

CHURCH GROWTH 101

Option One

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From surveying congregations during the past 12 years, we learned from leaders that one of their *primary* concerns was attracting more people. From analyzing surveys from 154 congregations that surveyed once, we identified 11 aspects of ministry with significant links to church growth. Snapshots in time, however, strongly *suggest* but do not *confirm* causality (see Ellsworth and Ellsworth, 2010).

Recently, we turned our attention to almost 10,000 surveys from 37 ministries that surveyed twice. By comparing initial and follow-up results, we identified which *changes* leaders made that resulted in changes in attendance. Survey results showed that strengthening 9 of the 11 most promising essentials resulted in more people coming. Strengthening the other two items had no impact on attendance.

For churches wanting to grow, this paper provides what you need to know and the tools necessary to help you succeed. We would love to see more churches attracting more people. To help make this happen, we offer a **free option** that includes a short form of the *Church Life Survey*, guidelines, scoring sheet and norms. Norms help identify strengths and areas that need further development.

Option Two provides a longer survey that measures additional essentials that impact spiritual development and emotional well-being. A handbook for applying this option will become available on this website by January or February of 2012.

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Part 1, NINE ESSENTIALS THAT IMPACT ATTENDANCE.

Listed *in order* of their *impact* on attracting more people, they include:

- 1st Church leaders (clergy, lay leaders, staff, etc.) support trying new things.
- 2nd Leaders are willing to evaluate and use what works, and put aside what doesn't.
- 3rd There is a lot of joy and laughter in this place.
- 4th This church really shows people how to pray through sermons and classes.
- 5th We are continually reminded here of God's love for us.
- 6th I find the sermons here almost always inspiring and interesting.
- 7th This church community helps me identify and use my spiritual gifts.
- 8th Congregational songs here are very uplifting, inspiring and easy to sing.
- 9th The special music is excellent and soul satisfying (solos, choir, etc.).

RESULTS

☆ Almost 5 out of 10 churches (46%) were able to *significantly* improve the *average*

quality of their nine essentials. A change of 4 percent is considered significant. The *average* gain was 6.4 percent.

☆ Eighty-seven percent (87%) of churches with a gain of 4 percent or more were growing at the time of their follow-up survey. This means that only 13 percent of churches that strengthened their essentials *failed* to attract more people.

☆ Attendance *increased* an average of **18** percent *per year* in churches with at least four percent average improvement in the nine essentials

☆ However, in the 54 percent of churches that failed to significantly improve their essentials, attendance *decreased* an average of 8 percent *per year*.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that if your church significantly improves the average quality of these nine essentials by *at least* 4 percent, your ministry has an 87% chance of growing.

Reflections (beginning with Leadership)

Three *leadership* essentials, when strengthened, had the *strongest* impact on attracting more people. The correlations between *changes* in leadership essentials and subsequent *changes* in attendance ranged between .54 and .61. Correlations this strong indicate that strengthening leadership essentials played *very* strong roles in attracting more people.

The amazing impact that leadership had on church growth surprised us. Because leadership emerged as most important, it's helpful to review *why* strengthening these essentials played such an important role in church growth.

Supporting new things (item #1). When leaders became willing to support new things, the chances of introducing important changes increased. On the other hand, when leaders *failed* to support new things, attendance almost never improved. It's been said that the last words of a dying church are, "*But we've always done things that way.*"

Accountability (#2). Just trying new things alone is rarely enough. In one of the most amazing studies in church growth even reported, Paul Borden reported that *accountable* leadership played a major role in attracting more people. Church attendance in the region he worked with grew from 22,900 to 40,420 worshippers per Sunday within five years (see reference). Borden defined accountability as, "*Deciding what you want to change, working hard toward that change, and finding a way to objectively measure whether change is occurring or not.*"

Joy and laughter (#3). People are drawn to church communities where they experience joy and laughter. Leaders set the tone for this. Studies also have shown that successful leaders use humor. Humor, well used, helps reduce tension and conflict. Also, Joy and laughter improve health by enhancing the immune system.

Reflections (items 4 through 6).

The correlations between changes in items 4 to 6 and changes in attendance ranged between .44 and .51. This means that *really showing people how to pray* (#4), focusing more on *God's love* (#5), and offering *inspiring sermons* (#6) played *strong* roles in attracting more people.

Reflections (items 7 through 9).

Learning about and using *spiritual gifts* (#7), singing uplifting, inspiring and easy-to-sing *congregational songs* (#8), and hearing excellent soul satisfying *special music* (#9), played **moderately** strong roles in attracting more people. The correlations between these three items and changes in attendance ranged from .40 and .42. When the quality special music remained below normal, however, it chased people away. Offering poor quality special music and hard-to-sing songs rarely meets spiritual and emotional needs.

Practical Application.

If your ministry wants to see more people coming, your average of these nine essentials needs to improve *at least four points*. It pays to first identify which of the 9 ministry essentials have *clearly* risen to above-normal levels, and which need further development. Next, focus on strengthening essentials that are underdeveloped. Third, give your ministry sufficient time to make needed changes before surveying a second time. A gap of 18 to 24 months between baseline and follow-up surveys has proven to be ideal. An example of what can happen is given below:

“Morningside” church in Kalamazoo, MI. contacted Thriving Churches because they wanted to grow after years of remaining plateaued. Their baseline survey revealed that leadership was two points below normal. Both the minister and church leaders committed to focusing on strengthening the essentials that needed attention and to re-survey to measure progress made. Two and a half years later:

- ✓ All three aspects of *leadership* had increased between 11 and 15 points. Other essentials linked to life-transforming outcomes also improved significantly.
- ✓ Spiritual development and emotional well-being increased 9 points.
- ✓ Attendance rose from 137 to slightly more than 200!

“Morningside” did not achieve these amazing results until their third survey when they made a strong commitment to change. Persistence pays.

REFERENCES

- (1) Ellsworth, R. B. and Ellsworth, J.B. (2009). Life Transforming Congregations. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*. 6, 46-60.
- (2) Ellsworth, R. B. and Ellsworth, J.B. (2010). Churches that Enhance Spirituality and Well-being. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*. 7, 131-142.
- (3) Borden, Paul (2003). *Hit the Bullseye*. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press.

NOTE: By January of 2012, *Revealing Secrets of Growing Life Transforming Churches* will become available on this website. This handbook explores: (1) *Which* of 19 ministry essentials had the greatest impact on spiritual development and emotional well-being, (2) *Why* these ministry essentials have such an impact. (3) *How* churches strengthened these essentials. (4) Unraveling the mystery of *why* people involved in church life enjoy higher levels physical health and live an average of 8 years longer. Be prepared for some surprising findings.

Part Two, SURVEYING YOUR CONGREGATION

PREPARATION

- _____ 1. Before surveying, announce to the worshippers *when* “Survey Sunday” *will* occur. Let them know why you are surveying.
- _____ 2. Reproduce the survey and insert into each Sunday bulletin. We recommend that surveys be printed on **yellow** or other colored paper.
- _____ 3. Make sure there are pencils in each row of seats.
- _____ 4. It’s *extremely* important to appoint a survey coordinator. This person needs to be a *detail person* who makes sure that enough surveys and pencils have been prepared, that volunteers needed are available, etc.

SURVEYING

- _____ 5. During opening announcements on “Survey Sunday,” let people know that a **special time** has been set aside toward the end of worship to complete the survey. By having one less song or shortening announcements, surveying will not prolong your regular worship time.
- _____ 6. Toward the end of service, let people know when it’s time to complete the survey. **Provide quite instrumental music** to help people relax and stay focused. It takes about five minutes to complete.
- _____ 7. Some churches place collection boxes at exits with volunteers reminding people to put their survey in a box as they leave worship. Others ask congregants to pass their completed survey to the end of the row where volunteers pick them up.

FOLLOW-UP

- _____ 8. If your ministry wants to obtain survey responses from those who were *not* present on “Survey Sunday,” simply announce the following Sunday, “If you were **not here last Sunday** when we surveyed our congregation, you have an opportunity to complete a survey today. We very much want your input. At the end of worship, please see *(name)* after worship” (Ask *name* to stand up).
- _____ 9. After surveying and reviewing your church’s results be sure that someone or some group is designated to *carry the energy for change*. Talking about and planning actions alone rarely produces significant changes.

We strongly recommend that the church seriously consider a “survey action team” to discuss and recommend actions. This is especially important for larger churches where boards have little time to devote to strengthening aspects of ministry that need further development. An action team needs to include a pastor, a board member who communicates with other church leaders, and three or so interested others. It empowers people when members of this team take turns facilitating.

- _____ 10. **Be sure to re-survey in 18 to 24 months.** This provides time enough to introduce changes and let them “settle in.” Re-surveying is essential to learning how much progress has been made and which areas need development.

Part Three. DIRECTIONS FOR SCORING SURVEYS (*FREE Option*)

We highly recommend finding or hiring someone with experience in using *spreadsheets* to reenter the survey data. This communicates objectivity to congregants since this person has *no* stake in the survey results. Using a spreadsheet makes it easy to accurately record and score the survey results.

Note: If your ministry would like Thriving Churches to score your surveys or prepare a report, call 541-382-7404. Email: *revsrobjan at bendtell.net*.

It's *important* for the data entry person (DEP) to follow the process described below because the norms were based on this scoring process. Comparing church scores with norms will have little relevance if the process described isn't followed.

Instructions for the Data Entry Person:

____ 1. When the surveys have been completed, the DEP needs to separate them into *six piles*, namely, those coming: (1) 1 to 3 times, (2) between 1 and 2 months, (3) 3 to 11 months, (4) 1 to 3 years, (5) over 3 years, and (6) those who *did not check* the length of time coming.

____ 2. Combine the six piles into one, with the surveys of those coming 1, 2 or 3 times on *top*, between 2 and 3 months next, etc. Then, *write consecutive numbers on each survey* in the stack, beginning with "1" for the first survey on top of the pile. These numbers help in case you later need to locate the recording of a questionable survey.

____ 3. For surveys completed by *those* coming less than 2 months (group 1 and 2), *enter only their responses to the worship items*. Why? Because those coming less than two months have little information regarding the other survey items 4 through 9.

____ 4. Next, enter scores for survey items for those coming over months, then 1 to 3 years, and finally, those coming 3+ years. We recommend that surveys, where length-of-time coming was not answered, *not be recorded*. Why? Because these persons may be new, not know much about the church, and leave many items blank. Blanks receiving "0's" indicate a NO answer. Including *these* surveys will erroneously lower church scores.

____ 5. *Before* calculating the averages for each item, *carefully* check the spreadsheet, searching for *and* correcting scores other than 0's or 1's for items #1 to item #9. Item #10 (worship attendance), however, yields scores of 0, 1 and 2.

____ 6. Compute the **average** percent of the congregation checking *yes* to items 1 to 9. Use a formula that automatically calculates averages.

____ 7. Enter these average scores on the **Survey Scoring & Norms Sheet**. This will allow church leaders to identify strengths and areas that need further development.

Interpreting Survey Results.

From the average scores for each item entered on the "Survey Scoring and Norms" sheet, leaders can see which ministry essentials are already above normal, and which need further development. This information helps leaders set priorities regarding which aspects of ministry they want to focus on strengthening first.

CHURCH LIFE SURVEY
SHORT FORM

Sharing your experiences in this church helps us evaluate how well we are meeting important spiritual and personal needs and to plan for the future.

How long have you been coming to this church? (Check ✓ one): ___ 1st, 2nd or 3rd time
___ Between 1 and 2 months, ___ 2 to 11 months, ___ 1 to 3 years, ___ over 3 years.

Instructions: Please check (✓) each statement that is TRUE for you.

- ___ (1) Congregational songs here are very uplifting, inspiring and easy to sing.
- ___ (2) The special music is excellent and soul satisfying (solos, choir, etc.)
- ___ (3) I find the sermons here almost always inspiring and interesting.
- ___ (4) We are continually reminded here of God's love for us.
- ___ (5) This church really shows people how to pray through sermons and classes.
- ___ (6) This church community helps me to identify and use my spiritual gifts.
- ___ (7) Church Leaders (clergy, lay leaders, staff, etc.) support trying new things.
- ___ (8) Leaders are willing to evaluate and use what works, and put aside what doesn't.
- ___ (9) There is a lot of joy and laughter in this place.

If you have been coming for several months, please check (✓) one of the answers below.

(10) Worship attendance, compared to a year ago, has . . .

___ (O) Declined somewhat ___ (1) Remained about same ___ (2) Increased

----- (Fold) -----

To help us better meet various needs, please provide the following information.

AGE RANGE (check ✓ one): ___ Under 18, ___ 18-39, ___ 40-54, ___ 55-64, ___ 65+

GENDER (mark one): ___ Female, ___ Male

Thank You!

SCORING AND NORMS FOR THE CHURCH LIFE SURVEY (Short Form)

Your Church _____ # Surveyed _____ Date _____

WORSHIP	<u>Norm</u>	<u>Your %</u>	<u>Diff.</u>	<u>Comments</u>
1 Cong. Songs	81%	_____	_____	
2 Sp. Music	85%	_____	_____	
3 Sermons	88%	_____	_____	
4 God's Love	88%	_____	_____	
Average	86%	_____	_____	

SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS

7 Show How to Pray	62%	_____	_____
6 Identify/use Sp Gifts	61%	_____	_____
Aver.	62%	_____	_____

LEADERSHIP

7 Trying New Things	75%	_____	_____
8 Evaluate	65%	_____	_____
9 Joy and Laughter	88%	_____	_____
Aver.	76%	_____	_____

10 Attendance Score _____ (Key: Declining = 0.1 to 1.05 Growing = 1.4 to 1.9)

<u>How long coming?</u>	<u>Norm</u>	<u>Your %</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>(Norm)</u>	<u>Your %</u>
1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd time	5%	_____	Under 18	4%	_____
Between 1&2 months	6%	_____	18-39	17%	_____
2-11 months	10%	_____	40-54	31%	_____
1-3 year	20%	_____	55-64	23%	_____
3+ years	59%	_____	65+	25%	_____

<u>Gender</u>	<u>(Norm)</u>	<u>Your %</u>
Female	65%	_____