

COMMUNITY ON MISSION LAUNCH CLASS

WEEK #3 - EXEGETING THE CONGREGATION

While some churches have software that attempts to capture accurate records of giving, attendance, and birth or anniversary dates, only occasionally (if ever) will a congregation dig deep enough behind the trends to truly analyze the data. Good decisions and future planning are made with good information.

Formally, churches who are preparing for the future can be helped by utilizing tools like <https://www.gloo.us> that provide additional data collection and management options. More informally, church leaders should regularly gather focus groups or engage in intentional one-on-one conversations with informal “influencers” and other congregants that represent the diversity of their people to proactively gather insights. Leaders who exegete their congregations by getting to know their people, listening to their questions, dreams, fears, and challenges are doing the kind of pastoral life-on-life work that is essential. The local church pastor will find it especially helpful to visit people in the places where they live their lives: work, home, school, and other “third places”¹ where people gather for social engagement. Seeing their worlds helps leaders see and understand what we might have missed in conversations that happened in the church office, a formal focus group at the church, or even in a local coffee shop. Being “on-site” helps form needed insights.

Church exegesis has been going on since New Testament times. Remember, your context will be unique, just as the Apostle Paul did not write a series of letters to “the Church” in general. He knew that there were different cultures, people, contexts, and problems in Corinth, Galatia, and Thessalonica. So, based his understanding of God’s revelation in Christ and the Holy Spirit’s prompting, Paul wrote particular letters to particular churches, often addressing individuals within those churches.

For our purposes, this type of insight from congregational research and reflection, whether formal or informal, can serve as an excellent way to identify Community on Mission Leaders and participants.

STEP 1

Gather Information

Establish a multi-generational list of the names of people with whom you are going to engage. One way to ensure a diversity of perspectives is by identifying generational groups such as:

- Builders – born before 1945
- Boomer – born 1946 – 64
- Generation X – born 1965 – 80
- Millennials – born 1981 – 96

- Generation Z –born 1997 to 2010
- Generation Alpha – born 2011 - 25

Establish a clear and reasonable timeline in which you intend to listen well and establish accountability with someone who will help you to complete this task in a timely manner. Whether formally asked or informally discerned, leaders are looking for answers to questions such as:

1. How do you understand what Jesus' mission was when He came to the world? What did Jesus come to do?
2. How do you see the Church fulfilling or not fulfilling that mission? What's your greatest frustration about this issue?
3. Do you ever imagine ways you (maybe with others), might participate in helping to fulfill that mission?
4. Why do you think the Church is dying in America? What do you think could help to turn that around?
5. What do you think are our church's greatest strengths? What are our greatest weaknesses? What do you think you (we) need to do to help enhance or change either of those things?

STEP 2

Get Personal...Stay Prayerful

Most people have at least a few family members they list among the “nones” or the “dones”² when it comes to the local or institutional church. At the heart of these conversations are the names of real people – friends and family members, who many can identify as still living in the area but no longer attending regularly or at all. These may include:

- A spouse
- Children
- Grandchildren
- Other Relatives

On a very personal level, hearing these stories and gathering those insights can provide an even deeper heartfelt reflection on the subtle migration away from church engagement and become an opportunity to cast a renewed vision for the work of the Church in the world.

Others often know the stories of friends, former fellow attendees, or even co-workers who they have heard talk about their reasons for disengaging. That list may include:

- COVID disappearances.³
- Retirees with leadership gifts who are in a time of life transition.
- Early retirees looking for something meaningful in which engage...and ener-

- Early retirees looking for something meaningful in which engage...and energy/resources to do so.
- Youth ministry alumni who have abandoned the local church.
- People who had a life or faith crisis and were rejected by the church.
- Harm imposed by the church

STEP 3

Ready, Set, Go...

PRAY.

The Holy Spirit IS at work in the hearts and lives of people. Your conversation is joining with Christ with He is already active and present in their hearts, minds, and conversations.

WRITE IT DOWN.

The key is to have information that can inform and guide your heart and thinking as you prayerfully develop your “List of 50” who have a passion and interest in Kingdom Work.

CAST THE VISION, ONE-ON-ONE.

From your “List of 50,” set a time for meeting and further conversations. For some visionaries, going from a great idea to the actual execution is the greatest hold up. In this phase it is essential to have a plan in your heart and mind - BUT one that can be tweaked and cooperatively shaped with the leaders you are onboarding. Having an “elevator speech” that provides clear vision (the why), basic expectations, and even an anticipated timeline, will help others know that this is more than a daydream, but a true vision.

Even during COVID, with the vaccine rollout, every sector of life is preparing for the “new normal.”

DEEPEN AND GROW THE RELATIONAL ENERGY.

As you begin, you will need to be “heart deep” with your core leadership team. Starting with ongoing mentoring, coaching, and prayer are key.

FORM THE MISSION — MAKE THE PLAN.

Footnotes

- 1 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2016/09/14/third-places-as-community-builders/>
- 2 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/summer-2015/meet-dones.html>; <https://christianleadermag.com/learning-from-the-dones-and-nones/>
- 3 <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>