

Your Attendance is Declining: Here is One Big Idea to Keep in Mind

If you track attendance at your church (and who doesn't), the vast majority of church leaders are tracking numbers that probably bother them.

That can lead into a death spiral of trying to drive greater attendance, only to discover more disappointment down the road.

The mission of the church is the same in every generation. But the methods we use—our *strategy*—has to change, as [I outlined here](#).

So what's one of the biggest changes we're going to see?

Simple. If you want to see your church grow, stop trying to *attract* people and start trying to *engage* people.

In the future church, engagement is the new attendance.

If church leaders put as much effort into trying to engage people in the mission of the church as they used to (or still) put into trying to drive attendance, they would see a huge spike in both engagement *and* attendance.

Conversely, leaders who focused solely on attendance or misconstrue what engagement is will continue to see declining attendance.

At [Connexus Church](#), where I serve as Founding and Teaching pastor, we're seeing encouraging spikes in physical and online attendance (the two are not mutually exclusive) at established locations, our online campus and our new location.

The growth in the number of new unchurched people has come for sure by the grace of God, but also after almost five years of focusing on increasing engagement in [these 7 ways](#). I also outlined why we made the shift and many people have made the shift in my book, [Lasting Impact](#).

Church leaders, if you cared as much about engagement as you did about attendance, you'd likely see a spike in attendance as your mission grows and expands.

So why is engagement the new attendance?

Here are 5 reasons.

1. Attendance Was Never The Goal

When did we get the idea that church attendance was the ultimate goal?

Flip back to New Testament days.

Jesus never said ‘Attend me.’ He said ‘Follow me.’

The only reason you would follow Jesus (in Jesus’ day) is because you were either intrigued by who he was and what he did, or because you had come to believe that he was who he said he was.

In other words, you were *engaged*.

You didn’t *attend* Jesus. You followed him.

A similar dynamic emerged in the first-century church.

Early Christians didn’t attend church. They *were* the church.

If you look back at the genesis of the Jesus movement, the idea of attendance as a hallmark would have been completely foreign.

You only attended because you were engaged. Period.

2. Attendance Grows Out Of Engagement Anyway

As the Christian movement grew and it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, mere church ‘attendance’ became an option.

Fast forward to our lifetime, and even in growing, effective churches, attendance had become an established path to engagement.

The big idea was this: come, and eventually you’ll get engaged.

That worked (quite effectively, actually) when people used to flock to church.

But in an era when the number of unchurched is constantly on the rise and even Christians don’t attend church as often anymore ([here are 10 reasons for that](#)), that strategy is becoming less and less effective.

Yet, many churches (even growing churches) are still counting on getting people to *attend*, hoping it drives engagement.

The shelf life of that strategy is limited because the number of people who want to attend church drops every year.

To say it clearly one more time, in the future church attendance won't drive engagement; engagement will drive attendance.

The new goal is to get people engaged faster and to engage people more deeply in the true mission of the church.

In the future, the engaged will attend because, in large measure, only the engaged will remain.

3. Trying To Attract People In A Post-Christian Culture Can Work Against The Mission

I am all for making church as attractive and accessible as possible.

But in the future if that's your *only* approach (better lights, cooler vibe, hoping people will come), you will get diminishing results. (I wrote on the death and rebirth of [cool church here](#).)

Why is that?

Well, as outlined above, when attendance was more normative and in some senses 'automatic' in our culture, attraction was a decent strategy.

Because people would go to church, creating a *better* church was a good approach.

But (and here's the underbelly), it also fed into consumerism.

Consumerism has defined the last century of North American and Western culture.

To some extent, the attractional church has played into consumerism. Build something attractive and people will come.

Again, that strategy was very effective when people instinctively flocked to churches, not just in terms of numbers, but also in terms of baptisms and authentic faith-building. And you shouldn't make your church inaccessible or unattractive on purpose. That's just...weird.

But in the process, building attractive, relevant churches has had an unintended side-effect: people have come to evaluate church by what they get out of it, not by what they put into it.

That's a mistake.

Along the way, discipleship has even been redefined in many circles to mean consumption of knowledge. The more you know, the more mature you are. I believe that's a flawed approach ([here's why](#)).

Authentic discipleship has always been about dying to self. It's about *giving* far more than it is about *getting*.

Again, I'm not slamming the attractional church. I'm all for building bridges to the culture, not erecting barriers.

Anyone who knows church knows that at the heart of every attractional church is a core of Christians who sacrifice—who give, who serve and who invite.

What's exciting is that selflessness will move to the forefront in the future church because those who remain will be engaged in the mission.

4. Our Culture Is Ripe For An Alternative To Consuming

One of the frequent criticisms non-Christians levy at Christians is that we're self-indulgent and hypocritical.

Those critiques are not without warrant.

As a more selfless church emerges (even excellent, selfless churches), that will drive more curiosity and interest from unchurched people.

While you can [debate what Millennials really want out of life](#), there appears to be a growing attraction in our culture to rebel against consumerism,

People are longing for an alternative to life as they know it. The church is that alternative.

In the future church, Christians obsessed with giving away their lives will eclipse Christians obsessed with themselves and their preferences.

5. People Become The Most Passionate About The Things With Which They're Most Involved

A final reason that engagement will drive future church growth is simply this: people become most passionate about the things with which they're most involved.

Just talk to a football dad or a baseball mom. Or your foodie friend who just found yet another recipe. Or your triathlete friend who set another personal best.

Engagement fuels involvement. Involvement fuels passion. Passion fuels invitation.

That's why your friend wants you to *try* that recipe, to *watch* the game with them and at least *attempt* a 5k.

Engagement leads to invitation. Invitation leads to unchurched people following Jesus.

In many ways, this can only be a good thing.

> [Read more from Carey.](#)
