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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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How to Turn Bystanders into Active Disciples

Every congregation faces the same challenge—a fraction of the members carry the majority of the load. These loyal few attend services weekly, participate in church programs, support the church financially, take on leadership roles, and volunteer for mission and outreach activities.

Is it true that a mere 20 percent of the congregation's members do far more than the other 80 percent? What can leaders do to encourage spiritual growth and discipleship among the other 80 percent?

Testing the 80/20 Rule

Researchers Scott Thumma and Warren Bird put this 80/20 notion to the test in *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church's Spectators into Active Participants* (Wiley Press, 2011). They found that the statistic varies widely but every church's membership list reveals uneven levels of involvement.

Yet some congregations find ways to shrink the numbers of those who observe church life from the sidelines. The remedy for converting bystanders into highly involved participants engaged in meaningful ministry depends on the type of nonparticipant—each spectator type requires a different strategy for reengagement.

Types of Bystanders

Thumma and Bird's research reveals several distinct groups of spectators:

The underinvolved member. This category describes those who are minimally active. Their worship service attendance may be steady, but they are rarely spotted at anything else that happens at church. They do not participate in a small group—such as adult education, prayer groups, or Bible studies. They have never taken on any kind of lay leadership role—chairing a committee, working on a mission project, teaching a class, or sponsoring a youth trip. Their financial giving is occasional and typically modest. However, the reasons behind their lack of involvement remain a mystery.

The decreasingly involved member. This category describes those who were once active members, but who slowly become less and less involved. Many times this decreasing involvement stems from complications at home—a husband who loses his job and continues to look for employment or a wife's declining health.

Changes in work or health, new family responsibilities, or other challenging personal circumstances take their toll on the once active. Others curtail their involvement for other reasons: a negative church experience such as a change in the worship service, a pastor or staff member who failed to meet their expectations, or a sense of disillusionment resulting from continuing church conflict.

The waiting to be asked member. Church leaders often overlook members in this category. Newcomers to the church, especially first-time church members or denominational switchers, need special attention to help them figure out the mechanics of involvement. Because they wait to be asked, a sign-up sheet or self-nomination strategy rarely works for them. Introverted members or those uncertain about taking on a new role need targeted encouragement too.

The disconnected member. One church expert refers to this group as “mental members.”¹ Those missing in action think of themselves as church members, even though they have not attended in years, and have yet to meet the current pastor.



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These paper-members receive some reward for their loose affiliation—such as connecting them to memories or family history, secure reservations for future weddings or funerals, or an easy way to maintain a Christian identity.

The virtual member. These attendees may be regular participants but they have never officially joined. However, in their heads and hearts, they are members. Their lack of involvement may stem from their uncertainty about what roles nonmembers can legitimately perform.

Strategies for Creating Greater Participation

The multiple reasons for nonparticipation require multiple strategies for reaching the 80 percent. Because every church has a unique profile of lightly involved members, the first task involves identifying your congregation's participation profile. Find out:

- What percentage of your church's membership is highly involved?
- How are these actively engaged members different from other members?
- What percentage of your church's membership is less involved?
- What types of bystanders do you observe in your church?

Thumma and Bird recommend that after leaders answer these questions they should follow a three-part strategy:

1. Listening to bystanders. The listening team interviews two or three members that fit the profile of each bystander category. The conversations with nonparticipants focus on three questions:

- How do they grow spiritually?
- What are their gifts and passions?
- What would increase their involvement?

Remind team members that there is only one goal: *listening to the member's story*. Coach interviewers to reign in any defensive responses.

2. Learning from bystanders. The team's second step involves reviewing and discussing what they learned from those conversations. For example, the researchers found in many congregations that the underlying conditions and circumstances for decreased involvement seemed to have more to do with *spiritual* issues than it did with circumstantial issues (such as work demands) or experiential issues (like feeling neglected during or after a personal tragedy).

According to responses from the least involved, they would be reengaged if the church strengthened three spiritual aspects of the church: meaningful worship; pastoral care; and ministry to the sick, shut in, and bereaved.

3. Engaging bystanders. Building the spiritual life of the other 80 percent should be the motivation as leaders creatively accelerate their efforts to reach by-

standers. Too few churches offer vigorous programs for helping people to develop a life of faith. Many congregations have discontinued any form of adult education or have greatly diminished it. Leaders should review every church ministry and ask, Does it make disciples?

More Strategies For Making Disciples

Additional action steps boost participation for all groups in the church:

- Create ministry teams to replace committees.
- Train leaders to make every group's experience spiritually formative.
- Encourage experienced leaders to recruit and mentor a less-experienced co-leader.
- Help members find their spiritual gifts and celebrate their contributions.
- Start new ministry teams and groups often.
- Hold a ministry fair to connect people with groups and ministry teams.
- Invite people to participate in a single-day ministry project.
- Provide opportunities for families and friends to do ministry projects together.²

The Bottom Line

Take comfort in the fact that no church engages 100 percent of their members at a 100 percent level. Keep a balanced focus on the church's entire ministry. "Do not neglect the team on the field (present active members) and the potential team on the bench (prospective active members) by focusing all of your attention on the ex-team that has retreated to the bleachers (inactive members)."³ If some members choose to return as active disciples, welcome them. If they choose to remain on the sidelines, love them anyway.

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1. C. Kirk Hadaway, *What Can We Do About Church Drop-outs?* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1990), 35.
 2. Visit the Center for Church Leadership Web site (http://www.churchleadership.com/resources/50_ways_to_build_strength.htm) to download materials from the "50 Ways to Build Strength in Participation" series.
 3. Herb Miller, *Church Effectiveness Nugget, Volume 6: How to Shrink Your Church's Inactive Member List*, 24. Download free at www.TheParishPaper.com/free-resources.