

## SOME KEY FACTORS

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Periodically people at the national level of the Episcopal Church go through an exercise of trying to decide what to measure. What should be reported on the parochial reports each year? Every parish is supposed to maintain a register in which the priest records services – how many celebrations of the Eucharist, the attendance at each, marriages, baptisms, and burials. You get the idea.

Long ago and far away, I was the vicar of an inner city parish on the East Coast. I had only been ordained for 4 years. Not much parish experience. I did a year as part of a team in one church. It was a Sundays only position. My daily work was split between being a staff associate at one of the church's industrial missions, as the director of planning and strategy for the council of churches, and doing a lot of parish development consulting for the diocese.

I knew enough about parish administration to look for the register when I arrived in the parish. I was also curious. It was frustrating and illuminating. The former vicar had stopped recording attendance several years earlier. I figured out he had done that because he found the decline in attendance depressing. Leaders sometimes change measurements because things aren't going well.

I was trained in the field of organization development. So, I knew that what you measure is what you see as important. Changing what you measure can contribute to a change in an organization's culture. When a non-profit executive director decides that in addition to measuring how many clients are served, adds a new measure of how satisfied the clients are with the service received—that may stimulate change. Or, if she adds a measure of how employees see the quality of their work life – that may introduce a new value into the organization's life.

It's a side note to the purposes of this article, but I'll say it anyway—as the decline in Sunday attendance has continued, pressure has built in some circles to discount measuring average Sunday Attendance (ASA). Just saying. Yes, I know, there is also a desire to measure other significant factors (see the paragraph above). But maybe, just maybe, it's also an attempt to deny reality.

The vicar before me had stopped measuring attendance. It wasn't just that he was depressed. He didn't know what to do about it. He didn't have any competence in parish development.

### *Parish development*

If the parish is stable and healthy—how to maintain that? If the parish is drifting and static—how to address that? If the parish is in decline—how to turn that around?

It always begins with getting people to talk. "How are we doing here at St. James?" And for such a conversation to be fruitful people need to believe that it is okay to say what they think. So it helps to know something about psychological safety and trust development.

Often the starting place is to acknowledge the truth. To look at the facts. When your average attendance has been dropping year after year—you begin by saying, "Our average attendance has been dropping for the past 10 years? Simple, right? Except that sometimes people get upset and angry about an invitation to look at uncomfortable information and inconvenient facts.

But if leaders can stay with their adult minds--you look at the numbers. Same thing if the attendance has been growing or stable. Do the same with any measure that you see as significant.

*Some key factors*

One tool Michelle Heyne and I have used is Some Key Factors. You can find a PDF of it – [HERE](#). The assessment worksheet gets used by a vestry or a group of parishioners to begin a conversation. It might also be a way for a bishop to understand the parishes of the diocese.

It asks people to rate four broad factors: overall satisfaction, the three purposes of a parish church, vibrancy, and alignment. Here’s the worksheet.

	Low				High
<b>A. Overall satisfaction</b> with parish life & ministry	1	2	3	4	5
<b>B. Effectively engaging the three purposes of a parish church</b> in a manner fitting parish size and charism					
Overall rating	1	2	3	4	5
<b>1. The worship of God</b> – fullest Prayer Book Pattern is a Sunday Eucharist, a public Daily Office (daily), and equipping members for personal devotions (especially reflection)	1	2	3	4	5
1 a. Primary - Great Sunday Liturgy and social time	1	2	3	4	5
<b>2. The formation of the People of God</b> – Fullest expression is a strong adult process in the tradition of the Episcopal Church - the total impact of Liturgy, spiritual guidance, overall parish climate, programs. At least 1/4 of those present on Sunday are very competent in the spiritual practices of the Episcopal Church.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>3. Having a sanctifying relationship</b> with the broader community.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>C. Vibrant</b> - The extent to which parish life is vibrant, creates a "buzz" that excites the congregation and spills over to the wider community, an attractive energy	1	2	3	4	5
<b>D. Alignment</b> - The elements of parish life are mostly in alignment: income-expenses, the energy, and funds to carry out the vision we have; liturgical space or number of services to match the number of attendees, and so on	1	2	3	4	5

### *Understanding the key factors*

I'll offer a few thoughts about each. But it's important to note that most people have an adequate grasp of the factors when they read the worksheet. When we work with a group we usually offer a brief introduction, have people fill out the worksheet, and record their assessment on a sheet of newsprint in the front of the room. It's enough to get the conversation started. A deeper understanding of the factors usually develops as people talk.

In those conversations there is sometimes an opportunity to deepen the group's understanding of the factors. But we always start with first thoughts.

A. Overall satisfaction – After a group's ratings have been posted one of our first questions is, "Would you share why you gave the rating you did?" Even when all the ratings are at the higher end—it's fascinating to hear the different things that add to people's sense of satisfaction with the parish. They usually don't know why others see things as they see them. People have a reason behind the rating. So, leaders need to ask and be respectful and non-defensive.

B. The three purposes of a parish church – worship, formation, sanctifying presence. The responses to the worship of God, and 1a the Sunday experience, can create a pathway for members to consider a more rooted prayer life as individuals and a parish. In my experience if the ratings for the Sunday experience are low there may be serious problems present. For most members the "Sunday experience" is the parish. It may be useful background to understand the [Prayer Book Pattern](#) (threefold rule of prayer). Some may question aspects of the formation category. A fourth being competent in spiritual practice may strike some as being too demanding while others question, "why not 100%?" Sanctifying presence is something parishes engage in a wide variety of ways: just the presence of the church building, bells that ring from the tower, the use of meetings rooms by community groups, the priest going to the site of a fire or other tragedy, inviting people to come together to discuss a neighborhood issue, programs that feed the hungry, and so on.

C. Vibrant – This is the extent to which the parish's life is vibrant. Does it generate a "buzz", and atmosphere of excitement and investment? Does that energy that excites the congregation spill over to the wider community. Others can sense the attractive energy of the parish in the life of members who are friends and family.

D. Alignment - The elements of parish life are mostly in alignment: income-expenses, the energy, and funds to carry out the vision we have; liturgical space or number of services to match the number of attendees, and so on. The issue isn't how does our pledging or attendance or endowment compare with other parishes? The alignment question is more like this, is our yearly income adequate to support the life and program we want?

### *Other possibilities*

You may find yourself wanting to have a different list of key factors. Go ahead and write it out. It might be useful to test it with others. Or you may see the need for a conversation about the state of the parish but want a different starting place. There are a number of resources and assessment forms on the [Shaping the Parish Resources page](#).

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