

**Why**



**PEOPLE**

**Attend YOUR**

**Church...**

**AND WHY OTHERS DON'T**

BY ALAN NELSON

## How to understand the psychographics and interest angles of your congregation

**A**fter leaving 20 years of local church leading to start serving pastors, I'm free to visit lots of churches. My wife and I joke that we hop churches like "party animals" hop the bars—on a given weekend, we may worship in multiple congregations. At times we walk out after worship saying, "What do people see in that church?" On other occasions, we'll ponder, "Why aren't a *lot* more people worshipping at this church?"

Every weekend scores of churchgoers pass each other, traveling in opposite directions to worship in their congregations of choice. Most drive past a half-dozen churches on the way to their own. Have you ever wondered why people attend your church and not others? "Of course we know," we tell ourselves. "They attend ours because it's so good. They prefer our doctrine, preaching, philosophy, music, and people."

So why aren't a *lot* more people coming to your church?

I'm more convinced than ever that the church at large is a wonderful collage of various colors, styles, and reflections of God's family. God is certainly bigger than any one model, style, or brand. Yet the perplexing issue nags at us: Why are there so many different

churches, and what can we do to grow (and perhaps not feel so bad when we don't)?

If you're not into ministry marketing because it smacks of corporate consumerism, consider Paul's admonition:

"I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:19-24).

"Running to win" in ministry includes understanding the different ways to communicate and reach people with unique interests and values. The reason people do (and don't) attend your church, and why existing members decide to leave, can be better understood by looking at a list of 10 potential characteristics people look for in the churches they attend. I call these "interest angles" because they're unique attraction motives among those in search of a church. While all 10 aren't on every person's list, combinations of three or four interest angles usually are.

Most of us are familiar with demographics—some-what tangible and sterile descriptions of who we are in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, education, and income. But a far more intuitive approach to understanding what attracts people to churches is psychographics. Every church conveys a persona, a self-image that consists of what it is, who it attracts, and how it operates. These very real but less tangible characteristics provide a clearer understanding of why so many different churches can exist in a single community, and yet so many cannot

seem to find a church with which they can connect.

One challenge churches face is that interest angles vary between people and each person's interest angles can change over time, depending on individual circumstances, spiritual growth, and life passage. As you read the 10 interest angles, think of why people attend your church and why they might not.

- 1 TRADITION** (denominational history, doctrinal distinctions)—As the saying goes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. According to most studies on the topic, a large number of people return to their childhood roots as parents, whether charismatic, liturgical, or nondenominational. Commitment to a specific denomination and its traditions is common.
- 2 PROXIMITY** (physical distance and familiarity)—Most will not travel more than 20 minutes away from their homes but will drive up to 10 minutes more if it's in the direction of their normal commute. Familiarity of the path helps, but it also limits where a person will attend. High fuel prices, available transportation, weather, and road conditions can reduce travel distance as well.
- 3 DEMOGRAPHICS** (age, life stage)—Finding people like oneself in a faith community, in terms of age and life stage, is significant. Collegians, young married couples, young families, families with teenagers, empty nesters, and retirees all have more in common with each other than age alone. Typically, a church member is within five to 10 years of the lead pastor's age, although a popular staff member can skew this norm.
- 4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC** (education, income)—People often relate more to each other because of a shared socio-economic class than because of any other similar factor, including age and ethnicity. Formal education and pay scale usually equate to lifestyle, providing things to talk about and common communication styles in general. Plus, socio-economic groups typically live in proximity to each other.

- 5 MUSIC/WORSHIP STYLE** (the arts and psychographics)—Hymns, choruses, charismatic expression, praise and worship, acoustic, pipe organ, choir, worship team, liturgy, performance, or participative...music and arts pique our emotions and thus are the most controversial, causing people to select or avoid a church.
- 6 PREACHING DELIVERY/PASTORAL PERSONALITY**—Some people will endure music they don't like if they like the preaching, *so long as* preaching is one of their interest angles. Consequently, "average" preachers have grown huge congregations while some dynamic communicators lead very small ones. Related to preaching is the pastor's personality, which can attract or detract people from a church.
- 7 ETHNICITY/CULTURE**—The multiethnic congregation is a passionate and mostly unrealized goal of many churches. For the most part, people enjoy the cultural norms, language, color, dialect, traditions, and history of their own "tribes." While first, second, and third generations differ from each other, the closer to the country of origin, the more people choose to value this interest angle.

## CULTURE STUDY IN YOUR TOWN

Next time you have a board or staff meeting, take a field trip. Drive through an area near you that has a variety of restaurants. Instruct your team to assess and take notes. Perhaps do a pop-stop where you pull up in front, leave the motor running, and walk in to investigate the menu, who's eating there, how full it is, and the décor. Pick two or three to visit. At the end of this adventure, discuss what restaurants attracted certain people, why some were busy and others weren't, and why someone might pass others to eat at one specific café. Then compare your findings to churches. If your church were a restaurant, what kind would it be? What can you do to get the word out about your style of soul food, and how might you improve what you do to reach potential customers?

- 8 COMMUNITY/FRIENDS**—People will endure disdain for various aspects of a church, so long as they maintain good friendships in church. Perhaps more than any single factor, this is the glue that causes people to stick to and feel fulfilled in a church, whether it's growing or shrinking. Many people accept lower quality programs and services when they discover close community among friends.
- 9 MISSION/VISION**—Churches that develop a strong mission vision tend to attract people who share that interest angle, whether it be for overseas missions, caring for the homeless, evangelism, or other outreach motivations.
- 10 YOUTH/KIDS**—When life passage includes children at home, finding a church that's liked by the kids and meets their spiritual needs becomes significant. Many churches underestimate the importance of this interest angle, so that children's and youth programs receive mediocre budgets and staffing. This answers the question that perplexes pastors when they discover that a family in their church has their young children in a different church's program and their teenagers attend yet another.

Which of these 10 interest angles would you say are the main reasons people attend your church (other than your great preaching, of course)? Some pastors, by intentionally changing or adding to their church's ministry facets, can attract new people who are waiting for a congregation like it in the community and who are not sufficiently committed to their existing church. Simply because people attend a certain congregation does not mean they're fully satisfied with how it addresses their interest angles. Therefore, they may gravitate to a new one if they hear that it's more in line with their interest angles. By understanding your congregation, the community in which you minister, and the interest angles provided by other churches around you, leadership can better articulate who they're striving to reach which, of course, also defines who they will not reach.

By acknowledging that people will gravitate from other churches to yours if their interest angles aren't being fulfilled, I'm not suggesting we intentionally engage in "sheep stealing." But sheep have the tendency to wander, especially when the grazing seems better on the next hill. This is a reality to help us understand why some churches gain members and others lose them.

As in the Scripture cited earlier, a church designed to attract "Jews" is more apt to gain "Jews" who've been attending the local "not under law" congregation.

Even though Paul's strategy was to become all things to all people, he couldn't do it all at one time. He couldn't reach Greek, Jew, weak, strong,

lawful, and lawless in a single moment, but needed to customize the message and strategy to reach the independent groups at different times. To contextualize the gospel is not the same as compromising it. Jesus varied his message on the Reign of God depending on the audience. If a single church could captivate all 10 interest angles, then we'd likely have a single brand of church that would be reproduced tens of thousands of times around the country. Anything else would be unnecessary. This is one factor behind the multi-site church trend, whereby one congregation becomes effective at reaching certain people and reproduces itself in different locations. Starbucks has put many coffee shops out of business, but they've also helped create a "java culture" in which Ma and Pa and small chain coffee shops thrive as well.

### The Size of Your Piece of Pie

Granted, one church can't do it alone, but why are a few churches mega, some large, others medium, and most small? There are only so many people in any given neighborhood who are attracted to the interest angles that your church satisfies. If two churches in a single community appease the same interest angles, then the potential audience is halved. If four address the same, the potential is quartered. God, being a good steward, isn't redundant and therefore doesn't need two identical congregations in one area, unless of course it's

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for very intimate community. Each church should intentionally be unique from others. This reduces the competitive spirit among pastors and also helps us feel less defeated when one congregation grows faster or larger.

What large size shows us is that there are more people in a certain community looking for that kind of church or that there's been a growing hunger for a church of that type that wasn't being satisfied. Any given congregation has a certain percentage of people who attend but aren't fully satisfied. They're apt to visit new or other congregations if they hear that it's the kind of church that matches their interest angles.

Obviously, church attendance can't be fully explained by interest angles, but they do provide valid sociological and psychological rationale that differs from the typical spiritual and personality-driven explanations. The better you can get the word out to the right people about what kind of church you lead, the better its chance of attracting those people. The more effective you are at understanding the needs and interests in your community, along with clarifying your niche from existing churches, the more productive you're apt to be.

By understanding interest angles, leaders can get a healthier sense of what makes their ministry unique in a community and why so many pass your church on the way to attend some other church, especially when gas prices are so high. This results in more effective strategic planning, increased confidence in your strengths

and who God has called your congregation to be, and a less competitive attitude among churches.

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## WHY SOME CHURCH PLANTS APPEAR TO 'POP'

Why do some churches seem to "pop" while many grow laboriously? There tend to be common characteristics among congregations that are taking off from the rest. These factors turbocharge interest angles.

- 1 **FIRST KID ON THE BLOCK**—Quite often, larger churches were at one time the first to have a significant ministry in a community. Starting a church in an established community (more than 70 percent built) is more difficult than in new areas. Many megachurches were the first kids on the block.
- 2 **LACK OF COMPETITION**—Every community only has so many people apt to attend a church. When there are more churches addressing similar interest angles, the potential decreases. Church plants should look for areas where they're significantly different from other churches. Attitude is more important to people these days than doctrine, so if a Baptist church is doing a seeker service well, don't think you should plant one just like it simply because you're Nazarene.
- 3 **CHRISTIAN MAGNET**—Attracting churchgoers is usually easier than attracting the unchurched. Some congregations grow large because they have the best programs and worship services compared to other churches around them, or because a church split took place in the area. While megachurches have exploded in the last decade, church attendance in America has declined; go figure.
- 4 **NEW COMMUNITY GROWTH**—This is related to being the first kid on the block, but it has more to do with people moving near to a church than the other way around. Whether there's a master planned subdivision sprouting in the suburbs or a redevelopment surge in an urban area, new people who've yet to develop their shopping habits and social circles make church growth easier than in a stagnant, declining, or merely turning-over area.
- 5 **THE BIG MO**—A church that, for whatever reason, has a net annual growth of at least 20 percent is often able to attract more people according to their interest angles than congregations with the same angles but lacking momentum. That's why adding a service, building a new sanctuary, or starting a new ministry in order to create momentum when there is none, usually doesn't work.