



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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Staying Attuned to Your Community by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

One of the most significant counterintuitive realities about churches is that the longer a church has been in existence, the less knowledgeable it is about its community and the less connected it becomes with that community. There are exceptions, of course. But it is rare that a long-existing church is more aware of the trends, demographics, and movements of its surrounding community than a new congregation in that same place. You would think that a well-established congregation would know its community inside and out, given years of service there. But the movement is just the opposite.

Here is how that is likely to happen. In the early years of a congregation, there is careful attention given to the community, its people, and their needs. Otherwise, the new congregation does not survive. Then the congregation reaches a point of critical mass in which weeks or even months can go by without new members joining the church; and the congregation continues to stay alive. At the same time, there tends to be a shift in focus from reaching new disciples to caring for current members. This change is particularly seen in the expectations for how pastors and other staff spend their time.

Such a shift leads many congregations to become worlds unto themselves, functioning in a way that is quite independent of any active engagement with the changes taking place in their surrounding context. This process reaches its extreme when a congregation comes to look and act nothing like the culture of its neighboring community. But even when communities do not change in dramatic demographic ways, the life of the congregation can still become almost alien to the way many of the neighbors in their surrounding community live their lives. That is the time when the church still has much to offer its long-time members; but, increasingly, new people do not call this church *home*.

This movement from external sensitivity to internal focus occurs in virtually all organizations. Without a careful plan to stay close to the heartbeat of one's surroundings, internal considerations will dominate. The chief executive officer of Proctor & Gamble said that a business CEO has one task, and that is to link the external world with the internal organization. He went on to add that without the *outside*, there is no *inside* (*Harvard Business Review*, May 2009).

John Kotter, in his new book *A Sense of Urgency* (Harvard Business Press, 2008), gives suggestions for how organizations can "bring the outside in." The instructions he offers can be readily translated into guidance for a congregation.

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- Send people out. Anything that involves church people with the dynamics and people of their community will help, as long as it is followed by reflection about the meaning of what they are learning in relation to their church's ministry. It is not that members are not immersed in their communities. They often are. But they have not been helped to translate that knowledge into implications for their congregations.
- Bring people in. Every congregation has connections within its community that permit the church to tap into knowledge about that community. It is also possible to do careful listening sessions with persons who are not involved in the congregation to the degree that they are involved in the surrounding community. For many churches today, that includes younger people.
- Bring data in, but in the right way. This is the most common method of learning about the community, but it is one that is not always used well. Make sure you have enough data but not too much, that it is organized in categories that matter for the church, and that the right questions are asked of the data. Having many small groups study and discuss the same data, with each group coming up with their "clues for the future" or "five implications for our congregation," will generate many ideas and often surprising consensus.

Yes, without the outside, there is no inside. Congregations all start not for themselves but to serve other people. Without deliberate attention to bridging the outside/inside gap, congregations forget their original purpose and turn in upon themselves.

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