

Three Growth Strategies

There are three broad membership growth strategies we might tease out of current practice in the Episcopal Church.

All three 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 three 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

This is when each parish working to be the best expression of the church that it can be -- living the mission "to restore people to unity with God and each other .."; shaping life to more fully show the characteristics of oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity; striving to be in an aware and effective relationship with the context they are within; and growing in its expressing of the best of the Anglican ethos and spirituality. It would include taking a developmental approach that values/appreciates the parish and the Episcopal Church.

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.

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 in an evolving way 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 -- singles, young families with children, gay and lesbian couples and singles. It's 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 the increase in electronic communication and multi media resources; 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 "Moderns" – the largest group in American culture (about 48% of adults); 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. It might draw on the Zacchaeus Project Report; pick up on aspects of the ethos such as -- life affirming rather than pleasure denying, "rooted in communal daily prayer ... intended to shape our relationship to God", "the church is called to be the sacrament of Christ in the world ...implies that our spirituality is political, combining both the contemplative and the active", "emphasizes a long slow journey into union with God", Comprehensive -- "truth is known and guarded by maintaining the tension between counter-opposite statements concerning truth ...personal freedom and communal responsibility, ...sacred and secular", etc.

This might include trying to attract those who are described as "Cultural Creatives" in Ray and Anderson's work – want to rebuild communities, seek experience over possessions, value the environment, relationship focused, believe in religious mysteries, etc. There seems to be a link between some of the best of Anglican culture as seen in the Episcopal Church and what the Cultural Creatives are seeking and value. The strategy would cast what the church offers in language and symbols that would connect to the Cultural Creatives.

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