

## THE FIVE AUDIENCES

The Pandemic of 2020 has left all our churches struggling with more questions than answers. It is virtually impossible to predict the mid-term or long-term impact of Covid 19 on the economy, the culture, and on corporate worship. This has been a painful experience for churches whose primary or exclusive way of being in ministry has been to gather people in a building for worship, fellowship, or learning. It is possible that the “building” paradigm has shifted permanently or semi-permanently, and that new questions must be asked. For instance, what would it look like to invert the worship paradigm, where inhouse worship augments online worship, rather than the other way around?

Whatever the future, the communications challenge is now paramount, and in the rush of meeting exigent needs, most churches have not had the time to think strategically about how their “audience” has changed in recent months. It is now critically important to identify the various cohorts that need to hear from their church, and to hone the message to the needs and challenges of each specific audience.

There are multiple ways of slicing and dicing the audiences within a congregation, but here is a start, based on willingness to engage in inhouse worship:

- **THE HIGHLY ENGAGED AND UNAFRAID:** These are the ones who will be present for inhouse worship no matter what when the decision is made to reopen.
- **THE HIGHLY ENGAGED BUT CAUTIOUS:** This audience will return more slowly, and perhaps in sputters, depending on the degree of confidence they feel about safety and health.
- **THE HIGHLY ENGAGED WHO WILL POTENTIALLY NEVER RETURN OR RARELY RETURN:** This audience is mostly seniors, but not entirely. Legitimate anxiety about disease, combined with the ease and effectiveness of digital worship experiences, may have changed their worship habits forever.
- **THE LESS ENGAGED:** Obviously, this covers all demographics and various levels of church commitment. We *do* know that this group often feels great affection for their church, but without necessarily feeling the need to be highly engaged. What happens to this group now? How do we continue to stay in relationship with them?
- **THE NEWLY REACHED:** It is possible that online worship has reached new people, and perhaps even reinvigorated some in the “less engaged” group. What happens to these constituents, and how do we communicate with them, if and when we return to inhouse activities?

**THE COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE:** Each of these target audiences will have their own issues, priorities, and needs. The first group will be the easiest with which to communicate. But doing so will be a tricky communications challenge. *IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WHEN WE RETURN TO INHOUSE WORSHIP, WE FIND A WAY OF ENTHUSIASTICALLY CELEBRATING THAT MOMENT AND INVITING PEOPLE BACK WITHOUT CAUSING THE OTHER GROUPS TO FEEL LIKE SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS.*

Meeting this challenge will be most important for Groups 2 and 3. These cohorts have traditionally been highly engaged, and have been some of the most dependable attendees in worship services. How does the changing worship paradigm, and their reluctance to attend inhouse worship, impact their affection for and commitment to the ministry of the church? Most United Methodist churches are highly dependent on the generosity of those in these two groups, and so communicating with them and *maintaining engagement is crucial to congregational vitality.*

**THE STEWARDSHIP CHALLENGE:** *In most United Methodist churches, the largest percentage of revenue is derived from the demographic that is most likely to not return to inhouse worship: those over 60 years of age.* How does the church tailor its generosity message to stay fully connected with this audience? What happens to generosity incentives when they are not affirmed by a sense of physical connection to the people and places where ministry seems to be taking place?

**THE BUILDING AND INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGE:** Until the current crisis is behind us, most congregations will likely be “stuck” with a dramatically underused building and parking lot. Most churches should begin thinking creatively about revenue opportunities associated with infrastructure, even if that means incurring Unrelated Business Income tax liability.

**AN UNKNOWN FUTURE:** A quick perusal of this paper will indicate how quickly circumstances are changing, and how nimble we must be in terms of adaptive leadership and planning. We should assume that no plan, strategy, or tactic will be immune to the chaotic changes that are likely to confront us over the next 1 – 2 years, or until there are effective therapeutics and vaccines that allay the anxiety of the current pandemic. Therefore, it will be crucial for every church leadership team to formulate *principles* that can guide plans and tactics, while remaining flexible about the content of those plans and tactics. *In an unmoored environment, what are the core principles that keep a leadership team on course even as it is constantly adapting to new or emerging realities?*