

*Leading the High-Turnover Small Church*

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*Abstract:* During the 1980s I pastored a church in coastal Maine that was highly transient. This drove me crazy. My efforts never seemed to add up to anything. I lived at square one. This article reflects on that experience, points to the significant positive features of an transient congregation, and offers suggestions for maximizing the potential of this very common and very important type of church.

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"How big is your church?" My standard reply: "It's a church of 1,000, in successive groups of 100." In my small, New England flock, every three years the membership turned over.

The normal attrition rate for church members is 10 percent per year. Ours was 35 percent. Each time a church directory company offered their services, I refused. In our case it would be church *history* by the time it reached us.

We struggled with two sources of instability:

First, due to the large Naval Air Station nearby, one third of our congregation was comprised of active and former military personnel. Many of these military families had only two or three years to belong to our church.

Second, during the 1980s a large shipyard in our town boomed economically, which brought skilled workers to our area. We rejoiced when several of these families attended our church. However, when this boom ended in the 1990s, the flow of people reversed, and we watched the economic tides carry many dear friends away.

This entrance and exit of church attendees, while acute in our instance, affects every local church. The average American changes careers four times during his or her

lifetime and moves every five years. This can make pastors feel like we're running a bus depot rather than leading a community of believers.

- *Dizzied by the revolving door*

The migration of our members, we discovered, impacted our congregation in several ways:

*Organization.* Putting together consistent programming was difficult. Most vulnerable were ministries such as Sunday school that required week-in, week-out commitment.

The problem was not so much a lack of warm bodies to fill positions as a lack of qualified leaders to motivate, train, and direct those willing to serve. No one seemed to be around long enough to accomplish anything. Frequently we ended up with a roster of part-time, substitute teachers larger than the regular staff! Many wanted to help, but few could serve full-time.

*Relationships.* Our church averaged one hundred members. Even with that small size, however, the members began to feel disconnected from one another. Each Sunday the faces changed. No one felt like they knew, or could ever hope to know, more than a small percentage of the whole body. I was constantly asked, "Who is that new person?" or "Whatever happened to so-and-so?"

When many of our permanent members lost close friends in the waves of out-migration, their incentive to get to know new people diminished--why expend the energy to get to know someone when, in a short time, they would leave? We suffered the worst of both worlds: the weak programming of a small church and the impersonal atmosphere of a big church.

*Grief.* Such losses led to grief. After several years of high turnover, the energy and excitement seemed to be draining out of the body.

The source of this spiritual recession became clear when a leader in the congregation shared with me how lonely and hurt he and his wife were. They had counted on a local church being a place for close, long-term friendships. They had not bargained on so many friends leaving them, and they were considering changing churches as a result.

At this point I realized my people were grieving deeply over their many lost relationships. An undercurrent of mourning affected everything we tried to do.

*Self-esteem.* When enough people left our church, those remaining began to ask themselves, *What's wrong with us?* I sensed the congregation losing confidence as it witnessed so many moving away only to be replaced by others who would leave eventually, too. It was as if each departing family took a piece of our strength with them.

Turnover created the false impression that our body was seriously diseased and that someone (maybe the pastor?) was doing something terribly wrong.

*Frustration.* I found this transience extremely frustrating. The worst part was seeing spiritually growing members leave just as they were ready for significant leadership. I identified with the Jews in Egypt who were commanded to make bricks without straw. How could God give me a vision to reach my community and then strip me of the tools necessary to do the job? Throwing my best efforts into that situation but still not producing growth was humbling.

- *Hope for the passing parade*

Is there any hope? Yes! Pastors can lead a high-turnover church, but it calls for the following assumptions and strategies:

*Adopt a world perspective.* I am continually reminded that I do not own my people, I only lease them. Each person that the Lord brings to a church belongs to him exclusively. My job is to be a good steward of the people until the Lord moves them on.

I had to teach the congregation that we were a *bakery* and not a *warehouse*. God had called us, in part, to process people for shipment, not to store them for inventory.

*Hit it head on.* If turnover is troubling the people who remain, talk about it. Whenever a vacuum exists, people rush in with their own interpretations to fill it. Frequently these interpretations are negative and, if they start placing blame, sometimes dangerous.

Several years ago I preached a message from John 15 on the pruned vine bearing much fruit. Losing some people now could prepare the church for a greater work later, I said. This perspective struck a responsive chord among the people, easing some of the grief and low self-esteem.

I also reminded them that our name, "Elim," was taken from an oasis in the Sinai where the Israelites stopped on their way to Canaan. We too could be a place of rest and healing for people on the move.

To show that we accepted this calling, we began honoring each departing member by holding small celebrations. Refusing to run away from these losses, these celebrations were healthy times of fellowship instead of quiet funerals for lost relationships.

*Integrate new people quickly.* The good news about high-turnover settings is that new people move in. We wove each new person into the fabric of the church's life rapidly.

We did this primarily by offering small group fellowships. Since worship services can be the loneliest place on earth for a new attendee, our fellowship groups provided a climate for getting to know one another and for personal ministry. These groups also gave our permanent people an island of security in a sea of change.

Connecting newcomers with the groups was the challenge. Our solution was to bypass the traditional method of having the pastor follow up on visitors and let the home fellowships do it. We passed visitor records along to each group leader weekly so that a group member could contact new people by telephone or letter. A call from a lay person was less intimidating than a pastoral contact and provided a more direct invitation to the fellowship's next meeting.

*Exercise leadership through teams.* In more stable churches a handful of key individuals who have been around for years administer programs. In the high-turnover scenario, the ministry is always vulnerable to the loss of that key person.

To protect ourselves we began a team model of leadership. When a group worked together to manage a program, it was less likely to fold when an individual or two relocated. Moreover, many qualified parishioners who were unable to play the "key person" role were willing to be on a team.

A fringe benefit of the team approach: we could train newcomers to assume leadership. Since the team's performance didn't hinge on any one person, we could take chances on giving newcomers limited amounts of shared responsibility as on-the-job training.

*Build ministry on projects.* Having a mission and goals is crucial in any church, but when people are coming and going as if you were a travel agency, these goals are often too big for people to own. So we broke them into short-term steps.

We organized some ministries on a *project* basis. One such project team organized a community outreach for the Fourth of July, when 15,000 people visit our town annually. On the fifth of July the team was no more. The side benefit of this was an easier time of recruiting. Recruiting became easier when people realized they wouldn't be drafted for a job that would last until Jesus returns.

*Be willing to change.* The hallmark of effective pastors in migratory churches is flexibility. This may mean "reinventing" your church every twelve months.

In my first years at our church, a Sunday evening service worked well. But as the church family turned over faster and faster, Sunday evening attendance dropped off sharply. Our needs had changed.

With two other services each week, we decided small-group fellowships featuring Bible study and prayer would care better for our families. Sunday evening services were a tradition in our movement, but they weren't working for us. The groups, on the other hand, proved extremely effective.

We have found that if a ministry does not work well and cannot be fixed - cancel it. If individuals cannot commit to teaching Sunday school every week - recruit teams to share the responsibility. If weekly meetings prove to be a burden - try biweekly

sessions. If a number of new folks can sing--start a choir. Our ministry is constantly evolving, calling for a willingness to try the unconventional.

Migratory congregations exist for at least two reasons: migratory people need them, and they serve as "pipelines" feeding equipped believers into their next church, often the one where they will bloom. Over the years we began to see person after person who moved on from our church develop a fruitful ministry in their new location.

Steve and Diane, one of our military families, weathered storms with us and then relocated to a church in Maryland where they developed a highly successful youth program and led a missions trip to Panama. Brandy, a student at a local boarding school, departed upon graduation and entered Bible College. Peggy came to us as a new believer and moved to Missouri six years later to enter seminary.

Tim and Charlie, two sailors, were part of our congregation for only a year until their guided missile cruiser sailed from the shipyard in our town to its homeport on the West Coast. They wrote to us several months later to say that they had both experienced important spiritual growth while among our people and were now leading a Bible study for crewmembers of their vessel. Reports like this help us get over the feeling that the product of our labors is slipping through our fingers. Instead, we can think of our church as having an international impact.

After seven years of ministry in a migratory church, I moved. I look back on my time in a high-turnover church as a rare privilege. We touched lives that carried the message of God's love to many places. We prepared the seed to be cast into the wind of the Spirit, who alone determines where it will take root.