



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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Moving Beyond Geographic Boundaries by Jim Downing

Where is your church called to serve? Many churches think of their outreach area in limited geographical terms. By this measure, the growth potential in First Sedalia United Methodist Church (UMC) might not seem promising. Sedalia, Missouri, a town of 21,000, has been the same size for nearly 50 years. It is stable but not growing. Established by a circuit rider in 1861, First UMC is one of seven United Methodist congregations in the town and one of fifteen in a county of 34,000 that has experienced only modest growth over the past decade.

Yet since 1997, average worship attendance at First UMC has increased from just over 100 to 857; and its membership has grown from 498 to 1,040, with sixty-five percent of the new members being new believers. Using multi-site ministry and digital outreach, the congregation has challenged traditional understandings of boundaries and transcended many of the issues that seem to stymie the growth of so many congregations.

Multi-site Ministry

In 1999, the church developed the Celebration Center, a south campus designed to engage the unchurched, giving the congregation both a traditional and a contemporary worship environment. This successful initiative helped the congregation expand its boundaries by moving from “either/or” to “both/and” thinking.

Yet too often, multi-site congregations are criticized by other churches for infringing on their territory. Every church should recognize that it may already draw people from beyond the immediate area of the church building. But the larger point is that no church can or will reach everyone, even if all the other churches in the geographic area closed. Every church brings an expression of God’s Spirit needed by some people. If we want to see younger, more diverse people come through our doors, we need to look upon ministry settings as more than geographic locales. We need to see that the church is everywhere our people are faithfully and lovingly serving God.

Transcending Boundaries Digitally

In the digital age, it is shortsighted to define boundaries in terms of geography alone. If a church has a website and services can be accessed from it, the outreach of the church is boundless. Our church has people from around the country and world who worship with us via the web—deployed military, for example. Others may not think of these worshipers as part of the congregation, but they surely are. In today’s cyber age, social networks such as MySpace,

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Facebook, and Twitter are challenging traditional understandings of community. And these are especially popular with the younger generations, the very people who are so underrepresented in most churches.

Caring outside the box

It has been my experience that most people are looking for a place of authentic belonging, genuine love and care, with people who are real—and people will cross ethnic, social, political, and economic boundaries to find such community. We have to stop putting boxes around our ministries and thinking. If we really care about unchurched people, the boundaries will be less about geography and more about the limits of our capacity to love and care for people who are like and unlike us. The only limit then is our willingness to love.

A Kingdom Mentality

This issue of redefining boundaries points to the difference between a church mentality and a kingdom mentality. A church mentality is protective of its own interests and unable to rejoice when another congregation sees success in drawing new people. Although most congregations espouse the value of reaching people, in many places they ignore and overlook the people who surround them every day.

A kingdom mentality recognizes that we will not reach everyone, but we will invite anyone to be a part of the congregation. A kingdom heart rejoices when a person finds the right fit for his or her own growth and fellowship. A kingdom heart looks at the population makeup of the area and realizes that you have that many reasons to exist as a ministry. The people are your concern, not just your membership.

Let us have an expansive view of what God can do not only through our congregation, but also through the emerging ministries of new congregations, multi-site campuses, and other models.

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The Right Question

Leaders do not need answers.

Leaders must have the right questions.

Every few months a church staff uses these questions of each other to take the pulse of the congregation.

What are the most common complaints we are hearing?

What are the most common requests we are hearing?

The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them

The following are summary conclusions from a study of young people not active in church and practices likely to help churches reach emerging generations.

1. Young adults are trying to connect and will make a lasting connection wherever they can find belonging. Churches that are effective at reaching and developing young adults place a high value on community and are using small groups to build that community.
2. Young adults want to be a part of something bigger than themselves and are looking to be a part of an organization where they can make a difference through acts of service. More than ever before, young adults are thinking locally and globally about how they can make a lasting impact. Churches that are reaching young adults are successful in providing opportunities for service.
3. More than looking for a good performance, young adults desire to connect with the experience of worship. They embrace the future and the past at the same time. Young adults want to be challenged by the message, and they want to participate in a worship experience.
4. Young adults are looking to move behind the trite and into more depth—and we found this among the churched and unchurched young adults.
5. Many churches are waking up to the need to embrace technology as an effective tool in reaching the unchurched.
6. Young adults need cross-generational relationships. Churches that are linking young adults with older, mature adults are challenging young adults to move on to maturity through friendship, wisdom, and support.
7. Young adults are looking for and connecting to churches where they see leaders that are authentic, transparent, and on a learning journey.
8. Young people are desperately seeking something real, something authentic—and they don't mind if it is messy. One hundred percent of churches reaching young adults hold authenticity as one of their highest values.
9. Team is an often desired but infrequently lived value. Churches that lead by teams—and invite young adults to be a part of those teams—engage all kinds of people in more effective mission and ministry.

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The future of American religion is in the hands of adults now in their twenties and thirties.

Robert Wuthnow

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