



# Congregational Life

Congregational Life Centre—Consultants to Congregations 780 619-0386

## Sept. 2006 Issue Contents

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## Boutique Congregations

by Joyce Madsen

When numbers were published in August about the decline in mainline congregations in Canada—53% decline for Anglicans, 39% decline in the United Church, and 35% decline in the Presbyterian church – I wondered how we could find a way to actually get people to pay attention and find a way to begin to dream about new possibilities.

Being a marketer by nature and training, I wondered if there was an example in our culture that could open up a new vision for the church. My answer was to think about how our shopping habits have changed over the past 30 years.

Most of the people in the pew of mainline congregations today have seen corner grocery and drugstores become Safeway and Super Stores; strip malls become enclosed malls; general stores have been replaced by big box stores.

Most of the people in the pew of a mainline congregation remember the first large grocery store coming into their neighbourhood, saw strip malls being built and then enclosed, and now we are shopping at the big boxes – Wal-mart, Home Depot, HomeSense, Staples, etc. The question is — how has your congregation changed during these transitions in our culture?

### Entertainment or Enlightenment

There was a time when going shopping at the mall was a form of entertainment. That happens less today. We go shopping for what we need, we want the best selection at the best price, and we want it to take the least amount of time. Time is the one commodity we never seem to

have enough of so we want to use what we have effectively.

In rural communities the changes have also been significant. Small local stores that provided specific services to the members of the community are dying as multi-car families and good highways enable people to drive to larger communities for shopping and recreation. Wal-mart and other big box stores are building in central areas and draw customers from surrounding communities. The result is that many small towns are dying, and so are the churches.

The other extreme is the community that has become a suburb or bedroom community serving those who work in larger centres. These people come and go every day and are very comfortable on the highway. What they are looking for from a church is a place to meet their neighbours and find a sense of belonging.

### What Do We Have to Offer?

The latest literature and research says that congregations that want to grow need to be clear about what they have to offer and what it is their consumers are looking for. We cannot be all things to all people; we have to either be very unique or boutique-like or we have to offer much about one thing like a Home Depot, Rona, or Staples.

### Much Ado About One Thing

For instance, if you are a congregation that is going to support families, you have to decide what flavours of family you will support, identify their needs, and offer a variety of ministries and programs to meet those needs. If you are looking for children and adult families, you have to recognize

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*Boutique Congregations—continued*

that there are all kinds of blended families today. You need to have programs for children to deal with divorce, and blending into new families. You need step-parenting programs for the adults.

These programs need to be available in formats that work for busy families, and families that may only be together every second week because of joint custody arrangements. Programs may need to happen around meals. Does your church office need to be staffed when people are available, namely weekday evenings and Saturday daytime?

**Being the Best Boutique Around**

If you are going to be boutique and provide a very specific focus, is that going to be a focus on a specific demographic (age, gender, etc.) or psychographic (values, attitudes, interests, lifestyles) community, or is it about a specific ministry. "We are the congregation that advocates for justice," or "We welcome seekers with all of their questions". A boutique-style congregation may not have large numbers out to Sunday worship, but it may have a number of small groups or 'family-sized' communities that are living out their call under one umbrella.

Boutiques may also be theology-based with congregations who are more liberal or conservative attracting different people. This type of congregation provides an opportunity for people to be clear about what they believe and ways to live out their faith from this perspective.

It has become increasingly difficult to try to meet the needs of all of the theological stances that are present in a typical main-line congregation. The language needs to be non-gender for some, for others strictly traditional. Some want upbeat music, others want to sing the old tried and true hymns. For some the concepts of sin, heaven and hell are meaningful — for others acceptance, support, and living life here-and-now are far more important.

**Meeting Needs One at a Time**

Those of us in mainline United, Anglican, Lutheran, or Presbyterian churches have traditionally had a community or neighbourhood focus. That's why most of our

congregations are Pastoral-size (150 or less on Sunday). How do we meet the needs of people today?

Gone are the days when those of us who attend mainline congregations see the church as the centre of our lives. Our schedules have become very busy, and trying to maintain a balance between work, family, recreation, and church is an increasing challenge. How do we adapt to these changes? It is certainly not by trying to get people to conform to a traditional church format – worship Sunday morning supported by mid-week committee meetings.

One of the clergy we are in touch with met with a family at the hockey rink one Sunday afternoon last year because that was when they were available. If we really look at what the possibilities are from the perspective of the people who live in our communities, what might we do?

Let's look at a young family – two working parents, kids in daycare and school. What kind of needs do they have?

- ✚ They need opportunities to play together.
- ✚ They need help when someone is sick.
- ✚ They need help when the school has Professional Development Days and holidays.
- ✚ They need help in balancing their lives.
- ✚ They need help in creating a financial plan for education and retirement.
- ✚ They need a social life.
- ✚ They need a place to understand and grow their spirituality.
- ✚ They might need a local family to connect with.

How can we respond to these needs?

- ✚ We can provide a place for families to be together – playing and learning.
- ✚ We can provide a small group ministry to be a place of community building and spiritual exploration.
- ✚ We can provide a support service for sick days.
- ✚ We can provide programs for days off school.
- ✚ We can provide meals for those with busy schedules to enjoy together.
- ✚ We can be a place for connecting with others in the neighbourhood.
- ✚ We can offer grandparent programs for

*What would it mean if we overturned our tables and developed a new way of being church?*

children.

- ✚ We can create a safe place for teens to be together.
- ✚ We can provide programs for different phases of parenting.
- ✚ We can provide resources for those who are struggling financially, i.e. computers/ Internet.
- ✚ We could provide tutoring.

You probably have many other creative ideas.

### Developing a New Way of Being Church

Mainline churches will not be successful by emulating our evangelical neighbours. They have leadership that is trained to staff big box type congregations. Some think they are growing, but in fact they merely continue to maintain their percentage of the population base. Main-line churches, on the other hand, have lost a significant percentage of the population. Some of that is because of social changes that make some of our traditional services irrelevant. Some of the loss, however, is because we have not responded in a meaningful way to the spiritual needs of people.

What now? There are no easy answers, but we need to do more than tweak our Sunday worship – we need to respond to the needs in our communities. To do that, it is important to know what they are. We also need to be prepared to let go of what is blocking our ability to change. The boutique stores that are successful today are renovating or moving so that they can provide the parking, the lighting, the space, and the quality presentation that people take for granted.

I think of Jesus overturning the tables as a model for what we need to do today to be faithful. What would it mean if we overturned our tables and developed a new way of being church?

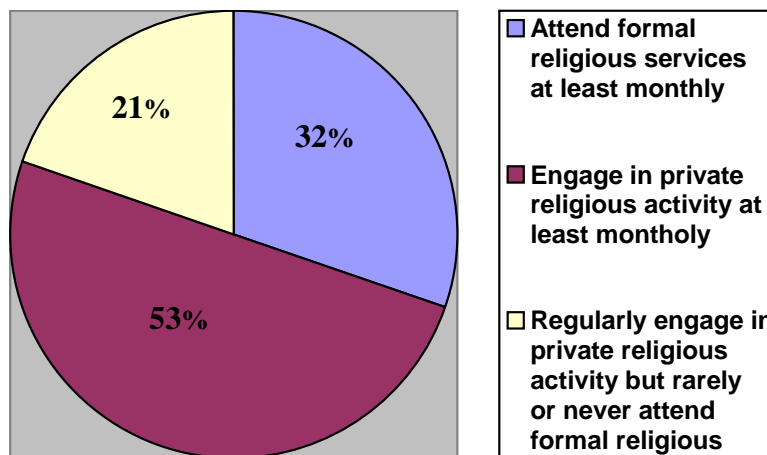
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## The Facts, and Nothing but the Facts

In August Canwest news service published the latest survey results concerning religion in Canada. Their summary: *Recent studies of faith and religious practice in Canada portrayed a nation where church attendance continues to drop. Women, older people and immigrants are likelier to profess their faith by attending services, though it is clear that for many people religion is important but doesn't include going to church.*

A Statistics Canada survey that looked at the church attendance habits of Adult Canadians found the following:



The 2005 McKerracher report to the Anglican House of Bishops compared parish membership among different Christian Churches in Canada, comparing figures for 1961 with those

	1961	2001	
Anglican Church of Canada	1.36 million	642,000	<b>-53%</b>
United Church of Canada	1.04 million	638,000	<b>-39%</b>
Presbyterian Church of Can.	201,000	130,000	<b>-35%</b>
Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada	144,000	232,000	<b>+38%</b>

for 2001.

What does it all mean? That is a question we need to continue to ask. This much we do know, if we continue to do the same thing, we will get the same results. The times call for a response on the part of main-line congregations that truly meets the needs of people today.

***We invite readers to send in any comments. Thank you.***

# Small Groups to Integrate New People

by Joyce Madsen

*New people have to make two or three new friends in the congregation within the first six months if they are going to stay.*

New people coming into a congregation are at a point in their life where they are looking for new relationships and support. They have not come in accidentally, they have made a conscious decision, and it is important to find ways to honour and meet their needs.

It is very difficult to walk into a new place for the first time, so presumably you have a very intentional process to make newcomers feel welcome, whether they come in during the week or on Sunday morning. (One of our favourite resources is *First Impressions*, by Mark Waltz.)

The big challenge, after welcoming, is finding ways for new people to make connections in the congregation so they feel they belong. When the new families include both adults and children it is important that they all begin to feel that this is a place where they will be comfortable.

Many congregations have done a traditional Newcomer's Lunch or some kind of get together where newcomers are invited to meet the clergy and other members of the congregation. Some people enjoy this kind of event, but many times people don't really get an opportunity to connect or engage one another in a meaningful way.

## **Small Groups Connect People**

One way that new people can have the opportunity to make real connections is by creating a small group or circle for new people. Remember, they have made the commitment to come, so they are often willing to make the time to meet new people. The best people for them to connect with are other new people because they have something in common.

You can choose whatever format you think will work in your congregation, but one suggestion is that when you find you have three or four new families start to attend, you invite them to come together once a week for three weeks. Depending on the situation, that might be after church on Sunday, over a meal during the week, or at some other time that fits their schedule. It will be important that you include all the members of each family, so be

prepared with activities or programs for the children and teens as well as the adults.

The three topics could be: Sharing our Story, Living our Faith, and Stewardship of our Resources. Someone from the congregation should be the coordinator and facilitator of this ministry. Clergy should try to be present as often as possible, but they don't have to lead the sessions. Remember, the idea is to hear from the newcomers as much as to share about the congregation, so you want to keep it interesting and interactive.

If you have an intentional small group ministry program, the centre, covenant, etc. should be part of the newcomers meetings.

## **Connecting with the Congregation**

As you move through the three sessions and get to know the newcomers and their needs, you can begin to think about ways to connect them with the larger congregation. If they want to explore their faith, suggest a bible study or faith questions small group. If they want to share a talent they have, you provide a structure for them to work in. If they are going through a transition you can connect them with a support group. The possibilities are endless. What you are doing is putting the focus on their needs and supporting them on their spiritual journey, not taking the traditional "We have a job for you" approach that we so often use in the church.

Repeat this process for every group of new families that arrive. You may have to host three or four groups if you have a busy fall. You can have parallel groups meeting at the same time if you have the need and the leadership. How exciting would that be! If you find you have more than one group over a three-month period, you could do a social event that includes all of them so you expand the connections. Go with the flow and respond to what you are hearing and learning.

New people have to make two or three new friends in the congregation within the first six months if they are going to stay. Using newcomers small groups can be a very effective way to provide opportunities for this to happen.

# Athabasca Small Group Ministry



Nine people shared four days with us at the Athabasca Lodge looking at Small Group Ministry for their congregation. Each day started with a small group time in our "circle tent".

←

Taking part in a circle is one thing — understanding the dynamics is another. Our fresh-air classroom made those times special too.

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The third part of the program was for each congregation to develop a plan for instituting a small group ministry when they returned.



Whether whittling diamond willow sticks by the fire, or hiking to the river, there was lots to do between sessions



Set aside Tuesday through Friday, August 7-10, 2007 for a four-day Small Group Ministry event at the Athabasca Lodge. Experience the support and spiritual renewal that comes from being part of a small group, and explore the theory and dynamics that make small groups such a dynamic means for growth and enrichment in the church today. Come with a team and leave with a plan for a small group ministry in your congregation.



Cost: \$295 per person includes tuition, meals and accommodation. Call the Centre at 780-619-0386 to register or for more information.

# A Question of Leadership

By Deborah Laing

*The following is an excerpt from a sermon preached at the Alberta and Northwest Conference Celebration of Ministries Service, May 2006.*

Over the years, I've probably had more questions about leadership than answers about leadership in the church. How much should be about "being" and how much should be about "doing"? How much of leadership is good planning, how much is good timing, and how much is sheer serendipity. I've wrestled with how much direction should come from me, how much from the congregation, how much from the Bible, and how much from the world?

## The Case of Saul

Saul didn't want to be a leader. He didn't want to be king. He was just out looking for his father's lost donkeys. The story says God didn't want a leader, God didn't want a king, but the people did — so God relented and said they could have a king.

Saul was chosen. But right off the bat at his anointing, in the midst of all the pomp and ceremony, you get the first hint that this calling to leadership is not all going to be a gentle and positive experience. The scripture narrates "some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' They despised him and brought him no presents."

There will always be times in leadership that people are going to grumble, and they aren't going to bring you any presents either.

Eventually Saul lost contact with God and fell into bouts of severe depression. He called for gentle music to soothe his battered soul, but got so jealous of the popular young boy who played for him that he'd fly into a vicious rage and throw a spear at him.

That young musician was David and his rising popularity only served to inflame Saul's jealousy and rages. David became a military leader under Saul and Saul devoted the last years of his kingship trying to kill him. He sent him out on increasingly dangerous missions, including a time when he told David to bring him back the foreskins of 100 Philistines, who as one writer put it, "would not have been

interested in donating."

Saul's life serves as a warning about how abandoning your call for self-interest can destroy those around you. David, Saul's successor, was more positive. Jesus, a descendent of David, was even more so.

## The Case of Jesus

When Jesus was choosing disciples, he was also in the process of choosing future leaders. While those followers received all the gifts of being in his presence that everyone else got, the more time they spent with him the more warnings they heard. Jesus was weeding out the mildly interested and looking for the passionately committed. He let his followers know that leadership came with warnings:

Warning: I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.

Warning: I will ask you to feed the people when you don't think you have much left in your basket.

Warning: I am sending you out where demons dwell.

Warning: You'll have to make something of the talents you've been given. You will be held accountable.

Warning: You'll be dragged before the authorities and won't know what to say.

Warning: You will lose your life...and find it.

Warning: You will become a new person.

We should be warned if we are to be followers of Jesus, and leaders as well. Warned that we will care about people and about the world in a way that will fill us up, and break our hearts. Warned that we will face powerful demons in life...personal demons that trap and enslave people like addictions and abuse, regrets, frightening illness and desperate longings. We will face community demons like consumerism and the unending quest for more. Demons like the manufacture of arms that protect our lifestyle and fuel the war machine world-wide. Demons like our reliance on the money and jobs that come from industry, often at the

*Jesus was weeding out the mildly interested and looking for the passionately committed.*



*Deborah Laing is minister at Rimbey United Church.*

cost of our health and our earth.

As leaders following in the way of Jesus, we will be asked to enter into the deepest struggles of life. And we are warned that we will often be over our heads, feeling that our skills are inadequate, our knowledge too limited, and our numbers too few. The irrational hope of God is that people will hear all these warnings, and will still say yes.

It is in facing the warnings that we truly discover who we are and what we're made of, what our potential is. Imagine if you had a church sign: "Come join us for Worship. Everyone Welcome! We guarantee nothing will ever happen to you here." Who would come in? Would you want them if they did? There is no point to an adventure without warnings.

### Jesus Was a Warning

Jesus had a warning for his followers who would be leaders, but more than having a warning, Jesus also was a warning.

He was a warning to the **Empire** that God was God and they were not, that people were a gift not a commodity.

He was a warning to the **elites** that privilege ends and

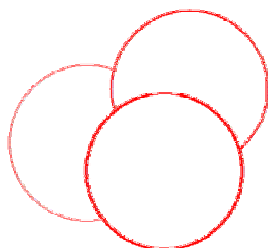
power is transient and that the only thing that is eternal is life in God.

He was a warning to the **religious authorities** who raised false barriers between people and tried to fence off access to God: barriers of race and gender, religious practice and family history.

We have our own walls dividing people on lines of sexual orientation, conservative and liberal thinking, feminist and traditional practice. In the midst of these carefully constructed division, Jesus lives the warning: God cannot be contained. Stay humble and open...you don't know everything.

He was a warning to those who would follow in his way, that we must attend to the people who are missing the basic needs of life; food, fresh water, clothing, health care, connection. Warning: Attend to these people!

The cross was meant to be a warning to followers of Jesus to stay in line and comply with the culture. Instead through the power of God it was transformed into a warning to the culture...Christ is alive! Alive in this church, alive in this people, alive in this time. The warning lives on!



Learning Circles are a new way for clergy leadership to

do continuing education. This format has proven to be an effective way for leaders to gain new knowledge and insights, and integrate those learnings into their work with congregations.

The format is quite simple. A group of 8 to 12 people interested in exploring the same topic meet with a facilitator once a month to learn and share together. The where, when, and what are determined by the group—and that is the secret of a Learning Circle's success.

The Faith Formation and Education Unit of the United Church are the supporters of this project. Last year they set up pilot projects in the Maritimes and in Ontario, and the one for rural Alberta that Centre Staff

facilitated. Their success resulted in the decision to expand the program this year. The costs for the Circles are shared between the participants and grants available from FF&E.

We encourage you to options to consider a Learning Circle as your Con Ed option this year. Do you have a specific area you would like to explore? Some topics that Learning Circles have dealt with are congregational leadership, transforming a congregation, dealing with change, and small group ministry. A learning circle is a very effective vehicle for sharing with peers and learning more about a particular area of interest.

More information is available at [www.congregationallife.com](http://www.congregationallife.com). United Church information on Learning Circles is located at [www.united-church.ca/learningcommunities/](http://www.united-church.ca/learningcommunities/).

We are planning Learning Circles in Edmonton, Calgary, Camrose. You

are invited to an initial gathering for all those interested in learning more about what is involved:

**Thursday, September 28 1:30 pm  
in Calgary**

**Tuesday, October 3 at 9:30 am  
in Camrose**

**Thursday, October 5 at 9:30 am  
in Edmonton**

A **Distance Learning Circle** is also being set up as a pilot project. Our initial conference call will be **Wednesday, October 4 at 9:30 a.m.**

Please e-mail or call if you are interested in finding out more about one of these opportunities for meaningful continuing education that fits your schedule and needs.

[clair@congregationallife.com](mailto:clair@congregationallife.com)  
Clair Woodbury 780 619-0386

## Learning Circles

A new con ed opportunity without limits

# Using Technology Effectively in Your Congregation –Joyce's rant

We spent hours this week trying to contact people in congregations and been greeted by complex answering devices complete with a message that the church is only open very specific hours. Leaving a message often did not get results!

In today's culture voicemail, the Internet, text messaging, and podcasting are all the norm for most families. The church needs to recognize this and get caught up with technology.

## Voicemail

Every congregation needs to have an effective telephone system. Ideally this is a real person answering the phone. If that isn't possible then you need to have a good, flexible voicemail system. If you are going to have a menu of options (which is not a great idea) keep it simple. If someone leaves a message they should get a response within three or four hours at a maximum.

Voicemail can be a great resource if you use it effectively, but first you have to have a system people can trust. Is your voicemail message clear and audible so people can understand what you are saying. I come from the school which advocates you change your message every day. That way people know you are actually listening to your messages.

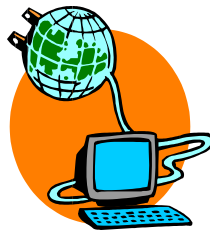
Your voicemail system needs to be accessible from anywhere. Whether you are at home, on the road or at a Synod meeting, you should be able to pick up your messages or change your out-going message. If you can't, it's time to replace your phone system.

Today, you can also use call forwarding with most systems, so if you can't be in one place you can forward your messages to your cell phone and be available.

People today are accustomed to being accessible and they expect that others will also be available when needed. We have the technology to support this thinking. Young people today find a cell phone is as necessary to them as a telephone was to my teenagers.

## E-mail

An e-mail address is now as important as having a telephone. No one should be without! I find it's the best way to stay in touch with my



grandsons and as families are spread across the country it provides a way to continue to communicate.

Congregations should be building e-mail databases of their members so they can keep everyone up-to-date with what is going on. It is a much better form of communication than the Sunday bulletin.

## Website

How do young people today access information? They look on the Internet. Having an effective website is critically important if you want to be found by people looking for a congregation.

An effective website is an investment so don't try to do it cheaply. Identify who you want to reach, what messages you have to share, and hire someone to create a good site. That doesn't mean the one with the most flash – we will only wait three seconds today for a site to come up before we move on. Your site needs to be designed for your slowest user (dial up vs. high speed).

Your site needs to be updated regularly – in congregations probably every week – so when people log on they can find out the most current information available. Your phone message can refer people to your website if they are looking for information about worship times or programs.

If you were starting a new business today you would want to make sure every possible customer could find you and make contact with you. Should the church be any different?

## Congregational Life

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The Congregational Life Centre is a not-for-profit charitable organization dedicated to assisting congregations to be more effective in their ministry.