

# The Moth Principle of Church Attraction

DAVID R. RAY



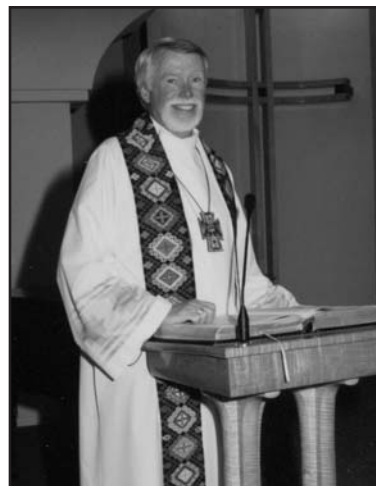
*In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture, and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.*

—Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*

DESPITE OUR HIGHER standing in the evolutionary process, humans, like moths, naturally gravitate to light and warmth. Churches that offer the light and warmth of genuine hospitality and personal meaning will experience visitors coming through the door. Visitors who are received as guests and who find light and warmth are likely to stay. The exceptional church of which I'm fortunate enough to be pastor is proving the moth principle, as have the three small churches I previously pastored.

San Rafael, California (population 50,000, located fourteen miles north of the Golden Gate bridge), is in the center of one of the most secular and affluent counties in America. It is a tough environment in which to be a growing church. An estimated five percent of Marin County is actively involved in a congregation. I cannot imagine any context anywhere with more attractive options for things to do on a Sunday morning besides going to church. So why have we more than doubled in active participation?

From the outside there is not much that's distinctive which would draw visitors in. Instead, it is the things that happen here, on what we call Pilgrim Hill, that draws, involves, and holds people. Our church buildings are modest, but attractive. Also here is Pilgrim Park, a sixty-one-unit, affordable housing community our church built thirty years ago with HUD money. In addition, our facilities are home to two Head Start programs,



three 12-step programs, YMCA and 4-H groups, and a Korean church. This is a center of activity and the church is at the core of it.

When I was called as half-time pastor eight years ago, the church had shrunk from 281 members in 1957 to 33 active members, with 19 involved in church leadership, about 30 in worship, and a church budget of \$56,000. Today, we have 70 active members, 42 involved in church leadership, an average of 60 in worship, and a budget of \$113,200, plus a lot of money received outside the budget. We've just completed a \$600,000 (almost all paid for) building renovation and expansion. Today there's an effervescent spirit of optimism, openness, commitment, and hospitality. Why the dramatic difference? Light and warmth.

Our people were already doing several things correctly when I arrived. The interim minister had helped our people begin to believe in themselves. The landscape committee was sprucing up the exterior. One member paid for a weekly invitational ad in the local paper. Audio tapes of worship were being made for shut-ins. Another was sending

birthday cards to everyone. Another member had taken a photograph of the smiling and waving congregation and turned it into several hundred post-cards. This was a congenial congregation.

Becoming a worshiping and serving community of light and warmth has become central to the personality and practice of this congregation. Our first order of business was to help our people see their size as an advantage rather than as an excuse or liability. They were (and still are) the right size to help visitors feel like guests who are welcome, known, and appreciated. Not being embarrassed by their size, they were more likely to invite others. We made sure there were hospitable greeters at the door, that visitors were asked to sign the guest book, and the pastor sent a personalized letter to those who visited. We now give visitors personalized pens as symbolic welcome gifts. We also look for first-timers and new people following worship and try to lead them to the refreshment counter and conversation. We are not shy about inviting new folks to make this their church home. Newcomers are brought into every level of church leadership as soon as they want to be.

The second thing we did, and are still doing, is provide people with a powerful worship experience that addresses our common need and builds a deep sense of community (see my book, *Wonderful Worship in Smaller Churches*). Our worship is very participatory throughout. We take a few minutes at the beginning of worship to greet one another. We sing a lot and well, so that our people experience being part of one strong voice. We've rebuilt our formerly dreary and nondescript worship space and turned it into a beautiful and hospitable sanctuary for spirited worship, where each person feels like a key actor in the cast of a divine drama. People come and then come back because it's a memorable and welcoming place to be. Everything we do in worship is designed to transform isolated individuals into a community of faithful disciples. And it's happening.

The third thing we did was move through a thoughtful process of becoming an Open and Affirming church. It's not that we weren't before. But we hadn't thought much about it and we hadn't said it loud and clear. For us to be Open and Affirming means that we are open to and affirming of ALL God's people—gay and straight, young and old, all cultures and classes, new age and old age, people with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. A large part of the money we

spent on our renovation made our whole facility accessible to all as a demonstration of our openness. It's indicative of this congregation that in our choir is a man who was living under a bridge when he first worshiped here, singing next to a man who may be a millionaire.

The fourth thing we did was to be very serious about being a mission-minded church. Every year I take a group of fifteen on retreat to a Benedictine retreat center in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This led to our starting a project called "Every Dollar Feeds Kids," in which we're partnered with an extraordinary organization called VAMOS! who spend every dollar they receive in direct service with the extreme poor in Mexico. We are currently providing all the food (to the tune of \$20,000 a year) for the feeding programs at two VAMOS! schools. We are recruiting other congregations who will also accept responsibility for the feeding program at other poor Mexican schools. Our church provides all the promotional and administrative costs so that what we say is true—every dollar received feeds hungry kids. We see ourselves as being on the front lines of ending world hunger and that's an exciting place to be.

Pilgrim Park was a troubled housing complex. The combined efforts of church board, management, and residents have transformed it into a healthy community with a variety of social services, an exceptional staff, and a long waiting list. We're looking at expanding our involvement in affordable housing. We've established the Pilgrim Hill Foundation which will spin off a new mission project every year. Our people provide leadership and volunteer in a wide array of social services and causes. On a per capita basis we probably contribute more to mission than any church in our conference. As Jesus would say, this church is a light on a hill.

The fifth thing we've done is to build the quality of our shared life. These people get along and tolerate, even treasure, their differences. They enjoy one another. They hold one another and the world in prayer and believe it makes a difference. One of our older members could no longer navigate the steps to her mobile home. Well over a thousand donated dollars and a few hundred hours of donated work later, Kate has a beautiful ramp that's the talk of her neighborhood. These people take good care of one another.

This church greets new ideas with "Why not?" They see their size as an opportunity for building

God's Community, not as an excuse for inaction. They know that the gospel is to be shared, not hoarded. Rather than clinging to power, they share it generously. Every communion Sunday, when the whole congregation (including all of our kids) gather around our beautiful, hand-crafted communion table, we proclaim: "God's Family Table is never full. There's always room for one more." In their faith and life, these people demonstrate that inclusivity.

Henri Nouwen wrote: "The church is perhaps one of the few places left where we can meet people who are different than we are, but with whom we can form a larger family." In our increasingly fearful, impersonal, and intolerant times, San Rafael's First Congregational Church is a bright, warm beacon offering light and life to others. A growing assortment of people are finding this to be a place and people where fears can be transcended

and community can be found. The moth principle is true, it's beautiful to watch, and wonderful to experience.



*DAVID R. RAY is pastor of the First Congregational Church (UCC), San Rafael, California, and associate conference minister of the Northern California/Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. Ray is author of the new Pilgrim Press book, Wonderful Worship in Smaller Churches, which sees worship as the core and crucial function of any church and the primary doorway into church life. He is also the author of the most comprehensive book about small churches, The Big Small Church Book, and is currently writing a new and even more significant book for churches where there is not a crowd. He can be reached at <revray@aol.com>.*

To find ways where all are welcomed at the table, to be truly inclusive, and "where fears can be transcended and community found," contact:

Parish Life and Leadership: Margaret Slater, 216.736.3800; e-mail <slaterm@ucc.org>

Evangelism Ministry Team: 800.UCC.FIND; e-mail <schoend@ucc.org>

Permission is granted to reproduce this article.