect another ministry-altering age profile—the declining participation of worshipers under 45 years of age. Further, less than half of worshipers today have children still living at home.² Fewer congregations in the future will draw worshipers from all four generations (those with birthdates earlier than 1946; the Baby Boomers with birthdates of 1946 to 1964; Generation X born in the early 1960s to early 1980s; and the Millennials born after 1980).

Decline in weekly attendance. Fewer worshipers report attending worship services weekly. Instead, over the course of an average month, the percentage of worshipers attending all four weekend services dropped 2–5 percent compared to only a decade ago.

Growing numbers of unaffiliated adults. About one in five adults in the United States do not identify with any religion. The percentages are even higher among young adults under the age of 30. In fact, 30 percent report no religious affiliation. Over the past five years, the number of unaffiliated American adults soared to 33 million.³

Increasing diversity among members. The racial-ethnic makeup of congregations appears to be moving in a direction that reflects the diversity of the general population. As recently as 1998, almost three out of four congregations were predominately non-Hispanic, white churches (80 percent or more of the participants were white). That percentage dropped to 57 percent of congregations attracting more than 80 percent non-Hispanic whites by 2012. In addition, the latest study reveals that 44 percent of congregations have some African American families participating.⁴

Greater concentration of worshipers in large churches. The average congregation has fewer than one hundred people participating in worship or



BIVOCATIONAL MINISTRY WAS A GOOD FIT FOR PASTOR BOB.

other activities. Yet the typical worshiper attends a large church. The largest 10 percent of congregations draw more than half of all worshipers. Although this is a long-term trend, evidence suggests that the concentration of worshipers is rising.

More small churches. Other factors, in addition to the trends already mentioned, contributed to the surge in small churches. Many denominations planted churches fifty, seventy-five, or one hundred years ago in growing population areas. Those same communities stopped growing decades ago and some even experienced population decline. Thus, thousands of rural and small-town churches across America are located in places with fewer and fewer people.

Smaller budgets. Church expenses continue to escalate while the membership and resource base shrinks. One in three congregations reports a declining financial base. Funding one or more staff positions includes providing salaries, housing allowances, health-care benefits, and retirement plans. In addition, congregations further strain their budgets through building maintenance, electricity, and heating costs. In real dollars, most congregations raise more money than ever before, but their budget demands far outpace the monies coming in through contributions, endowments, or facility rentals.

Fewer full-time pastors serving one congregation. Although the majority of pastors still serve one congregation as a full-time minister, already about one in six Protestant pastors are part-time clergy. A common pattern among conservative Protestant churches is the bivocational pastor—holding down a secular job *and* a ministry position. One in three conservative Protestant pastors are bivocational compared to only 6 percent of mainline pastors. Multipoint or yoked parish assignments—where one pastor serves in two or more churches—is a more common among mainline Protestant pastors. Currently more than one in ten parish assignments involve multipoint service.

Lack of consensus about the pastor's role. The authority for pastoral leadership is based on (a) the calling to ministry as a vocation and (b) a profession built on education, training, and capabilities. When members place greater emphasis on calling than competence, disappointment and church conflict often result.⁵ Effective pastoral leadership requires a complex set of gifts and skills. Congregations need help articulating their primary mission, and then expressing this identity in worship, programs, and organizational structure. When members disagree about how ministry tasks should be carried out, their diverse perspectives about leadership style creates another layer of frustration and potential conflict.

Weakening institutional support for parish ministry. Denominational agencies—regional and national—and seminaries supply much-needed support for pastors and congregations. As the number of congregations and members decrease, the funding that congregations used to send on to support their work also dropped off. Staffing and mission program cuts, little continuing education for clergy, modest lay leadership development, and crisis management become the norm. Pastors feel it—they are expressing less satisfaction with the denominational support they receive.

Multiplying channels of communication. The explosion of new technology invites congregations to make use of mounting avenues for reaching out to members and the community. Finding leaders and members adept at new media use proves challenging for many congregations. Innovative technology use raises new questions about appropriate boundaries and ethical issues as congregations seek to share an ageless message.

Look for the Desirable in the Difficulty

Failure and defeat happen because well-worn strategies produce remarkably consistent results. God's work in the world depends on people of faith seeing with new eyes—the advantage or strength that is not obvious. Moving through difficulties always requires change and the willingness to let go of the past. Discuss these questions with others in the congregation.

- Looking back over the past ten years, which of these trends have had the greatest impact on our congregation's effectiveness?
- Reflecting on the congregation's future, where do you see openings for renewed creativity, strength, and purpose?
- What new strategies could we try to accomplish our ministry goals?

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), Kindle edition.
2. Research drawn from Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012).
3. Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/non-es-on-the-rise>.
4. David Briggs, *Ahead of the Trend*, The Association of Religion Data Archives, <http://blogs.thearda.com/trend>.
5. Jackson Carroll, *As One With Authority*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).