

How do we get people to church?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

November 1, 2015

Attendance is down at church. At most places, there is a lag at Sunday morning services, Sunday school, or mid-week programs. It's not just your church. It's most churches.

It's easy to blame outside forces.

It seems like in years past, there was a sort of gravitational pull towards church. It was a societal expectation, so people went. I imagine moms who didn't work outside the home, were ready to interact with humans, so they made sure the kids were freshly scrubbed and dressed for Sunday. Dads who did work, could do a bit of networking there. People often met their spouses at church. Teens had a place to go and hang out.

But now, it's not a societal expectation. People often think it's rather odd that a person would go to church. Moms work, so she might have to work on Sunday or it's her only day to sleep in and *not* interact with the public. Dads can do more networking at the golf course or at a bar, because the church is mostly filled with retired folks now. People meet their spouses and hang out online.

The world just looks different. It's easy to say that people used to care about God and now they don't. But I think the picture is more complex than that.

The good news is that people usually come to church for a reason now. It's not just the thing to mindlessly do because it's expected.

And it's really good for the church to not be lazy about opening its doors and doing everything this week the same way we did it last week, because that's the way we've been doing it for the last hundred years. We have to actually think about the people in our neighborhoods. **What do people need? What do they want? What motivates them?**

In my work with the Center for Progressive Renewal, I often have people look at [this article](#) (I'm sorry it's behind a paywall), and think about the four drives that underlie employee motivation, because it extends to the church.

**1) Drive to acquire.** In the workplace, this can look like money and positions. I know that this drive has a limited place in the church, but if we ignore that it exists, then we ignore a very important aspect of human nature. It is the brass plaque and the Sunday school room that's named after a person. It is the experience of going on a mission/educational trip. It is the importance of being on the Vestry or the public acknowledgement of a person's hard work. It is the ability for a person to take credit for a particular job or achievement. In one church, the traditional Sunday school model wasn't working, so they began an interactive, high-energy family service and gave attendance awards to kids. It worked. Attendance went up.

I know Jesus said our reward will be in heaven. But *our reward will be in heaven*, so Jesus wasn't above using the reward system either.

**2) Drive to bond.** I was describing this particular motivation when I wrote [Tribal Church](#). It's the particular culture of church where the highest motivation is to love, care, and be a part of a community. This culture prizes collaboration and teamwork. It drives people to be as creative as possible and encourages them to perfect their craft. The best example of this motivation that I know of is [UNCO](#).

The drive to bond also means that we feel betrayed or wounded by the church when it doesn't meet our expectations.

**3) Drive to comprehend.** I recently visited a church where the members proudly described their congregation as "like a [Chautauqua](#)." They loved that they wrestled with big ideas. Their passion was in learning about the mysteries of faith, and understanding them in context of scientific, psychological, and political knowledge.

**4) Drive to defend.** In some organizations, people use the motivation that you will be downsized. You know, Glengary Glenn Ross style.

I've experienced this in church, and it's a terrible motivator for me. In a healthier church context, the drive to defend is the community that organizes around social justice. They care about issues like black lives matter, health care, mass incarceration, or domestic violence, and so they passionately defend people.

**What motivates people to go to your church?**