

Four Growth Strategies

There are four broad membership growth strategies we might tease out of the practice in the Episcopal Church over the past generation. They are not mutual exclusive. A parish may find itself using elements of a couple of the strategies.

All are rooted in the desire to bring people into relationship with Christ and the church. All are interested in helping the Episcopal Church grow. All assume that growth is the work of the Holy Spirit. All value diversity. All are open to all people. All have been effective strategies when properly implemented. They are however very different from each other in their assumptions about growth, what needs to change in the Episcopal Church, the target groups they are trying to attract, and possibly even in their understanding of the parish's primary task. What follows is an attempt to sketch the four strategies in broad terms. Others might describe them somewhat differently. Partisans of one or the other might like to change the descriptions in a manner that is favorable to their own position.

ORGANIC GROWTH

There is nothing so contagious as holiness, nothing more pervasive than Prayer. This is precisely what the traditional Church means by evangelism and what distinguishes it from recruitment.
Martin Thornton

This is when the parish is working to be the best expression of the church that it can be:

- Living the three purposes of a parish church, i.e., the worship of God, the formation of the People of God, and having a sanctifying relationship with some larger community.
- Growing in its expressing of the best of the Anglican ethos and spirituality.

The assumption here is that a portion of the population will be attracted to the parish if it is healthy and lives a full Christian life. The parish needs to see themselves as open to all people. It pays attention to the incorporation of new members and members that may be drifting away from the church.

The parish may be part of any of the traditions in the church -- Prayer Book Catholic, Broad Church, Evangelical, Anglo-Catholic. The parish's understanding of "health" and "full Christian life" are shaped by its tradition.

The parish focus is on being a healthy parish. Anyone that would like to join that life as the parish lives it is welcome. The assumption is that the congregation adapts to the shifts in the region. Occasionally it might "target" various population groups that are in the region and/or that the parish has reached in the past. Its attractiveness may depend on using a "critical mass" strategy that builds a core of members of apostolic faith and practice as a way of establishing a climate of mature formation that attracts people ready to grow.

Practitioners of this approach tend to see all sizes of parishes as desirable. They are increasingly open to a variety of parish forms – clusters, teams, one priest parish, etc.

CHANGE THE CHURCH'S CULTURE

This strategy believes that the changes in the church's context have been dramatic and that the Episcopal Church, in turn, must change dramatically if it is to grow (some even say survive). Advocates speak of broad shifts in American culture; and of a shift from a "churched culture" to a culture in which most people don't belong to a church or have a church background. The approach tends to be goal driven; believing that long and short-term goals are an important element of the growth process. Goals are often stated in terms of changing from "maintenance" to "mission" – from focus on self to focus on others; from an institutional orientation to a spiritual orientation, from hoarding to sharing, from indifference or hostility to love, etc.

Among the major changes needed in the Episcopal Church that get mentioned are – changing the national leadership which is seen as inadequately committed to growth, de-emphasizing divisive social issues, and recruiting a new generation of entrepreneurial clergy leaders.

This strategy tends to have a preference for large parishes. Frequently refer to "the Great Commission" as a mandate. Is largely focused on attracting the group that sets the terms of discourse in society, high value on success, relatively conventional religious views

APPRECIATIVE MARKETING

This approach starts with an assumption that there is a great deal that is right about the Episcopal Church and most parish churches. It might pick up on aspects of the Episcopal Church's ethos such as -- life affirming rather than pleasure denying, being rooted in communal daily prayer that shapes our relationship to God, an understanding the church is called to be the sacrament of Christ in the world... sees our spirituality as combining both the contemplative and the active, places an emphasizes a long slow journey into union with God (sanctification), values comprehensiveness in which truth is known by accepting paradox and balance in our thinking (personal freedom and communal responsibility, sacred and secular, etc.)

Typical questions related to this approach are:

1. What have been the high points in the life of this parish -- when people felt most alive, excited, energized, involved, committed, fulfilled, etc.?
2. What do people most value about the parish?
3. What has the parish done "really well"? Over a period of time?
4. What is at the "heart" of this parish?
5. What factors (leadership approach, strategy, climate, values, processes, etc.) in the parish have made significant contributions toward the parish's excellence, health, success?
6. What possibilities exist within the parish for an even better parish? Factors that already exist to some degree.

The same questions can then be used in regard to the whole Episcopal Church.

PERSONAL INVITATION

It's true that growth frequently takes place when a member invites someone they know. But it's also true that in many parishes it will produce no growth.

1. If people have been in the parish a long time they usually have already “worked” their relational network. Their friends and family have settled Sunday routines and an established approach to the issue of being part of the church. That doesn't easily change. We don't see growth, in these situations, by using the personal invitation method.

2. When you are in a place where there is a regular stream of visitors and new members there is also a new relational network. Each new person, especially younger new people, are connected to many others who may be open to a personal invitation. That may happen spontaneously, by chance or grace, when a number of visitors show up around the same time. If that isn't the story for a parish then they need ways to break out of the box.

3. Getting out of the “box” has happen in some places it by having a great website that focus on attracting visitors as well as serving internal communication needs. Many people seem to spend time looking at parish web sites before visiting. Parishes need more advertising based on a sound marketing strategy to help break out of the box. For that to have a chance of success we need to think of putting considerably more money into advertising - think \$10,000 plus per year instead of \$600. When we have a great website, we need advertising to get people to look at it. There are also parishes where very traditional methods produce enough of an increase in visitors and new members that the relationship based method works again.

4. “Buzz” is seen in places where there is energy and excitement about being part of that parish and being in the Episcopal Church tradition. It is that “buzz” (rename the phenomena if you want) that visitors notice and that existing members carry to their friends and relatives. There is more likely to be “buzz” if the Sunday morning experience is interesting, accepting and challenging. That means good liturgy, preaching and ways of connecting with others. It means attention to hospitality without destroying the liturgy with excessive concerns about “comfort” and “user friendliness.”

5. In many parishes there are or could be other entry points in addition to Sunday morning. In some parishes there are very faithful members who first connected by attending Evening Prayer during the week.

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