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| 9 Top Trends Impacting Church Leadership

By Doug Powe And Ann A. Michel On June 6, 2018

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Lewis Center Director F. Douglas Powe and Associate Director Ann A. Michel outline some of the major trends evident in their research and interactions with church leaders. While many of the trends are quite sobering, they also reveal possibilities for innovative and adaptive approaches to ministry.

1. Changes in church attendance patterns

Since 2001, worship attendance had been trending downward in many denominations, following a modest rebound in the 1990s. And declining worship attendance now plagues evangelical and Catholic churches in addition to the mainline. One contributing factor seems to be that "regular attenders" come to worship less regularly than in the past when pillars of the church would be in the pew virtually every Sunday. Today, many churches report that even their most faithful members sometimes attend only a couple of Sundays a month.

2. Changing life styles

The changing nature of young adulthood for generations born in the wake of the Baby Boom is one reason young adults are so absent in many churches today. Delayed marriage is perhaps the most notable trend. Since the 1960s, the average age for marriage among both men and women has risen 25 percent. Churches assuming that young adults will return once they marry and have children may be waiting a long time — forever, in fact, because these young adults may never

“ Savvy congregations understand that church engagement can no longer be narrowly contained by traditional ideas about where and when church happens.

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come back. Churches do just about as well in attracting young marrieds with children as they ever did, but this group has become a much smaller slice of the young adult population. The percentage of singles exceeded the percentage of marrieds among American adults for the first time in 2014, suggesting the need to adapt ministry models that are explicitly or implicitly focused on families.

3. The impact of income inequality

In his poignant book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, sociologist Robert Putnam describes how growing income inequality has eroded the American middle class, increasing fragile families and at-risk children. While many churches claim a calling to support families and children in need, the sad fact is that non-traditional families — singles, unwed mothers, divorced parents, grandparents raising children — often feel unwelcome in congregations they see as bastions of middle-class propriety. Churches often draw their participants from a decreasing cohort of “traditional families” whose lifestyle is increasingly associated with higher levels of income and education, while lower income families are increasingly dechurched, with each successive generation more distant from the church.

4. Demographic shifts and increasing cultural diversity

Demographers predict that non-whites will constitute the majority of the U.S. population by 2040 or 2050, and gentrification is reshaping the urban landscape in many major cities. Typically, congregations are slow to adjust to demographic change in their communities. And many urban and inner-ring suburban churches, weakened over decades as people moved further and further from cities, may not be nimble enough to adjust to the reversed flow. It is increasingly important that successful church leaders prioritize intercultural competence and inclusive approaches to ministry.

5. Changes in how people connect with congregations

We often expect that new people will become part of our churches by first attending worship, then visiting for a few Sundays before being received as members. But many newcomers today are less interested in joining even if they plan to stay around and get involved. Additionally, worship is no longer the only point of entry. Savvy congregations are developing mission activities, small groups, and online experiences as meaningful points of entry. They understand that church engagement no longer conforms to traditional ideas about where and when church happens.

6. The imperative of reaching beyond church walls

The idea that a church can simply fling open its doors and welcome those who come rests on the outdated cultural assumption that people wake up on Sunday morning motivated to find their way to a church. Successful congregations need to become “go to” churches rather than “come here” churches by extending their spiritual presence into the day-to-day places where people actually live and gather. New research on religion in everyday life provides hope to congregations that seek to connect with the spiritual impulses and religious memories of “nones” and “dones.”

7. Changes in how faith formation happens

How are people being brought up in faith today? Many are no longer taught at home. The Sunday School movement is waning. And preaching isn't as significant a factor if people attend worship more erratically. Congregations attentive to these trends are developing more intentional discipleship systems, emphasizing organic approaches to faith formation such as relational mentoring, and exploring how spiritual development can be fostered through mission engagement.

8. Creative approaches to church financing

Just as the paradigm of church membership is challenged as people grow more skeptical of institutions, so too is reliance on pledging and tithing. Online giving holds great promise, not just for established givers, but also for those who might be reached through creative online fundraising on social media platforms. Looking to the example of other nonprofits, some congregations are more aggressively pursuing major gifts. And others are leveraging the value of their buildings and property through rentals or redevelopment opportunities.

9. Changes in the religious workforce

As the average age of ordained clergy continues to rise in most denominations, the contours of the religious workforce are evolving with more part-time and bi-vocational clergy, with more laity taking on significant roles as paid staff or volunteers, and with more of those called to ministry serving in non-congregational settings. These changes have sweeping impact on how congregations fulfill their missions and on how people are prepared for ministry, and they require much more study.

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