

## Seven Habits of Highly Effective Parishes

First the good news: 25% of the parishes in the Diocese of Toronto are experiencing growth in attendance, number of givers or both. That means that 51 parishes are doing something that is setting them apart from the others.

The inconvenient truth about congregational health, however, is that 75% 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 2009. 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.

Our church is amid decline in 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. Other denominations are not immune. The Evangelical and Roman Catholic Church are beset with church closures. Mega churches, once touted as the saving grace for some denominations, are closing too.

The reasons for decline are countless – and have been discussed time and again in this column. At the top of the list is societal change. When going to church stopped being obligatory and when Sundays became a day just like any other then 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.

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 \$1,325. In our healthiest parishes the average gift is \$1,800. Our top giving parish has an average of over \$4,000 per giver – and it is not in downtown Toronto.
- 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. 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? In a digital age, working with young people takes time and patience. Failing to engage with them is a sure way to turn them off church.
- 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.

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 take on different forms and be held on different days and types of spaces. Perhaps our youth will be engaged in more hands-on ministry. Perhaps our missional engagement will look a whole lot different.

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. 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?

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