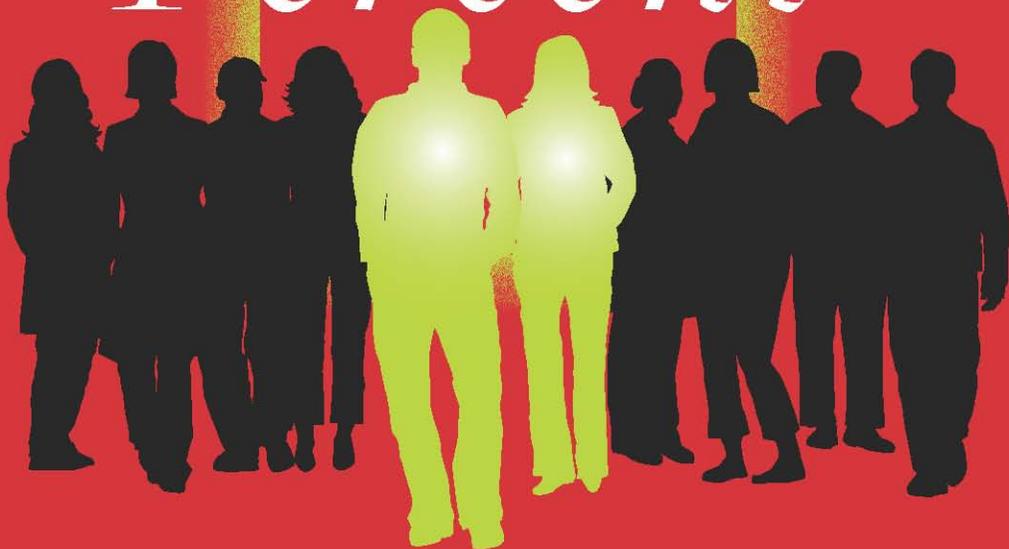


SCOTT THUMMA AND WARREN BIRD

The Other 80 *Percent*



TURNING YOUR CHURCH'S
SPECTATORS INTO *Active* PARTICIPANTS

A Leadership  Network Publication

Part One

LISTENING

If we could get more people to participate and share in the work to be done, we could do so much more. Those who joined in would get so much more out of their membership—spiritual growth, deeper/broader connections to other members, and that good feeling that you get when you know you are living the life God wants you to live.*

In almost every church a sizable group of members and attenders remain largely uninvolved. There is no single reason why this is so. Each less-than-active participant has unique grounds for his or her low level of involvement. As a result neither churches nor books addressing this situation can offer a one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of marginal participation. The best first step toward encouraging more active involvement is to listen to

*All quotations in this book are actual statements from people we interviewed or from written surveys we have used. Appendix B describes both processes. This epigraph comes from the parish inventories survey.

the reasons why some people are involved and why other people are not.

Your acts of listening will also help you draw in the allies needed to challenge the status quo. Virtually everyone, regardless of the level of participation, notices the dynamics of the situation; most feel it, and many lament it—even many of your less-involved contingents. However, your potential allies don't usually feel empowered to change the system. They need your courageous leadership to connect spiritually with those who are not plugged in.

The chapters in Part One will help you frame ways to *listen* to your congregation. Part Two will lay out the basis for what you need to *learn* about changing the system. Finally, Part Three will show you how best to *lead* all who identify with your church into a far more engaged level of committed involvement.

1

WHAT DO YOU HEAR FROM THE COMMITTED 20 PERCENT?

Pat and Mary, a married couple in their late thirties who have one child, could be the poster children for their church of about one hundred people. They teach children's Sunday school weekly and love every minute of it. They are part of the welcome team on the second Sunday of each month, greeting people as they arrive, handing them a bulletin, and helping to pass the offering plates during the service. They each are on the rotation to read Scripture during worship. When training was offered to help people learn to be better Scripture readers, they were among the first to sign up. In fact they are present at all church activities, from potluck lunches to Saturdays of service in a low-income housing project near the church building.

They also invite relatives and friends to church, two of whom come regularly. They have big hearts for reaching out to others. Mary, who is more outgoing, often talks about her faith at work.

They also give 10 percent of their income through the church.

Pat and Mary affirm that they've experienced much spiritual growth during their time at the church. They had come to the church just after Mary became a Christian, influenced by a good friend who was attending the church at that time. Pat gladly came along and agrees that his faith has grown, especially as a men's group helped support and pray for him during two difficult financial years when he changed jobs. As a couple they find

great joy in helping their five-year-old son learn about Jesus. They appreciate all the ways their church provides spiritual nurturing for him, and for them as well.

We suspect most readers would want a church full of people like Pat and Mary—the kind of people who are highly involved and spiritually vibrant. Our statistics cannot discern if Pat and Mary or the other people described in this chapter are the best Christians, because our categories do not measure the amount of faith they have, their spiritual maturity, or their theological positions. Yet in terms of their involvement and relationship to the church, they are as close to the ideal as you will find.

If you listen carefully to the people described in this chapter, you will no doubt succeed in serving them well. It is important to learn who these “20 percent” are and why they are connecting at your church.

You will find two groups of people in this chapter. Each group has something different to teach you. The good news is that these two groups are the easiest to hear from.

One group is the *already* committed—those with the highest participation levels. They tend to be your core people. They are engaged with spirit, emotion, and energy. By all indications in the research, they are growing spiritually as well.

The other group is represented by people moving *toward* greater commitment. This group has become increasingly involved in church over the past few years. They are excited, energized, and are also experiencing spiritual growth.

By comparison, understanding the dynamics of your less-active participants and absentee members is a considerably more difficult task.

Even though your less-active members typically outnumber your committed people, they are much less frequently heard from. (Of course there are the occasional squeaky-wheel members, who endlessly inform church leaders about the problems, disappointments, and perceived dysfunction they see in the congregation.) However, most of these members are rarely even

seen, whether in worship, at church functions or groups, or in the church office. With such limited communication, how can you come to know more about them and their needs? How can you discover why these members have drifted away, and more importantly, what should you do to reengage them in an active faith within the church community?

We heard from people at all levels of participation thanks to three large datasets, which we shorthandedly refer to as “congregational life,” “parish profiles,” and “larger churches” surveys. (Each dataset is described in detail in Appendix B.) Together they represent over one hundred thousand Protestant churchgoers in the United States. We created a scale of factors to measure members’ level of participation in the life of the congregation. This scale included their worship attendance level, involvement in small groups, committees and service programs, level of giving, level of inviting others, and number of close friends at the church. From there we compared profiles of each level of participation from highest to lowest. We also examined the groups of members who said they had either increased or decreased their level of involvement over the past two years. From this analysis we constructed an involvement continuum (see Table 1.1) and explored how these groups differed from each other on a host of spiritual and attitudinal questions.

Table 1.1 Everyone is somewhere on a continuum of involvement

<i>Participation Level</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
High involvement	Attend, give, invite, serve, lead, develop deep friendships
Medium involvement	Attend less frequently, might give, have friendships
Low involvement, nonattenders, dropouts	Attend rarely or never yet have some affiliation past or present, might still give, might have friendships

This chapter listens to those who are on the more involved side, the roughly 20 percent who seem to do most of the work of the church. The next chapter will attend to the voices of the less involved, those we are calling the other 80 percent.

Those Who Are Already Committed

Your most involved members and participants are just that—involved. Not surprisingly, people who are involved give more, attend church frequently, invite other people to church, participate in committees and groups, have more close friends at the church, and have been at the church longer than less-involved folks.

There is a good chance that you already know and listen to these “good sheep” in your congregation. They may include most of your leadership team, such as elders, deacons, and volunteers in Sunday school and infant nursery. They are the active participants that the entire congregation relies on week after week.

It is relatively easy to listen to these folks and to find out what they are thinking or feeling about the state of their church or their personal spiritual development. They are present and active in the life of the church. That means they’re easily accessible, and they’re often comfortable in joining constructive discussions about the church. All a pastor needs to do is make the time to inquire and then trust that they will provide honest feedback.

They Love Their Church Most

This choice group, as represented in our data, is more likely to be older. They are also more likely to be married. Not surprisingly they are also more frequently the longer-term members at the church. Some lament the fact that certain people keep doing everything. As one woman said, “In running [the church],

it's always the same people just changing jobs." Others love what they do and want to spread that joy:

If we could get more people to participate and share in the work to be done, we could do so much more and those who joined in would get so much more out of their membership—spiritual growth, deeper/broader connections to other members, and that good feeling that you get when you know you are living the life God wants you to live.

High-participation people are also more likely to see the church as having a clear vision, goals, and purpose, and they are strongly committed to it. Additionally these folks have a very strong and clear sense of the church's identity and how it differs from other churches. Not only do they know what the church stands for, but they are more likely to find it easy to tell others what is unique about the church. Above all, they are personally comfortable with this identity.

Likewise they have a very optimistic picture of the congregation. They perceive the church's overall morale as higher than do less-involved persons. They also more strongly agree that there is a sense of excitement about the church's future. Additionally, more than other participants, they perceive the congregation as ready to try new things.

In relation to the congregational community they are more inclined to perceive the members as very highly likely to help one another in times of trouble. They also affirm more strongly than other participants that factors like their friends, the adult education, and the social outreach keep them at the church.

But with this rosy picture you may be surprised to learn they don't always agree that church members are well informed about what committees and groups are doing. Further, they are less likely to think that adequate study is regularly undertaken for church planning, or that the neighboring community is aware of the church's programs. They also feel that the theological

and biblical implications of decisions should be discussed more openly, and that disagreements should be dealt with honestly and openly.

Essentially they are a bit more concerned than members of other involvement groups about the communications and functioning of the church. In part this is perhaps because they have invested the most, cared the most, and felt the most positive toward the church. Out of their commitment to the church comes a somewhat more critical concern for how well it functions. Likewise, because of their increased involvement in leadership they are probably more likely to see and experience the deficiencies of the organization more pointedly.

Contrary to common assumptions, this group is no more likely than others to be satisfied with elements of the Sunday worship, such as its style of music. Nor do they rate the pastor or the denominational identity more highly than other members do as factors that keep them coming back to their church.

But they are much more likely to affirm that the church's worship services and its activities do help them with everyday living. Highly involved people also stand out in their strong emphasis



Highly involved people also stand out in their strong emphasis that the church encourages them to serve the wider world.

that the church encourages them to serve the wider world. And they demonstrate this by being the most likely group to volunteer time in social service outside the church.

This group really stands out in the area of spiritual growth and fulfillment. There are huge differences here compared to the less involved (see Table 1.2). The most highly

involved members are much more likely to affirm that being at the church has made a difference in their spiritual life. These highest-level participants are also much more likely to agree that their spiritual needs are being met. They strongly affirm that they have had much growth in the faith in the past year.

Table 1.2 The most involved rate their churches much higher in certain areas

	<i>Low Participation</i>	<i>Medium Participation</i>	<i>High Participation</i>
Strong sense of belonging	27%	49%	67%
Church helps me find and use my gifts to a great extent	18%	34%	53%
Strongly agree that my spiritual needs are being met	22%	38%	54%
Have a strong sense of excitement about church's future	20%	31%	48%
My faith grew much in the past year due to the church	19%	36%	54%

Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2008/09.

Highly involved members also feel strongly that they are being encouraged by the church leadership to discover their gifts for ministry and to use them to get involved. And they are the most likely group to assert that they have a strong sense of belonging at the church, even after statistically controlling for the influence of their length of time at the church and other factors known to increase a sense of belonging.

Theologically they are more “orthodox” in their beliefs about the Bible and more likely to affirm Jesus as the only way to salvation, Jesus’ literal resurrection from the dead, and the view that the Bible has the answers for daily living. Additionally, more than other groups they like sermons that are biblically based and illustrated. They also score higher on frequency of personal daily devotions.

Listening to Why They Are Engaged

None of these findings will come as a great surprise to the astute pastor or church leader. After all, this highly engaged group is the one clergy have the most exposure to. However, it

is instructive to think about this group from the perspective of why and how they have become so involved. What exactly is it that they love about their church and its leaders that motivates them to be so engaged?

Worship trappings don't necessarily connect them and keep them highly involved, according to our analysis. Likewise it isn't merely that they have good friends at church. Rather, this group is involved in the life of the church on many levels. Together the multiple involvements contribute to these members' sense of spiritual satisfaction and personal enrichment.

As we will continue to suggest throughout the book, *you can and should continue to strengthen those connections and involvements that increase participation, and make congregational life even more spiritually meaningful for your most committed participants.*

The following comments from several highly involved people suggest ways they became engaged and yet also long for further connections.

My hope is that while I grow in my personal faith, I am able to contribute my gifts and talents in order to make my church better for my church family and for visitors.

It is very rare that you join a church that has a lot of opportunities for ministry. You know there's a lot more ministry opportunities here than at the church where I came from, so that made the difference [for me in getting involved].

I wish that I had the same involvement that I did while being confirmed.

You don't want to exhaust or burn out these stellar members. Nor do you want them to stagnate such that they feel underappreciated, unengaged, or spiritually unfulfilled. Without challenges or adequate personal rewards, such as helping them train to be better leaders or increasing their sense of responsibility or

acknowledging a job well done, they may detour into the feeling that all they're doing is church busywork.

Those Currently Increasing Their Involvement

Another important group to identify and listen to are those who would say their involvement has increased in the past two years. In fact in many ways they are more important to listen to than those who have been heavily engaged for a long time. Those who are already committed can tell you what you did right in the past. Those who are becoming increasingly engaged can help you know what you are currently doing to facilitate their involvement and growth.

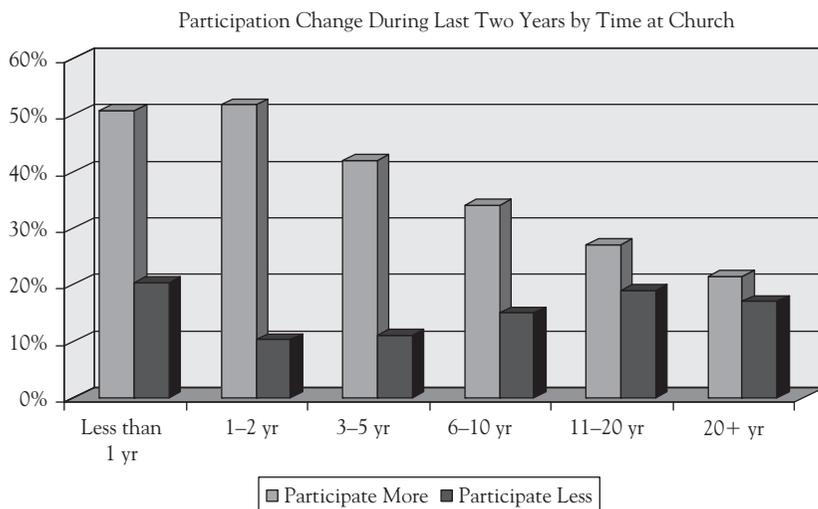
Unfortunately this group of people who are increasing their involvement is not always evident to a church's leadership team. You cannot spot them just by sight. It's not like they wear a button or T-shirt that reads, "I have recently increased my level of involvement."

However, you can find them in your own church by observation and asking around. Or you can identify them as we did by surveying your congregation and including a question like, "How has your participation in this church's activities *changed* in the last two years?" (The response options we used were (1) increased, (2) remained the same, (3) decreased, and (4) I haven't been here two years.) You can also invite them to self-select: "Later this month we want to offer some training to people who have become more involved in recent months. If you have accepted a new responsibility, we'd like to honor you, give you some orientation, and offer you some very practical help."

Similarities and Differences with the Highly Involved

In most cases those who have recently increased their involvement are potentially "best participants" in the making. Their activity level is quite similar to those who are highly committed.

Figure 1.1 The longer people have been at a church, the less they say their participation is increasing



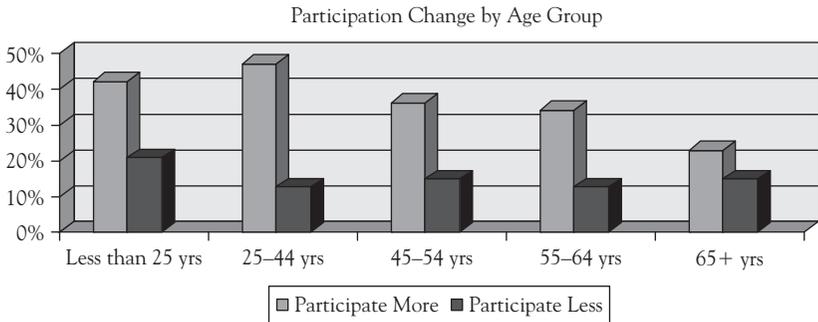
Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2008/09.

They attend worship, give generously, have a number of good friends at the church, and are increasingly involved in groups and committees, and in service programs.

Yet their demographic patterns are quite different from the picture painted of the most highly involved. These increasingly involved participants have been coming to the church for less time (Figure 1.1) and are more likely to be younger (Figure 1.2). Distance from the church doesn't make a difference unless they live more than a thirty-minute drive from the church, and then they are less likely to increase participation.

For this group, family household configuration also shows distinct differences from the highly participatory group and from the remaining congregation. Couples without children are less likely to have increased their participation, while adults with children are more likely. Married attenders are neither more nor less likely, but people who are single, in committed relationships, or divorced are more likely to have increased their

Figure 1.2 The older people are, the less they say their participation is increasing



Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2008/09.

participation in the past two years, while widowed attenders are less likely. No significant differences related to income, education, employment status, or occupation distinctly characterizes this group from other groups.

This group portrays a distinctive and telling interaction with church dynamics that seems to relate to their reasons for increased involvement. These more-participating people score higher in saying their church encourages them to find and use their gifts than those whose involvement is unchanged or in decline. They indicate that the church has made an effort to get them involved and has provided opportunities for leadership. They also see the leadership as more willing to try new things, and they strongly affirm that the pastor takes into account the ideas of those who worship at the church.

These persons are also more likely to say that the church and its members are of great help in times of trouble than those in the congregation whose participation is unchanged or in decline. Somewhat surprising, while the number of close friends in the church is positively related to increased participation, it is not as strongly correlated to a rise in involvement as many of the other dynamics.

to the respondents—what they perceived it to be for themselves. Likewise this group strongly affirms that their spiritual needs are being met and that they are satisfied with worship. They report greater levels of spiritual growth and attribute it directly to the church’s efforts rather than external sources or their own independent spiritual pursuits. They also have a very strong sense of belonging to the congregation. This perception exists even though these persons have been at the church less time and are generally younger than the full population, with large numbers coming from traditionally more marginalized groups in church life, such as singles and the divorced.

There is clearly a strong spiritual component to increased participation, but other dimensions of the church and personal conditions also play in increased participation. This can be best seen in the reasons these persons select for why their participation has increased (six response options were offered, and respondents could choose more than one). Table 1.3 shows the percentage of the 7,299 people in the parish inventory survey who said their participation had increased because of these reasons.

The table affirms that participation increased when a number of components were present. There needed to be *opportunity* for involvement (office or new responsibility), *motivation* for increased participation (stronger faith and, for some, children), and the *ability* to be more involved (time and better

Table 1.3 Increased participation results mostly from a new role or responsibility

<i>Reason Given for Increased Participation in Last Two Years</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Accepted office or other new responsibility in the church	57
Health had improved	28
Due to their children	15
Had a more positive attitude toward the church	4

Source: Parish inventory survey.

health). Across the datasets we used, the responses of those who had increased their involvement confirmed this three-part combination. These people perceived the church to be making efforts to provide them with opportunities by electing them, appointing them, or asking them to serve. They received training to discover and develop their gifts, and support to try new things. Their motive for increased participation is in part perhaps the satisfaction of being “called” into greater service and ministry, using their talents for God, or simply as mundane as being recognized and asked to help. But at its root much of this motivation is interpreted as or equated with a spiritual catalyst.

Clinton, one of the people we interviewed, models the way these factors can come together for participation to increase. Clinton is in a second marriage and in his forties. He and his family had been active in a small church for many years, but it went through what he calls a “nasty split.” As his family relocated to their present church four years ago, Clinton had one goal, and not a very spiritual one at that, he admits: “I came here to hide,” he says. “I was kind of a wounded veteran.” But it didn’t work for him. As hard as he tried to lay back and do nothing, week after week during the worship service he was “so stirred [that] I couldn’t sit in my seat another moment—and I really tried.” As he explains, “I looked at the bulletin and . . . I just could feel something inside of me beginning to burn that says, ‘I want you to get involved in that.’ It moved me and moved me. Even as much as I tried to ignore it for six months and I couldn’t ignore it any longer, [so] I went and volunteered. . . . It was the Holy Spirit just drawing me.”

From then on, Clinton has taken on an increasing amount of responsibility. Today he’s a prayer team captain, a member of the church’s vision board, a member of a care team, and a small-group leader.

Just as Clinton sees his involvement through a lens of spiritual motivation and spiritual development, so do others.

They consistently include a spiritual factor in their expressed desires that others too will move toward greater involvement. These quotes attest to this impulse while they also hint at the ways churches could promote this growth:

We need more emphasis on [the] spiritual growth of individuals and helping them find their place in ministry. This will help draw the people who participate on the fringe into the center of our church community.

I want to see the congregation get good at being church. The more clearly it communicates its vision for how this church makes disciples of Jesus, the more it will succeed.

I would like to see more development of lay leadership and more emphasis on spiritual growth of individual members. I think many hidden talents in the area of leading worship are left untouched.

I would hope for the church's reinvigoration and energy so people can attend church, seek spiritual refreshment, guidance, and fellowship without the weight of being a part of a small army of individuals who have to tend to the day-to-day matters of the church. People following their passion in their church involvement will turn this church around.

The point we draw from quotes like these and the survey data is that for those who increase their participation, their sense of spiritual fulfillment directly correlates with greater involvement in the congregation. The idea of spiritual fulfillment is individually defined. We don't always know what each person means by the term. We just know that they link two things together: greater involvement helps their sense of spiritual growth. Likewise a sense of spiritual growth increases participation. On the basis of our research it is absolutely clear that these two are intertwined.

Their sense of spiritual fulfillment directly correlates with greater involvement in the congregation.

What is less clear is which comes first: the increased involvement, or the increased sense of spiritual fulfillment and spiritual needs being met. Our “larger church survey” hints at an answer. In it we asked people about the primary path in their move from spectator to participant. The path most likely

to lead to increased participation was the spiritual motivation path (“I responded to an inward sense of call or spiritual prompting”). Other options, such as bulletin announcements, invitations from people they knew, and invitations from people they did not know, were unrelated to their increased involvement.

Certainly increased participation happens through a combination of effects working together. Clinton talked about seeing service opportunities in the bulletin. But he also spoke about things stirring and burning inside of him that he attributed to the tug of the Holy Spirit. Our guess is that on the survey, where he was limited to one choice, he would have checked the spiritual motivation option: “I responded to an inward sense of call or spiritual prompting.”

Help Them Take Their Next Step

One of the surveys we used for this book listed sixteen items and asked participants which they’d like to see their church strengthen in order to help them increase their involvement (see Table 1.4). The most important thing to learn is that there is a great diversity of opinion among the twenty-five thousand persons who responded. None of the sixteen items received more than 12 percent. Yet each response option got some responses.

The implication? People attend church for different reasons and want different things from their experience. Likewise strengthening one aspect of the church may increase the

Table 1.4 Most churches need multiple pathways to help increase involvement

<i>For the sake of your own personal involvement in your congregation, which one task would you most like to see strengthened?</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Helping members deepen their personal and spiritual relationship with God	12
Helping members discover their own gifts for ministry and service	10
Providing Christian education for children and youth	8
Offering worship that provides a meaningful experience of God and the Christian tradition	8
Helping members understand their use of time, talents, and money as expressions of Christian stewardship	7
Encouraging members to act on the relationship of the Christian faith to social, political, and economic issues	6
Providing fellowship opportunities for members	6
Providing a caring ministry for the sick, shut-ins, and the bereaved	6
Participating in activities and programs with other local religious groups	5
Expressing our denominational heritage/tradition	5
Providing worship that expresses the Gospel in contemporary language and forms	5
Providing Christian education programs for adults	5
Sharing the good news of the Gospel with the unchurched	5
Engaging in acts of charity and service for persons in need	5
Providing pastoral counseling to help members deal with personal problems	5
Supporting the global mission of the church	2

Source: Hartford Institute parish inventory.

involvement of a small percentage of attenders, but to engage many folks the church has to approach the matter differently. We think the key is not in a specific menu of choices so much as in helping people do more of whatever has been fostering their spiritual fulfillment at the church to date. If you can help them

identify and take a next step, then we suspect they will report that they are continuing to grow.

Remember Groups in Transition

Every church can identify specialized patterns of church involvement—variations over time stemming from challenges in life situations, such as college, a new baby, illness, retirement, and aging. This is especially important for congregations full of retirees and aging baby boomers. Active-participation norms and values will have to be reconceptualized and reformulated to make the most of these key participants so as to keep them vital and involved with a true sense of engagement.

One example is a church that provides a Mom’s Day Out program for new mothers. Another church does seasonal work with students from nearby universities, training them in leadership and campus evangelism. Another church in a university corridor offers programs for visiting scholars. A Florida church accommodates “snowbirds,” doing meet-the-church welcome events and opening ways for them to do partial-year ministry.

Drawing Them In and Keeping Them

Hopefully you felt encouraged as you read this chapter. Maybe you had not realized that you have two kinds of active folks: those who are already committed, and those who are increasing their involvement. Perhaps it has been helpful to imagine specific aspects of your church that have drawn those with high or increasing levels of commitment. We trust you found it reassuring that people make a connection between their participation and their spiritual growth.

We now want to build on this chapter in three ways:

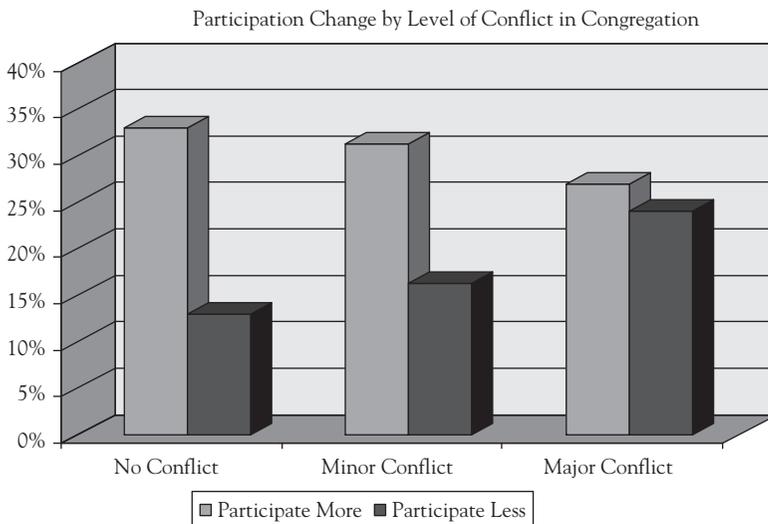
1. We certainly encourage you to keep listening to those who are committed. Let them tell you what you did that

The increasingly involved members also sense that worship services are more likely to help them with their everyday lives. Predictably these folks invite more people, and while they are equally likely to attend church on a weekly basis, they are much more likely than other groups to attend several times a week. They are also more optimistic about the church's future and perceive a higher morale within the congregation. Not too surprising, people who are increasing their participation are somewhat more likely to be found in congregations that experience no conflict or just minor conflict (Figure 1.3).

Spiritual Issues Are Very Important

Most dramatically the data on this group show an overwhelmingly strong correlation between this increased participation and having a rich, strengthening "spiritual life." All the surveys we used left the definition of "a satisfying, fulfilling spiritual life" up

Figure 1.3 The less conflict, the higher the level of participation



Source: U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2008/09.

was right. Listen to those who are moving toward greater involvement as they tell you what you are doing well. Learn who they are and why they're increasingly connected.

2. It is equally important to understand those with declining and minimal participation. If a church's leadership is attuned only to listen and respond to the voices of the most involved participants, the others are left to sit on the sidelines, attending only infrequently, participating marginally, or never connecting except at holidays, weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Chapter Two will profile these people.
3. The dynamics that draw people in and integrate them into a church are typically different from those that keep them there. That is why so many churches see a huge loss of people out the back door and why, in particular, participation can begin to decline within two years. Chapter Three will teach you how to create a listening team, not only for your committed and involved people but also for others whom you may not be hearing.

If you keep the model you have now, you'll get the 20 percent—those who are highly involved. If you augment your participation model based on that group, that's who you will get. But you will probably need a diversified model to reach all the other groups in your church. Each participation group tells you something different about the congregation's needs, how to lead them to be more involved, and ultimately how to help them develop and grow spiritually. Our goal is to help you pastor your entire flock, including the other 80 percent.