

WHAT REALLY GROWS LIFE CHANGING CHURCHES

Rev. Robert Ellsworth, Ph.D. and Rev Janet Ellsworth, M.S.

Introduction

In surveying more than 29,000 people in 174 congregations, we identified six ministry essentials that correlated strongly with life-changing impact and church growth. Since correlations neither prove nor disprove causality, however, we needed to see if churches that improved their essentials would actually change more lives and attract more people. Among 174 congregations, we found 36 occasions in which ministries resurveyed. By comparing follow-up with initial surveys, we accurately identified which ministries improved their essentials. We found that 19 ministries that improved essentials and 17 that did not. More than 9 out of 10 ministries that improved essentials increased their life changing impact. Eight in 10 attracted more people.

This paper discusses what thriving ministries did to strengthen six essentials that really make a difference. We also discuss five barriers that often keep unsuccessful ministries from strengthening their underdeveloped essentials and attracting more people.

An Example of Success.

“New Hope” decided to try again after their first follow-up survey revealed that their below normal essentials had not improved and the numbers of people coming had not increased. Gossip and complaining had been high. The minister took in-depth training in family systems. Before resurveying again, they also tried something different.

Challenge. Before trying again, this church conducted a visioning experience to receive congregational input and build support for change. Part of the visioning process included acquiring their own building after years of renting worship space. As the minister later reflected, “*This set the stage for our turnaround.*”

Results. Two years later, a second resurvey showed that five of the six ministry essentials had improved significantly, namely, Worship, Leadership, Purpose, Empowerment, and Transforming Teachings. As a result, their life-changing impact improved 8 percentage points. Attendance increased, eventually growing from 85 to 144. These dramatic changes in the quality of ministry essentials, attendance and congregational support made it possible for them purchase their own building.

Comment. Persistence paid off. This example shows what can happen when a ministry honors congregational input and persists in seeking ways to strengthen underdeveloped essentials. They also discovered that a visioning process was an excellent way to honor congregational input and move ahead in fulfilling a common vision.

Successful and Unsuccessful Ministries.

TABLE 1. OUTCOMES IN GROUP A AND GROUP B MINISTRIES.

Group A (19 with high essentials) Group B (17 with low essentials)

	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up
Average Attendance	177	233	169	125
Av. % of Lives Changing	82%	87%	84%	82%
Average Number of Lives Changed	145 (177 x 82%)	203 (233 x 87%)	142 (169 x 84%)	102 (125 x 82%)

Outcomes.

Life Changing Impact: Group A ministries were *nine times more* successful than B in changing more lives (95% vs. 6%). Lives changing also help grow congregations. When people's lives are changing, they become enthusiastic ambassadors for their church.

Note: Three survey items measure life changing impact, *Coming to this church is making a positive difference in my life, I am becoming a more joyful person, and This faith community plays a vital role in my spiritual well being.*

Attendance: As seen below, average attendance of Group A *increased* from 177 to 233 over a three-year period (the average time between baseline and follow-up). Life changing impact *increased* 5 percentage points. In Group B ministries, life changing impact *decreased* 2 points and average attendance declined from 169 to 125.

What Happened in Group A and Group B Ministries?

Thriving ministries (Group A) were far more successful than Group B in strengthening the actions that change lives and attract more people. Listed in order of importance, the actions Group A took most often included:

1. *Leaders here are willing to try new things.*
2. *Leaders frequently encourage and support people.*
3. *Congregational songs here are very uplifting, inspiring and easy to sing.*
4. *Worship here focuses on the mystery and wonder of God.*
5. *Leaders are willing to evaluate and use what works and put aside or what doesn't.*
6. *This community helps me to identify and use my natural (spiritual) gifts.*
7. *From the sermons here, I learn practical ways to handle everyday life.*
8. *The special music is excellent and soul satisfying (solos, choir, instrumentals, etc.).*

Comment. Three of Group A's actions related to leadership, namely willingness to try new things (#1), encouraging and supporting people (#2) and evaluating and using what works and putting aside what doesn't (#5). Four ingredients of worship also improved dramatically, two aspects of music (#3 and #8), focusing more on the mystery and wonder of God (#4), and providing sermons that people found helpful in their daily lives (#7). Finally, helping more people identify and use their spiritual gifts occurred (#6).

Three Surprises.

The results in Table 1 take on special meaning when comparing the *numbers* of people whose lives were changing in A and B ministries 3 years later. It amazed us to find that Group A ministries ended up **impacting twice as many lives** as Group B (203 vs. 102 people). This confirms how important it is to meet essential emotional and spiritual needs!

Second, we were surprised to find that average attendance in Group B ministries *declined*. We expected that attendance in B ministries would have remained unchanged. When congregational input does not result in needed changes, however, many people become dissatisfied and eventually leave. *Failing to act often results in some unanticipated and unwanted consequences.*

Third, it surprised us to discover how important it is for ministry essentials to exceed normal levels. The emotional energy shifts in ministries with strong essentials. For example, more

congregants in above-normal ministries checked *yes* to, “*I feel enthusiastic when I talk to people about this church,*” and “*There is something special happening here.*”

The good news is that many surviving churches need only to come up a few percentage points to exceed normal and to begin thrive. The bad news is that many of these same churches will need to deal with powerful blocks that often keep ministries from improving their ministry essentials.

Barriers that Inhibit Ministries from Improving Essentials.

Phone contact with ministers and board members in churches that resurveyed provide important insights into how ministries succeed and fail. We identified five major barriers to keep ministries stuck in mediocrity.

Top down management style. When discussing survey results in phone conferences with leaders, it quickly became obvious when leaders discount congregational input and the validity of survey results. This we-know-best attitude occurred most often in Group B church communities that failed to improve essentials and attract more people. Top down shuts off creativity.

Lack of accountability. In several B ministries, church leaders often *talked about* improving essentials but no one carried the energy for change over time. Agreeing to change is not the same as *acting* to improve essentials and evaluating results.

Turning to quick fixes. Rather than working to strengthen ministry essentials, some leaders focused instead on “latest and greatest” theories or easy-to implement strategies such as advertising and spending more money on their music or youth ed. programs. These strategies may help *if* the quality of essentials is above normal. We find that quick fixes alone do not result in impacting more lives or reaching more people.

High levels of *gossip and complaining* occur in one out of four churches. None of these churches are growing. Almost all have a low life changing impact. Gossip and complaining often occurs when ministry essentials are seriously below normal, or when there has been some kind of misconduct in key leaders. In other ministries, gossip and complaining has been going on for years.

Power struggles. Often, various factions failing ministries vie for control. For example, boards trying to micromanage clergy or congregational subgroups insisting on having *their* way. Under these circumstances, there isn’t much energy left for strengthening essentials. Or, if they do succeed in improving the quality below-normal essentials, positive outcomes do not last. An example of power struggles:

Challenges. Rockville is a small neighborhood church without much parking space. Over the years, attendance averaged 67 people. They had tried several things to grow, but resistance from congregants and members undermined each attempt. Several people would stop coming until things returned to “normal. Before surveying, one board member called us, “We don’t want to change or to grow. We hope the survey will help us return to previous times.” Despite warning signs of conflict, power struggles and strong resistance to change, we believed that the power of improving ministry essentials would overcome these kinds of obstacles. *How wrong we were!*

Early Results.

- Resurveying six months after their first survey, results showed that the quality of several ministry essentials had increased an average of 9 points and now exceeded “normal.” Initially, attendance increased to around 80 people. On their surveys, 55 percent of the congregation indicated that attendance had increased. However,

many older members refused to complete a survey. Many became unhappy and stopped inviting people to come. Several complained, “We are losing control.” Responses to the survey item, “*I am becoming a happier person*” dropped 9 points.

Subsequent Results. Four months after the resurvey, we learned from a third party that attendance had declined. We finally came to realize that *when strong resistance, unhappiness and power struggles exist, improving essentials is not enough.*

Amazing things happen when leaders and congregants work together to strengthen the underdeveloped essentials that help people and congregations thrive.

What Might This Mean for Your Ministry?

Would you like to see *significantly* more people coming *and* reporting their lives changing? Before surveying to discover which essentials are above and below normal, we suggest that your ministry considers two questions.

- 1) If you surveyed and your results showed that certain essentials needed further development, would your clergy and leaders likely accept the findings and focus on improving the essentials that needed attention?
- 2) Are any of the barriers mentioned above present in your ministry? If so, would your ministry be willing to address them? For example, would you be willing to invite people to a visioning session to receive feedback and arrive at a common vision for your future? Research has shown that if a core group of questioning-but-somewhat-open people begin to support change (about 20%), then most of a much larger percentage of *neutral* people (about 50%) become supportive.

A New Vision.

There has been a strong cultural mind-set that church communities have little if any impact helping people change their lives and that drugs and counseling are the best answer. While these often are helpful, we believe that it's time to break with the past and recognize the possibility that *many church communities have an enormous impact on changing lives in positive ways.*

For more information, see: “Life Transforming Congregations” by Ellsworth and Ellsworth, found in the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, Vol. 6, (1). (Note: this article can be read or reprinted by going to www.interscience.wiley.com).