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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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Does a Congregation's Location Influence Its Effectiveness?

An old business adage cites three essentials for success: Location, Location, Location!

Can the location of its building prevent a church from accomplishing effective ministries?

Yes and no. Location is *something* in congregations—especially in some circumstances, such as (a) when choosing where to build a new church on the edge of a growing city and (b) when a older downtown church is parking starved, land-locked, and unable to purchase adjacent property for parking. But in the vast majority of congregations, location means *almost nothing!*

- First Presbyterian Church, Osawatomie, Kansas (population 4,488) describes itself as “An unlikely place with a refreshing Spirit.” What makes its location an unlikely place? A church leader answers, “An outsider might see a small town riddled with poverty. But we see people we know living in every home. We do big things here for a small place.” The church’s big vision is to be part of and serve the entire community.

- Fifty miles north in Lenexa, Kansas (population 46,822) the Kaw Prairie Community Church ministers in a growing suburb of Kansas City. When building their new church, leaders carefully considered its physical design and chose to go in the direction of a community, or public, facility. Adults use the church’s gym daily. In its Playland (a children’s indoor play area), parents can spend time with their children. Situated next to Playland, a coffee shop—equipped with Wi-Fi for laptop-computer-convenient Internet access—gives community residents a place to meet. With a clear dream for the future, the Kaw Prairie Church holds two Sunday morning services that offer “contemporary worship with ancient echoes.”

- Albany, Georgia (population 76,574) lies 200 miles south of Atlanta and claims a rich history, including the birthplace of singer Ray Charles. The community’s religious leaders unite to address high rates of poverty, infant mortality, and community violence. Yet, Albany is also home to Sherwood Baptist Church and its outreach ministry—Sherwood Pictures, a successful producer of Christian films.

On the surface, these three church settings seem to have nothing in common. But each church has identified ways to do effective ministry in its location. The vitality of each congregation busts the myth that location determines church health and numerical growth.

Yes, the ministry strengths of effective congregations vary by community type. The distinctive strengths of rural churches differ from those of effective churches in stable suburbs. But regardless of location, effective ministry happens everywhere! *Church research across the United States shows that healthy congregations find creative ways to fit their mission and outreach with their community’s population profile.*¹

While there are dozens of ways to describe community type, the five location categories listed below illustrate how effective churches match mission and place.

Finding Strength in Rural Communities. This locality includes non-urban places, such as small towns and rural areas—like Osawatomie, Kansas. With low population density and low mobility (few people move in or out of the community), unemployment tends to be low as well. The percentage of people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine is smaller than in other community types. Most of the younger people tend to move away after graduating from high school. (About one in four U.S. congregations is located in this community type.)



"This looks like the perfect location for us!"

Churches in small towns and rural areas tend to do particularly well in promoting members' spiritual growth, providing meaningful worship services, and building a strong sense of belonging among their participants. *In rural communities, the most effective churches excel at caring for children and youth and empowering their worshippers to use their talents.*

Finding Strength in Growing Suburban Communities. This second community type contains large percentages of traditional families—married couples with children living at home. Many of the adults are well educated and are employed as professionals. People between thirty and sixty-four are the biggest age group. (About one in five U.S. churches—like the Kaw Prairie Community Church—is located in this type of growing community.)

Churches in growing suburbs often excel in caring for children and youth. They also stand out in another way—many of their members are involved in the community in multiple ways. Area population growth enables churches to welcome larger percentages of new worshippers, too.

However, most churches in growing population communities face other challenges—such as (a) finding ways to involve worshippers in activities beyond just attending worship, (b) fostering feelings of belonging, and (c) facilitating personal spiritual growth. *The most effective suburban churches excel at these ministries.*

Finding Strength in Small Cities and Stable Suburban Communities. In these locations, population growth is almost nonexistent, and few new homes were built recently. People over the age of sixty-five are more likely to claim this community type as home, but few minorities or immigrants live here. (One in four U.S. congregations is located in a small city or stable suburb.)

With many older worshippers beyond child-rearing years, churches find experienced volunteers who want to contribute to their community. Some congregations continue to nurture children and youth through their programming. But churches here may find it more difficult to involve members in small groups and other church activities, foster spiritual growth, and engage lay leaders' gifts in the church's mission. *Effective churches in such communities excel in these ministries.*

Finding Strength in Economically Distressed Urban Communities. Albany, Georgia, is like other urban places: high rates of unemployment, poverty, and numerous female-headed households. Despite low population growth, many children live in these distressed urban settings. Also, many racial-ethnic minorities reside in these economically challenged environments. (One in five U.S. churches is in an economically distressed urban community.)

With low population growth, these urban churches can struggle to attract new worshippers. *Effective churches in these communities tend to excel in (a) providing meaningful worship experiences, (b) motivating members to share their faith with others, and (c) giving attendees the feeling that their church values their talents.*

Finding Strength in High-Mobility Urban Communities. The largest population group in areas of high mobility tends to be well-educated singles, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. Most residents are renters and few of them have children. (The fewest U.S. churches are located in these settings—only one in ten.)

Research indicates that high-mobility urban environments present the greatest challenges for congregations. The strength that most consistently emerges in effective churches in these communities: More worshippers are more involved in their city's life than are worshippers in the other community types. *Effective churches use this strength to leverage greater vitality in other areas, such as spiritual growth and congregational participation.*

Finding Strength in Any Location: Church as a Neighborhood Destination. In his excellent book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg argues that in the past, three gathering places existed in every community—home, workplace, and the neighborhood hangout (such as the coffee shops or barbershops).² These three places anchored the community, keeping the collective spirit and individual identities of residents afloat.

Oldenburg says that many communities now lack a third place—spots where people gather to share their lives, talk about their values, and get their social and spiritual needs met.

He believes that congregations are uniquely positioned to be their community's third place. However, becoming a "public congregation" that is a neutral "third place" requires intentional strategies.

The following questions help to develop an intentional "third place" strategy: What community type best describes our church's location? Do our current ministry goals fit our community? What changes would our church need to consider so that non-members feel like welcome guests who can relax and be themselves in this setting? What are the pros and cons of having local residents see our church as a neighborhood place rather than a place only for "church people?"

The Bottom line. Former President Jimmy Carter boasted that he could hammer a nail into a board with three hits. The trick, he said, is "try to hit it where it's going to go."

By responding to community change and matching their ministries to present-day needs, effective church leaders focus their ministry in ways that "hit the nail on the head."

¹ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999 Edition).