

Nearly 30% of our churches are growing – here's why

First the good news: 28% of the parishes in the Diocese of Toronto are experiencing growth in attendance, number of givers or both. That means that 54 parishes among 194 are doing something that is setting them apart from the others.

The inconvenient truth about congregational health, however, is that nearly 70% of our parishes are experiencing decline. For some the decline is gentle and hardly noticeable. For others, the decline has been severe – losing 40% or more of their Sunday worshippers since 2012. As the decline intensifies it leads to low morale among existing congregants and may eventually signal the closure of a church and disestablishment of the parish. About 20% of our parishes are in, or perilously close – to this reality.

Our church is amid decline in terms of attendance and participation; it cannot be avoided. Across the mainline Protestant denominations in Canada and the Global West – including Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian and United churches – the decline has been happening since the 1970s. It is only recently, however, with the aging and passing of the first born of the boomer generation, that the pace of decline has accelerated.

There are glimmers of hope. Diaspora congregations – whose homelands include China, the Middle East, Africa and the Philippines – are growing at an unprecedented rate in the Diocese of Toronto. There are at least fourteen acknowledged congregations in our churches representing a Sunday worship population of close to 1,000. These congregations are not factored in to the data noted earlier. Another sign of hope is the emergence of worship centres in locations that have laid dormant for some time. These are commonly referred to as reboots in church language and we currently have two.

The reasons for decline are countless. At the top of the list is societal change. When going to church stopped being obligatory and when we abandoned the notion of a common pause day, it was only a matter of time before church worship itself became just another choice.

It is very hard to grow a church – let alone start one from scratch as we are presently doing at St. Stephen in Maple, Ontario. They take special leadership, commitment and a knack for thinking outside the box. If we assume that people have spiritual needs beyond a nice walk down a country foot path, then we need to find a mechanism that captures their attention and engages their participation. It might mean holding services at times other than Sunday morning or framing worship around a meal or other community gathering.

To this end, I have identified seven indicators that lead to church vitality in our diocese. Not every parish that is growing is doing every one of these things, though most are.

- 1) Giving to church ministry is exceptional. In the Diocese of Toronto, the average gift per year through envelope giving or pre-authorized giving is \$1,509. In our healthiest parishes the average gift is \$1,900. Our top giving parish has an average of over \$4,000 per giver. Exactly ten of our parishes have average giving over \$3,000 per giver.
- 2) There is a breadth of engagement in outreach. Our top parishes often give more than 10% of their total offertory to outreach initiatives: food banks, hot lunches, out of the cold, after

school clubs, FaithWorks, mission trips to the developing world, etc. Some, like St. Stephen in-the-Fields take outreach so seriously that it defines who they are, and they dedicate well over 20% of their giving to this purpose. Churches need to look beyond their own walls and seek to involve as many parishioners as possible.

- 3) Newcomers are welcomed and invited to become involved in the ministry of the parish. The role of the greeter should be more than simply handing out the order of service. We need to present our very best to new comers: welcome them at the door, interact with them at the sign of peace and during coffee hour, and then invite them to become involved in some ministry.
- 4) Clergy are active in promoting discipleship and Christian formation. Canon Harold Percy (now retired from Trinity Anglican Church in Streetsville) notes in his book Your Church Can Thrive that “the failure to make disciple-making a priority is the basic cause of our current malaise and stagnation.” He contends that churches need to teach the gospel, teach people how to pray, read scripture, forgive, worship, give generously, model Christ in their lives and give witness to the work of the Holy Spirit.
- 5) The church makes connecting with young people a priority. Parish leaders often lament the absence of young people from their pews. Connecting with adolescents needs to be part of our core witness. How do we involve young people: Are they serving at the altar? Do they participate in reading the word of God, singing, playing an instrument, welcoming newcomers and organizing events? Young people are pining for opportunities to be active in the church. We need to find ways to capture their energy and engage with them.
- 6) The church has a well-maintained website and uses various communication methods. If you are still promoting the strawberry social from 2014 then something has gone amiss. Healthy parishes use their on-line footprint to communicate with church members and seekers alike. They post sermons, weekly bulletins, ministry opportunities and lots of photos of church members doing stuff.
- 7) Healthy churches experiment with new liturgies, music, missional engagement, giving vehicles and roles for volunteers. If we believe that we have already tried that or that a certain idea will not work then we have no chance of being successful. I know of several churches who have grown their congregations by adding a third service targeted at a specific demographic or modifying the format of existing ones.

Our church is going to experience unbelievable change over the next decade. We will become a lot leaner and there will be fewer of us worshipping on Sundays in a traditional format. That doesn't mean that the remaining churches cannot be full of energy, vigor and hope. Perhaps worship will be held in the form of a sit-down meal or informal coffee-hour. Perhaps our youth will be engaged in more hands-on ministry or mentored by life-long members of the congregation. Perhaps our missional engagement will take place in a pub or with community service provider.

We have seen that while there is a place for traditional ways of doing church, those that are thriving are doing things differently – they must. It means that stewardship education too will need to adapt, becoming more closely aligned with discipleship and faith formation.

Change is unavoidable but decline can be reversed. Many will close or amalgamate. Others will reconfigure their ministry to better respond to their demographic or geographic reality. Can we, collectively, realign the church to arrest decline and set our churches on the path to health and growth? Will you take up the challenge to do church differently in your own worship community and help lay the foundation for a healthy, vital Anglican presence in the years to come? Are you open to being creative in the way you connect with the community, newcomers and young people?

Thinking that says we've tried that before or it didn't work needs to be reconsidered. Just because that idea didn't work at that time isn't reason enough to not try again. A hallmark for any church of the future will be change and adaptability.