

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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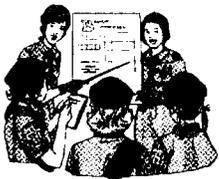
We want members, but why?

A clergy couple in their late twenties wrote a thought-provoking response to the recent "Generation X" issue of *Connections* (February 1997).

They liked most of the issue, but not my saying that the future of today's churches depended on reaching their age group. "This is precisely the kind of talk," they pointed out, "that turns us off, along with many other GenX folks, Christians and prospective Christians alike."



"It seems that as churches decline in membership," these Generation X pastors explained, "the focus of congregations becomes not seeking those who are lost, but getting younger people in the door because they are the church's future. The subtext is, 'They might keep this building up and keep this church from going under.'"



A painful reminder

These comments jolted me into remembering that I had felt similarly when I was one of the younger people. Whenever my contemporaries and I attended a meeting of one of the traditional women's clubs of my town, or the women's group of my church, older members constantly said how glad they were to have us and how much the group needed us because we were young.

These women meant well, I'm sure, but their insistence on preserving all of the groups' current activities and policies forever spoke louder than their welcoming words. It said, "We're desperate for new members to take the load off of us and keep this organization from dying. But we only want those who will keep it exactly as it is, for our enjoyment."

These messages made me want to leave in a hurry, because much of what



Looking with outsiders' eyes

If we're active churchgoers, we tend to think the non-attenders are at fault, rather than the church, when people aren't rushing to our churches. Especially if we're among the older members, we may see church participation simply as part of everyone's duty. We think, "If those people were doing what is right, they would come."



Many outsiders, however, especially those in younger generations, don't see it that way. They tend to base their decision on whether they see any real benefit in church participation. They look at whether church programs and physical facilities are top quality. They look at whether the members really live by what they claim to believe, and whether they seem better off as a result.



Why would they want to join?

Even when newcomers see convincing reasons for attending and participating in our church activities, many see no reason to become official members. After all, participating without joining may let them escape being asked to give money or hold church offices, and most of our church activities and ministries are available to non-members just as they are to members.

For current members, reasons for wanting new people to join us are easy to find. Being in a church with a large membership may give us status in our local community. New members will bring new funds. They'll be available to teach Sunday School and to do some of the other necessary church jobs, too, relieving the pressure on those of us who currently have to do all of them. Having more members also will make the pastor, District Superintendent, and Bishop look good, providing evidence that they deserve larger responsibilities, more prestige, and a higher salary.



Whose benefit are we concerned about?

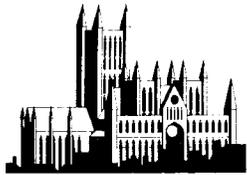
But what real advantages are there for the people we're trying to persuade to join? For them to want to join instead of just to attend, they must see benefits that they want, that they can't get anywhere else, and that they can't get without joining. It's time to ask ourselves, "Do we want new members for their benefit, or just for ours?"

the organizations were doing required great amounts of time and energy, yet it wasn't enjoyable to me and wasn't serving any purpose that I could see as worthwhile. I soon went elsewhere, and so did many of my contemporaries.



God may not need "today's church"

The couple who wrote me about the February *Connections* are also troubled by the expression "today's church." To them it means institutional churches in their present forms, many of which aren't doing what God needs done. "God needs churches that are faithful," my correspondents observed, "that are willing and ready to be 'tomorrow's churches,' trusting tomorrow to God."



"That means," these two readers went on to say, "that congregations have to be honest and ask tough questions. They need to ask, 'Is

this congregation truly existing for the glory of God and as a witness to the world, or are we just trying to keep up a building and clinging possessively to old programs because we like them?'"

The church needs to reach GenXers, these pastors realize, "because our God is a God constantly seeking the lost, not because 'the future of the church depends on it'—this is extremely selfish of churches." Yet, these pastors say, "we experience this kind of congregational selfishness every day."



Getting clear about the church's purpose

The main question these comments are asking us to look at, it seems to me, and to be honest in answering, is "What is the purpose of the church?"

Fishing isn't for the good of the fish



Jesus compared seeking disciples to fishing. But fishing, it seems to me, requires using whatever bait is most likely to attract the fish. It also involves sneaking up on them and capturing them only for the fishermen's purposes, not for the good of the fish. Does this say anything about our ways of trying to attract new members to our churches, or about our motives? Maybe we simply have to assume that the comparison doesn't apply that far! What do you think?

They ask us to look at whether we're concerned about God's purpose or just about our comfort and enjoyment.



Recently I attended a dinner at a large United Methodist Church. It was the opening event for the speakers at a conference-wide meeting. The meal was provided by volunteers from the host church. Suddenly realizing that someone from that church needed to welcome us, one of the volunteers dashed out of the kitchen to do it. Speaking with no notes and apparently with no advance planning, he included in his brief welcome a one-sentence statement of his congregation's purpose—what in today's jargon would be called its mission statement.



I was astonished. I wondered how many other lay church members could state concisely, off the top of their head, the purpose of their congregation or of the church as a whole. I don't think many could. I don't think I could. If I had some time to think, I could probably come up with what I believe the whole church's purpose is supposed to be, but I couldn't say what specific aspects of that purpose my congregation is aiming at.

Unfortunately this isn't unusual. I recently read about a survey of a thousand churches whose members were asked "Why does the church exist?". 89% said the church's purpose was to take care of their needs and their family's needs, yet according to the Bible this is not the purpose of the church.



Worshiping God and making disciples



If we look at what Jesus did during his time on earth, at what he commanded his followers to do, and at the various ways in which the churches described in the New Testament operated, we get a very different picture. We see that the church's main purposes are worshiping God, showing God's love to the world, and helping people to become more like Christ and to live in the kind of community that is based on God's law of love. We may also believe that eternal salvation comes only through Christ, and thus that we need to try to bring everyone to Christ, but does

accepting Jesus Christ as savior have to mean being on the official roll of an institutional church? I doubt that it does.



Lesser purposes

Lack of clarity about our purpose seems to be a major cause of our churches' failure to be as effective as God wants us to be. We're like the person an old saying describes, who got on his horse and rode off in all directions.

In his excellent book *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan, 1995), Rick Warren, the very effective pastor of the Saddleback Church in California, lists some inappropriate purposes that seem to be driving many churches.



- **Tradition.** In a tradition-driven church, Warren observes, the goal is simply to continue what has been done in the past. "Change is almost always seen as negative," he notes, "and stagnation is interpreted as stability."

- **Personality.** Being driven by the personality of one person (usually the pastor, but sometimes a lay member) puts the church at risk of collapsing when that person leaves, and of neglecting important ministries that he or she doesn't happen to push.

- **Money.** The question most prominent in everyone's mind in a money-driven church is "How much will it cost?", Rick Warren finds, and the budget is the main topic that can cause heated debate among members.



- **Buildings.** In a building-driven church, funds for needed ministries must be used instead for maintaining and paying for the building.

- **Programs and events.** A program-driven church's main goal is to fill all the offices and jobs that are necessary to continue all the current church activities and groups. An event-driven church aims mainly at keeping people busy and constantly having a lot of activity going on in the church. No one asks whether the activities and jobs still serve a purpose.



Going off in any of these directions, instead of using our money, building, program activities, traditions, and leaders only to serve the church's God-given purpose, makes a church unfaithful as well as ineffective. If we're want new members only to help us maintain an operation that isn't aimed at the church's true purpose, we're on the wrong track.

Being named "church" is no guarantee

... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

—Matthew 16-18

[Paul] planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

—1 Corinthians 3:6

We tend to console ourselves with scriptures that testify to the permanence of the church and say that God will insure the church's survival.



I'm afraid, however, that when we do this we're misleading ourselves. We're right in remembering

that our efforts alone can't make the church effective—that God's actions are essential. But we're wrong, I believe, in acting as if what we do won't affect whether our churches survive.

God works through people

It seems to me that God most often works through people rather than without them. To accomplish God's will, God motivates people to use their minds, emotions, talents, skills, spiritual gifts, discernment, money, and whatever other God-given resources may be available to them.

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

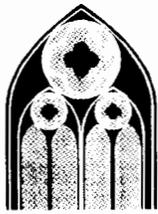
—Matthew 10:14

When a person or group refuses to be part of what God wants done, God doesn't force them to do it, but neither does it go undone. Instead, God moves on and gets it accomplished through someone else.



So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

—Isaiah 55:11



Evidently this is how God works through church groups. I believe that if my congregation or my denomination refuses to do what God wants done, it isn't being the church, therefore it can't expect God to preserve it. I don't believe that merely having the name "church" guarantees a group's survival.

Our reasons need to match God's reason

If we want new people to join our churches, we need to be sure that our motives match God's. If we want new members because we honestly believe

that both they and the world will benefit in ways that God considers important, we're justified in trying to attract them. If it's for any other reason, we urgently need to re-examine what we're doing.



Barbara

Next . . .

**Whose welfare gets top priority--
the clergy or the laity?**



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An important point about worship styles

Responding to the March *Connections*, a reader makes a point that I believe is valid and very important. "A church in a small town or rural area may need to appeal only to the tastes of the majority," she points out, "but in a metropolitan area that isn't necessary or desirable." She reminds us that with a large population to draw from, some congregations can specialize in the classical music and formal, traditional liturgy that many Christians find essential and that are our timeless treasures, while other congregations offer other styles of music and liturgy.



"It would be tragic and sinful," this reader says, "to scrap a top-quality church music program when many other congregations are already providing music of the types that happen to be more popular." I think she's right.

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