

The Effect of a Church Growth Strategy on United Church of Christ Congregations

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One response to the continued decline of old-line Protestant denominations has been a growth industry in church growth books, workshops, and consultation services. Everyone, it seems, has ideas about what to do in order to grow—from adding parking spaces, to follow-up calling on visitors the same day they visit, to slick advertising, Communications, marketing, and organizational theory all have contributed ideas, along with theology and sociology. In most cases, however, the ideas and particular techniques advocated are based on individual experience rather than empirical research. Thus, a practical question about such techniques is, “Do they work?”

A second question about such techniques is “Where do they work?” Studies of church growth included in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950–1978* (Hoge and Roozen, 1979) underscore the importance of community context and the interaction of contextual and institutional factors in understanding church growth. For example, in both Presbyterian (Roof et al., 1979) and United Church of Christ (McKinney, 1979) congregations, different institutional factors were related to congregational effectiveness in urban, suburban, and rural churches. The Presbyterian study also found that different factors were related to church growth in growing and stable communities. If institutional correlates of growth vary by community context, techniques to promote church growth may be differentially effective as well. In addition, because congregational size is important in understanding church dynamics (Dudley, 1983; Rothauge, n.d.; Schaller, 1982), church growth techniques may not be equally effective in churches of different sizes.

A Church Growth Intervention Program

The United Church of Christ, like other Protestant denominations, continued to experience small annual membership declines throughout the 1980s.

One denominational response to this continued decline was the development of a series of church growth workshops held throughout the United States from 1984 to 1987. The workshops were designed to create positive attitudes about evangelism and church growth, to provide practical ideas for growth-producing activities, and to motivate participants to persevere in their efforts. Participating churches agreed to send their pastor and a team of lay people to a series of three workshops over a two-year period. They also agreed to work in their local congregations between workshops and to report their progress. People from over 1,325 congregations, nearly one quarter of the denomination, attended at least one phase of the program.

The program was modeled on the writings of Lyle E. Schaller and led by two members of the national evangelism staff (see Schaller, 1983). Several hypotheses about church growth were implicit in the program. Workshop leaders taught that, in order for a church to grow, church members must:

1. Have positive attitudes about growth.
2. Work intentionally on evangelism and growth.
3. Improve the marketing of the church and create a higher community profile.
4. Welcome newcomers actively.
5. Work to assimilate newcomers into church life.
6. Provide a compelling product that helps members grow in their faith.
7. Be active in meeting community needs.

Concepts were taught and practical suggestions presented in each of the seven areas. The program evolved over the years, although elements from all areas were present in some form in most of the presentations. Particularly in the second and third phases, participants shared with one another their past successes and failures and future plans.

As the intervention program came to a close, an evaluation was performed to learn how valuable it was in spurring growth in the participating churches, and how it might be redesigned to be more effective. Because churches implemented the program differently, the evaluation also provided an opportunity to determine how useful particular interventions were in producing growth.

Because participation was voluntary, however, participating and non-participating churches were not equivalent in ways that may limit attempts to generalize the results. Churches that chose to participate were larger than nonparticipating churches. Participating churches also

were more likely to have declined in membership and to have a lower proportion of members attending worship. These patterns suggest that participating churches also had more inactive members than did nonparticipating churches. Although not a random sample of all UCC congregations, the group of participating churches represents an appropriate collection of the kinds of churches that would be candidates for growth programs. Although these findings may not be applicable to all churches (for instance, the dynamics of growth in new churches may be quite different), they are applicable to the typical old-line church that wants to pursue church growth.

The Evaluation

The Survey Sample

Six hundred congregations were randomly selected to participate in the evaluation study. Each was sent a packet of four surveys in June, 1987. By that time, all congregations had completed at least two phases of the program, and many had completed all three. The pastor was asked to complete an eighty-four-item survey that included questions about whether the church had organized for evangelism and church growth, whether it had implemented specific program suggestions, whether attitudes about growth had changed, and whether other changes had taken place since the workshop.

In addition, the pastor was asked to give copies of a shorter, forty-six-item survey to up to three lay persons who had been part of the team attending the workshops. These surveys contained some of the same questions that were included in the pastor's questionnaire concerning changes in attitudes and programming in the church.

At least one survey was returned from 259 congregations for a return rate of 43.2%. Of these, responses from 213 churches, 35.5% of the original sample, were complete enough to be used in the analysis.¹

Two other types of information were added to the records for these churches. First, several measures of church membership from denominational records were added. Total membership, average worship attendance, numbers and types of gains and losses for 1985 through 1987, and church size in 1983 (before the program began) were all included. Second, the percent population change in the area defined by the church as its parish was added.²

The number of new members received into the church from 1985 to 1987 was used to measure church "growth."³ To determine the effects of program activities, a partial correlation was calculated between new additions and each measure of program or attitudinal change. The partial correlation was

used to remove the possible effects of two factors that also might explain the number of new members received: church size (measured in 1983 before the program began) and population change (since 1980).

To address the question of where the program works best, churches were categorized in two different ways. By using census information, three groups of churches were identified: (1) those in communities of decline or no growth, (2) those in communities with slow growth of less than 10% between 1980 and 1986, and (3) those in communities with growth of 10% or more. Churches also were divided into three size categories: (1) up to 150 members, (2) 151 to 300 members, and (3) 301 or more members.

Then, partial correlations were calculated between program measures and the new member measure separately for each subgroup.⁴

All Churches

National denominational records for all churches (not just the 213 for which survey results were available) were analyzed to estimate the effect of the entire program, nationwide. All 4,184 participating and nonparticipating churches were identified in areas where the program was offered. Then, partial correlations were calculated between participation in the program and (1) the number of new members received in 1987, and (2) the total number received from 1985 to 1987. As in the survey sample, the use of partial correlations removed the effects of church size in 1983 and community population change—partially compensating for the fact that participating and nonparticipating churches were not equal in size.

This analysis probably underestimates the effect of the program for three reasons. First, the participating churches were counted as those having had one person attend one workshop (rather than a team attending all three phases of the program). Second, even when church teams participated fully in the program, they were not always able to implement changes when they returned to their local churches. Finally, participating churches were self-selected. Although they may have had more interest in church growth, they also probably were in greater need of it, as reflected in their greater decline in membership prior to the workshops.

To determine where the programs might have been most effective, the 4,184 churches were divided into groups by community growth or decline, church size, and the church's prior record of growth or decline. Because of the larger numbers of churches, more categories of church size and community growth or decline were used for these analyses. Partial correlations were calculated within these groups.

Measure	Total Sample (N=213)	Type of Community		
		No Growth (N=70)	Small Growth (N=91)	Growth (N=52)
Intentional Efforts				
Size of Committee	Strong	Strong		
Numeric goals		Some		
Members have ideas re how-to		Some		
Ability to generate new ideas	Slight	Strong		
Increased involvement of all church committees		Slight		
Congregation was involved	Slight	Some		
Amount of budget for growth	Some		Strong	Strong
Money spent for projects	Slight			Some
Resources were available		Some		
Number attending workshops	Slight			
Number of activities	Some	Some		Strong
Marketing Activities				
Special Sundays	Slight			
Visitor Sundays				Strong
Money spent on media ads				Some
Clergy/lay calling teams				Some
Efforts to Welcome Newcomers				
Name tags	Strong	Strong	Some	Strong
Money spent for name tags	Slight			Some
Usher training	Slight			
Membership Sundays	Slight			
Non-traditional follow-up	Some	Strong	Some	
Efforts to Assimilate Newcomers				
Number of new groups formed	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Increased fellowship groups	Some		Some	Some
More newcomers in groups	Some	Strong	Some	
Efforts to Improve the Product				
Quality of music		Some		
Lay involvement in worship		Some		
Opportunities to share faith		Some		
Retreats		Some		

Measure	Total Sample (N=213)	Type of Community		
		No Growth (N=70)	Small Growth (N=91)	Growth (N=52)
Efforts to Meet Community Needs				
Facilities used by community	Slight			
Users invited to church		Some		
New or strengthened social service ministries	Some		Slight	Some
Ministries chosen by study	Slight	Some		
Ministries chosen as evangelism tool	Some	Strong		Some

Note: All correlations were partial correlations, with the effect of church size in 1983 removed. Correlations for the total sample also partial out the effect of community growth or decline.

Slight = statistically significant correlation in .10-.19 range
 Some = statistically significant correlation in .20-.29 range
 Strong = statistically significant correlation of .30 or greater

Intentional efforts. Organizing and working for church growth were also related to adding new members under all conditions of community growth. More resources invested, whether people on the committee, attendance at the workshops, money in the budget, or number of activities undertaken, all seemed to produce more new members. Particular details of organization, such as starting a new team and holding regular meetings over a long period of time, were not significantly related to the outcome, appearing to matter less than the amount of resources put into the effort. Setting numeric goals seemed more helpful than setting either program or general goals.

In general, effects were strongest in conditions of no community growth. In these churches, particularly, involvement of the whole church seemed important, as did the church's access to ideas about how to grow.

Marketing activities. Although pastors reported that they had increased efforts in many activities related to attracting people to church, only a few of these activities were significantly correlated with increased numbers of new members. For these activities, the relationships were strongest in growing communities. This finding suggests that promotional activities may have their greatest value in situations where the church must inform newcomers of its existence. Such efforts may not be effective in communities where the church is already a familiar presence.

Although several activities for creating increased visibility, such as special events, media expenditures, and calling in the community, were related to attracting new members, others were not. Newspaper advertisements or stories about the church, and efforts spent in developing a church brochure were unrelated to numbers of new members received. Although one of the most common activities that congregations undertook after attending the workshops was improving their signs, such improvement was not significantly correlated with attracting new members. The use of radio, television, and cable television programming also was not significantly related to bringing in new members, although the few congregations that increased their use of the media experienced an increase in church attendance.

Efforts to welcome newcomers. The results summarized in Table 7.1 support the claims of many church growth programs that congregations need to work hard at welcoming newcomers. Although many members do not like wearing name tags, they were significantly related to increased new members under all conditions of community growth. In addition to being useful in themselves, name tags may be an indication of a congregation's willingness to put personal anonymity aside in order to welcome others.

Several activities in this area were not significantly related to numbers of new members, however. Although workshop leaders stressed the importance of the coffee hour in welcoming guests and the use of print media, such as the church bulletin and newsletter in creating an attractive and welcoming impression, improvements in these areas were not related to receiving new members.

Church growth advocates stress the importance of immediate follow-up calls on visitors. Little connection was found, however, between follow-up practices and the number of new members received. Correlations generally were positive, but the only statistically significant relationship was with follow-up by some unusual means, such as church members bringing a loaf of "Friendship Bread" to visitors. Average time to follow-up, the percentage of visitors receiving any follow-up call, and whether a visit was followed up by letter, telephone, or in person were not significantly correlated to numbers of new members.

Efforts to assimilate newcomers. Clearly, as church growth experts advocate, involvement of newcomers in groups is a crucial activity in building membership. Congregations that formed new groups and were successful in getting newcomers involved in groups had more new members than other congregations. These partial correlations were among the largest and the most consistently positive across community growth levels of any in the study.⁵

Efforts to improve the product. Efforts to improve the church program, including revitalizing worship life and providing spiritual development opportunities were significantly related to the number of new members received, but only for churches in communities that were not growing. Where competition among churches for members is strong, that is, in communities with a stable or shrinking population, the quality of the product may be more important than in churches in communities with less competition.

Efforts to meet community needs. Involvement in social service ministries and community outreach activities was positively related to receiving new members for churches, regardless of the community setting.⁶ Developing social service ministries as a result of church growth-related community study or as a part of a total evangelism strategy appears to have been particularly effective.

Differences by church size. When analyses were performed separately on churches of different sizes, activities were found to be effective for some churches, but not for others (see Table 7.2 below and Table A7.2 in the Supplemental Appendix). Differences in church growth effectiveness were not as clear by size as they were by community growth, however. Many activities, such as those measuring the amount of intentional effort, celebrating special or Visitor Sundays, using name tags, involvement of new members in group activities, and new or strengthened social service ministries, were significantly related to the number of new members regardless of church size.

Some measures were significantly related to receiving new members for churches of less than 300 members, but not for the larger churches. These measures included setting numerical goals, involving the whole congregation, holding Visitor Sundays, usher training, and following up visitors by personal visits.

For the smallest churches, those of 150 or fewer members, newspaper ads, money spent for name tags (perhaps so people would wear them), and Membership Sundays were related to receiving new members. The presence of community service ministries among these churches was negatively related to the number of new members received. Perhaps very small congregations, often without full-time staff, have little energy left for nurturing newcomers if they also support significant community ministries.

Other measures were significantly related to the number of new members, but only for churches of over 300 members. They included the ability to generate new ideas, celebrating special Sundays (like Homecoming Sunday), new or improved coffee hours, nontraditional ways of following up visitors, providing opportunities for the pastor's own spiritual growth, and choosing community ministries as an evangelism tool.

TABLE 7.2
Relationships Between Local Church Efforts and
Total New Members in 1985–1987 for Different Size Churches

Measure	Size of Church			
	Total Sample (N=213)	150 or less (N=39)	151–300 (N=70)	Over 300 (N=104)
Intentional Efforts				
Church started a new team			Some	
Size of committee	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Numeric goals		Strong	Some	
Ability to generate new ideas	Slight			Some
Congregation was involved	Slight	Some	Some	
Committee had a budget			Slight	
Amount of budget for growth	Some	Strong	Strong	Some
Money spent for projects	Slight	Strong	Some	
Number attending workshops	Slight		Strong	
Number of activities	Some	Strong		Some
Marketing Activities				
Special Sundays	Slight			Slight
Visitor Sundays		Strong	Some	
Newspaper ads		Strong		
Money spent on media ads			Some	
Clergy/lay calling teams			Strong	
Efforts to Welcome Newcomers				
Name tags	Strong		Strong	Strong
Money spent for name tags	Slight	Strong		
Usher training	Slight		Some	
Coffee hour				Slight
Membership Sundays	Slight	Strong		
Follow-up by personal visit		Some	Some	
Non-traditional follow-up	Some			Strong
Efforts to Assimilate Newcomers				
Number of new groups formed	Strong		Strong	Strong
Increased fellowship groups	Some	Some	Some	Slight
More newcomers in groups	Some		Some	Some

Measure	Total Sample (N=213)	Size of Church	
	150 or less (N=39)	151-300 (N=70)	Over 300 (N=104)
Efforts to Improve the Product			
Opportunities for pastor's growth			Slight
Efforts to Meet Community Needs			
Facilities used by community	Slight	Some	
Church has social service ministries in community		Strong	
New or strengthened social service ministries	Some	Some	Some
Ministries chosen by study	Slight	Some	Some
Ministries chosen as evangelism tool	Some		Strong

Note: All correlations were partial correlations, with the effect of church size in 1983 and community growth or decline removed. Measures were omitted from the table if no partial correlation was significant.

Slight = statistically significant correlation in .10-.19 range
 Some = statistically significant correlation in .20-.29 range
 Strong = statistically significant correlation of .30 or greater

Finally, a few measures were significantly related to new members, but only for churches of between 151 and 300 members. These included financial commitment: having an evangelism budget, and spending money on media ads. Two other significant measures were institutional support: starting a new team or committee for church growth and sending a larger number of members to the workshops. A final item that was undertaken by only a small number of churches—the use of clergy/lay calling teams in the community—also is a measure of the seriousness with which the congregation takes the church growth program. Perhaps congregations that support a full-time pastor and try to provide a full range of programming without the resources of larger churches, must make evangelism a top priority in order to grow.

Total program effects. Survey results demonstrated that the program was effective in causing a considerable amount of activity and change in the congregations. On the surveys, the majority of clergy and laity reported many new or changed activities and improved attitudes about growth. Things happened as a result of the program, although short-term, limited activities such as developing a brochure were more likely to hap-

pen than longer-term commitments such as developing clergy/lay calling teams. However, things did not happen in every church. Pastors in nearly a third of the congregations (31%) reported that they were not successful (or not yet successful) in getting organized. Those in this category very often reported a change in key clergy or lay leadership or some other major internal upheaval.

All Churches

When new member statistics were examined for all 4,184 congregations, participation in the church growth program was related to increased numbers of new members, but only in some types of churches or communities. For the total group of churches in areas in which the program was offered, when church size and community change were taken into account, churches that participated in the program were no more likely to have gained new members than those that did not participate. The partial correlations, controlling for prior membership and community growth, are displayed in Table 7.3.

The program was effective in communities with slow or moderate growth, but not in stable or declining communities or those experiencing rapid growth. The finding that the program had little effect in rapidly growing communities is not surprising, and may indicate that the need is less there. The lack of effect in stable or declining communities is surprising, however, because in these communities churches that implemented various parts of the program were successful in recruiting new members, according to the findings from the sample survey. One possible explanation might be that the program was less successful in motivating congregations in these communities to implement the program, but those that did so gained members. Another might be that, in such communities, the more successful congregations were more likely to have returned the surveys.

The program also was successful in the smallest churches and in those with between 250 and 500 members. Many ideas presented in the workshops may have been implemented already in the largest churches, leaving little room for improvement. In fact, on the survey, the largest churches indicated that they had been doing many of the recommended activities prior to the workshops.

Finally, churches that had been relatively stable in size before the program appeared to benefit the most from it. Previously growing churches may not have needed it, while it may have come too late for declining churches.

TABLE 7.3
Partial Correlations Between Participation in
Church Growth Program and Number of New Members Received

Church or Community Type	Number of Churches	Number of New Members Received	
		In 1987	In 1985-1987
Total Group	4,184	.03	.00
Communities of:			
No growth	1,476	.00	-.03
Slow growth	1,881	.07*	.00
Some growth	625	.11*	.07
Rapid growth	145	-.04	-.07
Size of church:			
Less than 100	898	.11**	.17**
100-250	1,464	.03	.03
251-500	1,074	.06	.12**
More than 500	664	.03	-.04
Church history of:			
Decline	1,345	.02	.00
Stable size	1,692	.10**	.12**
Growth	988	.04	-.03

Note: Only church size was partialled out for different levels of community growth or decline.

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$

It Works for Some Churches

Several conclusions can be drawn from the evaluation of this church growth program. First, a multiple-phase program that provided information, trained leaders, and brought participants back together to report their progress was successful in generating a considerable amount of activity in the churches. That activity, in some cases, resulted in increased numbers of new members.

Second, activities designed to attract, welcome, and include prospective members were related to growth, particularly when the congregation at large was involved. More efforts did produce more growth. Some support was obtained for the hypotheses that positive attitudes about growth, intentionality, marketing, efforts to include newcomers, improvement of the product

through worship and spiritual development, and involvement in outreach activities are important in helping churches gain new members, at least for some types of churches.

Third, the effects of the program were much stronger in some types of churches than in others. Two factors seemed to be important in determining where it was most effective. First, the churches needed some resources (people, funds, time, and so on) at their disposal. Declining churches may not have had these. Second, these churches must not already have been involved in many of the suggested activities for the program to be effective. Growing or larger churches may have already been involved for much change to occur.

Finally, community context is an important factor in understanding church growth. Different activities were effective under different community growth conditions. For example, churches in communities with no growth need to work harder in providing high quality programming and seeking out and integrating new members, while churches in rapidly growing communities must work harder at letting the community know they are there. Understanding the local context and its interaction with church climate and programming is crucial to understanding the dynamics of church growth and decline.