

When Our Calling Isn't Enough

Recently we had the privilege of participating in several church planting events, including ARC, Exponential East, and Stadia.

The level of passion and enthusiasm we saw was unparalleled. I can't tell you how many pastors spoke to me about their calling. They left no doubt that this was the decision God had asked them to make.

Meeting these expectant pastors reminded me of an article I had read several months before in the [Christian Post](#). The article referenced research done by Warren Bird and Ed Stetzer claiming that U.S. churches were no longer in decline.

Their primary metric to prove this was that, according to their research done in 2010, 4,000 new churches were being planted each year, compared to 3,500 that close their doors. Essentially working out to a positive net 500 churches.

A secondary data source, from the Barna Group and mentioned by [Pastor James McDonald](#) in a 2013 article, claimed that there are now [4,000 churches that close each year](#), equal to the number of church plants.

In summary, anywhere from 3,500-4,000 churches close each year, while approximately the same number are planted in their place.

There's positives and negatives to take from this data, but the simple fact remains that the average American church has an attendance of 75 people, and approximately 80% of all churches are either stagnant or declining in terms of attendance growth.

Advice from popular pastor Tim Keller, quoted in the aforementioned Christian Post article, suggests one potential solution to the problem, "The only way to increase the number of Christians in a city is to plant thousands of new churches."

But is this really the answer?

There must be a reason why some churches survive, grow, and thrive, while 4,000 others close each year.

Countless church consulting groups have identified the "stuck" nature of many churches, and are now creating programs specifically tailored to create growth.

Two of these programs in particular target the small church. Tony Morgan's Unstuck Group launched a program call [GrowthSolutions](#) with the goal of helping small churches, "take intentional steps towards growing their church to 500 in weekly attendance."

The other group, simply titled [Grow](#), is a ministry of Church of the Highlands, and since 2010

they've been pursuing a goal of, "helping 1,000 churches under 1,000 in weekly attendance break that barrier."

The two initiatives represent comprehensive programs, led by industry experts, dedicated to helping churches find a way to survive, grow, and thrive.

At the end of the day though, if for a second we can remove spiritual elements such as faith and calling, church success comes down to a single word: **participation**.

As a church, your best ideas, most well thought out programs, and truest intentions cannot survive the absence of participation.

On the positive side, when we have participation, it allows for amazing growth and spiritual maturity through those very same discipleship programs.

Here are three ways churches can focus on increasing participation without sacrificing calling.

Increasing Participation Comes Down to Three Elements

1. Generate Excitement by Leading with Generosity

In our book, *Be Prolific*, Brad Leeper of Generis made this profound statement, "Generosity is now the best apologetic we as Christ followers have to a watching and needy world."

His point is that generosity is now so counter-culture, that to see an individual or group practicing it in ridiculous excess is the one thing that catches people's attention. As a pastor, lead the charge. When was the last time you publically gave financially to your church? Or to another church or ministry?

During the holidays this last year, we matched the first Sunday offering of churches who signed on with Pushpay, up to \$500, as a way to generate excitement from individual givers. Find a way to create a matching moment in your church as an excitement generator!

2. Make First Time & On-Going Participation Easy

This may seem like a no-brainer, but the statistics still remain the same. 80% of church attendees do not give or volunteer on a regular basis. I refuse to believe that these 80% are just extremely selfish individuals, seeking to take more than they give. I imagine them to be not so different from myself: busy, slightly distracted, managing a family, and splitting time between work, church, a non-profit, side projects, hobbies, and quality time with my wife.

These aren't excuses, they simply speak to the fast-moving and always-on culture that most of us find ourselves in everyday. As a church that is serious about increasing participation, how do we interrupt that flow for a moment to encourage first time engagement?

Use technology to do three things really well: make giving & church communications available

through apps on the mobile phone, collect and manage email addresses to send highly targeted invitations, and be proactive in creating on-going real-time conversations through social media.

3. Never Lose Sight of the True Goal

Rachel Held Evans wrote a spectacular commentary in the Washington Post this past week, titled, "[Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church cool.](#)"

Her point is that participation isn't tied to flash or bang, but rather to authenticity and substance. For example, "You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God."

Echoing her sentiment is blogger Amy Peterson, also mentioned in Evans' article, "At church, I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone's marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community."

The true goal is not participation in our church, but rather participation in the life of being a disciple of Christ. Keeping this front and center is essential as we move away from entertainment and towards true church growth.

I'll leave you with a final line that I heard from one of my favorite worship leaders, Will Reagan of United Pursuit. During a recent worship set he made this statement, "There's a new development in Christianity where we're beginning to see it as more of a participation and less of a club."

Amen!

> [Read more from Derek.](#)