



# *52 Churches in 52 Weeks*

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## ***Preface: Looking for a Pastor to Bury Me***

It all started with a Pecan Pie, or rather when I heard the senior pastor of a church tease an elderly congregant that he wasn't going to bury her unless she made him a Pecan Pie. Having once owned a local restaurant, the 80-something lady was well known for her expertise at baking.

Overhearing this comment, initially I admit I was horrified. Then I witnessed the deep understanding and humor that the minister and this spry senior shared. Their relationship had been forged by many decades of friendship. Besides, there was no doubt that the rambunctious woman was not going to die anytime soon.

The affection that they had for one another, made me realize instantly that no one would be more grief-stricken than this pastor, if he ever had to perform this spunky lady's funeral. It was obvious that she was like a mother-figure to him, and in that moment, he was like her mischievous little boy, even though he was almost a senior himself.

Her eyes twinkled with merriment, as the elderly woman said she had baked him the Pecan Pie and personally delivered it to his house. Everyone listening to this account broke out into laughter, but I didn't laugh. Instead the story made me wonder, who would bury me? Who would comfort my grieving husband and son if I were to

die before them? Who would console my extended family?

As we age, and witness death all around us, many folks wonder who will bury them. The funny thing is that some are church-goers, but that doesn't mean that there will be a pastor who will know anything about us or our lives, or more significantly how to comfort those we leave behind.

If you attend a megachurch like I did for four years, it's relatively easy to become lost in the crowd. "The term megachurch generally refers to any Protestant...congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2000 persons or more in its worship services, counting all adults and children at all its worship locations."<sup>i</sup>

Until recently, I was convinced that the megachurch model provided the best opportunity for a positive church experience for most people. In explanation, church growth was a personal topic of interest for me during graduate studies, since I went back to school after working in interdenominational television ministry for some years.

Through my studies, I came to believe that the megachurch model provided the ideal prototype for church growth. Like most folks in ministry who are keenly interested in growing a church, it has never been about the number of individuals for the sake of numbers, but about finding the most productive way to minister to hurting people.

Due to the size of an extremely large fellowship, the increased budget and overall

resources provide a greater base to reach more people with the Gospel, and to assist in meeting their needs, spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

Small groups are a key component to a healthy megachurch creating almost a church within a church, so that the congregants' personal needs get met. There is no way the pastoral staff can become acquainted with thousands of church attendees, and these groups can provide a sense of security, belonging, and accountability to those involved. This works pretty well, unless those attending a megachurch do not take the initiative to get connected to a small group, or do not find a group that fits their expectations. Sadly, then they fall through the proverbial cracks.

In my case, for a variety of personal reasons, I began to feel lost within the megachurch. Even though I had spent years working in ministry prior to my last geographic move which landed me in this specific congregation of several thousand believers, I felt anonymous. As an aging boomer, I started to empathize with what other older individuals had described in the past, that my usefulness and God-given talents were no longer of value, and so I sat back and observed as thirty-somethings led the church.

I tried to be supportive, but I couldn't help feeling frustrated and confused. I had been employed, overseen, or been a part of a variety of ministries, even working with national religious organizations, but in this specific megachurch, I



couldn't seem to find a ministry niche. Perhaps, it might seem that I was not humble enough to start at the bottom of the ministerial ladder, but truthfully I don't have enough time left on the Earth to squander the skills that I have spent a lifetime acquiring.

When I realized the busy young pastors on staff didn't even know my first name after attending there for four years, I went in search of someone who could bury me. Please forgive my sarcasm, because hopefully I won't die anytime soon. In reality, what I was looking for was a fellowship where somebody there, "got me," as my younger counterparts say. Where I could feel connected, and of use, as I age and learn how to be this older version of my once more productive self.

Thus began the project, "52 Churches in 52 weeks," when I decided to attend a different fellowship in Miami County, Ohio, each week for the next year. But this could have been many rural counties in our country. I hope you will travel along with me as I share what I uncovered during this journey, and why it has encouraged me not only in faith, but also about the future of the church community.

*\*Due to speaking engagements at specific fellowships and other engagements, a few churches were either visited a couple times or were not in Miami County. I made up for this number by extending the length of the study.*

## ***Beginning the Journey of 52 Churches in 52 Weeks***

What's it like to move to an area and to have to find a new church home? Or better yet, what's it like to have never gone to church in your lifetime, and to suddenly decide you would like to find a Christian fellowship that you can call home?

Statistics reveal that the largest population growth in religious attendance in Miami County is in the category of those who do not attend church at all. In a county of approximately 104,224 people estimated by July 2015 data from the United States Census Bureau, currently about 64,347 individuals are not attending or claiming affiliation with a religious group.<sup>ii</sup>

This is not a phenomenon peculiar to Miami County as nationwide especially mainline denominational churches have seen a tremendous decline in attendance in recent years. This is often attributed to the large proportion of the young adult (millennial) population who are not church-goers.

“The term *Millennials* is usually considered to apply to individuals who reached adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. The precise delineation varies from one source to another, however. Neil Howe and William Strauss...define the Millennial cohort as consisting of individuals born between 1982 and 2004.”<sup>iii</sup> They are also referred to as Generation Y.

What is it that folks who do not attend church are looking for in a fellowship? Why does

the millennial demographic seem to find little relevance in being a member of a church? Most importantly, what could local churches do better to attract more folks?

As I began the journey of attending 52 churches in 52 weeks concentrating on Miami County houses of worship, those are questions I asked myself. A journalist friend also inquired about why I had focused this study solely on Christian churches with the exception of one Jewish congregation. The reason is simple, because that's my area of expertise educationally and experientially.

While completing a Master of Arts in Ministry at Mount Vernon Nazarene University, I had studied churches that had grown from only double digit membership, to that of thousands. I have also come to realize that whether a church is large or small, it has a profound purpose within a community fulfilling the Biblical mandate of the Great Commission expressed in Matthew 28:16-20. The heart of this command is found in Jesus' words to, "<sup>19</sup>Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..." (KJV)

Having a community full of healthy growing churches supports the belief that the power of the Gospel can change the lives of broken hurting people. That said, I would be remiss not to share that as I decipher the research gleaned in this past

year, it will be disseminated through the eyes of a Christian believer. As a journalist, one is called to lay aside personal beliefs, but there was nothing impersonal about this amazing year of visiting churches all over the county, so I will not be able to do that.

A list of all the churches involved is included. I only occasionally refer to specific churches by name in this report and only in a positive light, because there are some negative findings as well as a tremendous amount of positive. That's why, I chose to share my experiences in a more general way.

As for how I decided which fellowships to attend, that is a difficult question to answer. I would like to tell you that there was some kind of systemic scientific formula in selecting which churches should be part of the study. The truth is my goal was to include as many varying denominations, different sized churches, geographic locations within the county, and worship styles as possible.

Acquaintances invited me to their fellowships, I read about area church happenings in the newspaper or online, and I went to many churches that I had driven by for the past several years. In addition, I wrote a newspaper column this past August for both the *Piqua Daily Call* and the *Troy Daily News* explaining the project. I included that I was nearing the end of it, and if there were any churches that wanted me to visit to please contact me.

I was pleasantly surprised when due to that column, I received invitations from: Piqua Baptist Church, Laura Christian Church, Piqua Apostolic Church, Center Friends Church, and Covington Christian Church. I attended each of these fellowships. In addition, the column solicited an invitation from Upper Valley Community Church in Piqua, and Grace Baptist Church in Troy, but I had already attended these congregations.

It is impossible to be sure of the exact number of churches that currently exist within Miami County, since there are home fellowships, possible unregistered churches, and also some churches that are in a state of flux. For example, when one fellowship closes or disbands, another unrelated denomination or congregation might be “planted” or take up residence in that same vacated church building.

Still, statistics from [www.arda.com](http://www.arda.com), the website for the Association of Religion Data archives are helpful in identifying 132 churches within Miami County.<sup>iv</sup> This website also reports that Mainline Protestant membership accounts for 15,247 individuals, while Evangelical Protestants are comprised of 11,232 residents. The Catholic denomination would come in third recording 10,860 folks, Black Protestant would be 264 people, 556 other, accounting for the just over 38,000 county residents who claim a religious affiliation.<sup>v</sup>

Many who are believers regardless of denomination find acceptance, security, and

camaraderie in the local church. They embrace the Biblical instruction found in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews, “<sup>24</sup> Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. <sup>25</sup> And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”(New Living Translation)<sup>vi</sup>

Information from a March 11, 2016, article, “Majority of American Churches Fall below 100 in Worship Attendance,” by Aaron Earls on [www.lifeway.com](http://www.lifeway.com) points to the growing statistic of smaller fellowships. “Almost 58 percent of U.S. churches don’t reach triple digits on the weekend...In 2005, the median attendance was 129. That fell to 105 in 2010 and down to 80 this past year. This means half of all American churches have a weekend attendance of 80 or less.”<sup>vii</sup>

Needless to say, even though these are national statistics, in Miami County, numerous churches I visited seem to fit into this same category. It’s imperative to note, that just because a church is small, does not always mean that it is not healthy, or that a profound faith movement is not occurring there.

The majority of churches will always be small in numbers. A fellowship does not have to have thousands of members to be doing great things. We live in a church-growth obsessed culture, and we can overlook the fact that a small church can be a healthy church as Karl Vaters has

expressed in various articles for *Christianity Today*. Sadly, “one of the unintended consequences of the church growth movement is that it leaves a lot of people feeling that small equals broken,” writes Vaters in a July 7, 2016, *CT* blog, “The Essential First Step to Having a Healthy Small Church.”<sup>viii</sup>

It is important to note that when I refer to a larger church, I am not referring to the megachurch of 2,000 or more weekly attendees. I am using “large” in a more general sense of anything that breaks the 200 or more attendee barrier weekly.

The primary thing most notable about the majority of smaller churches that I visited in Troy, Piqua, Tipp City, West Milton, Casstown, Covington, Laura, and Bradford was the gracious hospitality of the church members. Especially, because friendliness is a key ingredient to sustaining the momentum of a fellowship.

### ***The Importance of Friendliness***

The reason that I visited some churches was due to the fact that an individual from a specific fellowship who I encountered in an everyday situation invited me. For example, while we were in a checkout line at a Troy grocery store, my husband, Larry, struck up a conversation with another man. Before their brief exchange was over, that outgoing gentleman told us about his church. When he gave us his card, we discovered he was Pastor Charles Carnes of the Apostolic Church of

Jesus Christ in Troy. My husband and I enjoyed visiting there on May 1, 2016, due to that friendly conversation in a grocery line.

On another occasion, an acquaintance from the Robinson Branch of the YMCA mentioned that he was a church musician. This, too, turned into an invitation to check out what was happening at the First Lutheran Church in Troy last spring.

Hearing about the 52 weeks' project, Tom and Joyce Jenkins of Troy invited us to worship with them at their home church, Christian Life Center in Piqua. Last July, we joined them to hear Pastor David Dyess deliver a Sunday message.

These are only a few examples of the invitations to area churches by community folks. The point is friendliness can cause an individual to visit once, but how does it continue to play a vital role regarding the new fellowship?

“Many church growth studies have found a direct correlation between friendliness and potential growth. ...According to a Barna Research survey of people looking for a church, more than 90 percent stated that friendliness is either extremely or somewhat important.”<sup>ix</sup> This research does suggest that some churches believe they are friendly, when in reality they are only friendly from an internal standpoint. There is friendliness among the members, but no outreach to outsiders who might be visiting for the first time.

Other churches error on the side of over-friendliness making visitors feel overwhelmed by



zealous churchgoers. There is a balance of being friendly, without being invasive to guests by asking them to fill out too many forms, or pelting them with personal questions. Many churches in Miami County practice a great balance, but some have a little work to do, and might not even be aware of it.

For instance, often first-time visitors like to “hide” in the back rows of a fellowship. When my husband and I were sampling area churches this is usually what we did. In one congregation with several hundred in attendance, an elderly woman who was obviously a long-time attendee, not a visitor, also sat on the back row. She was not only unfriendly, but she was territorial and downright mean.

After enduring her wrath for trying to sit in an empty seat that she did not prefer for me to sit in, I watched as she was scathingly unkind to a young man who appeared to be a first-time visitor, too. Sadly, a person like this might be a hidden destroyer when it comes to being a friendly church, causing a visitor not to return.

The cantankerous woman’s excuse for her behavior might have been legitimate. Perhaps, she had lost her husband, and that could have been “his” empty seat that she was so territorial about. Or maybe she was experiencing excruciating physical pain prohibiting her from being hospitable.

Whatever the reason, lack of friendliness will not only impede church growth, but it could further damage an already wounded human being.

Remember, the only right reason to want to grow a church is not to increase the numbers of those attending, but to reach more hurting people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Greeters and ushers are also paramount to assisting visitors in feeling welcome. This is an area of expertise that is often overlooked, but demands attention if a fellowship wants to engage new folks. Overall, our county's churches are doing this pretty well, which might be partly due to the social courtesy that remains a mainstay in many rural communities. Even though Troy and Piqua both have populations of over 20,000 people, most churches there seemed to retain the small town feeling of hospitality.

In some churches of under 50 members, it appeared that although there might not have been assigned greeters, an outgoing congregant or two would try to attend to the needs of newcomers. Plus, helpful ushers can really ease the tension for a visitor to find a seat in a larger church.

### ***The Sign Outside: Great Advertising Asset***

In order to visit a church to find one that might be a good personal fit, an individual has to first discover that the establishment exists, what time services are held, and the address or directions to it.

A sign outside of any institution can alert passers-by as to what's happening inside. We've

probably all been amused or convicted by a church sign with a humorous or profound saying. For example, you might have seen a sign that said, “Honk if you love Jesus. Text while driving if you want to meet Him.” A sign’s message can make us laugh, pique our curiosity, or make us want to visit. That’s why it’s essential to have service times on the sign outside.

It’s worth spending some hard-earned dollars from the church budget to make sure the exterior sign is visible, in good condition, and always bears current information. An electronic sign is probably cost-prohibitive for smaller fellowships, but it could be worth the investment for a larger church.

Then placing a responsible congregant or staff member in charge of updating information is vital, since it can also be used as a tool to advertise upcoming special events, sermon series, or community programs. Besides, when you drive past a church daily that has an outside sign that doesn’t change for weeks, you begin to wonder if the inside message is stagnant, as well.

## **Websites, Social Networking, & Facebook Plus: “What should I wear?”**

A church website remains a powerful tool to reach potential new attendees, but it can’t be another task for an already overwhelmed pastor to maintain. There are a variety of avenues to create a

functional website with little or no investment, and there might be hidden talent within your congregation to do this.

One of the greatest needs in area ministries in our county is a more active presence on the Internet. With the advent of social media, it has also become necessary to maintain a visible presence on sites like Facebook, Twitter, etc. Facebook is especially pivotal, because “The total Facebook audience in the United States amounted to 156.5 million users.... [making it] the most popular social network worldwide,” reports [www.statistica.com](http://www.statistica.com).<sup>x</sup> Individuals of all ages, use this social media giant for news, to obtain information, and to stay connected with others.

Despite this fact, two weeks in a row, I discovered that some rather large churches within Miami County are not utilizing the free tools available to share relevant information like listing their service times on their Facebook page or even with easy access on their website. Both fellowships did list a phone number, and one church included service times on their voice message. The other voicemail greeting instructed me to leave a message and that someone would get back with me. The problem with this procedure is that by the time someone would have returned my call, the Sunday service would have already taken place.

Both of these churches also had Facebook pages, but only one was utilized. The other had been computer generated by Facebook, and there

were only a couple congregant posts. One did list service times on Facebook, but in reality, if someone is not a churchgoer, I doubt if they will go to all the trouble that I did. When I finally attended this Troy church, I was surprised that more than 200 adults were there.

In a September 27, 2016, article on [www.lifeway.com](http://www.lifeway.com), Todd Wright shares, “7 Reasons to Cultivate an Online Presence,” for a fellowship.<sup>xi</sup> “For many people the front door of the church is not the front door of the church, the online presence is...Many internet-savvy people are looking for a website or even a Facebook page that lets them know what is in store for them when they arrive,” according to Wright who has been the pastor at Midway Church in rural Georgia for three decades.<sup>xii</sup>

Perhaps, there is someone within the church, with Internet technology and social media skills who would be willing to volunteer their services to create a website and Facebook page. Still, if a budget permits, it is crucial to make sure that anything you create or post connected to your ministry appears professional and adheres to the spiritual integrity that your fellowship embraces.

Part of the problem with a lack of information might be familiarity. Since quite often, within a nonprofit or ministry, those in leadership can become so familiar with the inner workings of their organization, that they forget that outsiders do not possess this information. It might be beneficial

to have someone not affiliated with your group look over the content provided online.

It's almost impossible to visualize what it's like to visit a church for the very first time. What is the specific information a visitor will require, and can they glean this from the website? Not only the times of service, but is childcare available? What ages are welcome in children's church, and how does the church monitor the safety of children placed in their care.

Knowing what to wear when visiting a ministry can be a real challenge, too. Since society has become increasingly casual in dress, attire in church can run the gamut from a t-shirt and jeans to a tie and blazer. Casual dress is now most common, but would still be considered out of place at more traditional fellowships. Therefore, it would be helpful for photos of those who regularly attend dressed in their Sunday attire to be posted on the church website or Facebook page.

Also, since many of us are now using cell phones to search the Internet for data about everything from driving directions to current news events, an organization has to make sure that their website is mobile-friendly. Not only that, but online giving has become increasingly popular, as have text-to-give opportunities, so updating to include these features might be crucial.

## *Advertising on the Cheap*

With the creation of social media, we can forget that outsiders still need to be informed about special events or even to originally discover your church. It's necessary to have a Facebook page, and website, etc., but something has to initially drive an individual to look for more information about your church.

Please don't assume that I am negating the power of prayer or the Holy Spirit's intervention by leading individuals to a new church. Yet for too long, there are those in the church community that have viewed "advertising" as a dirty word that can attack a ministry's spirituality.

In truth, if a congregation hopes to attract new visitors, it would be wise to employ common everyday marketing tactics to let others know the fellowship exists. Advertising costs money, and since the benefit can be difficult to measure with tangible data, it's easy to overlook the value of a targeted mailer, newspaper or Internet ad, etc.

Perhaps, your ministry hosts a women's conference, free festival or community celebration, which might require more than word of mouth advertising. Urging congregants to invite outsiders is an effective way to reach new folks, but ministries have to do more.

In addition to special events, getting the word out about a Christmas celebration or Easter service can be significantly productive, since these

are peak times when non-churchgoers are considering attending a service. Make sure the service is promoted on your website and Facebook with service times listed in conjunction with any external advertisement.

Of course, it's great to create a Facebook page just for the specific event you are trying to promote. Then ask people who are part of your church, if they would be willing to share the news of an important happening on all their social media sites (not just Facebook) as well.

"How to Use Pinterest and Instagram to Promote Your Next Event," is a good blog post to read to learn more about using these additional heavily trafficked social sites.<sup>xiii</sup> The March 12, 2015, post by Ivan Serrano reports, "...Pinterest and Instagram are two very useful tools for showing your audience what they can expect from your event and provide the information they need."<sup>xiv</sup>

You can also pay to advertise your event on the news feeds of others on social networking sites. This costs money and could be tricky if you don't know your target audience. So choose what works best for you.

If you have a church sign, it's great to promote special services there, too. Then send out a short press release to area media, and if your budget permits purchase some type of advertisement.

For example, this past Easter I wanted to attend a Good Friday service. Being relatively new here, I had no idea what churches would host this



event in the Miami County area. The same thing happened when I was looking for a Christmas Eve service with family coming to Troy for the holidays.

I watched the newspaper, googled for events online, watched my holiday mailings for church services, and scoured community bulletin boards. That's why it can be important to use traditional methods of advertising to reach out about special events or to initially familiarize the public with your church.

The First United Methodist Church in Troy is great about getting the word out about their special services and events, so on both Christmas Eve and Good Friday, I visited there, along with my visiting family.

Newspaper advertising, television and radio spots or ads in local magazines would be a great way to do this. But, let's be honest, churches often have very limited advertising budgets if any at all. Yet there are business entrepreneurs who adhere to the philosophy that in order to make money you have to spend money. We can translate that to spread the Gospel's message, it's necessary to invest finances, and to design a strategic plan to reach the unchurched or those looking for a church home.

Some fellowships might not realize that press releases concerning upcoming events can also be distributed to local media, and community calendars whether in print or online. Yet non-profit organizations and ministries can't always expect adequate coverage from this free method of

advertising. After all, media outlets have to make money, too. If a church event is covered by media, sending a thank you note would not only be in good taste, but it would show appreciation to the media outlet highlighting the event.

Never take for granted, the goodwill that can be instilled by being grateful for whatever free coverage is afforded. From my own professional background, spending almost two decades in both west central Ohio TV broadcasting and as a newspaper columnist, I can't adequately express the vast difference a small expression of thanks can mean to many journalists. After all, there are probably thousands of events which occur each year, and if a ministry is blessed to garner any coverage at all, they should be grateful their organization was highlighted.

Another inexpensive way to advertise an event is to create a poster, and approach area businesses about displaying it. Make sure that it looks professional, and has either an impressive photo or some kind of artwork that would draw attention to it. Often there are community billboards at businesses and grocery stores, and in store windows, etc., where you can place these kind of promotional posters with permission. Again, always be grateful for whatever assistance public entities provide.

Flyers can be created relatively inexpensively, and handed out at community gatherings, but check for permission to do this.

Whatever you do, make a concentrated effort to get the word out about your event. You might plan the most wonderful meeting, but if nobody knows about it, the church will be empty and it will be a great disappointment.

As a public speaker, I can't tell you how disappointing it is to arrive at a church or religious event and to find out that little or no pre-publicity has been done. People have to be aware of a church happening to attend, especially if you are trying to reach new folks and not just to minister to those within your church walls. There's nothing more distressing then to have prepared diligently, and to have empty seats waiting for you. So, whatever you do, get the word out when your church is hosting something special.

### ***Church Signage: Helping Visitors Navigate your Church***

When a visitor does come to your church, is it easy for them to navigate their way around? In regards to this point, Pastor Dale Christian of First Baptist Church in Troy, made me more aware of the importance of signage within and around the church. Besides being one of the churches I visited, Pastor Christian's church was the site for several of the meetings for Miami County's Hope over Heroin event last July, and has hosted the Troy Mayor's Breakfast for the past two years.

As a visitor, the first thing you often look for is which outside door is the correct door to enter, believe me this might sound simple, but you can end up on the platform with the pastor if you enter by the wrong door. Upper Valley Community Church in Piqua uses an outside sign to help visitors with this.

Then there is the priority of locating the bathrooms, if you have children, the children's church, and of course, directions to the sanctuary should be clearly marked.

I spent a lot of time wandering church hallways aimlessly looking for all of these vital locations, so the importance of signage was really driven home for me. When you attend a fellowship for a long time, it's easy to forget how daunting it can be for a newcomer to find their way around.

Here's also where the importance of ushers or greeters comes in to play, and I really can't say enough about the need to have friendly and highly-trained hospitality people. They are pivotal in connecting with individuals who are visiting.

### ***A Boxful of Bulletins***

After visiting 52 churches in 52 weeks, well really, it was more like 52 churches in 58 weeks, since I visited a couple more than once, I have a lot of church bulletins. Each week, I would save a bulletin from whatever fellowship I attended, and now I have a large box filled with them.

Depending on the size and budget of the church, some bulletins were professionally printed with color graphics, and several pages of inserts. Others are the old-fashioned kind on black and white paper which follow the order of the service, along with several church announcements. However a bulletin is printed and whatever the format, this is a powerful tool to transmit information to a first-time visitor.

The bulletin is similar to a community's newspaper in that it is a reliable source of church news, upcoming events, groups or classes that are available, volunteer opportunities, and activities for children, etc. Most wise churches include service times, contact numbers for the church office, staff emails, website information, and the address. Similar to a ministry website or Facebook page, it would be valuable to have an outsider look over your church bulletin or newsletter to see if there is anything crucial missing that a newcomer might require.

In addition, upcoming events are often announced from the platform or pulpit in varying ways via video, a verbal announcement, etc., so that folks know what's happening in their church. Sometimes, church staff try to encourage congregants and newcomers to visit the church's website for more information about an event, class, or ministry. This can be risky, because people lead such hectic lives it's easy for them to forget to follow up on this. Out of all the churches I visited,

only a couple didn't have a Sunday bulletin of some kind to share news.

Quite a few churches were also prepared for visitors with a professionally organized welcome packet that included pertinent information about the church. Getting these packets in the hands of visitors might be a little difficult. Although in the smaller churches, a visitor is readily identifiable due to the fact that everyone in the congregation knows everyone. On more than a few occasions in smaller churches an industrious pastor would make sure to greet us following the service, and invite us to return. But in the larger churches (with a congregation of 200 or more) it's not as easy to tell who's visiting for the first time.

With my husband along for this year-long experiment, there were quite a few weeks when we were approached with these helpful welcome packets. The dilemma here is that countless visitors to a larger church are not willing to let others know they are there. They are timid and hold back from sharing that they are visiting.

Frequently, churches also had connection cards included with their bulletins, and usually an announcement was made to fill out the card. Yet I have to wonder how many folks are willing to give out personal information, like email, home address, phone number, etc. while searching for a church? That's why having a meeting time for newcomers with someone on the pastoral staff or a trained hospitality volunteer following the service might be

beneficial. Again though, shy guests might not show up to a meet and greet on their initial visit. One incentive that could work is offering a welcome gift for visitors.

### *A Welcoming Gift and Reconnecting*

Who doesn't like to receive a present? At many Miami County churches, there is a free gift waiting for a first-time visitor. This past year, I was blessed to take home water bottles and a small thermos bearing the church's name, a paperback New Testament, spiritual booklets, notepads, a delicious loaf of homemade banana-nut bread, a bag of peanuts, a coupon for a free coffee from the church's coffee shop, a small box of six chocolates, a coffee mug with the church's name, and quite a few pens, among other gifts.

Here's the thing, if one studies the Bible we find that we are to live our lives as Christian believers with a sense of excellence. When we bless others, we should give them items that adhere to this code of excellence.

"And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." (Mark 12:30 & 31)<sup>xv</sup>

I learned this valuable lesson about Christians living and giving with excellence from

my former ministry supervisors, Ginger Stache and John Ondo. While employed as a reporter/producer at WTLW TV 44, both of these individuals modeled a form of excellence that would cause them to go on in their careers to become regional Emmy-award winning journalists. Ms. Stache now heads up TV production for the worldwide ministry of Joyce Meyer. Mr. Ondo owns a production company, and is well-known for his award-winning documentaries.

These dedicated professionals taught me that when we give our best professionally, others perceive that they are of value to us. For the most part, they were referring to doing our job, whatever that may be, with the utmost excellence each day.

This lesson translates to giving in other areas. For example, most churches have very restrictive budgets that prohibit them from offering a welcoming gift of much monetary value to visitors. That's why it's essential to find a creative way to bless someone with excellence without breaking the budget. For instance, the ballpoint pen was a very popular item for churches to give away. According to a random poll that I took of my almost 3,000 Facebook friends, a "nice" pen is one of the most desirable promotional gifts that people like to receive. A note of caution as to the accuracy of this survey rests in the fact that the majority of my Facebook friends are other writers.

Here's the disconnect, a couple of the pens that I was given were so inexpensive that they



would barely write, or when they did they produced globs of ink. I would look at the name of the church, get frustrated at the pen, and subconsciously identify the church with the pen. I threw these pens away pretty quickly.

On the other hand, I still have a couple of the better quality pens that were welcoming gifts that continue to be useful writing instruments. I'm not talking about quality like Cross Pens, just not so cheap that they leave a bad impression each time you try to use them. Then when I look at the name of the church on the pen, it lends to the remembrance of a favorable experience there.

Perhaps, if the budget is tight, it's better to give no gift than one that causes a visitor to remember your church with less than excellence. As for reconnecting, often a gift is given in exchange for a visitor filling out an information card. This is a perfectly acceptable exchange, but a church shouldn't make it mandatory, or it is no longer a gift, but rather a gift with strings attached. Still, if there's any way possible, a fellowship would and should try to find out who's visiting in order to reconnect with them. I tried not to accept a more expensive gift from churches, knowing I would not be returning to the fellowship. However, I would often fill out a connection card wanting to ascertain how visitor follow-up was handled.

A few times, I received a snail mail letter from the pastor expressing his or her hope that our visit was pleasant, and encouraging us to return. At

other times, it was an email with the same intent. There were a couple of cards from hospitable congregants, too. Once, there was an unsolicited home visitation following my Sunday worship at a local church. This could be a mode of reconnection that a ministry might want to rethink in light of the world we live in today.

With the advent of heroin addiction running rampant in many communities, one has to wonder if it is safe to send congregants or ministerial staff to a home where they are not personally acquainted with the occupants. Not just that, but being on the other end of this visit, it was not a good feeling to have church folks show up at the door unsolicited, after only one visit to their fellowship. I don't want to seem harsh, but I don't know them anymore than they know me. As a journalist, I have had to report on heinous crimes that have occurred simply because the victim was too naïve or kind-hearted to perceive a dangerous situation. Since I work from home, it was also an unscheduled intrusion in the midst of a very hectic day, so I did not answer the door anyway.

### ***The Importance of the Gatekeeper***

The church secretary, better known as an administrative assistant might be far more powerful than you realize. This is a position that can be overlooked, but it is instrumental to the success of any church.

It's necessary to define, "gatekeeper," as this term literally describes an individual who guards a gate. In the business world, the website, [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com) defines a gatekeeper as a "junior officer (such as a secretary) who has the authority or ability to control access to a decision maker or to certain information."<sup>xvi</sup>

In a church, the gatekeeper might also be the hospitality director, a receptionist, administrative assistant, or office manager who decides how to deal with outsiders' inquiries. In the post, "What is a gatekeeper?" Wendy Connick writes, "A gatekeeper is the person responsible for keeping a decision maker from being bothered by irrelevant callers," reports [www.thebalance.com](http://www.thebalance.com).<sup>xvii</sup> "The gatekeeper screens calls and visitors, typically deflecting the ones he [or she] believes are unimportant."<sup>xviii</sup> For a busy pastoral staff, especially for a small church with only one pastor, this becomes a vital position.

Regardless of the size of the fellowship, the gatekeeper has to handle people with wisdom and courtesy, especially in a church setting, because many folks have serious concerns. Therefore, the gatekeeper must know how to direct them to the appropriate channel where their needs can be met without overwhelming those on the ministerial staff by prioritizing needs with correct referrals.

The problem here is that a gatekeeper can either make or break you when it comes to creating a positive atmosphere for a loyal congregation.

Since gatekeepers are the initial person many outsiders and congregants encounter, this first impression can result in an image of goodwill or hostility that can rarely be forgotten. Years of goodwill can be undone by one unpleasant exchange, because people attend a church where they feel respected and appreciated.

Admittedly, the demanding position of gatekeeper is not easy to fill, and it usually doesn't pay as much as it should. The demanding part originates in that most of us believe that our request is of paramount importance, and that we always need to talk to the person in charge. Still the gatekeeper has to stay calm, keep a smile in his or her voice, while referring every inquiry to the proper chain of command.

After formerly working in public relations in a career technical school, I witnessed firsthand the incredible value of the administrative assistants (secretaries) who streamline the operation of the school system. Often, they handle upset parents, sick or unruly students, staff communication, media requests, and monumental record-keeping tasks, while being the friendly face at the front desk.

In contrast, once I had a disturbing phone conversation with a church receptionist. My request obviously seemed unclear, as the woman impatiently muttered something about, "Not having all day... and for me to get to the point." I was saddened that her inappropriate impoliteness could

impede her church's growth, or worse possibly hurt a person in need of compassion.

This was an isolated incident, because most church secretaries, receptionists, etc., are top-notch gatekeepers with a true heart for helping people. The ministry's gatekeeper is the protector of pastors, referral specialist, and public relations person all rolled into one valuable position.

### ***Communicable Diseases, Communion, and Comfortable Chairs***

Americans have changed a lot in social etiquette when it comes to greeting one another. In part that's due to more education, and a greater awareness of how diseases can be transmitted.

This new perception changes the way that churches engage in age-old rituals. For example, the sacrament of communion is usually celebrated now with individual cups of wine or grape juice and wafers. If bread is used often those distributing communion sanitize their hands publicly before handling the loaf to be shared.

On a couple occasions, I did witness entire congregations served from a goblet after it was wiped only with a dry cloth after each use. Let's face it, that won't do much to kill dangerous germs, and the elderly and young alike could be affected.

As for the use of wine for communion, even though this is a tradition dating back to Biblical times, there is a concern for visitors. "According to

a Columbia University study, "40 million Americans age 12 and over meet the clinical criteria for addiction involving nicotine, alcohol or other drugs."<sup>xix</sup>

Millions of folks are battling addiction, and for quite a few this includes alcohol addiction, but we tend to look the other way. There has been an historic battle among church leaders of different denominations and doctrines, as to whether the use of alcohol is acceptable for those who are Christian believers. But that's not the point I am trying to address here.

The point is specifically about the use of wine in the Communion service. After all, we should never be a stumbling block to a struggling brother or sister, and this includes those plagued by addiction. It's important not to create additional problems for them when they worship. Therefore, it might be prudent to announce whether the fellowship is offering wine or grape juice in the communion cups. Some wise churches offer both, and this is helpful for those struggling with any kind of addiction.

When it comes to wisdom and church greetings, hugs don't seem to be as plentiful as they once were, either, and this might be all for the good. This is, unless we know the person we are hugging on Sunday morning.

Don't get me wrong, hugs are fine if you are acquainted with the individual, and comfortable with this practice. But for newcomers, this might be

a little too much closeness. Handshakes seem to suffice as a way of greeting. Even this can be a concern as a handshake could make a timid visitor uncomfortable.

On his blog, author and pastor, Mark Waltz, borrows from his own book, *How to Wow Your Church Guests: 101 Meaningful Ways to Make a First Impression* (Group Publishing) where he writes, “It’s really simpler than you think. Not everyone wants to have their hand shaken. Church people want handshakes (unless there’s a flu epidemic, then no one wants a handshake); people new to your church may only want a courteous ‘hello.’ Read the body language of your guests to determine an appropriate greeting.”<sup>xx</sup>

As Waltz notes, there is the quandary of not spreading any more communicable diseases than necessary. For example, one week a physically ill ministry worker publicly mentioned to the small congregation that he was sick. He sounded like he had a very bad case of laryngitis. Then he greeted every single person in that congregation during their greeting time by enthusiastically shaking hands. There were babies, young people, and elderly individuals. All I could think about was that entire church was going to catch whatever he had.

Thankfully, I had my trusty hand sanitizer in my purse to use after he shook my hand. I felt bad that I didn’t have enough sanitizer to pass out to everyone. We have to be proactive and employ

common sense in not passing our germs on when we are ill.

Another concern for physical comfort in regards to health issues, might be the design of church chairs or the use of wooden pews. In many of the churches I visited, the congregations were growing older. With so many elderly folks and aging boomers attending church, it is important to consider having comfortable chairs for arthritic backs and hips, and for accommodating a society that is increasingly overweight and unable to use standardized chairs. This factor could be the difference between a positive or negative visit for many people.

Quite honestly, there were some churches where the wooden pews were unpadded and painful. There were plastic folding chairs that were probably sold as being ergonomically designed, but it was agonizing to spend over an hour seated in some of the chairs or pews that I encountered along the way. This might not seem like a vital point, but it is another subconscious aspect of whether one has a pleasant and fulfilling worship service.

Restaurants have known about the value of a comfortable seat to enhance a positive dining experience for many decades. According to Restaurant and Café Supplies online, at <https://rcsuppliesonline.com/make-your-guests-comfortable/>, “Making sure that guests are comfortable is critical, and you want to be able to appeal to people of all shapes and sizes. While a



flimsy plastic chair can be very affordable, it is not going to provide a significant amount of stability, and an uneasy seat can turn customers away for good, regardless of how good the food and service may be.”<sup>xxi</sup>

This principle holds true not only for eating establishments, but for any place where you have to sit for quite a while. In order to make wooden pews more comfortable, some churches have added a padded cushion. In many traditional older churches, the pews have great sentimental appeal, and replacing them with chairs can cause great division within a congregation. Yet, chairs can be stacked making the sanctuary free to host other events. Also, chairs usually offer a bit more seating capacity, but with folks growing larger this might not always be the case.

Whatever kind of seating a church uses, it really is worth mentioning that people may not be aware of why they had a negative experience visiting, when in essence it all boiled down to physical discomfort.

## **Music, Music, and the Message**

Music is a primary part of any church service. Folks in Miami County have been blessed with many forms of musical expression, and a vast resource of musical talent. The Biblical mandate, “To make a joyful noise,” [KJV] is more relatable when worded, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the

earth, burst into jubilant song with music...<sup>xxii</sup>”  
[Psalm 98:4 NIV]

There sure is a lot of shouting for joy during worship services, but it takes so many forms that an entire book could be written about the variety of worship available. First of all though, it might be interesting to mention that some of the church leaders are themselves quite musical, and this enhances their church’s worship experience.

For instance, at the First United Church of Christ in Troy, Pastor Lauren Allen’s beautiful singing voice and musical selection accompanied her sermon. At the Laura Christian Church, Pastor Curtis Duncan uses his guitar and voice to add to his messages. Co-pastor Nicole Simmons from Upper Room Worship Center in Tipp City has a gift to lead worship and preach, too. Her husband, Pastor Aaron Simmons co-pastors and preaches at the Tipp City congregation.

It’s also a family affair at the Piqua Baptist Church, at 1402 W. High St. in Piqua; where Pastor Charles Wilkins’s son-in-law and daughter, Dr. Bryan and Rebecca Harju, lend their voices to the praise and worship team. Then there’s the classically trained voice of Rabbinic Intern Sara Otero-Eiser from Piqua’s Congregation Anshe Emeth, who was once a cantor. All in all, there are as many styles of worship as there are talented and anointed musicians. For example, a worship experience at some local churches is more like a concert with guitars, keyboard, drums, and a

worship leader or team of voices blending in harmonic contemporary music.

I found this type of contemporary praise music at churches like: Ginghamburg UMC in Tipp City, Troy's True Life Community Church, Troy Christian Church, Victory Church Assemblies of God in Tipp City, Grace Family Worship Center in Troy, and the list goes on and on. This was a common way that music was presented at various fellowships. Some of these contemporary gatherings offered several different options as far as service times, but it appears to be basically the same service.

It's necessary to interject a personal note, I deeply enjoy contemporary forms of worship, but occasionally there is one drawback. My husband and I are boomers who used to play rock music so loud that our parents had to yell in order for us to hear them tell us to, "Turn it down!" Now, like many older individuals, we can get a little attitude if the volume of worship music is too loud. In our defense, and for some crazy reason, aging does this, because although hearing seems to diminish for some folks, sensitivity to sound seems to increase.

It's why I was concerned when one of the churches we visited had a basket filled with ear plugs at the entrance. It was quite nice though, because my husband began to squirm from the volume when the music started, so I offered to get him a pair of ear plugs, which he gratefully accepted.

My question: “Is it really necessary to have music that loud?” Don't get me wrong, I still like to rock, but there is a saying, “Moderation in all things.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Volume could be one of those, and thankfully we only experienced painfully loud music just a couple of times throughout the year of visiting churches.

Then there is the more traditional version of praising God with hymns accompanied by an organ or piano that happens at places like St. John's United Church of Christ where Ginny Beamish is the organist or at Lifeway Baptist Church in Tipp City, among other similar fellowships. My mother was a church organist and choir director, so admittedly this kind of music holds a very special place in my heart. As for choirs, many traditional and even contemporary congregations do have choirs, and the size of the choir can vary from a few members to dozens of congregants.

There are some churches like Piqua Baptist Church and Covington Christian Church that have a form of blended worship where traditional hymns and contemporary music are both part of the service. When I received an invitation from Covington Church member, Judy Young, her email expressed it as, “We have a beautiful stained glass window and combine old and new music.”

Besides blended music, there are fellowships that have both a traditional and contemporary service to meet the needs of congregants like Troy's First United Methodist Church, Hoffman United

Methodist Church in West Milton, St. Paul's Evangelical & Reformed Church in Piqua, etc.

For example, at the PiquaNaz Church (also known as the Piqua Church of the Nazarene) the traditional service begins on Sunday at 9:15 a.m. with the pastor's son, 21-year-old Andrew Spoon, leading the song service which is predominantly composed of hymns. Then the modern service takes place at 10:30 a.m. The music for this service incorporates current praise and worship, the team of singers is led by Sonja Spoon. Mrs. Spoon is the pastor's wife, who has a gift of music that is both vibrant and uplifting.

Rev. Steve Spoon, the church's pastor leads the two different services each Sunday, but he preaches the same message at both. It sounds as though it might be like speaking to two entirely different congregations, "...although we have a good age group representation in both of our services, a majority of the attenders of our 9:15 service have been a part of church for many years and have a higher Bible knowledge. Our 10:30 service is filled with many more young people and new seekers who do not have a deep understanding/knowledge of the Bible.

"Therefore, when I refer to a particular Bible character or scriptural teaching during the first service they tend to get it and I move on quickly. During the second service, if I refer to any major understood truth or particular Bible character I find that I need to spend a bit more time

explaining it more thoroughly so that I can nurture their growth and full understanding,” said the PiquaNaz pastor. “...I don't intentionally change my sermon, but it does have a different feel and delivery,” he added.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Another interesting point is that at the First United Methodist Church in Troy, the traditional service is held in the sanctuary, while the contemporary service meets across the street in First Place Christian Center. Everything about these services is unique.

As for the preaching, there are as many styles out there, as there are a variety of human beings presenting the message. I do not think that it's appropriate for me to critique anyone's specific style or delivery. There are folks who utilize video to drive home a specific point in a sermon, while others rely on the power of the verbal narrative. At Nashville United Church of Christ, Rev. Lynn Labs utilizes her background in theater to make her characters come to life. There are also those ministers who find a good prop to be an effective tool. For example, I will never forget the Sunday at Piqua's Westminster Presbyterian Church when Interim Pastor Kathleen Burslem relied on chocolate covered insects to illustrate her children's message.

It is the music that uplifts us, and the message that hopefully challenges us in some area, or encourages us in our faith. There is no lack of quality preaching in Miami County, but there really

is a shortage of younger folks hearing many of these great messages.

## **The Truth about Dying Churches**

There are a host of life-changing movements that the local church is responsible for in Miami County. Reciprocally, there is one glaring and very depressing fact that can't be denied, some churches are dying.

I would rather bury this bad news, but a pastor whom I respect urged me to "tell the truth" about my findings. He is one of those inspiring individuals who led a stagnant church in growing from double digits to thousands of attendees over the course of several decades.

For the past few months, I've felt rather like a football fan watching Will Smith's brilliant portrayal of Dr. Bennet Omalu in the 2015 movie, "Concussion." Throughout the film, he claims that football does cause injuries that can lead to brain damage from the repeated concussions some players sustain. In one scene, Dr. Omalu pleads with another colleague to, "Tell the truth," despite the consequences of revealing this negative message.

Perhaps, like sparing numerous football players from brain injury, concerned ministry leaders will be able to implement methods to offer life support to a failing fellowship. First of all, what factors will be responsible for causing a percentage of churches, even some within Miami County to

disappear completely within the next decade or two? According to Blackaby Restoration Ministries, “Seventy percent of churches in America are either plateaued or in decline. Thousands of churches are closing their doors each year....Pastors can feel like failures when they are unable to turn their church around or to stop its gradual decline.”<sup>xxv</sup>

If we refer back to the statistic that...“half of all American churches have a weekend attendance of 80 or less,”<sup>xxvi</sup> it becomes self-explanatory that some Miami County churches fall into this category. Not only that, but in my admittedly limited and unscientific method of church-hopping for one year, I discovered that almost 20 percent of the local fellowships I attended had one frightening commonality. They shared the attribute of having approximately 50 weekly attenders/members or less with almost all of these individuals being senior citizens using age 55 as a base. Tragically, these churches are in danger of extinction.

It’s eerie to go to church and not hear the cry of a baby, or to have no need for a children’s ministry, because there are no children to teach. A church is not an institution, but a living organism and it cannot sustain healthy function without youth and the interjection of new life. As members die off, new members should be added, but in some churches this is not happening.

Yet most churches will always be small churches, as stated at the beginning of this booklet. Thankfully, that doesn’t mean they have to be



identified in the soon-to-be-dead category. As mentioned earlier, in this church-growth obsessed culture, we can overlook the fact that a small church can be a healthy church according to Karl Vaters.

Small churches have the ability to fill the societal void for close relationships in a way no megachurch or larger church ever could. In a *Christianity Today* post, Vaters reports, “People don’t attend a small church to get a dumbed-down version of a big church experience. But that’s often what we try to give them.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Originally, I expressed my desire to learn more about why millennials aren’t churchgoers as a general rule. During this journey, I did learn a few things that might be helpful to explain why those born between 1982 and 2004 are for the most part not darkening the doors of a church.

Millennials are sophisticated and keenly aware of marketing techniques that try to entice them. While churches do have to use advertising or accepted marketing methods to allow the community to know that they exist, or to inform others about the programs or events they offer, they do not have to market the Gospel’s message.

In my humble opinion, millennials are searching for and craving authenticity. In this Internet world of social media, texting, cyberbullying, and online communication, today’s young people are seeking something real. As for going to church, they want to get something

meaningful out of it, and experts say they are seeking to establish true relationships there.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In contrast, dying small churches are creating intimacy, but unfortunately, it is only an internal closeness bonding long-term attenders. As communicated in the friendliness discussion, the sense of friendliness and family ties is solely among members, too. There are also the components of compassion and caring being turned inward, as opposed to reaching the world outside of the fellowship.

Ministry should be about going out and evangelizing the lost, instead it becomes about taking care of those who are seated in the pews. Their lives become intertwined and they function as a sort of family. This is not all bad in a transient world where families have disintegrated due to divorce, geographic moves, and ongoing dysfunction, but there has to be more.

As believers, the Great Commission's mandate is that we are called to, "preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15 KJV) It is not the fault of the elderly in the pews who have grown fragile and require compassion themselves. It is not the fault of a busy pastor whose job becomes about praying for the sick, burying the dead, and visits to the homebound.

In the end though, there is little in these self-involved churches that would appeal to millennials, (Generation Y) or to those even younger, Generation Z. It's not anyone's fault, but the result is

tragic. The hurting in the community go unnoticed as church resources concentrate on the needs of its members. In some way, at this point, a church ceases to function as the church Christ intended. It is rendered powerless to reach out to those in heroin addiction, to minister to the poor, or to provide a safe haven for those broken by life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Frighteningly, we are now witnessing the culmination of decades of ministering internally. These congregations have grown older and silver-haired seniors sparsely fill the pews of the sanctuary. Some of these fellowships do have culpability in refusing to remain relevant in an ever-changing culture.

I'm not referring to hosting a Sunday coffeehouse, or having cool music and décor, rather to investing in meeting the needs of those around them. Not just the spiritual needs, but historically churches that retain vitality regardless of their size provide tangible assistance, and recreational or recovery opportunities for those who attend.

For instance, at Piqua Baptist Church, there are a lot of young families along with boomers and seniors. The church stresses the importance of ministering to children through the Awana Club and Upward Basketball.

Recovery issues are also of critical priority in our nation, and Miami County is no different. At Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City on Saturday evenings at 6:30 p.m., a unique

service, “Next Step Recovery,” is held for those seeking freedom from any kind of addiction.

The format is much like a 12 Step Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous meeting with an inspiring lead by a speaker who has overcome some kind of addiction, along with praise and worship music, and a short sermon for the several hundred folks that gather there. New Creation Counseling Center is another outreach of the church. With a staff of certified counselors, the center is also a resource for the entire community regarding mental health and addiction issues.

At many Miami County churches, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings are held at various times. Although these groups are not affiliated with the church, it is a great benefit to the community that so many ministries provide meeting rooms to host those seeking help from 12 Step programs.

The Upper Room Worship Center takes addiction issues seriously, too. Pastor Aaron Simmons has been credited as one of the folks instrumental in bringing together 48 churches for this past summer’s Hope over Heroin event.

At St. John’s United Church of Christ in Troy, member Pat Robinson oversees the program, Lifetree Café, where community members meet on Monday evenings to discuss a variety of relevant topics like: addiction, suicide, human trafficking, etc.

There are fellowships who are reaching out, and in a state of continual change as they earnestly try to accommodate unmet needs in the community. Feeding people and ministering to their physical needs seems to be ongoing priority in numerous fellowships in our county. In contrast, there are churches that seem to refuse to change a single thing.

Besides neglecting societal issues, some cling to outdated tradition and demand that the style of worship or liturgy remain as it has always been, not allowing for a balance in appealing to various age groups. This practice might serve as a death blow to a church's health.

Something as elementary as rethinking service times might be more important to attracting new people than a fellowship realizes. One established church only offered one rather early morning service. For some individuals, early is not a good thing, because Sunday is the only day off for countless workers.

There are other barriers to growth besides resistance to change on the part of established congregations. For example, there are quite a few traditional denominations housed in aging buildings that require tremendous upkeep. They are aesthetically beautiful, historical, and have great sentimental value to the community, but they are challenging. Some are landlocked in downtown areas of county cities and villages with little or no parking available in a culture where almost

everyone owns a car. The size of the sanctuary is also constructed in such a way that there is no ability to expand it, even if growth should occur.

### ***Closing Thoughts on Reviving the Church***

One of the very last churches that I visited on my quest was Covington Christian Church. It is housed in a historic building in a downtown area with little parking available, all the factors that can be barriers to growth.

Just five short years ago, according to several church members, it was in the category of a dying church with a small aging congregation. It certainly was questionable that it could ever recover vitality.

Then a young preacher shook things up. The music was blended to appeal to young and old, and other factors were changed. Some people who didn't like the changes left, but now on a Sunday, there are young families and children mixed with the older individuals, and today Covington Christian Church is once again a healthy small church

“It is easy to blame the culture or liberalism or a growing hostility to Christian values and teachings for the church's problems.”<sup>xxix</sup> It's easy to say a church is dying, because they conform to Biblical standards, and that nobody wants to hear the message. After all, there does remain a struggle within churches in our community concerning many

controversial subjects like: whether women should be in ministry, homosexuality, same sex marriage, heterosexual couples living together, etc.

It's worth mentioning this controversy, but it is not the topic of this research. The bottom line is some churches will close. Some will have to merge with other fellowships to survive, and others will employ church growth tactics, prayer, and put God's Spirit to work on their behalf. After all, the best techniques will be of no avail, if God's Spirit is not in the lead.

There is one fellowship that is difficult to find statistics for. That is the house church. There are proponents of this movement who say it will have the greatest growth in the future, but not all experts support this theory or agree about what the church will look like in the decades to come. "In fact, the biggest movement in U.S. evangelical Christianity, as far as a statistical trend, is towards contemporary, non-denominational large churches," according to Ed Stetzer in his post, "House Church Critiques of the Megachurch: 3 Ways to Make it Better."<sup>xxx</sup> Stetzer is referring to megachurches, those with over 2,000 in weekly attendance. This differs from the way that I have used the word, "large" to identify a church of 200 or more attendees.

So millennials apparently do like the music, the coffee, the messages, and the programs that better their lives, but still they seek it through authenticity, not church size. That's alright, because

it's not just a dilemma about what will draw millennials back into the church. The big question remains, what does the church have to offer the current culture and the generations to come? Those who were raised in Modernity went to church simply because they were taught that it was the right thing to do.

Those in the Postmodern demographic didn't buy into this type of blind discipline, they questioned and sought relevance, and their children are no different. So, how can the church become relevant?

Maybe we can learn from the fellowships who are attracting young folks that seem to be vibrant, growing, and hopeful. Although, it is not by pushing everyone older out. Instead it is about the young and the old – and all those folks in-between working together – finding purpose and passion in living the mission of Jesus' mandate to reach out to a hurting and broken world.



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***“52 Churches in 52 weeks”***  
***List of churches attended***

- 1) True Life Community Church, 56 Foss Way, Troy;  
Lead Pastor: Chris Daum, attended on August 30,  
2015
- 2) Victory Church Assemblies of God, Co Rd. 25a, Tipp  
City; Pastor Andy Warren, Sept. 6, 2015
- 3) Troy Church of the Nazarene, 1200 Barnhart Road,  
Troy; Pastor Jeff Rollison, Sept. 13, 2015
- 4) First Baptist Church, 53 S. Norwich, Troy; Pastor  
Dale Christian, Sept. 20, 2015
- 5) Troy Christian Church, 1440 E. St. Route 55, Troy;  
Preaching Minister Mark Messmore, Sept. 27, 2015
- 6) \*\*\*\* Wapakoneta Community Worship Center  
Assemblies of God, 14871 Fox Ranch Rd.,  
Wapakoneta; Pastor Dan & Peggy Holbrook,  
October 4, 2015 (spoke here that evening banquet)
- 7) Tipp City United Methodist Church, 8 W. Main St.,  
Tipp City; Pastor Don Glover, Associate Pastor  
Bonita Richie, October 11, 2015
- 8) Upper Valley Community Church (Nazarene), 1400  
Seidel Park, Piqua; Pastor Andy Monnin, Pastor of  
Encouragement, Pastor Stephen Smitley, October 18,  
2015
- 9) Grace Baptist Church, 1400 N. Market St. Troy;  
Pastor Shawn Hess; October 25, 2015
- 10) Tipp City Church of the Nazarene, 1221 W. Main St.  
Tipp City; Interim Pastor, Nov. 1, 2015, Salvation  
Army Bell ringing campaign sign-up
- 11) Cornerstone Baptist Church, 1879 Old Staunton Rd.,  
Troy; Pastor Matt Harbour, Nov. 8, 2015
- 12) Pleasant Hill United Church of Christ, 10 West  
Monument St., Pleasant Hill; Pastor Craig Showalter,  
Nov. 15, 2015

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- 13) Bradford Church of the Nazarene, Location: 300 W. Keller St., Bradford; Pastor Louie Reindell, Nov. 22, 2015
  - 14) Casstown-Bethel Charge, The United Methodist Church Box 203, (Casstown), Rev. Maggie Sykes, Nov. 29, 2015
  - 15) St. James Episcopal Church, 200 W. High St. Piqua; Rev. Jeffrey Bessler, Dec. 6, 2015
  - 16) Hoffman United Methodist Church, 201 S. Main St. West Milton; Pastor Robbie Scott, Dec. 13, 2015
  - 17) St. Patrick Catholic Church, 409 E. Main St., Troy; Rev. James S. Duell, Dec. 20, 2015
  - 18) First Presbyterian Church, 20 S. Walnut St. Troy; Dr. Richard B. Culp, Dec. 27, 2015
  - 19) Community Church a.k.a. Chicken Church, 2261 S. Miami St., West Milton, Jan. 3, 2016
  - 20) Koinos Christian Fellowship, 722 Grant St., Troy; Pastor Johnathan Newman, Jan. 10, 2016
  - 21) Grace United Methodist Church, 9411 N. County Rd. 25a, Piqua; Pastor Gene Phelps, Jan. 17, 2016
  - 22) Troy Baptist Temple, 691 E. Staunton Rd., Troy; Pastor David Thomasson, Jan. 24, 2016
  - 23) St. John's United Church of Christ, 130 S. Walnut St., Troy; Interim Speakers, Jan. 31, 2016
  - 24) Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, 1209 S. Miami St. West Milton; Fr. Steve Gellatly, Feb. 7, 2016
  - 25) Upper Room Worship Center, 648 N. Hyatt St. Tipp City; Pastor Aaron & Nicole Simmons, Feb. 14, 2016
  - 26) Community Bible Church, 1427 W. Main St. Tipp City; Pastor Jeff Seekins, Feb. 21, 2016
  - 27) \*\*\*\*Living Word, 926 E. National Rd., Vandalia; Pastor Patrick Murray, Feb. 28, 2016
  - 28) Centerpoint Christ Community Church, currently meeting in Motel 6 conference room, Troy; Pastor Paul Calvert March 6, 2016

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- 29) \*\*\*#23 St. John's United Church of Christ, speaking in interim, March 13, 2016
  - 30) Greene St. United Methodist Church, 415 W. Green St. Piqua; Pastor Kenneth Stewart, March 20, 2016
  - 31) Troy Church of the Brethern, 1431 W. Main St., Troy; Pastor Jon Keller
  - 32) Lifeway Baptist Church, 445 W. Evanston Rd., Tipp City; Pastor Wil Brown, April 3, 2016
  - 33) \*\*\*Ginghamsburg streaming online service, Sunday 11:30, Tipp City location, Pastor Rosie Ricardo, April 10, 2016
  - 34) First Lutheran Church, 2899 West Main Street, Troy; Pastor Ric Barnes, April 17, 2016
  - 35) Westminster Presbyterian, 325 West Ash St., Piqua; Interim Pastor Kathleen Burslem, April 24, 2016
  - 36) Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, 1624 North County Road 25-A, Troy; Pastor Carnes, May 1, 2016
  - 37) Nashville United Church of Christ, 4540 OH 571, West Milton; Pastor Lynn Labs, May 8, 2016
  - 38) St. Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church, 500 N. Downing St. Piqua; Dr. Keith Gebhart, May 15, 2016
  - 39) First United Church of Christ, 120 South Market St. Troy; Pastor Lauren Allen, May 22, 2016
  - 40) \*\*\* #33 Ginghamsburg UMC Recovery Church , 6759 S. County Rd 25A Tipp City Campus, Tipp City; Pastor Mike Slaughter, May 28, 2016
  - 41) The First United Methodist Church, 110 W. Franklin St. Troy (held in Crystal Room for Strawberry Festival parking); Pastor Dave Leckrone; June 5, 2016
  - 42) Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Third & Main St. Tipp City; Pastor Jeff Glawe, June 12, 2016
  - 43) \*\*\*\*Lima First Assembly of God, 1660 Findlay Rd., Lima; Pastor J. Randy Davis, June 19, 2016

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- 44) \*\*\*#33 Ginghamburg UMC 11:30 service,  
....Pastors Mike Slaughter & Pastor Chris Heckaman,  
June 26, 2016
  - 45) Crossroads Christian Fellowship, 18 E. Broadway  
St., Tipp City; Pastor Jim Valekis, July 3, 2016
  - 46) Christian Life Center, 8654 Co. Rd 25-A, Piqua;  
Pastor David Dyess, July 10, 2016
  - 47) Troy View Church of God, 1770 N. CR 25A, Troy;  
Pastor Dan Cain, July 17, 2016
  - 48) \*\*\*#23 St. John's United Church of Christ, speaking  
in interim, July 24, 2016
  - 49) Piqua Church of the Nazarene, 400 South Sunset  
Drive, Piqua; Pastor Steve Spoon, July 31, 2016
  - 50) Christian Family Fellowship, 1575 W. St. Rt. 571,  
Tipp City; Pastor Tonia Shoyer, August 7, 2016
  - 51) Piqua Baptist Church, 1402 W. High St. Piqua;  
Pastor Charles Wilkins, August 14, 2016 (invited  
through newspaper article by Pastor Wilkins)
  - 52) Abundant Life Baptist Temple, (held in the Jewish  
Temple) 320 Caldwell St., Piqua; Pastor Scott Euton,  
August 21, 2016
  - 53) Laura Christian Church, 1 S. Main St., Laura; Pastor  
Curtis Duncan, August 28, 2016 (invited through  
newspaper article by Pastor Duncan)
  - 54) Piqua Apostolic Church, 830 Covington Ave., Piqua;  
Pastor Daniel L. Hathaway, September 4, 2016  
(invited through article by church member, Sister  
Freda Fries)
  - 55) Center Friends Church, 8550 W. State Rt. 571, West  
Milton; Pastor Duane Cox, September 11, 2016  
(invited through newspaper article by Pamela Cox,  
pastor's wife)
  - 56) Congregation Anshe Emeth, 320 Caldwell St., Piqua;  
rabbinic intern Sara Otero-Eiser from Hebrew Union,  
Sept. 16, 2016

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- 57) Covington Christian Church, 115 N. Pearl St., Covington; Pastor Scott Bates, September 25, 2016 (invited through newspaper article by church member, Judy Young)
- 58) Cornerstone Piqua, 8440 King Arthur Drive, Piqua; Pastor Jamie Wellman, October 2, 2016
- 59) \*\*\*Ginghamsburg “ ” October 9, 2016
- 60) Grace Family Worship Center, 725 Lincoln Avenue, Troy; Pastors H. Eugene and Trina Collier, October 16, 2016

\*\*\* Visited this church more than once for speaking engagement or variety of service ie. Online, recovery church, traditional.

\*\*\*\* The Church was not in Miami County

### **Endnote Sources**

<sup>i</sup> Hartford Institute for Religion Research,  
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\*At this time the Institute only focuses its research on Protestant megachurches.

<sup>ii</sup> Christina Ryan Claypool, “A Miami County Church Hopper,” August 3, 2016, Troy Daily News  
<http://tdn-net.com/opinion/columns/12772/a-miami-county-church-hopper>

<sup>iii</sup> Millennial, Millennial Generation, WhatIs.com  
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<sup>iv</sup> County Membership Report, Miami County, OH, Religious Traditions 2010  
[http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/39/rcms2010\\_39109\\_county\\_name\\_2010.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/39/rcms2010_39109_county_name_2010.asp)

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<sup>vi</sup> Bible Gateway, The Bible, New Living Translation, Hebrews 10:24 & 25  
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<sup>vii</sup> Aaron Earls, "Majority of American Churches Fall below 100 in Worship Attendance," March 11, 2016, Lifeway—Pastors ,  
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<sup>x</sup> Statistic – The Statistics Portal, "Number of Facebook users by age in the U.S. 2016,"  
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<sup>xi</sup> Todd Wright, "7 Reasons to Cultivate an Online Presence," Sept. 27, 2016, Lifeway—Pastors,  
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<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ivan Serrano, "How to Use Pinterest and Instagram to Promote Your Next Event," March 12, 2015, wethink,  
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<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Bible Gateway, The Bible, New Living Translation, Mark 12:30 & 31  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A30-31>

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<sup>xvi</sup> Business Dictionary online, [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/gatekeeper.html)  
<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/gatekeeper.html>

<sup>xvii</sup> Wendy Connick, "What is a gatekeeper?" The Balance,  
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<https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-a-gatekeeper-2917359>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

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<https://rcsuppliesonline.com/make-your-guests-comfortable/>

<sup>xxii</sup> Psalm 98:4 King James Version, New International Version, Bible Gateway online,  
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*“Christina Ryan Claypool's, 52 Churches in 52 Weeks, is a gift for any congregation seeking to be more purposeful with first impressions. This view from a fellow believer opens our eyes to the first impressions we give visitors, both intended and otherwise. From our outreach – to our signage – to the ways we communicate (or don't) inside the context of worship. I provided copies of this resource to my staff and leadership, as well as to our ushers and greeters, so we could all learn from the experiences she shares with us.”*

*Pastor Robbie D. Scott  
Hoffman United Methodist Church  
West Milton, Ohio*

*“Because of my respect for this author, I read this book in the first 24 hours of receiving it, knowing that it would be a great read. It reminded me of some areas we need to improve. This can be an encouragement to any pastor willing to read it and then ask the hard questions.”*

*Pastor Randy Davis  
Lima First Assembly of God  
Lima, Ohio*