

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### What Type of Follower Attends Our Church?

As Jesus prepared to go to Jerusalem during his third year of ministry, his followers increased dramatically. As the crowds grew, what percentage followed because their deepest desire was to respond to God's call?

Research psychologists Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja suggest that there are multiple reasons that an individual will choose to follow a certain person, group, or movement.<sup>1</sup> They identify five different motivations that propel people to follow a leader and stay with a group. How might an understanding of these motives help congregational leaders increase member participation and engagement?

#### The Five Motivations

**Type 1: The Subordinate.** The individual's primary motive is "to stay within the hierarchy or stick with the herd." This member feels obligated to be a part of the group. In many family-size congregations (fewer than 50 active members), a large percentage of the members may have been drawn there by family and friends. Although this pattern is common in all sizes of congregations, persons attending church due to a subordinate motive may feel more comfortable submitting to a hierarchical leader (sometimes this is a church matriarch or patriarch rather than the pastor). The challenge in deepening subordinates' church connection and faith development is to tap into their own passions, interests, and spiritual gifts. Subordinates can experience internal conflict over valuing their own faith development rather than the leader's agenda. However, such struggles can act as a gateway to a more healthy relationship with the congregation.

**Type 2: The Supporter.** These members participate because of personal attraction to a charismatic leader or the leader's objectives. Many attendees of congregations, especially those who attend megachurches, come because they feel a connection to the leadership's core ideals. Unlike the subordinate category, these participants already feel a strong alignment between their beliefs and organizational values. For these members to mature, church leaders

need to continue building those core values in a consistent manner even when the key leadership changes. Ideally, the congregation also continues to mature in its decision-making, strategizing, and engagement with the outside world. When a significant percentage of followers fall in this category, it puts an extra burden on the leader. To the extent that leaders unwaveringly point followers to Christ rather than to themselves, the greater the likelihood that both leaders and followers will be pleased with the long-term results. These leaders must learn to relish the empowerment of members and release personal ambition.

**Type 3: The Loyalist.** This member is motivated to create cohesion and avoid ridicule. While a number of people probably still attend church drawing upon this motivation, the number was probably even higher when congregations and denominations fell in the mainstream. For many years, attending church just seemed like the right thing to do. A recent survey within one mainline denomination revealed that approximately one-third of their pastors attend national conferences out of loyalty to the denomination. That statistic may be a clue to the loyalty that resides in the pews. Discovering together what God



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is up to outside the walls of the congregation may be one way to deepen the faith of loyalists.

**Type 4: The Apprentice.** These members are motivated to combat uncertainty and aspire to learn new skills. Businesspersons who seek out mentors and devour the business literature fall into this category. In the corporate context, the motivation of these apprentices often comes from a desire to accrue the same benefits as the mentor or other professionals. Congregations that promise financial prosperity may indeed attract apprentices as well, but so can congregations whose leaders display a deep sense of joy and satisfaction with life. In other congregations, apprentices may simply want to follow similar pathways of persons that they have grown to admire. In this instance, the difference between an apprentice and a supporter is that the supporter is committed to the values of the leader while the apprentice has developed an additional trust for the leader's processes. Such followers are obviously well on their way to becoming leaders within the organization.

Congregations that encourage apprentices to forge their own pathways based on their own personality and leadership styles benefit more than those who encourage the mere mimicking of esteemed leaders.

**Type 5: The Disciple.** This group of members' motivation to emulate the leader arises out of the longing for a new identity. They seek wisdom and guidance about how to live. This is the reason we hope motivates most of the persons attending our church. Unfortunately, new identities are seldom formed within passive attendees. People hollow out new identities by trying new things, reaching beyond their comfort zones, and finding that sweet spot balance of challenge and support. Too many discipleship programs teach discipleship through traditional educational processes. While Jesus certainly taught others, the New Testament disciples emerged by being sent out by Jesus to connect with the community and their neighbors. Upon their return, the disciples then turned their reflections into new identities.

### What Motivates Members in Your Church?

There are no statistics on how many people fall into each motivation category and the profile of members differs greatly by congregation. An increasing number of persons in the U.S. indicate that they have no religious preference—a trend described as the “rise of the nones.” Many church attendees, particularly in motivation types 1, 2, and 3, have become nones over the past few decades. People are and will continue to attend church with motivations born out of each of these five categories well into the future.

Church size is limited by the number of lay leaders who are spiritually mature *disciples*. If a congregation grows to 150 or more members (a program church), lay leaders must be willing and able to have their spiritual direction needs met by someone other than their ordained leader. In the program church, many volunteers carry out the congregation's ministries.

### What Creates Disciples?

As leaders continue to help members pursue discipleship, it is important to realize that people choose to be part of a congregation for a variety of reasons. Many may be there for some other reason than to become a disciple of Jesus Christ—at least at the outset.

Further research suggests that it is possible for members in any motivation category to move toward the disciple category. Two proven methods include (1) encouraging the group to engage in common activities, and (2) helping participants reflect on those activities.

*Common activities.* Invite people to participate in a single-day ministry project (such as a Habitat for Humanity workday or a CROP walk to raise funds to fight hunger). Take a group field trip to experience an alternative ministry or organize a mission trip. Interview community leaders about neighborhood strengths and challenges or canvas the neighborhood to ask residents about their concerns and dreams. Engaging in common activities plants the seeds to grow disciples.

*Reflecting on our common purpose.* Because every group experience is potentially spiritually formative, talking about common experiences helps members articulate their faith. Discussion and reflection helps members find their spiritual gifts and celebrate their congregation's mission.

Leaders recognize the calling of followers. Paul wrote, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Building up the church always means building on followers who are motivated to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

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1. Mark van Vugt and Anjana Ahuja, *Naturally Selected: The Evolutionary Science of Leadership* (NY: HarperCollins, 2011).

2. 1 Corinthians 11:1.