



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

ON HOAGIES AND SOBERING STATS

Recently one of our pastors found himself struggling to find a way to help his small congregation face up to the unalterable fact that by year's end there would be too little funds—even in savings and reserves—to cover all of their necessary expenses. In other words, apart from their illiquid assets (like the church building and the parsonage), the church would be *flat broke!*

One day, this pastor happened to share his communication problem with a business friend, and the friend came up with a simple solution: “Pastor,” he said, “figure out a way to express the seriousness of this financial problem with some kind of practical, down-to-earth illustration that everybody will understand.”

Now, like many of our churches, for quite some time this congregation had been trying to make ends meet by selling hoagies. Once a month a bunch of the dedicated members would gather in the church kitchen to put together several hundred hoagies, which they would then sell around town for a dollar or so profit.

Most people in the church seemed to feel the congregation's financial woes would simply disappear if they just sold a few more hoagies. And this gave the pastor an idea. He simply calculated how many hoagies they would have to make and sell in order to break even for the fiscal year.

Then he began to talk to various members about their proposed “hoagie solution,” saying something like this:

If we make and sell one thousand hoagies *each* week for the rest of the year, we will then have just enough money to pay all of our bills. But you need to know one thing: since our town has fewer than one thousand inhabitants, it will be necessary for *every* citizen in town to purchase one or even two hoagies *each* week for the rest of the year!

Now they got the point! And as a result, the congregation finally began having productive meetings to address their long-term financial situation.

Unfortunately, I don't have a hoagie-like illustration to share with you, but I *do* believe the overall future prospects of our Conference are no less critical than the financial prospects of that one PNEC congregation.

Instead of hoagies, let me share with you a simple chart → → → → →

Taking the membership breakdown, by age group, of twenty of our typical congregations that in the past three or four years have searched for a new pastor (their search committees had to do this calculation as part of their preparation of a congregational “profile”), I arrived at the following set of numbers:

Age	Actual % of whole	Ideal % of whole
0-5	5	6.25
5-20	15	18.75
20-35	11	18.75
35-50	21	18.75
50-65	22	18.75
65-80+	26	18.75

How to read the chart: On average, 5% of church “members” are ages 0-5, 15% are ages 5-20, 11% are ages 20-35, and so on until we reach the last category (over 65 years of age), which contains 26% of the total membership of the typical PNEC congregation. (Note: these churches range in size from 49 to 621; they are rural, small town, suburb, and urban; three are in a yoked parish; all are healthy enough at the present time to engage in a full-scale search for a new pastor. These are definitely “typical” of the rest of the Conference's churches.)

Now look at the third column. If all age groups were represented equally, as one might expect for a congregation with a bright distant future, then the 0-5 range would hold 6.25% of the members, the 5-20 “cohort” would contain 18.75% of the members, the 20-35 group would also have 18.75%, and so on. (Note that except for the first and last categories, all of the ranges are fifteen years.)

Assessment: First of all, the 3 younger cohorts all contain less of a percentage of the whole than they ought to—ideally speaking. Second, the largest cohort is also the oldest: it contains fully one quarter of the whole membership! And most troubling, the cohort that “makes” new members, i.e., babies, is *way below* the percentage it ought to be (11% rather than 18.75%). Inasmuch as our churches historically haven't done a particularly good job of evangelism with “outsiders,” the dramatic loss of young parent-aged members constitutes a profound problem for the future of many of our congregations.

The upshot is that by about mid-century, the typical PNEC congregation (regardless of its current size), will be only about 70% the size it is today. Think about this for a moment. What would happen to your congregational budget, programming, and pastoral leadership if you had only 70% of the income you have today? **UNLESS SOMETHING TRULY DRAMATIC (MIRACULOUS?) HAPPENS, THIS IS OUR FUTURE.**

And hoagies won't save us. -Toby Holleman, Associate Conference Minister

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