

Midwest First Church

Ecological Study For Growth Assessment

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Background

Student

Debra Edwards is a Junior at Nazarene Bible College, where she is pursuing Bachelor Degrees in Biblical Studies and in Christian Counseling. Her father, Leslie Wooten, is a retired Nazarene Pastor, who started a mission church in Decatur, Illinois, where he pastored for 47 years. Three years ago, Debra left her 22-year IBM career to begin preparation at Nazarene Bible College to fulfill God's call on her life. During her tenure with IBM, Debra held various positions including Worldwide management positions of Engineering Change, Customer Satisfaction, and Quality Assurance.

Debra is currently a member of Central Church of the Nazarene, Colorado Springs. At Central Church, she initiated a one-year Sunday school program for 3rd - 5th grade children, known as B.I.T. The Bible Investigator's Team members earn badges for completed projects. Over the course of 52 weeks the children are progressing through the Bible. The program, which will culminate in April, has proven to be successful. Additionally, she has been the Elder Care Pastor at Central Church for the past two years. This ministry will be terminating in May, as the elderly population of the church has declined due to death and movement. As these ministries are ending, God is moving Debra in new directions. She has recently started a nondenominational church known as Church at the Plaza where she is pastor to a community of previously homeless individuals. The facility is operated by the Sisters of Mercy. Although this is a government subsidized community, with the support of a loving Catholic Sister, permission has been granted for the establishment of a nondenominational church. Debra is excited about where the Holy Spirit is taking her.

Paper

This study began as a Church Growth Project for Dr. Lewis' Sociology class at Nazarene Bible College. Textbooks used for the course included Sociology: Concepts and Characteristics¹ by Judson R. Landis and Studying Congregations: A New Handbook, edited by Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney. Students were requested to select one sociological frame to be used to study an aspect of a congregation from a church growth perspective. An ecological frame was selected for this study. An ecological study for growth assessment enables the researcher to see the congregation in the context of its history and community.

Hypothesis

¹Landis, text book used for Sociology class was not used specifically in the context of this paper, but was used as general reference tool with regard to Sociological Studies, data collection, etc.

An ecological study for church growth will help pastors and congregations serve their communities better by providing insight into periods of growth and decline, by identifying the needs of the community to be served, and by inspiring renewed interest and hope as the congregation sees the community through windows of opportunity.

Study Design

The Ecological Frame presented in Studying Congregations² was used for this study. A single congregation, which will remain anonymous, was selected for this study. Statistics were gathered from the 1990 Federal Census Data³ and Church of the Nazarene District Journals. Historical information was gathered from members of the congregation and the pastor. A community door-to-door survey was conducted to determine the community's perception on community need and church participation. This survey consisted of 85 homes. Half of the responses were solicited from older sections of town and half from new subdivisions. The older sections included a population majority of couples aging 55 and older. The new developments consisted of young families.

The church historical data was gathered from a combination of sources which included District Reports; local church data such as church reports and minutes, bulletins, and newsletters; and personal interviews. Data was charted and analyzed. Conclusions were drawn from an analysis of all sources. Conclusions were then assessed by the pastor and long-term member for validation of the assessment. The team concluded that the conclusions were unbiased and that the variety of sources utilized, including the statistical data, supported the conclusions. The data, conclusions, and recommendations were summarized in presentation format and presented to the church pastor and to the Sociology Class at NBC.

²Ammerman, Chapter 2, "Seeing the Congregation in Context" by Nancy L. Eisland and R. Stephen Warner

³2000 Census Data was not yet available when this study was completed.

Data Overview⁴

Community Summary

The church studied is a Midwest Nazarene church. The community is affluent and relatively well-educated. The cost of living is less than the national average. It is located close to a metropolitan area. Professional families are continually moving in. 62% of the population consists of young to middle aged families. 50-60% of the people in this township do not attend church. 59% of the church attending population are Catholic. The Catholics grew by 29% between 1980-1990, and the entire church population grew by 25%. The churches that lost ground are the extreme legalistic denominations. This Church of the Nazarene is the only Nazarene church in this growing and hungry community. The field is white for harvest!

Township Statistics

- Population - 27,500

⁴See supporting presentation data included in this package.

Male/Female: 50/50

98.5% Caucasian

■ 9,548 Households

83% Families

71.5% Married Couple

3% Single Male Head of Household

8% Single Female Head of Household

■ Education

3% Less than Highschool Grad

82% Highschool Grad or Greater

15% Bachelor's Degree or Greater

■ Income: Median Average 35% Higher Than National Average

■ Cost of Living Lower Than National Average

Average Home Value 29% Less Than National Average

Average Rent 18% Less Than National Average

County Church Statistics: 1980-1990

■ Church Adherents Grew 25% (Population remained flat)⁵

■ 59% Denominational Church Attenders are Catholic⁶

⁵ Census Data Includes Denominational and Nondenominational Churches

- 90% Of Denominational Church Growth was Catholic⁷

Township Survey For Church Growth Assessment

- 85 Homes Visited

57 Responses

28 From Older Sections (55+ Age Group)

29 From New Subdivisions (Young Families)

- Survey Questions

1. What is the greatest need in the area?

67% - Public Improvements

22% - Family Activities

2. Are you actively attending church

66% Attend Church Regularly

3. Why do you think people don't attend church?⁸

55% Of Unchurched Are Too Busy To Attend

4. What would you look for in a church?⁸

53% Would Seek Fellowship/Sense of Community

37% Want Church To Care, Meet Needs, Listen

Midwest First Church Attendance Statistics/Trends

⁶ Growth Figures recorded by Denominations

⁷ Catholic church growth needs further analysis; appears to be new membership

⁸ Response From Unchurched Only

Worship Attendance

■ 1982 - 83 Peak 238

■

1991 - Lowest
110
(54%)

■

1999 - Upward Trend
146
(39%)

Sunday School Attendance

■ 1981 Peak 178

■

1999 Lowest
64
(64%)

Sunday School Children Attendance

■ 1981 Peak 58

■

1998 Lowest
17
(71%)

■

1999 Slight Increase
21
(64%)

Highlights From The Church's Past

1970's

- Focus: Outreach in Love
- Stable Attendance/Large Sunday School
- Growth Strategy: Bus Ministry

1979 - 1981: New Pastor

- Focus: Outreach in Love
- Day Care Ministry Initiated
- Morning Worship Radio Broadcast Draws Many
- Van Bus Ministry Replaces Bus Ministry
- Attendance Remains Stable +200

⁹ Rate of Decline from Peak Attendance

1982 - 1984: New Pastor

- Focus: Cut Costs/Discontinue Extraneous Ministries
- Day Care Closed
- Van Bus Ministry Discontinued
- Drive Through Canopy/Parking Lot Pavement Improvement Not Supported
- Worship Attendance Stable +200
- Sunday School Declines

1985 - 1991: New Pastor — The Era of Serious Decline

- Focus: New Programs for Growth
- Lay Training Classes Started/Discontinued
- “Break the 200 Barrier” Program Started/Discontinued
- 2nd A.M. Service Started/Discontinued
- Small Group Program Started
- John Maxwell’s *Grade Program* Started/Discontinued
- Work & Witness Trip Over Burdens Finances
- Pastor Proposes Sale of Building - Denied
- Lowest Attendance 1991 - 110
- Congregation Disheartened/Building in Disrepair/Budgets Are Not Met

1991-1998: New Pastor and Beginning

- Focus: Become Holy People, Love God and Neighbor

- All Roofs Replaced/New AC and Heating Units/Parking Lot Paved/New Sign Installed
- Bloated Membership Records Reality Adjusted
- Community Outreach Begins
- Morning Worship Attendance Upward Trend From 110 to High Point of 141

Current Church Status

1999: New Pastor

- Focus: Being Holy People, Love God and Neighbor
- New Residents Contacted By Pastor
- New Visitors Each Week
- Care Ministry Implemented
- Increased Giving/Budgets Met
- Worship Attendance Positive Trend Continues - 146

Midwest First Church Growth/Health Profile

- Focus: Holiness/Perfect Love
- Good Bible Preaching, Excellent Musical Talent, Contemporary Service
- Well-Disciplined Lay Persons Reach Out To Community In Love
- Visitors Say The Church Is Friendly
- Well-Positioned in Growing, Affluent Area
- Sanctuary Capacity Is 200
- Church On 10 Acres Of Land
- Finances Are Improving — Budgets Are Paid

Assessment: Healthy, Ready For Action and Growth!

Recommended Actions For Growth

- Focus on Perfect Love, Two Greatest Commandments, and Great Commission
- Give Ecological Presentation to Membership To Help Them Envision Potential Windows of Opportunity
- Communicate Positive Message of Winning The Lost Through Understanding and Meeting Needs of the Community

- Continue Care Plan
- Renew Focus on Children's Programs
- Reinitiate Radio Broadcasts - Message of Love to a Hungry Community
- Establish Trend of Packed Church Before Implementing 2nd Worship Service
- Gain Commitment of 50% Church Families to Seed Second Worship Service Prior to Surveying Community or Implementation
- Survey Community for Flexible Worship Times
- Fill the Church for Two Services and Reduce Current Debt Before Implementing New Building Program
- Maintain Outreach In Love Focus vs. Inward Focus
- Do Everything With Excellence For The Lord in Love!
- "If He is For You, Who Can Prevail Against You?"

Observations

- Period of decline marked by focus on issues other than holiness/outreach in love
- Periods of stability/increase marked by focus on holiness/outreach in love
- Inward focused programs did not work

Conclusions

This study supported the hypothesis. It provided insight into periods of growth and decline. The needs of the community are clearer because the demographics are understood and the community has been heard. This study helped the participants envision windows of opportunity.

General Application

Ecological studies such as this are applicable to any church to help it better understand its history and community.

A denominational study might also be beneficial. The denominational study would consist of an analysis of the following: U.S. demographics; periods of church growth and decline; sampling of ecological studies from Nazarene churches in various areas of the country; comparison of other denominations' statistics and ecological studies.

The hypotheses for such a study might be the following:

- Church growth declines or grows when church focus changes.
- Declining growth trends will be reversed with the preaching, teaching, and living the Doctrine of Perfect Love.
- If love is our focus, we will attract a love-starved world.

Some Questions For Consideration

- What are the growth statistics of the Church of the Nazarene in the U.S.?
- Why are many churches closing?

Works Cited

Ammerman, Nancy T.; Jackson, W. Carroll; Dudley, Carl S.; McKinney, William, editors. Studying Congregations. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

Landis, Judson R. Sociology: Concepts and Characteristics. Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998.

1990 Federal Census Data.

Church of the Nazarene District Journals and Local Church Data requested to remain anonymous.

