



Building **STRONG** Congregations

Attracting, Serving, and Developing
YOUR MEMBERSHIP

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The business of religion and the running of a house of worship is a huge challenge in our world today. Seminaries educate clergy, but the practical knowledge and valuable tools to help effectively run our religious institutions are often overlooked. This valuable book provides practical tools to clergy and lay leaders alike to help build stronger and more advanced institutions and organizations. Through relevant examples, interesting tools, and carefully crafted worksheets, we are able to reflect on our sacred work and to build up our communities to be stronger and more vibrant. We no longer need to be “winking in the dark.”

—Rabbi Steven Stark Lowenstein
Congregation Am Shalom
Glencoe, Illinois
Kellogg Jewish Leaders Class of 2008

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Marketing and Religion in a Dynamic Environment

Part 1:

Saying that churches currently exist in a “dynamic” environment is an obvious understatement. As this is written in the spring of 2009, the world is struggling with a global economic crisis unsurpassed since the great depression of the 1930s. Churches are facing reduced funding, declining membership, and competition from sources that did not exist just a few years ago. Faced with critical decisions about how to meet these challenges, congregational leaders are realizing that they cannot afford to “learn from their mistakes”—they must make the right decision the first time. Leaders must combine abiding faith with proven methods for tackling intractable problems.

In this first part of the book we describe the environmental threats and opportunities facing congregational leaders that can be successfully addressed through the use of marketing tools and processes. We are careful not to overreach when delineating where marketing can contribute to the success of the organization. Some might say we are being *too* restrictive in indicating where marketing thought should be proscribed. We use chapter 1 to explain our position on what can and cannot be marketed within religious organizations. Chapter 2 then lays out a process by which organizations,

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adopting marketing practices, can best gain the benefits that derive from that implementation. A supplement to chapter 2 demonstrates the marketing process at work within religious organizations, showing that marketing can indeed be a significant contributor to a church's mission to do good works.



CHAPTER 1:

The Intersection of Marketing and Religion

“For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many”
(2 CORINTHIANS 2:17, NRSV).

In this chapter we will address the following questions:

1. What challenges do religious institutions face today that marketing can help address?
2. How have leaders of some religious institutions applied marketing activities in their congregations?
3. What have been some of the arguments for and against the marketing of religion?
4. What is our position on what about religion and religious institutions can and cannot be marketed?

When John Roh, a Korean-American living near Chicago, graduated from the University of Chicago seminary, he did what many newly minted seminarians do—he waited for “the call.” It never came. Roh came to the conclusion that God wanted him to step out in faith and start a church that would serve the Korean immigrant community around Chicago. But

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where should such a church be located, and how would he get the word out in the community? What should be its ministry focus, or even its name? Where should he turn to get answers to these questions?¹



The church board at the Springs Community Church was in a quandary. The 700-member nondenominational congregation was outgrowing the church building they had occupied since the mid-1950s, and now they learned they had an infestation of termites, requiring extensive and expensive repairs. Members of the board saw this latest development as a sign that the time was ripe to improve and enlarge the church facility. The problem now was how to finance such a massive building effort—only three faithful families whose membership went back decades had supported the church building fund. No one on the church board had had any experience in fund-raising, but they would need to become good at it, and soon. The termites had had a say in that!



The St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, faced the most important decision in its 100-year history. The church's membership had been steadily declining, and now the remnant of 40 or so people, the majority of whom were over 50 years old, had just lost their 60-year-old rector to a brain aneurysm. The part-time interim vicar sent by the Diocese in Bethlehem confronted them with the cold hard facts: "You can't just go along and keep doing what you are doing and expect to survive. You have to take a serious look at yourself and your neighborhood, and then decide who you are and what you are going to do." The choices were: (1) stay and keep doing what they were doing (and continue to decline); (2) hire a part-time priest and hope the older members could come up with a ministry that would cause an influx of new members; (3) close and let members choose to join other Episcopal churches in surrounding towns; (4) form a joint congregation with a local Lutheran church; or (5) change locations

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and attract new members from that new community with ministries suited to that location. What to do?²



The worldwide economic crisis, caused in part by sub-prime mortgage lending practices, has had a devastating impact on some churches in the U.S. Mark Holbrook, president and CEO of the Evangelical Christian Credit Union of Brea, California, which specializes in lending to churches, says, “We are seeing more [financial] stress in churches than we have in modern history.” His organization foreclosed on five churches in late 2008, and expected to foreclose on five more in early 2009. Until now, it had foreclosed on only two churches in its 45-year history. “There have been too many churches with a build-it-and-they-will-come attitude,” says N. Michael Tangen, executive vice president at American Investors Group in Minnetonka, Minnesota. “They had glory in their eyes that wasn’t backed up with adequate business plans and cash flow.”³ The current economic climate causing these troubles is expected to last at least through 2010.



Religious organizations of all persuasions and sizes are facing challenges that many leaders feel unprepared to meet. The current environment bears little resemblance to that of just a few decades past. Kirbyjon Calswell, senior pastor at Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, describes how religious practices have changed in his lifetime this way:

“When I was growing up, you could make the argument that Christian faith had a monopoly on society. It wasn’t just on Sunday. When someone talked about the Lord on Monday, you knew which Lord, which God, they were talking about. Now that’s not the case. We’re no longer a monopoly. Christianity is now a competitive situation. But for any local church the real competition today is television, the Internet, shopping malls, and other social options. The culture offers so many alternatives. Culture—not the ‘church across town’—is the local church’s primary competitor.”

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“Our churches have to adapt, not necessarily who we are, but what we do. We must intentionally identify, predict, and meet the needs of people—or else decline. It’s a basic business and spiritual principle: when you don’t adjust your methodology and strategy, you will lose market share—for pastors, that means members.”⁴

Bill Hybels, a founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, provides this insight into why church attendance looks the way it does:

“Less church attendance doesn’t necessarily mean that people are less dedicated to knowing Christ or loving their families. To me, these are pace-of-life issues. The number of schedule activities has bled way over into Sunday. We have people at Willow Creek who 15 years ago would be in church 50 weeks a year, simply because their lives allowed that kind of schedule. Now, baseball and soccer games are on Sunday mornings, and a lot of student activities happen over weekends. Less church attendance is an American culture issue.”⁵

John Throop described some key shifts in American society that are presenting challenges for many congregations:

1. *Secularization has created a new kind of person: a seeker.* Younger seekers look for relevance and benefits in their purchases, and their lack of religious ties causes them to consider religious organizations from the same perspective.

2. *The “megachurch” is more appealing than the denomination.* Many baby boomers have grown up with a distrust of large institutions. Denominations, to them, represent institutional bureaucratic religious relics. Independent, unaffiliated “megachurches” appear to be free from religious traditions that they find constrain the worship experience.

3. *An increasingly affluent culture that values personal freedom wants more choices.* The consumer accustomed to a wide variety of options in media, goods, and services brings that expectation to the religious organization with them. They desire a wide range of choices for their family with respect to the religious organization as well.

4. *Open immigration policies have brought a flood of new cultures, lan-*