

CHAPTER SIX

APATHY AND DECLINING ATTENDANCE

When I moved from the pastorate to teach at a seminary our family looked for a new church home. For several months we visited congregations. Each Sunday we would talk together about our experience, specifically asking the children for their input. Sometimes the children would complain, "I don't like this church, Dad." Other times they would exclaim, "Let's join this place; I like it here!" Interestingly, their observations about their Sunday School classes usually paralleled my wife's and my observations about our class. Make your own observations as I tell you about two particular adult classes.

When my wife and I arrived at Church A, we asked some folks where we could attend Sunday School. No one knew where the class for our age group was meeting. We finally located the class, at 9:45 A.M. when it was supposed to begin, but there were only two people in the room. Since they were engaged in conversation, we just sat down at one of the tables. Eventually people trickled in and after about fifteen minutes things got underway.

The announcement time was first, and for ten minutes a mission's committee representative tried to solicit volunteers to decorate the sanctuary for the upcoming mission's conference. The pastor wanted each class to make a banner. Since there were no takers, a task force was appointed to bring a suggestion on the following Sunday.

Next the teacher began his lesson by trying to extricate himself from a theological mistake he apparently had made the previous Sunday. Rather than just acknowledging the error, or getting on to the current lesson, he spent ten more minutes explaining why he had come to that poor conclusion.

During the middle of his defense, two women came in with refreshments and began to distribute forks, napkins, cake and coffee. At this point the teacher was upstaged. Eventually order was restored, and the day's lesson began.

At 10:26 A.M. the teacher started reading Job, chapter 17, interspersing three or four extemporaneous comments on the text. Twelve minutes later he finished the chapter, looked at his watch, and concluded: "Well, we only have seven minutes left, and since that's enough time to do chapter eighteen, let's just close in prayer," After exchanging a few pleasantries, my wife and I found our children, and moved into the sanctuary for the worship service.

A few weeks later we visited Church B. This church had greeters in the hallway, and although the couple did not know the location of my daughter's room, the wife inquired at the church office, and then cheerfully escorted Ben and Betsy to their classrooms. Meanwhile, her husband introduced us to a couple who took us to our adult class.

As we entered the classroom, several friendly people greeted us. Each was wearing a nametag, and there were blank nametags for visitors. After the class leader greeted us, one couple invited us to have a cup of coffee with them at their table. Shortly thereafter, the leader moved to the front of the room, made several pertinent announcements, and then introduced us to the whole class.

The teacher began his lesson by asking a question, and instructing each table to discuss it among their group. After making some general comments about the role of Israel's prophets, he directed each table to answer a series of questions from the Minor Prophet assigned to them.

After twenty minutes in our smaller groups, he drew us back together with a mini-lecture. Next, a representative from each table shared the results of their study. The leader summarized the lesson theme with suggestions for personal application. We concluded in small-group prayer around the tables.

Now let me ask a simple question: Which church would you like to attend week after week? Let me raise another question related to apathy and declining attendance: To which congregation would you prefer to bring a visitor? The answer to both questions is obvious.

Churches can move from apathy and decline to enthusiasm and growth by developing: a positive self-image; a format that recognizes differences; a competent teaching staff; relevant topics of study; methodologies that encourage involvement; a warm learning environment; room for growth; sufficient financial resources and a marketplace mentality.

A Positive Self-Image

You only have to visit a church once to pick up vibrations on how the congregation feels about itself. Some churches communicate, "Why are you visiting us? We're just a poor, struggling congregation with some real problems." While other churches communicate, "We're a great church, and we know you'll eventually join our congregation if you visit a few times."

A church's self-image develops over time and is related to a number of factors. However, there is also a certain mystery about self-image. We are not always aware of influences which have shaped it. The situation is comparable to a couple adults similar in appearance, age, intelligence, and vocation, yet greatly different internally. One exudes a good self-understanding and appreciation, while the other reveals self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. This contrast displays itself even in the attitudes of children. One child despairs, "I can't do it"; the other asks, "Why don't you let me try?" A newcomer to the congregation can quickly sense an enthusiastic spirit, a reserved atmosphere or even an oppressive environment.

Visitors' first impressions begin as they move through the church campus. A well-planned, carefully maintained *facility* communicates a positive message. I'm not advocating stained-glass windows, and fourteen-karat doorknobs. Rather it is a composite of little things that reveals members' feelings about their church. Healthy pride is visible in attractive grounds, neat buildings, clear signage, clean restrooms, adequate lighting and ventilation and visible information.

Let me illustrate. I visited a suburban church where the paint was peeling on the exterior walls of two of its three buildings. The carpeting in the foyer was torn, and handprints were in abundance on the walls of the hallway. Their problem wasn't lack of money but a lack of pride and commitment to their church.

By contrast I attended another church and was pleasantly surprised to see decorations in the foyer, a candle in each window, and the church dressed up with greens. My first impression was that these folks really enjoy their church, and that feeling was confirmed later when I met their people.

Self-image is also communicated through *interpersonal relationships*. How people treat a newcomer is obviously important; but how they interact with one another is equally significant. Do people praise and encourage one another, or do they talk critically about one another down (even in jest)?

Self-image is related to *personal involvement*. Do people really sing during worship? Do they use their Bibles during the sermon? Are they eager to serve? Are they regular in attendance?

Another indicator of self-image is a church's *generosity*. Do they recognize the dedication of key volunteers, grant sabbaticals to pastors, or make an annual contribution to their local police and fire departments (since churches are not taxed, yet still receive their services)? People who demonstrate generosity are usually people who feel good about themselves. This same principle applies to congregational life.

By now some of you may be asking, "Our church doesn't have a good self-image, so what can we do to improve it?"

Learning theorists affirm that people will live up to expectations. They also believe that "as we think, we will do," and "as we do, so we will think." A church experiencing stagnation and apathy can break out of this negative

pattern by recapturing a big picture, Kingdom outlook, with its renewed attitudes and practices.

First, the pastor and leaders must renew their understanding of God's greatness, and rekindle their passion for Christ's Church. Second, each small, positive step (in attitude or deed) should be praised. Healthy attitudes stimulate positive behavior, and healthy service stimulates positive attitudes. Perhaps one or two people will commit themselves to maintain the lawn and shrubbery. Maybe one person will volunteer to collect clothing for a nearby shelter. The list of possibilities is endless. Every step in the direction of improving the quality of plant, praise, program or outreach further encourages a positive self-image.

A Format That Recognizes Differences

Since people vary in their preferences, a congregation can reach a larger constituency through a variety of discipleship emphases. These specialized ministries include programs for mothers of preschoolers, single parents, families with children who have Downs Syndrome, business men or women, artists, sports enthusiasts, those fighting weight problems, and the list goes on. A church builds enthusiasm for its ministry by observing things that people are already interested in and excited about, and then showing the impact that Christ can make in those areas.

A format that recognizes differences offers a *diversity of program*. It will recognize that some people prefer a home study group to a campus Bible class. It will realize that mothers at home would enjoy a mother's day out. It understands that women employed outside of the home cannot attend a morning Bible study, so will provide an evening Bible fellowship.

An insightful church knows that children need changes of pace to maximize learning, instead of a static, passive environment. It empathizes with seniors who prefer daytime activities to events at night or in the cold.

A format that recognizes differences not only offers a diversity of program, but also provides *diversity within a program*. For instance, not all fourth-graders are alike. A nine-year-old can have a reading level anywhere from first grade to ninth grade, and his maturity level, desires and skills equally vary. Adults also differ from one another and bring a rich background of experience to each session. The teacher using only one or two classroom methods is less effective than the teacher who provides a choice of activities for the students. A variety of educational emphases will produce enthusiasm, because it recognizes individual differences.

A Competent Teaching Staff

Only the most deeply committed adults (or most foolish) will keep attending a class taught by an incompetent teacher. If a situation like this is ongoing, the members are probably attending for reasons other than study (usually the fellowship of their peers). Though children and teens are sometimes forced to attend poor programs, if the choice were theirs, they would rather bail out. An effective teaching staff is one of the essential links in the chain of new enthusiasm and growth.

A competent teacher obviously must *understand the subject matter*. Whether the lesson is from the Old Testament or New Testament, from narrative or teaching passages, the good teacher must understand what the text means. He doesn't need a seminary degree, but he must do his homework to explain a given Scripture portion.

Furthermore, the competent teacher must *understand the teaching-learning process*. Just because a teacher is moving her lips does not mean that learning is taking place. The effective teacher mixes an understanding of her students with her knowledge. Furthermore, she uses appropriate methodology to bridge her knowledge to the students' understanding.

The "community of faith" model of education reminds us that the competent teacher also lives his or her *life as an example* before the students. A teacher who is authentic and demonstrates genuine concern builds rapport that helps students more appreciate the teacher's instruction. Contacts that are made with students outside of the learning session build positive attitudes about the class itself. Anything that will improve the character or skills of teachers will result in greater interest on the part of the students.

Relevant Topics of Study

What are you studying in Sunday School next quarter? Some may respond, "Whatever the publishing house sends us." Others will answer, "Whatever the teacher choose to teach." Many people believe that curriculum itself will not make or break a class. For example, even with poor curriculum, a good teacher can manipulate the learning environment to make a lesson interesting. Other dynamics in the classroom, including friendliness and fellowship, obviously can keep a class going.

Nevertheless, learning is enhanced when good curriculum is selected, and then delivered by teachers using the best of classroom practices. Good curriculum is biblical, attractive, methodologically sound and relevant. The greater the relevance of topics to learners' lives, the more likely they will participate. In a course on "The Christian and Personal Finance," for example, a couples' class might give extra emphasis to budgeting, while the seniors' class to investments or living trusts.

Irrelevant Sunday School classes produce apathy, which in turn leads to decline in attendance. Relevant topics of study foster enthusiasm, which in turn produces growth.

Methodologies That Encourage Involvement

Teaching methodologies that encourage involvement draw learners into the educational process. Long lectures (with adults) or long stories (with children) become boring. Furthermore, they do not help students develop their own study skills. However, asking Scripture-search questions (with adults or youth), or completing a computer Bible game (with children or youth) *enhances learning*.

Three days after a learning experience people retain only 10 percent of what they hear and 20 of what they see. But they remember 65 percent of what they see and hear, and 90 percent of what they actually do with their hands. So why would a teacher spend hours in study and preparation and then present a lesson with methods that restrict learning? Involvement methodologies are a must for learning.

Methods of involvement not only enhance learning, they also encourage, *fellowship*. For example, I can teach the content of John 15 with lecture, or I can divide my class into small groups to answer questions from the passage. After discussing the importance of abiding in Christ, I might ask participants to share in their group which fruit of the Spirit they need most right now. The class could conclude with members praying for one another. Both of these instructional methods can be used to unpack the meaning of John 15. But the interactive method also produces a rich byproduct—the fellowship that results from the students working together. The members of a class using involvement methods will get to know one another far better than those in a class using non-participatory methods.

Whether working with children, youth or adults, methods that maximize engagement will enhance learning and encourage relationships. Better learning and better relationships result in a better quality program. And a better discipleship ministry produces enthusiasm and is attractive to additional people.

A Warm Learning Environment

Why do people install carpeting in their homes? Why do they hang curtains in their windows or place pictures on their walls? Obviously, because furnishings soften a home; they give it a warmer feel. So why then are some

churches content with bare walls, cement or tile floors, and cold metal chairs in their classrooms? Church facilities that communicate warmth are both conducive for learning and attracting people.

Major facility renovations are costly, but smaller outlays of dollars, wisely spent, can make a great investment in learning. For some churches this may simply mean fresh paint in the classrooms, improved lighting, or curtains for the windows. Quality floor coverings warm a room, but more importantly they help reduce sound problems. The use of tables or learning centers can further warm up a room. Now just add some tack boards, pictures and some media equipment and the room is transformed into an attractive learning environment.

There are many books that describe how to design good learning environments for specific age groups—that's not my purpose here. I simply want to reinforce the fact that a warm learning environment directly impacts people's receptivity and participation. The friendlier the atmosphere of a classroom (and that includes both the physical and the relational), the more likely people will return.

Room for Growth

A warm learning environment has another characteristic; it says "Welcome" by providing room for guests. While this may seem obvious to some, I'm amazed at how many leaders do not really practice this principle. They many say they want to grow, but their lip service is rarely transformed into behaviors that welcome newcomers. For example, they may recognize that the parking lot is full (and even see people drive off), but still resist personally parking off-campus.

Many churches bump over their 80 percent capacity, yet find members resistant to additional services or facility expansion. Comments such as, "We like our class the way it is," or "But we all want to worship at the same hour," are indirect ways of saying, "We're not willing to make space for new people."

An empty pew in the front of the auditorium does not mean there is still room for growth. An architect's stated seating capacity (16 ½ inches per person) does not realistically determine how many people a church can accommodate. To get an accurate picture for the auditorium, simply have a group of people sit comfortably in a pew, and then multiply their number by the number of pews. In a classroom, take the total square footage (minus clutter, pianos, cabinets, etc.) and divide it by space requirements for the learners (Preschoolers—35 square feet per pupil; children—30 square feet per pupil; Youth—30 square feet per pupil and adults—12-25 square feet per pupil).

Churches with dynamic teachers and warm classrooms will attract people. But eventually they will stagnate and even decline if there is not

enough space for people. Room for growth is essential to a healthy learning environment.

Sufficient Financial Resources

Most churches struggle with finances. It's a rare church (or perhaps one that hasn't planned well) that has a surplus year after year. A large budget does not automatically produce a better program, but sufficient funding is essential for effective ministry.

A teacher supplied with good resources is better equipped to communicate Bible truths, than a comparable teacher without solid materials. Money spent on teacher-training improves the quality of classroom instruction. The return on these financial expenditures is a higher quality program, and the result of an exciting program is enthusiastic participants. Classrooms with carpeting, comfortable seating and attractive bulletin boards further enhance the learning atmosphere.

Since a typical church budget includes many "fixed items" (salaries, debt retirement, utilities, and missions), too often program areas are under budgeted in relationship to need. Those concerned with improving the quality of discipleship must lobby for expanding the financial base of the congregation's educational ministries.

An effective and attractive discipleship program never develops just overnight. Intentional steps must be taken each year to improve its long-range quality. For example, one classroom renovation can be placed in the church budget each year. Likewise one or two pieces of new equipment can be budgeted each year until all of the classrooms are properly furnished. Money should be designated annually to send a few workers to a training seminar. Budgeting for a teacher recognition night can also take place gradually, with quality of program and meals increasing over time.

One issue worth special attention relates to budget surplus. Since the money a church receives above its budget is undesignated, I recommend that the congregation adopt a policy to use the annual surplus for designated projects. These dollars go further because they do not need to be divided among the fixed expenditures. Therefore, the Christian Education Committee will want to make sure that it maintains a list of suggestions for improving the teaching ministry of the church (training, facilities, equipment, etc.).

A Marketplace Mentality

There is nothing more uplifting to a church's self-image than to see new people joining the fellowship. When new people are attracted to a

church, even the long-standing member begins to feel: "We must be doing things right if new people are coming." The infusion of new blood into the congregation is a quick cure for overcoming apathy. Church growth produces enthusiasm, and an enthusiastic church is the type of church which draws even more people.

Church leaders concerned with outreach need to recognize a changing phenomenon in our culture. Socialization has moved from the neighborhood to the workplace. Our neighbors are no longer those who live next door, but are typically those with whom we work. Several factors have brought about this transition.

Perhaps the greatest contributing factor is the growth of women in the workforce. Among the builder generation, 37% of women were employed outside of the home. Among Boomers the number is at 62%, and among Busters the percentage climbs to 82%. The expanding work world of the dual income family and the single-parent family has facilitated corporate relationships while shrinking neighborhood ties.

Not only have relationships in neighborhoods decreased among adults, but they have also decreased among children. Preschoolers attend Kindercare or the Learning Tree, and children participate in special enrichment programs. Neighborhood ball fields are empty as *teenagers join the workforce*. Nearly one half of our junior high and senior high young people have part-time jobs (compared to less than one fourth in 1950).

Relationships among men in their neighborhoods are also affected by societal changes. Increased technology, boredom and desire to get ahead often lead men to make vocational changes. Frequent transitions hinder people from building (or even desiring to build) deep relationships with neighbors.

Upward mobility has given families greater affluence and therefore, the means to spend leisure time away from their neighborhoods. Boats, campers, snowmobiles and trips to Disney World have all taken a toll on neighborhood relationships.

While not neglecting our geographical neighbors, the church that is interested in outreach will motivate congregants to view the workplace or social flub as their harvest field. A pastor who encourages his people to "invite a neighbor for the Christmas program," may see less response than the one who suggests, "Invite a friend from work." A church with a marketplace mentality, desiring to reach outside of its own walls, will reap the enthusiasm of new attenders.

Conclusion

Greenfields Church had grown steadily for twelve years, but plateaued when they hit 240 in attendance. For seven years they did not grow beyond that number.

When Pastor Bloom was called to the congregation, his first goal was to build a positive attitude in the church. He worked with the Christian Education Commission to select relevant topics for Sunday School, and set up several teacher-training opportunities. Sensing that many people had a desire for Bible study and fellowship, he coordinated the start-up of a few home Bible studies. He encourages program leaders to “have a party” with their workers at the end of the year. Time was taken to write notes of appreciation to those working in leadership and especially to commend those who cultivated friendships with nonbelievers.

In time, Pastor Bloom presented the elders with several models for moving into double services. He parked his car across the street and asked the leadership to do the same. He worked with the long-range planning committee, and subsequently the building committee, to construct an attractive multipurpose building. Most importantly, he continually tried to help the congregation believe that God could do even more through them than they could imagine.

The vision of Pastor Bloom helped Greenfields break through their 240 barrier. In fact, they have registered growth every year since. Two years ago the pastor moved on to a new ministry, but the church has continued to grow. The leaders have caught a positive vision of effective ministry, and together they are doing a better job than one man could have ever done.

Can a congregation overcome apathy and decline, and move toward a vibrant, enthusiastic ministry? Most certainly. Even churches facing declining neighborhood demographics can have meaningful, and therefore positive ministries. Whether we direct our efforts toward the Sunday School, club program, shelter for homeless, or crisis-counseling center, effective ministry produces life and enthusiasm.

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A Checklist for Building Enthusiasm

Does our church have...

- A Positive Self-Image
- A Format That Recognizes Differences
- A Competent Teaching Staff
- Relevant Topics of Study
- Methodologies That Encourage Involvement
- A Warm Learning Environment
- Room for Growth
- Sufficient Financial Recourses
- A Marketplace Mentality