

Chapter Six

Do Church Growth Consultations Really Work?

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For many pastors, the “mainline membership decline” is old news. Even if their own church is not declining, they know scores that are. Pastors are well aware that most mainline denominations peaked in the mid-1960s and have continued to decline into the 1990s. They also have been to conferences dealing with the decline and heard innumerable explanations for the losses. Most have heard enough. In fact, at a recent interdenominational meeting to plan a conference on the future of the church, a pastor remarked, “One more conference on the decline of the mainline church, I do not need.” What this pastor wanted was not more analysis of the problem, but some solutions.

The majority of churches in the United States are either plateaued or declining in membership. And while this problem is more serious among mainline churches, Marler and Hadaway (1992:61) show that this generalization also holds for churches in growing denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God. One response to this situation was the “church growth movement,” which has produced many books designed to help churches grow (Benjamin, 1972; Wagner, 1976; Werning, 1977; McGavran and Hunter, 1980; Gibbs, 1982; Miles, 1981; Reeves and Jenson, 1984; Wagner, Arn, and Towns, 1986). Other responses have included a literature on congregational planning (Schaller, 1971, 1979; Walrath, 1979; Dale, 1981), a series of “church growth” books written outside the confines of the church growth movement (Schaller, 1981, 1983; Callahan, 1983; Miller, 1987; Johnson, 1989; Hadaway, 1991), training conferences and workshops on church growth and evangelism, and on-site evangelism/church growth/congregational planning consultations.

The effectiveness of the last of the above responses—evangelism/church growth consultations—is the focus of this analysis. Do they work, in the sense that they help churches grow?

Church growth consultations come in all shapes and sizes, but most involve one of two strategies. The first is for the consultant to visit a congregation as part of a prepackaged evangelism/growth program. According to

Herb Miller (1989), the goals of a congregational visit are inspiration, motivation, attitude change, and education. The consultant attempts to convince members that evangelism is important, to motivate them to be involved in evangelism, to show them that they can reach people for Christ, and to present a program that will give them the necessary skills in evangelism. The second general type of consultation does not sell a prepackaged program. Instead, the consultant helps the church to develop a strategy of its own. The purpose of the consultant's visit in this case is to gather information and to give counsel to church leaders or a planning task force. The consultant does not motivate the congregation around a strategy, because the strategy does not yet exist. The consultant helps the church create a strategy by (1) telling them what they need to do, or (2) helping them reach their own conclusions.

Whatever style is employed, church growth consultants have not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of their consultations. When asked, "does it work" they can give examples of churches where it worked well, but they can give no figures on the percentage of churches that grew as a result of the program or the average number of new members gained by participating churches. This study is an effort to determine whether or not consultations have an effect on the membership, Sunday school, and worship participation among 208 Disciples of Christ congregations.

Methods

In order to test the effectiveness of church growth consultations it was necessary to obtain a list of participating churches and examine their membership records. Such a list was provided by the National Evangelistic Association for Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ). The list included churches that had participated in one of six NEA evangelism consultation programs from 1981 to 1988.

Four of the NEA consultation models are prepackaged evangelism/church growth programs. Of these four, three involve a one-day, on-site consultation, while the fourth is a half-day consultation. The two nonpackaged models allow the church to create their own strategy plan with the help of the consultant. One is a single-day event that is designed to help a church develop a tailor-made evangelistic program. The final model is an open-ended planning consultation, called a "parish enrichment conference." The programmatic outcome of this consultation depends on the needs and orientation of the church, rather than on a predetermined agenda to promote evangelism.

Various measures of "effect" were possible. However, because the focus of this book is church growth, the effect of the consultation was measured in

terms of gains in membership, enrollment, and participation. Thankfully, yearbooks for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) contain consistent records from 1981 through 1988. The variables chosen to test the effectiveness of the consultations included total membership, participating membership, average worship attendance, and church school enrollment. Change in each of these areas was measured on a yearly basis.

The initial list of 307 participating churches was reduced to 208 churches that had participated in consultations from 1983 to 1986. This reduction allowed measurement of change during the year prior to the consultation, the "treatment year" in which the consultation took place, and for the two years following the consultation. Due to the relatively small number of churches in this test, it was not possible to separate the effects of each consultation model.

Three types of analysis were performed to compute: (1) the average effect on churches participating in the consultations, (2) the aggregate (cumulative) effect of the consultations, and (3) the percentage of churches that were "revitalized," as measured by average worship attendance.

Findings

In Figure 6.1, the average percent change for the four test variables (membership, participating membership, average worship attendance, and church school enrollment) are compared for the year prior to the consultation, the consultation year, and for the two years following the consultation. As can be seen, the average church that was involved in a consultation declined by 1.0% in participating membership in the year prior to the consultation. In the year of the consultation the average church grew by 1.7% in participating membership. However, the positive effect of the consultations did not continue, as the average church lost participating members in the two years following the consultation.

The same basic pattern exists for all of the measures. Growth (or a very low level of decline) is evident during the year of the consultation. Only in the area of total membership does the positive effect continue thereafter.

Figure 6.2 looks remarkably similar to Figure 6.1. Here the data for all churches are added together to form an aggregate total. It can be seen that the churches lost (cumulatively) 3% of their participating members and 1.2% of their worship attendees in the year prior to the consultation. On the other hand, during the year of the consultation the churches cumulatively grew 1.3% in participating membership and 0.5% in worship attendance. As was seen in Figure 6.1, performance declined in all areas in the year following the consultation—except for total membership.

FIGURE 6.1
The Impact of Intervention:
Average Percent Change for Participating Churches

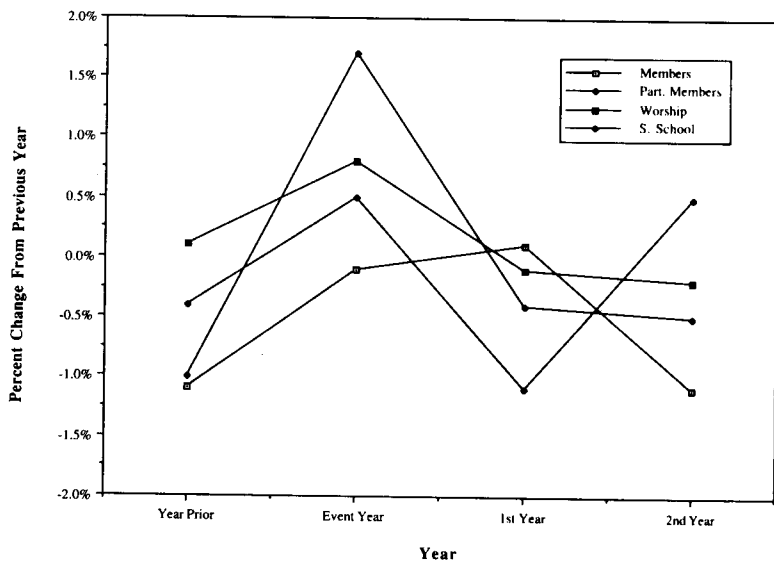
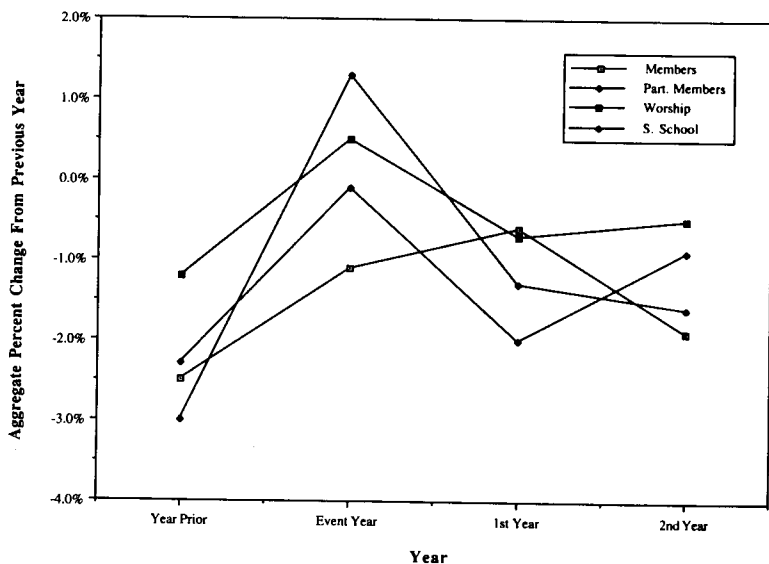


FIGURE 6.2
The Impact of Intervention:
Aggregate Change for Participating Churches



The results of this analysis clearly show that the consultations tend to have a positive effect on participating churches. However, the positive effect does not last very long—at least for most churches. This is consistent with the expectations of Herb Miller, who directs the National Evangelistic Association, now called The Net Results Resource Center. According to Miller, participating churches tend to have a surge in membership additions, but the surge typically does not last beyond the first year of the program. After the first year, various events conspire to reduce the long-term effect of the program. Pastors move, priorities change, and enthusiasm that was high in the months surrounding the consultation event begins to lag. As a result, churches tend to settle back into old patterns that were dominant prior to the consultation. The church added some new members, however, and because all churches do not regularly clean their memberships rolls, growth in total membership continues for an additional year.

As a final test of the “impact of intervention,” the percentage of participating churches with some growth during the consultation year was measured, along with the percentage of these churches that continued to grow during the subsequent two years. This was an effort to determine the likelihood that a church selecting one of the six options would see some long-term results.

In the year prior to the consultation, 44% of the churches grew by at least one person in average worship attendance. During the year of the consultation, this percentage increased to 50%. Very few churches (only 12%) grew during the consultation year and during the two subsequent years. Two years after the consultation, however, 43% of the churches had average worship attendance that was higher than they had during the year of the consultation.

These trends suggest that few churches are thoroughly revitalized through consultations. The consultations and the programs they promote do have a measurable effect on church growth, however.

Concluding Remarks

Are these results good news or bad news for church consultants? And what do they say to churches that are considering investing in a consultation?

The answers to these questions depend upon one’s perspective. In a very real sense the results are good news for church consultants, or at least for “The Net Results Resource Center” church consultations. They can say that, on average, their consultations do have a positive effect on the membership, worship attendance, and church school enrollment of the average participating church. This is true even though the consultations are of short duration, and in spite of the fact that many churches do not follow through with the programs launched through the consultations.

Yet there also is a warning implied in the data. Few churches see long-term growth as a result of the interventions. The surge in growth typically is for one year, a fact that suggests that church growth consultations are often the “mainline equivalent of a revival” (or at least the type of revival that produces measurable results). The consultation generates enthusiasm and activity. Members tell their friends about what is happening at the church. For a time, the church seems “vital” to members and visitors. As a result, worship attendance increases and more persons than usual join the church. Growth happens.

Unfortunately, it is easy for enthusiasm and activity to wane. When this occurs, the church returns to the old ways of doing things. Excitement drops and the church no longer seems as vital to newcomers. Further, programmatic changes that encourage outreach and evangelism tend to break down because the pastor and church leaders no longer give these areas priority.

Clearly, enthusiasm among members and programmatic changes that encourage outreach will produce a temporary surge of growth in most churches. Consultations help in this process by providing motivation and concrete strategies for evangelism. In order for a church to see long-term benefits from a consultation, however, profound changes must be made in the identity and structure of a congregation. Most consultants know this and offer strategies to make the long-range changes. This is a long process that begins with the self-defined purpose or identity of the congregation. Until a church’s identity supports outreach or active membership recruitment, and until outreach is built into the goals and structure of the church, these efforts are unlikely to last very long. Further, unless a church “has the goods” that meet people’s needs, members are unlikely to invite friends and co-workers to the church, regardless of an identity that supports outreach. The challenge to church consultants is to create planning models that recognize these realities and that assist churches in the process of becoming vital, accepting institutions that reach out to the communities that surround them.