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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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What Are the Big-Picture Trends in Congregations?

Old First Church's beloved senior pastor retired in 2002. An interim pastor served the congregation for the next two years, but many long-term members disliked his leadership style and left. The church called a new pastor in 2005, someone whose gifts and vision more closely matched the congregation's core values. Six months later, the associate pastor resigned because of her husband's job transfer to another state.

But during those three years of rollercoaster change, the congregation paid off its building debt for the remodeled educational wing. Then, over the next five years, the church expanded many aspects of its ministry. An immigrant group began holding services in its building. Several teams of adults and youth traveled to areas of the state devastated by floods and aided in the rebuilding.

The staff and members feel that—despite their congregation's major internal changes and a severe national economic downturn—their church is building a positive future on its strong ministries.

Question: Are the rapid changes at Old First Church normal? Does change move at that speed in all churches?

What Changed between 2001 and Today?

Research reveals that during the past eight years, congregations across the United States experienced rapid change in seven major ways.¹

1. Increasing Use of Electronic Technology: In one of their biggest changes since 2001, U.S. churches embraced the Internet as a way to enhance their mission. In 2001 only 43 percent of U.S. congregations had established a Web site; by 2008 that figure almost doubled—to 77 percent.

Congregations use their Web sites as electronic billboards to help people in the community know about their services and programs. Their Web sites also help regular attendees know what is going on in the congregation. For example, 83 percent of congregations with Web sites post a calendar highlighting upcoming events. More than one-half of those Web sites list volunteer needs or service opportunities. One-half post sermons—in text, audio, or video formats. Others post newsletters (52 percent). A small percentage (one church in ten) allow worshipers to make financial contributions online.

Seventy-four percent of congregations also use E-mail to stay in touch with their people. Most of those churches

use E-mail to disseminate information (96 percent) and to publicize events (84 percent). E-mail also enables churches to inform their members about the joys and concerns of other worshipers, help them engage in ministries, offer opportunities to register for events, solicit feedback, and send out devotional messages.

2. Increasing Diversification in Worship: A majority of attendees still prefer traditional hymns, but the percentage of worshipers favoring traditional music dropped from 61 percent in 2001 to 56 percent today. Just 45 percent of worshipers ages twenty-five to forty-four prefer traditional hymns—which predicts a continued decline in traditional-hymn preference in the future.

Several changes suggest less formality in worship. Compared to 2001, fewer of today's congregations regularly include singing by a choir or soloist, Communion or the Lord's Supper, the use of hymnals or hymnbooks, and a printed bulletin or worship-service outline in their largest worship service. More churches include a special time for children, silent prayer or meditation, and the use of visual projection equipment on a regular basis.



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ALL DURING THIS MORNING'S WORSHIP SERVICE.

3. Increase in Caring Ministries: The involvement of worshipers in activities and programs that serve members and neighbors has increased. The largest increase is in services for children and youth—such as job training, literacy programs, scouting, and sports. In 2001, three in ten congregations provided such programs; today, more than one-half do.

Health-related services grew at about the same pace. In 2001, three in ten churches sponsored blood drives, health screenings, or health-education programs; today, one-half of congregations provide those types of health-related services.

Two other areas widened almost as much: emergency relief activities—including food, meals, clothing, or other assistance for people in crisis; and cultural activities such as music and arts programs.

4. Decreasing Size and Financial Strength: Many news stories report a growth in the number of and size of megachurches. However, on average, congregations are smaller today than they were in 2001. While four in ten congregations averaged 100 or fewer worshipers in 2001, today six in ten congregations fall into that small-church category.

The total financial income that congregations receive today is greater than in 2001, even when adjusted for inflation. The median size annual budget for congregations nearly doubled—from \$121,000 in 2001 to \$226,000 today. But the operating expenses climbed as well. More money flows into the typical congregation than before, but more money is expended.

In 2001, one-half of congregations described themselves as having “a stable financial base,” while one in three told of “an increasing financial base.” Today, the percentage of congregations deemed financially stable remains about the same. But far fewer congregations—just 12 percent—say that they are blessed with an increasing financial base, and almost one in three face a declining financial base.

5. More Older Worshipers: Today’s worshipers are older, on average, than the general U.S. population.

But perhaps more important—the average age of worshipers is older now than in 2001: The average age of worshipers increased from fifty in 2001 to fifty-three today. Almost seven in ten worshipers are now forty-four years of age or older, up from six in ten worshipers of that age in 2001.

6. More Educated Worshipers: Among worshipers who are age twenty-five or more, the percentage of college-educated worshipers increased from 38 percent in 2001 to 47 percent today.

7. Less-Frequent Attendance: Fewer of today’s worshipers report attending services on a weekly basis. In 2001, 83 percent came to worship services “usually every week” or “more than once a week.” That number has dropped to 76 percent.

Question: Looking at those seven changes what ideas might strengthen our congregation’s future?

What Did Not Change since 2001?

Despite several significant changes among U.S. congregations, a portrait of worshipers across the country exhibits stability in the following ways.

1. Unchanged Demographics: The gender ratio, the marital-status profile, and the household composition of worshipers remain unchanged.

2. Participating Non-Members: In 2001 about 11 percent of worshipers who actively participated in their congregations were neither (a) members nor (b) in the process of joining. Some 2001 experts predicted a big increase in that percentage but it didn’t happen. Today, about 12 percent of worshipers are non-members.

Yet differences between younger and older worshipers indicate that the percentage of participating non-members could grow in the future: Currently, one in ten worshipers in the forty-five or older age range are active participants but not church members. Twice as many younger worshipers (18 percent) are active participants but are not church members.

3. Congregational Involvement: Other than a decrease in weekly worship attendance, little change has occurred in the ways worshipers involve themselves in church activities. In both 2001 and today, about four in ten worshipers hold leadership roles in their congregations; about four in ten worshipers participate in the congregation’s small groups; and almost one-half give at least 5 percent of their income to the congregation.

Question: Looking at those three signs of stability, what ideas might strengthen our congregation’s future?

What Is Our Congregation’s Handprint?

In 1940, four teenage boys discovered prehistoric art in caves near Lascaux in southwestern France. Anthropologists believe the paintings are about 16,000 years old and think early people used the cave as a kind of church.

When the boys hoisted their lanterns in the dark cavern, they saw more than 2,000 animals decorating the cave’s walls. Among the images left by the artists are their own handprints, which they made by tracing around their own fingers.

Just as early artists left a record, what handprint do we expect our congregation to leave behind in worshipers’ lives?

As we trace around our congregation’s profile, what long-lasting impact do we see our congregation making in our neighborhood, region, and world?

¹Findings drawn from *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations (2nd Edition)* by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).