

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONSULTANT

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Abstract

The church in North America is in decline. Research indicates that many churches are not growing or even considered “healthy.” More and more churches are addressing their declining attendance through hiring consultants to identify areas of growth and improvement. The key is finding the right consultant or consulting firm for the needs of the local church. This article seeks to help the local church ask the right questions when selecting a consultant or consulting firm.

INTRODUCTION

It is almost universally agreed that the church in North America is in decline. The numbers are staggering. Although there are more churches today than at any other time in the history of the United States, the proportion of people attending churches tells a different story. The number of churches has increased 50% in the United States from 212,000 in 1900 to 345,000 in 1995, according to the United States census. This, however, has not kept up with population growth, which has increased by 300% over that same time.¹ Research indicates churches are not growing or even considered “healthy.” In a research study conducted by David T. Olsen from 1996 to 2005, he

¹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 7.

found that among Protestants, 52% of churches researched had declined in attendance by at least 10% over the 10 year period; 17% of churches were stable attendance or had plateaued; and 31% of the churches were growing in attendance.² According to Olson's research, 69% of all Protestant churches are either plateaued or declining. In addition, according to church growth researcher Thom Rainer, "eight out of ten of the approximately 400,000 churches in the United States are declining or have plateaued."³ Rainer's research allows for a back-of-the-envelope calculation, which shows that 320,000 churches are currently either in decline or plateaued. This is alarming, but the concern does not stop there.

According to Ed Stetzer, "churches in the first decade of the twenty-first century are closing at a phenomenal rate. Eighty to eighty-five percent of American churches are on the downside of their life cycle."⁴ Leith Anderson, noted pastor and church leader, made the same observation, stating that "an estimated 85% of America's Protestant churches are either stagnating or dying."⁵ George Barna's observation is correct: "Thousands of churches across America have deteriorated to the point where they are a ministry in theory only, a shell of what they have once been. In these churches, little if any, outreach or in-reach takes place."⁶ This led Olson to state that the American church will continue to decline to a point where fewer than 15% of the American population will attend church.⁷

One manner in which churches are addressing their declining attendance is through seeking outside help. A fresh set of eyes can help the church see opportunities for change, opportunities for outreach, and opportunities for growth. The fresh pairs of eyes are known as consultants. Consultants can help a church see areas of growth, they can point out areas that need addressing, and they can offer hope for a better and brighter future for the church.

The key is finding the right consultant or consulting firm for the need of the local church. This article seeks to help the local church ask the right questions when selecting a consultant or consulting firm.

² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 131–32.

³ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 45.

⁴ Stetzer, *Planting New Churches*, 10.

⁵ Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change: An Arresting Look at the New Realities Confronting Churches and Para-Church Ministries* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1990), 9–10.

⁶ George Barna, *Turnaround Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 22–23.

⁷ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, 180.

CHECK REPUTATION

Reputation is a funny thing. A reputation can be either good or bad, yet it does not provide a complete picture. Despite this, however, reputation is a good place to start. A reputation can help you eliminate potential options. The key areas of reputation to look for are: past performance, working style, previously made recommendations to churches, assessments or tools used to survey staff, key leaders or the congregation, and the reporting of findings.

Past performance is the easiest aspect to figure out about a consultant. You can ask past clients whether the consultant(s) delivered on what was promised. Was the work completed on time? Was the work done well? These may seem like simple and unimportant questions, but choosing a consultant who does not meet a deadline is frustrating and can cause distrust in the process and in the leadership of the church. It can also cause delays in implementing needed changes.

Working style is another important factor to consider. Is the consultant(s) combative? or confrontational? or are they more collegial and supportive? This might not seem important until you consider the reason(s) for hiring a consultant. A church that is seeking a consultant is either going through a time a of transition, i.e. a long-term senior pastor has retired, or the church has been in decline for a number of years, or a church's leaders are unsure of the vision or direction of the church. In any of these cases, the church hires a consultant to **HELP** the church figure out these things; the consultant is not hired to **LEAD** the change of these things. The consultant's role is to give **input** to the leadership team of the church; the consultant does **not lead** the leadership team of the church. A consultant should not have a vested interest in the church, so that they have no rights to demand or pressure the leadership of the church in a particular direction. A consultant should offer guidance and remain objective!

CHECK PRESUPPOSITIONS

Consultants are people like each of us. Understanding the presuppositions or bias of the consultants is probably the most difficult information to assess during the selection process, yet it is imperative to know and understand before hiring a consultant. Presuppositions or bias are not bad, if known and accounted for; unknown or unrecognized bias can lead the consultant down the wrong path before the assessment of the church begins, and therefore, be led to a wrong conclusion in the end. For example, a consultant might believe that it is always the senior pastor's fault that a church does not grow. It is true that the senior pastor may be the cause of the decline of the church, but to assume that the senior pastor is *the* reason for the decline before completing an assessment of the church is both wrong and dangerous. Too many

other factors affect whether a church grows and remains healthy. Having this presupposition about the senior pastor might keep the consultant from getting to the root of the problem. Perhaps the issues are not with the senior pastor, but it is with the board. Perhaps the church is located in a community that is experiencing a population decline or shift. Perhaps there is a hidden sin within the church, like in Joshua 7, and God will not allow the church to grow until the sin is confessed and repented. On the other hand, some presuppositions or bias are quite good and healthy. For example, to believe that God wants the church to grow and be healthy is a bias that everyone should have.

Here are some questions to ask to determine the presupposition or bias of the consultant: “What do you believe about church growth?” “Who is responsible for the growth of the church?” “Can one person alone determine the growth of the church?” “What are the major factors limiting a church’s growth?”

CHECK RECOMMENDATIONS

Checking previous recommendations is perhaps the easiest information to obtain when interviewing a consultant or consulting firm. Ask the consultant or consultant firm for the names and contact information for the last five churches that they consulted and, if possible, the last five churches that were the same size and circumstance.

Make the calls, and find out about the consultants. Importantly, ask about the previous recommendations that were made by the consultant. It should be expected that consultants would have some standard recommendations for a church, such as, the church needs more local outreach; the worship style needs to better reflect the local community; changes need to be made in staffing; start small groups; get rid of Sunday School for adults; and perhaps the church should consider hiring additional staff in order to take advantage of opportunities for outreach.

What the inquiry into previous recommendations is looking to understand is does the consultant always offer the same recommendations or “canned” answers? Alternatively, is the consultant offering unique, detailed recommendations that fit the local church that they are consulting? For example, some consultants believe that adult Sunday school should be done away with and replaced by small groups, whereas a healthier (and maybe a less divisive) recommendation would be to *add* small groups and make adult Sunday school just another small group. Another example might be to recommend training or coaching for a pastor or staff members instead of replacing the pastor or the staff.

Here are some questions to ask church leaders when checking previously made recommendations: “Did the recommendation offered seem generic or location specific?” “Did you feel that the recommendations took into

account the nuances of your church's situation?" "Looking back, do you think the recommendations were correct?" "Did you implement any or all of the recommendations?" "If you did not implement a recommendation, why not?" "What would you do differently, if anything?"

REVIEW CHURCH HEALTH ASSESSMENT OR SURVEY TOOL

Examining the church health assessment or survey tool that a consultant may use to survey staff or survey the congregation is the most difficult task for a church leader during the selection process. Let's face it, not many of us at the local church are experts in survey development or are trained in evaluating the reliability, validity, and content alignment of survey instruments. If we were, then we could develop our own survey tools for the staff and/or the congregation to examine issues about the church. However, data is important in making decisions. Your data is only as good as what you measure and collect. So, ask for a copy of a consultant's past survey tools for both staff and the congregation and find out whether the consultant customizes the tools to your local church situation. Remember, a good survey tool should be reliable (e.g. consistency of the results), be valid (e.g. accuracy of question design), and provide actionable feedback about the church and its ministries.

Reliability and validity are closely linked. If a survey does not produce valid (or accurate) results, then the survey may not be repeatable (e.g. reliable). In the same way, if the survey does not produce consistent information, then the survey is unreliable and invalid as a decision-making tool. The assessment or survey tool that is used by a consultant should first of all be reviewed during the selection process. Most importantly, the survey should address concrete and actionable issues within the church. A full read of the survey will highlight for you the main areas that the survey can address and the topics that can be reported. Look for areas that may be missing in the survey that are important in your church history, evolution, leadership, culture, and environment.

When reviewing the overall structure of the survey, a rule of thumb for ordering topics within an assessment or survey tool is to move through topics from general to more specific. Broad, open-ended questions are typically placed at the end of the survey once a respondent has answered all of the closed-ended questions, followed by respondent characteristic questions such as age, gender, etc. The placement of broad, open-ended questions at the end is done so that the survey tool has brought to mind the main areas of importance addressed in the survey before having the respondent reflect on providing narrative input or comment. Open-ended questions are designed to elicit specific feedback or comments for which details are wanted/needed that is not easily captured in a closed-ended question.

After reviewing the content and structure of the survey, it is ideal to walk through each question and think through the terms used and the

appropriateness of the response scale. The first step is to examine the terms used and decipher if the terms and respondent characteristic questions align with the church, its structure, and its ministries. It is critical that the terms used are aligned with how the church and its ministries are structured. If the survey uses different definitions for terms such as mission, outreach, small groups, etc. than are used within the church and its own ministries, then the data collected will not reflect the reality of the church, and the results will be meaningless or misrepresented. Next, review each of the closed-ended questions and their associated response scale. Every possible response to a given question should be included within the response scale or response values, without any overlap. There also should be a “Not Applicable” option included for many questions, especially those targeted toward specific ministries in which not all congregants participate. A Likert scale is a common scale used for closed-ended questions. In its final form, the Likert scale is a five (or seven) point *scale* that is used to allow individuals to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement. Typically, questions about the same content are grouped together in a survey, and then within a content area, questions with the same type of response scale are grouped together. Screener questions may also be used for questions specific to a sub-population within the church.

It is more important to be thorough in terms of survey content than to worry about survey length. Previous research suggests that survey length generally does not affect survey response rates. Prior findings suggest that the number of survey questions that respondents were required to answer, from as few as 23 to as many as 95, had little effect on response rates, and respondents were as likely to answer a relatively longer survey as a shorter one.⁸

Note that questions should be at a low level of reading literacy (e.g. typically at the eighth grade reading level) and absent of any jargon. The main issue is to have the wording of questions clearly understood by all ranges of people within the congregation. Emotionally charged questions are not appropriate.

DISCUSS ADMINISTRATION PROCESS

OF THE CHURCH HEALTH ASSESSMENT OR SURVEY TOOL

Understanding the process of how the church health assessment data is to be collected and discussing how to make this successful so that the effort yields a large number of responses is critical. Set up a time to discuss the

⁸ P. M. Gallagher and F. J. Fowler Jr., “Notes from Field: Experiments in Influencing Response Rates from Medicaid Enrollees,” in Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Portland, OR, 18–21 May 2000.

details of the survey administration process with the consultant, and make sure to ask about the plan to distribute the surveys (paper, email with web-link, etc.). Decide what timeframe allowed for people to respond (e.g. how long will they be fielding the survey or administering the survey) and what types of reminders will be used and how often. Importantly, discuss what is the target number of completed surveys they are aiming for and how are they going to determine that the completed set of surveys is a good representation of the entire church congregation.

Another issue to address is anonymity of respondents. An anonymous survey is a key to getting honest feedback. Fear of repercussion might keep people—staff or congregants—from sharing their true thoughts and feelings about the church. Confidentiality is a must. Therefore, the survey must be designed so that no one can determine who has responded. This includes ensuring that when responses are de-aggregated by specific characteristics, no one is able to determine the identity of a given person. Questions such as, “How long have you attended the church?” and, “What role(s) do you currently serve?” combined can easily identify the person who responded to the survey. Bottom line, there should be no way to link responses to those who gave the response.

Another important area to consider is the response rate and sample size. The larger the response rate, the larger the sample size of completed surveys, and the more generalizable and representative the data. With this in mind, the minimum goal is to have at least a 30% response rate if using an email/web-based survey and 50% response rate if using a mail/hard copy survey.⁹ The response rate is the number of people who answered the survey divided by the number of people in the sample (e.g. the total number of congregants).

Characteristics of the congregation are important data needed in order to understand whether the completed set of surveys captured a good representation of the entire congregation. For example, if mostly the married 30–45-year-olds took the time to fill out the survey, then you are missing the viewpoints of other types of congregational members. The survey results displayed by congregational characteristics (e.g. age, gender, etc.) and compared to these same characteristics from administrative church data can determine whether the assessment was able to collect a representative sample of the whole congregation. If there are gaps, then additional surveying is required. Ask upfront questions such as, “What is your target of completed surveys given our church size?” “What methods of follow up will you use to ensure a completed survey?” “What comparisons can we make to church administrative data to know that we have a good sample of completed surveys?”

⁹ H. Rodriguez et al., “Evaluating Patients’ Experiences with Individual Physicians: A Randomized Trial of Mail, Internet and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Telephone Administration of Surveys,” *Medical Care* 44(2), (2006): 167–74.

REPORTING OF ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

Finally, when hiring a consultant, the church must understand how the information found will be reported back to the church. This is done by comparing the assessment or survey tool used by the consultant with an example of previously reported findings. Ask for examples of past briefings or findings that a consultant has provided to churches in addition to the assessment tools used. For example, if the consultant's assessment tool asked for the age of the congregation in ten-year blocks (e.g. 20 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, 60 to 69, 70 to 79, and 80 plus), then the data should be reported by displaying it with the same breakdowns. Alternatively, is the data being displayed differently (e.g. 20 to 24, 25 to 34, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, 65 to 74, and 75 plus) and has somehow been aggregated? If data is not reported in the same way it is collected, there is room for misunderstanding the data at best and manipulating the data at worst. Remember, the findings will help determine the future direction of the church's ministry, so it is imperative that it is done right!

REVIEWING CHURCH DATA

Church health assessment tools are a valuable way of gaining insight into the current thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of the church body encompassing the staff, leadership, and membership of the church. However, church health assessment tools cannot give a full picture of what is going on at the church; in other words, these tools do not tell you what has been going on at the church. To understand the evolution of the church, its neighborhood, and its congregation, it is important that the consultant(s) review historical information. Several types of data are important for any consultant to review. First, attendance information for at least a span of the last ten years (fifteen to twenty years if possible) should be divided by congregant characteristics such as age, gender, married status, race/ethnicity, etc., if possible. A good consultant will also review financial statistics for the same period of time, including giving patterns, missional giving patterns, construction projects, or major expenditures, etc. It is important to understand the changing demographic patterns for the location of the church, as well, although this may require some research about the community. However, the time is well spent, as it provides context for the changing membership and neighborhood of the church.

By examining attendance records, financial information, and demographic patterns of the church, its city, and neighborhood, the consultant(s) has the opportunity to see trends, either good or bad. For example, if the church experienced consistent growth and then sudden decline, the consultant(s) has important questions to ask key leaders. "What happened during this period of time?" "Were there any big changes in church lead-

ership or church staffing?” “Did something change in the community?” “Was there a major crisis?” “Did the community makeup shift dramatically?” Without answers to these kinds of questions, it is impossible for the consultant(s) to make meaningful recommendations that will benefit the local church.

REVIEWING CHURCH CONSTITUTION, BYLAWS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

Similarly, it is important that the consultant(s) review the constitution and bylaws as well as all policies and procedures. This provides a good structure for understanding how decisions are made. Are the constitution and bylaws outdated? Do the constitution and bylaws require the organization to be run in a way that stifles growth, or are the constitution and bylaws written in a way that encourages growth? Are policies and procedures written to eliminate human decision-making, or are they written to allow the staff some freedom to operate within defined boundaries? For example, what spending levels do the congregation need to approve? If the number is too low, it makes decision-making very difficult. Will the consultant(s) offer useful suggestions on how to improve the constitution and bylaws, or does he let the church try to figure it out by themselves? Will the consultant review the polices and procedures and provide input or changes? This poses an interesting tightrope for the consultant(s) to walk, because if too much direction is given, then buy-in from the congregation might be lacking. If not enough input is given, then the leadership might not address glaring structural/operational needs or issues.

CONCLUSION

Hiring the right consultant or consulting firm can be a great blessing and benefit to the local church. Consultant(s) can help the church see opportunities for growth, identify areas for improvement, assist with the development of policies and procedures, recommend needed training or reorganization, and assist in staff development plans. These benefits could help a plateaued or dying church become a healthy, vibrant church again.

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