

Developing and Growing a Multi-Generational Church

Presented by Elder Edgar Holman, Jr.

Pastor of the Greater Mount Zion Church of God in Christ, Marks, MS

Educational Leadership Conference

Jackson, MS

January 25, 2025

Mississippi Southern Annual Leadership Conference

Jackson, Mississippi

The Present Situation

- **Declining Church Membership**
- **Slow to Non-existent Church Growth**
- **Congregational Shrinkage Due to Attrition**
- **Untapped Church Resources**

Studies and Statistics

A survey of more than 15,000 religious congregations across the United States by Faith Communities Today (FACT), which was conducted just before the pandemic lockdown, was recently released and it was found that the average decline in attendance between 2015 and 2020 was 7% or roughly 7 out of 100 members were not present and accounted for. And even worse statistic was also given. These surveys by FACT which first started in 2000 when 350,000 congregations were surveyed and found to have a median membership of 137 members but by the year 2020, the average number was 65. That's a decline of over half a congregation in just two decades.

In April of 2022, a study by Patricia Lotich stated that Google searches for "Church Growth" was up 22 percent. This indicates that the epidemic of 2019 had lingering effects on the church community. Many church members simply went home and never came back. Church leadership was left to wonder and ponder concerning the alarming number of empty seats that had been filled by what was believed to be generally faithful members of the congregation.

Not only was the Covid virus a major factor in the decrease in church attendance but Pastors found themselves competing against the technological world as individuals of this generation were and even more so now, technologically competent and skilled and used these skills to find religious programming that appealed to them and consequently lead to the individual staying at home and viewing some religious services online.

The above statistics, along with the infallible truths stated in the Word of the Lord in several scriptures lets us know that "In the latter days, some would depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils" (I Timothy 4:1) as well as "The love of many shall wax cold" (Matthew 24:12). Some will simply leave and go to other churches where the gospel and living holy may no be stressed and in search of an environment in which they are comfortable, they will choose to "Not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (II Timothy :3-4)

According to a study done by Yahne and Norcross, August 2023, it was found that middle aged Americans, those in their 40's and 50's, often identify with a religion but are not putting their faith into practice. The statistics say that since the year 2000, there has been a 12% decrease in attendance in people ages 39 – 57.

While there are many different things that may have caused our churches to be slow to develop and grow those are just some that come to mind.

Perhaps it is time to look at some possible solutions to this present day state of our churches.

Essential Advice/Encouragement for the Pastor

These are just some small tidbits that I personally wanted to share with the Pastors here in our sister jurisdiction. These are from my heart and what I thought of when I considered myself during the research for this presentation.

Trust God

- I will look towards the hills from which cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD which made heaven and earth.”

STAY PRAYERFUL

- Pray without ceasing”. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Men ought always to pray and not faint.

CONTINUOUSLY SEEK THE LORD FOR GUIDANCE

- In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.
- And David said to Abiathar the priest, Ahimelech’s son, I pray thee, bring me the ephod. And Abiathar brought hither the ephod to David. And David inquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? Shall I overtake them? And He answered him, Pursue; for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all.”

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF. YOU WERE BUILT FOR THIS!

- And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.
- Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Helping the Overall Congregation

The following statements are just some suggestions of how to help grow and development your entire congregation of believers.

- Develop a good Mission and Vision Statements for your church that should be repeated often. Research says that the average person has to hear something 2 – 7 times before they take action and 6-20 times before it can really stick with them. Repetition is a key to learning.
- Find out what is working well and strengthen it.
- Remember, churches are built “Front to back” but are seated “Back to Front.” Your “Back Pew” members are many times your “Self-appointed” welcoming committee. Make sure they have great attitudes as visitors many time will seat at or near the back at first.
- When members are absent, make sure they are contacted as soon as possible.

The Generational Makeup of the Church

There are three basic age groups that makeup practically every church. Those three are as follows:

Youth or the Younger generation which for clarities sake, we will say includes those individuals from infant to the late 20's.

Middles Aged, which we will, just for clarities sake, goes from 30 social security age.

Senior or Older Members, which will be defined as those from Social security age and beyond.

The following slides will give some insight as to how each of these different age groups can be developed to function at their maximum potential.

Youth or Younger Generation

The youth of today due to these changing times are much more in tune with the current events of this world and how to navigate it to make themselves be productive in their own beliefs and feelings as opposed to adhering to the traditions and customs that was or may have been the standards, both in the church and in everyday life, in which we lived by previously. They are much more likely to ask “Why” or “Why not” in a challenging manner as opposed to just following along on the advice of the older more established generation. Nevertheless, there are some things that can be done to enhance the participation and growth of our youth in our churches. The suggestions listed below are just a few of which may work well in our churches as we get to the task of Developing and Growing Our Youth in our churches.

1. Involve them in as many activities as possible. From roles in leadership to just asking for their honest opinions.
2. Give them responsibilities that are meaningful both to them as well as the entire church. This will probably involve some steady training and dedication from both the trainer and trainee.
3. Allow them to use their gifts and talents. Singing, Praise Dancing, Religious skits, Poems, Program Planning and other activities will in most cases give the youthful individual a sense of purposeful involvement. Now it is important to realize that these talents may have to be “coaxed out” of our youth because some are going to be a little shy in front of adults especially at the beginning stage.
4. Activities are always a wonderful opportunity to help make inroads with our youth (and many of us more mature folks, truth be told) and can get them to happily participate. The activities listed below are just some of the ones that can be used and I encourage you to be creative and think of some that will probably work best with the youth in our churches.

The following activities can be geared towards where they can have a major part in developing and implementing them which will create a sense of ownership, our desired result.

Field Trips, Ice Cream Socials, Cook Outs, Movie Nights (with refreshments), Vacation Bible School, Picnics, Etiquette Classes and Technology Training.

As previously stated, there are many other ideas just waiting to be thought of and implemented.

The Middle-Aged Generation

The Middle-Aged population in our churches are in a unique situation. We, including myself, are old enough to remember the fundamentals, customs and traditions that have been with the church from its' infancy but we are still young enough to be apart of the technology age. Unfortunately, it is our age group that is falling faster than any other group. They are however; some things that can be implemented to help solidify this group as well as make it a functional part of the church.

We must in our consideration of developing and growing our church members, the Middle Aged is usually our working class group and with the demands made on working individuals in society today the level of stress can be draining and individuals often find that it is more rewarding to find time to rest and relax whenever possible and unfortunately this time often comes at the expense of our worship times.

With this in mind I offer a few thoughts they may be helpful in having our middle aged members to become more productive in our churches.

- Offer any ministries that may allow them to attend and if possible, be an integral part of the service without physical attendance.
- Include them in planning yearly events so they are aware of times and timeframes and can make appropriate decisions concerning vacations and abbreviated days at work.
- While this may seem odd, make sure and keep your older and younger generation deeply involved. These are the two generations that must be cared for and that responsibility falls on the middle aged son or daughter.

Our Senior Membership

Our Seniors are precious to us. They have been the ones who have stood the test of time and serve as living testimonies of what it means to devote your life to the Lord. While they may be ageing, which is a blessing in itself, there are ways to make sure that they are yet considered to be active workers for the kingdom by incorporating them in the working of our churches. I would suggest that the following thoughts be considered when it comes to our senior membership.

- **Many of them are retired and have a generous portion of free time that they would love to use in the service of the Lord. Therefore it would be both profitable to the church and fulfilling to our seniors to allow them to do meaningful work at the church.**
- **Just as we have movie nights and gatherings for our youth, it is a good idea to have senior fellowship events for our seniors.**
- **Allow them to use their talents as often as possible. Regardless of what their talent is, using it would create a sense of worth for them and just as importantly, serve as an example to our youth that we are never to finish our work for the Lord.**
- **Inquire of them concerning their private desires and interests and if possible, allow them to fulfill those desires and interests if they can be profitable to the church.**
- **Inclusion in church ministries are crucial. Missions Department members, Ushers and Door Greeters are ministries that may be tailored to the personalities of our seniors.**
- **Be prepared to train our seniors in some areas as they may want to be part of some ministries that may have come to fruition in a different era than theirs.**

The Conclusion of the Whole Matter

In my conclusion I want to emphasize that although there is a widespread epidemic as far as the shrinking of church membership which is a great hindrance to developing programs and initiatives that are the essential elements of our church we must still find a way to overcome this as well as any obstacle we encounter as we must remember that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

In spite of any hindrance, brothers and sisters, we were put here to do what our Lord has instructed us to do and that is to go into all the world and preach the gospel while making disciples of men. This is the real kingdom work.

Considering these facts, I encourage everyone to at least consider the following thoughts as part of your plans to develop and grow our churches as we prepare ourselves for the return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

- Understand that your present situation has been ordained by the Lord and it is as the words from one of the Winans songs say, “Just the way He planned it.”**
- Embrace the new normal and find ways to make situations work for your local church which is unique even though it is part of the Brotherhood.**
- As much as possible, be a church that is purpose driven and that purpose should be embraced church wide.**
- Remember the scripture has indicated that some things are inevitable so you may be disappointed but you should not be surprised at what you see.**
- Everyone is important and should be treated as such. Your best ideas may come from the most unassuming member.**
- Finally, please remember to look to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith and we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.**

Questions, Comments and Gratitude

I personally want to thank Missionary Virgil for inviting me as I am convinced that she could have contacted a whole host of individuals who are no doubt much more qualified than myself. I also want to thank your Jurisdictional Prelate, Bishop Daniel Littleton, a man who has my utmost respect as he stands for holiness and to any other Southern Mississippi Official who had any portion in my being here. God bless my wife of over 41 years, Missionary Cornelia Holman, who accompanied me here on this day. The Lord bless you all of you richly! I will now entertain any questions, comments or even criticisms if they are not too harsh.