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Reflection: *Pastoral Excellence*



What is required to help congregations grow?

A study finds that pastors are more effective leaders when they spend time in Christian community with their peers, writes David L. Odom.

by [David L. Odom](#)



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Pastors, denominational officials and lay leaders fret over the numbers -- attendance, baptisms, new members and the like. Why do some congregations grow and others decline? What kinds of leadership cultivate thriving congregations? Perhaps more important, what can pastors and their supporters do to cultivate such leadership?

In flipping through the channels recently, I came across the televised worship of First Church. Instead of standing behind the oak pulpit, the pastor was pointing to a huge line graph that went straight downhill. The graph charted the attendance of this historic congregation from the 1950s, when it was the largest in the state, to today. Flabbergasted, I wondered why this pastor would turn worship into a "state of the church" report on communitywide TV.

In this case, like so many others, the leaders had come up with a plan to "grow" the church. They had ambitious goals to add to the staff and ministries and improve the building, recommendations of a national consultant. The leaders needed to convince the church that these plans were right, to create a sense of urgency that the congregation needed to act. The presentation was a classic example of the

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theory of change most famously articulated by Harvard's [John Kotter](#).

Sound familiar? Denominations have spent much effort developing programs and, more recently, training consultants to help congregations “turn around.” In many cases these well-developed plans don't change the numbers. In 20 years as a congregational consultant and 10 years as a pastor, I have come to believe that Kotter's change theory is right. The problem in this case was with the execution. Congregations and denominations often get caught up in the quality of the plans without focusing any attention on the leadership needed to make it all work.

In the last year, sociologist Penny Marler from Samford University conducted research on the impact of [pastor peer groups](#). By comparing data from a survey of peer groups with a respected survey of congregations, Marler and her team demonstrated that a pastor's participation in a peer group was a strong predictor of church growth. A second, related predictor was that the peer group had a trained facilitator and/or a curriculum. Pastors develop when they are in community with one another, focusing on the classic disciplines of Christian community: reading Scripture, praying for each other, fellowshiping.

Congregations are more robust, growing communities of faith if the pastor is a part of a robust community of faith. By practicing the essential elements of Christian community, pastors are likely to nurture such practices in others. Great ideas for programs and services have to be grounded in the “more excellent way” to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians. This way is based in the community, not the activities. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul refers to the spiritual gifts present in the church. He uses the analogy of the body, emphasizing how all the gifts work together as do the parts of the body. The “more excellent way” is what keeps the body together. The phrase is the launching point for chapter 13's beautiful description of love. The excellence and love are resident in the community, not in any single participant.

Marler's second predictor -- the group's having a trained facilitator and/or curriculum -- is also important. Pastors are susceptible to the same pressure all of us face to “make do” with current circumstances. Peer groups that don't have any structure can become places for licking wounds. But to develop the leadership a congregation needs, the pastor has to be challenged, not just consoled. The pastor needs a community of peers in order to remain faithful to a vision for what the church can be.

One of the most powerful practices in which a peer group can engage is the study of Scripture. New Testament scholar C. Kavin Rowe describes how the study of [Scripture “pressures”](#) the student to hear God speaking, even in the most familiar passages. Rowe suggests that Scripture orders and reorders our thoughts. Lay people might assume that pastors study Scripture all the time, whether in a group or not. However, the “excellent way” of Paul involves doing such work in community. Only then are we challenged with both what the text says and how we live it.

I wonder what would have happened if First Church's pastor had told a peer group he planned to devote worship to a report on attendance decline. Would his peers have pressed him to reflect on the purpose of worship? Would they have mused about the differences between the embarrassing and the prophetic?

The next time a congregation's leaders ask for help in developing a strategic plan, I am going to ask the pastor a series of questions. Does she meet regularly with other pastors? What do they do together? What does she think about the group's leader? With some basic elements of nurture in place, the pastor is likely to have the imagination and persistence necessary to lead the church through whatever strategic plans her congregation imagines.

