

Common Factors in churches that are growing
Carolyn Chilton, Program Director, Diocese of Virginia
cchilton@thediocese.net

Numerical list and information is taken from: FACTs on Growth by C. Kirk Hadaway, Director of Research for the Episcopal Church. Copyright 2006. The full report can be downloaded at:
www.episcopalchurch.org/research.htm

1. Location: Among those things that are related to growth and about which a congregation has no control are the location of the congregation nationally and growth/decline in households in the surrounding community.
 - a. *Area of the country*: Of these two issues, the most important is *South/non-South* location. Congregations do better in the South because it is both a growing region and because the culture is more supportive of religion.
 - b. *Growth in households* also remains statistically significant as a source of growth. And this stands to reason—areas where the population is increasing through new households and new housing units are areas where people are moving to and putting down new roots.
 - ▶ Do you know the demographics of your community? Visit www.perceptgroup.org to get statistics from the government's census data in the context of religion.
 - ▶ Do you know the growth rate of your parish? To see a 10-year growth chart on your parish visit:
http://www.episcopalchurch.org/growth_60791_ENG_HTM.htm?menupage=50929

2. Age structure: A congregation has limited control over the age structure of its membership, and this factor has a very strong independent effect on growth.
 - a. Congregations with *smaller proportions of older members* and larger proportions of younger adults and households with children are more likely to experience growth. In order to be healthy a congregation must be able to include both younger and older persons, retirees and families with children.
 - b. A related influence is the proportion of females in a congregation. As American congregations become increasingly populated by women, those congregations that are able to even out the proportions of males and females are those most likely to grow—even when controlling for the effect of age.
 - ▶ What are the age and gender demographics of your community? How do these compare to those of your parish? How can you address the difference? For example, suppose you need more young families...what might draw them into your parish?

3. Identity: In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was a rating of the congregation as having “*a clear mission and purpose.*” Growing congregations are clear about why they exist and what they should be doing. In American religion generally, conservative churches tend to be clearer about their mission and purpose. But this is not the case in the Episcopal Church. Here there tends to be a greater sense of purpose and mission among more theologically liberal congregations

- ▶ What is your church's mission statement? Do you have one? It should be short and easily to memorize. It should be printed on all your publications and on your website.
4. Conflict: The strongest correlate of growth when all controls were in effect was the presence or an absence of *conflict*. Obviously, conflict cannot be completely avoided, but whether or not a congregation finds itself mired in serious conflict is the number one predictor of congregational decline.
- ▶ All organizational systems - even our families! - always have some measures of conflict. But if the conflict inhibits or prevents ministry and mission, inhibits working relationships, or causes membership decline then it is serious enough to be addressed. Serious conflict in the church is best handled with the help of an outside consultant.
 - ▶ Conflict is often the result of differing views on the mission of the church. This can often be eliminated by a clear vision statement and a strategic plan with goals and objectives.
 - ▶ Conflict is also often the result of bad communication patterns. If most of the church's business takes place in the parking lot after church, how is that helpful to the leadership? How does gossip inhibit leadership and foster conflict?
 - ▶ What is the effect of conflict on new members and visitors?
5. Worship style: Independent worship-related factors that are important to growth include both positive and negative influences. Strongest and most interesting among these influences is a rating of corporate worship as "*reverent*." Reverence in worship has an independent negative effect on growth. Although most worship services probably could be said to be reverent to some extent, characterizing worship as reverent seems to imply a level of stiltedness and somberness that works against the possibility of growth. The obverse of reverence, characterizations of worship as "*joyful*" and "*exciting*" had no independent effect on growth even though they added to the overall ability to predict growing congregations.

Independent worship-related factors that are important to growth include both positive and negative influences. A scale that combined responses to questions rating worship as being "*predictable*," with "*formal liturgy*," and regular use of "*kneeling*" produced an independent *negative* effect on growth. Although worship in most Episcopal congregations is typically more formal than in many other denominations, a great deal of variation exists between parishes and within parishes (those having multiple services) in the level of *formality and predictability*. In contrast to formality and predictability, characterizations of worship as "*joyful*" and "*exciting*" had no independent effect on growth even though they added to the overall ability to predict growth.

So apparently, as was observed in the case of congregational conflict, *not having a growth-killing factor* is more important than having something that would seem to encourage growth.

- ▶ How do you understand the word 'reverence'?
- ▶ How does reverence relate to a sense of spirituality or having a spiritually alive worship service? Are they mutually exclusive?
- ▶ Look back at the demographics of your area. The percept data will give you preferred worship styles also. What changes could you make to your worship so that it was more attractive to the unchurched in your area?
- ▶ Does the lack of positive influences on growth from 'reverence', 'formality'...mean that all worship services have to be happy-clappy?

6. Worship changes: Positively and significantly related to growth is the degree to which a congregation *changed its worship services* in the past five years. Congregations that changed their worship services moderately or a lot were more likely to experience substantial growth than congregations that changed worship only a little or not at all. The independent effect of worship change on growth is interesting because it does not include any information about the direction of change. Apparently, change in worship is a primary means by which congregations adapt. Congregations that adapt in this way tend to grow, but congregations that remain the same do not.

- ▶ This again points to the positive growth correlation for churches that are adaptable. How does your church deal with change?
- ▶ A clear vision statement can give a church the strength to try new things. Why would this be so?

7. Spirituality: In terms of congregational identity, the most important factor was a rating of the congregation as "*spiritually vital and alive.*" Since congregations are religious institutions, it is essential that religion be central to their collective identity. And it is odd that so many congregations find other, more tangential activities and identities to crowd out the core function of a congregation. Spiritual vitality is necessary for a congregation to be a congregation and thus to grow.

- ▶ How does this fit with #5 above on worship styles?
- ▶ Have you been to a spiritually alive worship recently? What were its' characteristics?

8. Website: Somewhat surprisingly, most of the recruitment/outreach questions did not turn out to be statistically significant when controls were in effect. The clear exception was *web site development*. Congregations that have established or maintained a web site for the congregation are more likely to grow. Congregations that establish web sites are outward

looking and are willing to change and adapt. They look to a variety of traditional and non-traditional means to reach out to their members and non-members.

- ▶ You have to have a website these days. Does your church?
- ▶ How often it is updated? The front page should be updated at least weekly.
- ▶ How easy is it to find information on worship times, directions, nursery and Christian Education? These are the most important elements for a visitor.
- ▶ Finding information should never require more than two-three mouse clicks.
- ▶ How does your website reflect the needs and interests of your community? Read your percept data!

9. Visitors & newcomers: Somewhat surprisingly, given previous findings in other denominations, two of the recruitment/outreach questions were statistically significant when controls were in effect. Most important was the question asking “to what extent are your congregation’s members involved in *recruiting new members*.” Of less independent importance to growth, but adding to the overall ability to predict growth or decline is *number of visits or phone calls* to visitors, prospective members or newcomers to the community. Growing congregations are those which let people know the congregation cares enough to contact them.

- ▶ It’s time for Episcopalians to get over their understanding of evangelism as “street preaching” and get on with living the Great Commission.
- ▶ By our baptism, we are all evangelists.
- ▶ Why do you think programs such as “bring a friend to Church Sunday” receive largely negative responses from members and the un-churched alike? But did you know that “bring a friend to Church” works much better if it involves teenagers?
- ▶ How is your church training its members to be evangelists where they work and live? What might this look like?
- ▶ Does your church have a specific plan for greeting, welcoming and incorporating newcomers? Does it include visits, sponsors, and education classes?
- ▶ Does your church tract newcomer’s?

10. Leadership: The second most powerful correlate of growth when all controls were used was a scale that combined four highly related characteristics of the parish’s rector or vicar: generates enthusiasm, charismatic leader, has a clear vision for the congregation, and knows how to get people to work together. *Leadership* is critical to growth in the Episcopal Church.

- ▶ The ministers of the church are lay people, bishops, priests and deacons. What is the leadership organization of your church? How should your organization chart look for a church your size?
- ▶ How are you caring for your leaders?