

This just isn't working: When people don't show up

by [LeeAnne Watkins](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue



[Some rights reserved](#) by [mk30](#).

Recently our church did something I never thought we would do. We canceled all of our adult education opportunities and midweek services. They just weren't working.

We've tried Bible studies, Gospel Based Discipleship and Education for Ministry. We've done things in the morning and the evening, onetime deals and series of various lengths. We've included adult ed as part of regularly scheduled meetings. We've gone general ("The Gospels") and specific ("Sex in the Bible").

We've focused on attracting longtime Episcopalians, brand-new Christians, wounded-by-other-traditions Christians and people filled with spiritual questions. Our leaders have included younger and older people, seminary-trained and nonseminary-trained; they've team taught and they've been on their own. We've tried book studies, multimedia projections and videos on famous people. We've met at church, in homes, in coffee shops, in bars. We've used catchy titles, posters, social media, newspaper ads and lawn signs. We've shared potlucks and catered dinners and yummy snacks.

As for the midweek services, it's the same story. We've lit candles and sat silently; we've read poetry. Musicians have played organ, piano, drums and cello; we've sung hymns and Taizé songs and chants. We've tried liturgical stations and specific

liturgies (e.g., one about reproductive loss). We've experimented with different days of the week, times of day and service lengths. We've held retreats. We've done all this in Advent and Lent and summertime.

But folks simply have not been coming.

Over the years I've found myself seduced by whatever the latest idea is for getting people to flock to church. And every single time I've been disappointed. What's more, in the last few years I've developed some inner snarkiness toward the people who don't show up, even though I otherwise adore them. I worry that I inadvertently pass this resentment along to them. Great—as if what people really need is more shame about the status of their spiritual lives.

I feel like I'm selling something that people don't want—and then getting mad at them for not wanting it.

When I ask why people don't come, the answer almost always is time. They have good intentions, but their lives are so full. So they tend to use their precious free time only for things that they really care about, which tend to be things that offer immediate good feelings. They flock to tutor at the local elementary school, to work for civil rights for LGBT people, to serve free meals for the hungry. And they love to eat with friends—the church's social calendar is filled with dinners, dances and parties. The congregation is also growing, and quickly.

But the idea of having leisurely conversations about Jesus is just, well, too slow. The only adult formation things that have been in any way successful are sermon podcasts and daily e-mailed bits of wisdom, prayer or scripture.

A mentor once gave me some good advice: stop doing things that aren't working. This makes all the sense in the world, but it's hard to do. It is hard to give up the picture I have in my head about what a church is supposed to look like: people sitting around on couches in the parish hall, Bibles open.

But at least in my ministry context, that just isn't working anymore. And personally, I'm done with the roller coaster of getting seduced by the latest thing that's supposed to work, putting mountains of energy into making it really good and then getting cranky with people because they don't come. So we stopped it all.

The world changes so quickly, and often it feels like we as a church are trying to sell pagers to people who want smartphones. Or, as Kwok Pui Lan writes in the Fall 2011 issue of *Reflections*, we still have a cathedral mind-set, while the world has a bazaar mind-set. The cathedral mind “takes patience, learning, concentration, and years of training.” The bazaar mind is

a marketplace where you shop from place to place. You have no obligation to stay long and no commitment to buy. . . . It’s not just the volume of information we face but the way it affects brain function—the clicking from page to page, the new habit of linking information so quickly.

How to share the gospel in a bazaar world? Lately I’m seeing the need to reverse what I learned as the linear process from inner conversation to service in the world. What if instead the Spirit is leading us to begin with acts of mercy and justice? How can we use our connective technology to host conversations about real-life experiences, to ask thoughtful questions and then see where our stories intersect the gospel? And then how can we take things deeper, challenging one another to live a life of integrity and purpose, using God’s gifts for the healing of the world?

I’ve also been intrigued by communication models such as the TED talks, the Episcopal Story Project and the Khan Academy. Where I’m serving, the question is this: how do we move the discussion from the (mostly empty) couches in the parish hall to the online world that people can access from where they are, when they have the time? It’s about going where people are, rather than continuing to try to make them come to us.

After finally letting go of some old wineskins, my church is finding creative energy to go after new ones. I don’t know what exactly this will look like, but it is a thrill and a privilege to be a gospel-bearer during this reformation. There is much for us to receive, but we won’t have the hands to do it unless we set down whatever things are no longer working.