

## The Changing Church: *Participation Patterns*

People interact differently with churches today than they used to. They attend less, use the internet more, and no longer defer to the church as an authoritative voice in their lives. This has serious implications for the church in terms of how we deliver our message and carry out our mission. Here are the most significant changes that impact churches.

1. *The redefinition of "regular."* Once upon a time a "regular" church member was defined as someone who attends church services 3-4 times per month. Now, "regular" is defined by researchers such as Lifeway and Barna as 1-2 times per month. They have changed their definition of regular because the attendance pattern of many committed church members has changed. They are routinely out half the time due to changing work patterns and other activities. Thom Rainer says this is the single biggest reason for the decline in church attendance. "Members attend with less frequency than they did just a few years ago" (thomrainer.com, 8.19.13, "#1 Reason for the Decline in Church Attendance").

2. *The collapse of "cultural Christianity."* Church growth strategies once were based on the existence of a large group of "non-attending but interested" people in the community. They're still a large group; they're just not interested. Fewer and fewer folks who are not already committed church members are interested in becoming one. More and more people who used to describe themselves as "Christians" because of a cultural or familial connection with a church now check the box "none" when asked about their religious leanings. They're not against you going to church; they just have no interest themselves. Churches that put on big "attractational" events as a growth strategy are largely attracting people from other churches (church-hopping is another change in participation patterns), not the unchurched population.

3. *The decline in biblical literacy.* Increasingly the language churches use to tell their message sounds like Swahili to the average person. Here is how Dan Morgan, a Southern Baptist professor and church planting missionary, described the situation to me: "As more and more people are several generations out from church, the traditional church is losing its ability to converse about spiritual things due to a lack of common vocabulary." And the loss of biblical literacy is in the church, too. The preacher can no longer refer to a Bible story and assume that it is familiar to most people in the pews. Chances are it's not, at least not in a way that is consistent with the meaning of the biblical text.

4. *Online all the time.* If a person decides to interact with a church, the first touch will nearly always be through the church's website, closely followed by interaction with church-related social media and blogs. A lot of decisions are made about churches by people who never set foot in the church's facilities. And if they do show up, they're still online all the time. If the pastor in his Sunday sermon refers to some historical person or fact, within seconds he is being fact-checked via smart phone by many in the congregation. Increasingly people interact with, give to, and draw conclusions about churches through digital means. It's the world we live and minister in.

5. *Slow to trust.* Deference is no longer given to the church in any matter. Trust is slow to develop and must be earned. Millennial parents don't just take your word for it that their children will be secure and well cared for in your children's ministry; they must see it happening. And when you deliver your message as a church, "the Bible says so" won't have much currency with unreached people in your community. They do not automatically accept Scripture as authoritative. They will look at what you do – for a long time - to determine if what you say has any relevance.

6. *High value on relationships and "hands-on" participation.* Millennials especially are less interested in crowds and more interested in conversation and relationships. In terms of Bible teaching, they want it straight and they want to discuss it in groups. In the past the big Sunday worship event was seen as the key to reaching new people. As Millennials, the largest generation in American history, take their place of prominence in our society, small group ministries and team projects will be increasingly important for churches. "Increasingly a church without conversation is a church without converts" (careynieuwhof.com, 6.7.13, "12 Cultural Trends Church Leaders Can't Ignore").

You may not like some of the changes that are affecting church participation patterns (I don't), but that is irrelevant. The changes are here. Here are some ways you can address them positively.

1. *Raise the standards for membership.* High standards are more motivational than low ones. Consider how you can raise the bar through a new members' class, a membership covenant, and preaching and teaching on biblical church membership (see Rainer's book, [I Am a Church Member](#)).

2. *Focus on key participation behaviors.* Be realistic about how many times a week people are going to participate in church activities. Focus on the key ones, the ones that are most important for growth as a disciple. If you can get people to participate in worship, a small group, and a place of service related to the church's ministry and mission, then you have accomplished a lot. And the more attendance options you can give them, the better. A lot of people are at work when you are at church.

3. *Refurbish your online presence.* It doesn't have to be amazing, just informative, attractive, and easy to use for people who are not familiar with the church. Make sure it is regularly updated.

4. *Watch your language.* Your mother told you this, but she meant something different. Give thought to what level of Bible knowledge is required to understand what you are saying as a church.

5. *Elevate your small groups strategy.* Especially for Millennials, groups matter a lot. Conversation and relationships are increasingly important in making disciples. Developing leaders, starting new groups, and synergizing groups with the church's mission are how you raise your game.

6. *Develop a "sending" strategy for your local mission field.* Make sure your church's mission statement is very clear and make sure it is being directly applied in your own backyard. Multiply opportunities for hands-on involvement in things that bless people in your community. Tap-in to what people in your community are already doing (think schools, youth sports, and community events).

Bottom line: Is your church designed to interact with people today or in some previous period?