

TRI-VALLEY CHURCH HAS A CRM PROBLEM: YOU MIGHT GET THEM TO COME, BUT WILL THEY STAY?

Deanna R. D. Mader

Fred H. Mader

Elizabeth C. Alexander

Marshall University

Tri-Valley Church has built an exceptionally strong reputation for its ministries, particularly those focused externally. Internally, many programs have been developed to meet congregational needs ranging from traditional Bible Study to cutting edge ministries aimed at strengthening marriages and managing family finances. In spite of these offerings, membership and attendance have stagnated. One family's experiences serve as the basis for the situation facing the Church Board, to acknowledge potential alienation of congregation members and to develop a plan for corrective actions.

THE DISILLUSIONED COUPLE

"Are we going to church tomorrow?" asked Tom with a pleasant tone in his voice. "I'm sure Gary misses us!"

"Yeah, right," responded Dorothy sarcastically. "No one, including Pastor Gary, has noticed we've been gone!"

"Ah-hah!" exclaimed Tom. "I knew something was bothering you and that's why we haven't been back."

"Well, don't you find it the least bit odd that no one has ever called?" replied Dorothy. "We went darned near every Sunday for three years and during that time, I went to Bible Study every week for two years, you helped with Upward Bound basketball, I helped with the Christmas mission donations, and Lauren helped with Bible School. Wouldn't you think somebody would notice we weren't there? Heaven's sake! When we ran into Gary and his wife at the

restaurant, it was clear he didn't recognize us. Melinda had to tell him who we were! The whole thing really hurts my feelings."

"I know," said Tom sympathetically. "I know church means a lot to you. So what do you want to do? Where else would you like to go?"

"I don't know," answered Dorothy with a depressed quality in her voice. "I just don't know. I loved the worship service and the praise band, and I really think they 'get it' when it comes to missions, but I'd like to go to a church where they also care about my family and me. It's not like we just skipped church for awhile," she continued. "We had Sandra's destination wedding, then I got that awful virus followed by bronchitis. You were in the hospital for a week and ultimately had your gall bladder removed..."

"And Lauren had two surgeries, including the bone graft in the month before Mom's heart surgery," added Tom in agreement. "Don't I remember you called someone about that?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy. "I called Janice each time about you, Lauren, and your mom and asked her to put each of you on the prayer list. No one ever called to see how anyone was doing. There was simply no follow-up. It would be nice if someone actually cared."

THE TRI-VALLEY CHURCH BOARD

The first item on the Tri-Valley Church Board's agenda last night was the future of the church. Attendance and membership numbers have not decreased, but they haven't increased either. If growth does not occur, the missions of the church will be hindered and any hope of expanding the physical plant will be in jeopardy.

Head Deacon Bob calls the meeting to order, "Ok, gentleman, let's get started. Bill, could you please provide the invocation?"

Without hesitation, Bill began, "Certainly, let us pray. Father be with us and guide us in providing leadership to help your church family bring glory to your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

"Thanks Bill," as Bob began to chuckle, "Based on Agenda Item 1, I think we may need God's help more than ever." Everyone laughed.

Bob continued, "As you know, guys, we've talked about expanding missions and building a new larger facility off and on for several years. Pastor Gary has been great about dual services, but I can't help wondering if eliminating adult Sunday

School is partially responsible for our stagnating membership growth. Without evidence of renewed growth, I don't think we can proceed. Ideas, opinions?"

Charley interjected, "I hear what you are saying about the impact of reduced Sunday School offerings, but do we really know that's the problem?"

Jim added wearily, "Guys, I was talking with Janice and Maury Higgs (long time members) this week. They didn't want to offer names, but they said a couple opened up to them that after having attended and been involved for several years, they began to feel like outsiders. Several life events had caused them to miss most of several months, and they felt like the church never missed them at all. The wife had even made multiple requests for inclusion on prayer lists as those life events unfolded. No one from the church ever followed-up. They have not returned."

"Now Jim," the Head Deacon mused, "These folks are, I mean were, only attending, but had never officially become members, right? Until someone commits formally to the church, I don't think we owe them the same level of connectivity . . ."

Jim interrupts, "Oh, please, guys, at any given service probably half to two-thirds of the congregation are not formally members. Why, when we have a business meeting for members after the service, there's a mass exodus out all four sets of doors! Have you ever wondered why they continue to attend but don't formally join? Maybe there is more to this than meets the eye!"

Bill joins in, "That's true. Besides, is it right to treat any of our congregation as second-class Christians? We're a church, not a members-only club."

Exasperated, the Chief Deacon concedes, "Ok folks, maybe we don't know enough about our congregation. What do we do now?"

The Board began to delve into identifying what they need to know, how best to find out, and what to do with the information once they have it.

TRI-VALLEY CHURCH

Location and Demographics. Tri-Valley Church is located in the eastern outskirts of a southeastern city with a population of 50,000 within a metropolitan area of approximately 250,000. Census and zip code data show the immediate area to be comprised of households with dual career couples and children less than 18 years of age. Average level of education is some college and average per capita income is \$21,173 (U.S. is \$28,555).

Staff. The church employs fulltime a pastor, an associate pastor, a Sunday School director, a licensed counselor, a youth minister, a secretary, and a custodian. Part-time employees include a choir director, a praise band director, a children's church director, and another secretary.

Missions and Ministries. Tri-Valley Church has built an exceptionally strong reputation for its ministries, particularly those focused externally. The church helps to support a Christian orphanage in Africa and sends church members to assist the orphanage director at least once, sometimes more, each year. Tri-Valley sends members on a mission trip to Mexico each summer. They also sponsor a married couple who are ordained ministers for their mission work in Russia. Tri-Valley Church does its part to support the Christmas Child Christian mission by packing hundreds of shoeboxes with clothes, small toys, and personal care items to be shipped to children all over the world each Christmas.

Locally, Tri-Valley Church extends its ministry outside its walls in multiple ways. The church conducts kindness-in-action events that include free car washes, free yard work, and moving assistance at the beginning and end of each term to university students living in the dorms. Teenage skateboarders, with nowhere to practice their skills in the area, are welcomed at Tri-Valley's parking lot, complete with several ramps, every Saturday afternoon throughout the summer. The church also serves as a location for Upward Basketball and provides many of the team and cheerleading coaches and referees, as well as a full concession stand staffed by church members. Each summer, a week-long Bible School at the church draws hundreds of children from the area, and a separate week-long overnight summer camp for abused children is held at a camp outside of town.

Internally, the church offers many programs developed to meet congregational needs ranging from traditional Bible Study to classes on discipleship and spirituality to cutting edge ministries aimed at strengthening marriages and managing family finances. Separate annual weekend retreats are held for men and women at remote locations, and family nights are held monthly at the church. Once each month, all college students are invited to stay for lunch provided by the church. This has been very successful and during the school year large numbers of college students attend on a weekly basis.

Physical Plant. The sanctuary was constructed in 1973. A gymnasium and classrooms were added in 1975. An adult education center (1977) and a youth building (2012) constitute the current campus. In 2010, an opportunity arose to acquire vacant property across the street. Unfortunately the street is a five lane major artery. Shuttles or an elevated crosswalk would have been required to make the situation workable. The property was not acquired. In 2014, the sanctuary was

remodeled to remove traditional pews and install more comfortable theater-like seating.

Attendance and Membership Stagnation. Tri-Valley Church, founded in 1969, saw slow growth through the early 1990s then rapid growth in the next several years as the population migrated to the east and upscale neighborhoods developed. The church began offering two Sunday services in 2002 at 9:30am and 11:15am, separated by a 30-minute coffee and doughnut time. The decision to move to two services was not an easy one as it meant eliminating both the teenage and adult Sunday School programs. At the same time, children's Sunday School classes began to be held during the worship services. Growth slowed not long after the switch to two services and has remained fairly stagnant since 2005 even though growth continued for three other churches in the vicinity. One of the three churches expanded its physical plant and a second built a new physical plant which tripled its capacity.

Attendance at Tri-Valley's worship services over the past two years averaged 287 in the 9:30am service (335 high, 230 low) and 240 in the 11:15am service (320 high, 225 low). Fewer college students attended during the summer months (anecdotal), but otherwise, there was no pattern across the two years of data. Attendance then, and now, is taken via headcounts by the ushers. There is no procedure for documenting which individuals or families attend on any given Sunday, and guests are identified only through voluntary submission of a guest card in the offering plate. First time attendees are invited by the Pastor during each service to identify themselves at the Welcome Center when they leave so the church can give them a Welcome Kit. In either service, approximately one-third of those in attendance are members as determined by member-only business meetings following the services.

Financial Data. The annual budget for both 2008 and 2009 was \$158,016. To reach this total, Tri-Valley Church needed \$13,168 weekly from the offering. The offering received from the combined services averaged \$14,360.17 across the two-year period (\$20,032 high, \$10,995 low). Although final numbers are not available, it is estimated that the 2015-2016 budget will exceed \$180,000 requiring a \$15,000 weekly offering from the combined services. Of note, the church currently has no long-term debt.