

Commentary: 10 opportunities knocking at your church's door in 2018

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As we begin 2018, the challenges to local congregations are real, but so are the opportunities. Generational attrition, rotating attendance, deferred facility maintenance, and the decline of denominationalism are realities that affect most churches. What if the healthiest way to address the challenges is to focus on seizing the opportunities at our door?

Analysts who look only at declining Sunday attendance statistics declare that the challenges facing local communities of faith are almost insurmountable, and they are composing their eulogy for the church prematurely. Other indicators, including the fertile soil of opportunity, suggests that a local church is on the threshold of vibrancy and is ripe for ongoing transformation. How can a local church best address the new dynamics and extraordinary challenges of their current context?

There are some well-intentioned but ineffective things churches do to address these common challenges, reactions that almost guarantee forfeiture of mission and failure to thrive:

- Imitate another church that seems to be “doing it better than us.” (Most likely, that church is dealing with their own unique set of challenges.)
- Sell your soul to a worship style that is not organic to your congregation. (Healthy congregations grow to be liturgically ambidextrous.)
- Resort to a “felt needs” ministry. (Rather than creating growing

serving disciples, catering to felt needs creates spiritual narcissists who thrive on having their way.)

- Blame the pastor and staff for perceived decline. (In most cases, a staff is called and competent, and is still learning to address the cultural shift we are experiencing.)
- Quit. (It may be time to re-tool, re-vision, re-purpose, and re-commit, but it's certainly no time to give up.)

Rather than acting in desperation or jumping into a protectionist “survival mode,” what if a church analyzed their giftedness, re-evaluated their calling, and identified their clear and present opportunities? Even the most rigid of congregations have more elasticity than they realize. These opportunities before us may actually serve as portals to the future, concourses that proactively lead us toward clarifying our purpose and reinforcing our mission.

There are specific opportunities correlated to economic trends and social demographics that are unique to given communities. However, the following 10 opportunities are common to almost all congregations:

1. **Love your community.** Your church doesn't exist for the sake of its own perpetuity, but to serve your community in Jesus' name.
2. **Unite your congregation in prayer.** Prayer has a cohesive effect, bonding diverse and at times cantankerous believers into spiritual family.
3. **Cultivate intergenerational relationships.** Rather than focusing on one age group, such as millennials, focus on perennials, those who are there for the long haul.
4. **Be proactive, not reactive.** “Let's do whatever we have to do to keep the doors open,” is not a vision but a reaction. A proactive strategy envisions how congregational gifts and resources can be appropriated and applied to human need.
5. **Major on your niche and maximize it.** Paul's confession that “I

have become all things to all people..." (I Corinthians 9:22), is a statement of pastoral flexibility, and should not be interpreted, "We should do all ministries for all people."

6. **Partner with neighboring congregations.** We should perceive other churches as our colleagues, not our competitors. When a church ministers out of the wellspring of their giftedness, their giftedness partners well with the giftedness of their neighboring congregations.
7. **Welcome all guests generously, especially the "stranger."** Hospitality fosters community. The church is the one body that welcomes the CEO and the indigent with equal enthusiasm.
8. **Complement your staff.** Compliment your staff, for sure. But it is even more important to complement your staff. Like parishioners, staff ministers have a limited number of spiritual gifts. In a healthy congregation, members of the congregation utilize their unique gifts and talents to complement the spiritual gifts of staff.
9. **Learn to respect diversity.** Churches of all shapes and sizes are experiencing an explosion of diversity ... theologically, politically, and socially. Since the body of Christ is diverse, we are wise to claim diversity as a congregational asset, not a liability.
10. **Right size your ministry by downsizing your menu.** Churches are notorious for starting new ministries without bringing closure to ministries whose effectiveness has expired. A church may be more effective by doing fewer things with excellence than by attempting many things with mediocrity.

In his book, [*Church: Why Bother?*](#), popular author Philip Yancey underscored that: "Jesus gave us a model for the work of the church at the Last Supper. While his disciples kept proposing more organization – Hey, let's elect officers, establish hierarchy, set standards of professionalism – Jesus quietly picked up a towel and basin of water and began to wash their feet."

In 2018, opportunity is knocking. Let's take up a towel and basin, and answer the call.

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Barry Howard serves as a leadership coach and consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches. His writings also appear on his blog, Barry's Notes. You can follow him on Twitter [@BarrysNotes](#).

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