

10 ways to empty pews fast

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With all the attention given to dwindling church attendance, leading to deteriorating finances and crumbling buildings, it is time to talk about the handful of churches with a different problem - too many members.

When churches get too big, unregulated growth creates problems like crowded parking lots, long lines during Communion, packed pews (forcing some members to sit in the front) and multiple services.

Longer hours of operation can also lead to salary increases for the choir director and organist, hiring an associate pastor, or worse yet -- a new building program.

While cash-strapped churches struggle with heating, lighting and maintaining historic buildings, the responsible thing for overpopulated churches to do is downsize.

If your church has an embarrassment of riches, it's time to discourage visitors, alienate current members, and de-emphasize your church's role in the community -- before it hits your pocketbook. I offer the following modest proposals.

First, impose a litmus test for new members. Forget about diversity and inclusion; that leads to dissent. Consider how a newcomer would fit into your existing structure. Race, economic status, sexual orientation, education, age and national origin should all factor into your review process. People who are "different" will start asking questions, or worse yet, suggest doing things differently.

Second, incorporate arcane rituals into your liturgy, which are not

printed in the bulletin. Current members will need to memorize the responses and chants, but then they will be able to recognize newcomers in their midst. Churches with too many members have difficulty doing this at present, because many longtime members are total strangers to one another.

Third, avoid provocative sermons. This just makes people think for themselves, gives them the false impression that their opinions matter and suggests that the minister does not have all the answers. A never-ending supply of platitudes, slogans and sound bites will drive away those who have differing opinions, and alienate those who do not share your narrow beliefs.

Fourth, keep church finances a secret. An inner circle can periodically renominate and re-elect themselves to office, encouraging would-be activists to seek spiritual development elsewhere. Besides, those 24/7 Christians would just create demand for additional activities the other six days of the week.

Fifth, devise an order of worship, and stick to it. This will be a comfort to older members, who will be able to nap during the predictable portions of the service. Loud music just prior to the offertory, and at the benediction, will rouse them in time to open their purses, and grab their car keys.

Sixth, discourage lingering after the service. Do not offer coffee and tea in the parlor. This just encourages social interaction between members, which would only lead to demand for greater involvement of your church in community activities (like food pantries, tutoring for immigrants, homeless shelters and youth groups).

Seventh, encourage mediocrity and predictability in your music program. Innovative, diverse music

only attracts newcomers, including people who don't look like you, talk like you, or think like you. If too many newcomers return next Sunday, this will eventually lead to a new building program.

Eighth, avoid all reference to contemporary issues in your sermons. Iraq, abortion, gay/lesbian ordination, clergy abuse, racism, sexism and economic justice are all taboo topics. Focus on obscure scholarship in scriptural translation and interpretation. Besides, there is no way you can relate what happened in a desert 2,000 years ago to what is happening in America today.

Ninth, avoid publicity. Publicizing special events just leads to increased membership. Keep exterior signage to a minimum. If your church has a Web site, keep it stagnant and unimaginative. You never know who might drop in, so avoid any current, timely or attractive content. Besides, it's a lot of work keeping a Web site up to date.

Tenth, justification by faith alone keeps things simple. Involvement in social justice and acts of mercy would just open a floodgate of seekers swelling your ranks.

I hope these 10 suggestions will help your own congregation avoid the financial pain of a new building program and permit you to maintain your status quo. Those of us with empty pews and full coffee pots will gladly accept your hand-me-downs. My own church is so inclusive, they even let me join.

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