INFLUENTIALS AND THE CHURCH
IN
SMALL COMMUNITIES

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Introduction and Purpose

Much of the dialogue among those concerned with the church revolves around the major issue of how the church can remain a viable institution in a changing **society**. The church is an institution of major **importance**, although various factors indicate **it**, and especially churches in small **communities**, has not kept pace with the **many changes**. Its **situation** is especially critical in areas where the population is nearly stable or **declining**.

Typical of the problems found in the town and country church are those reported in a recent study of **a four county area in Ohio**.¹ The researchers note a decline in **size** of congregations and the **accompanying** loss of **support**, both financial and by **attendance**. Many churches **do** not have the resources to carry out effective **educational, religious, and welfare programs**, or the funds to hire **competent, well-trained full-time ministers***

A related finding of the above study and one central to this paper was lack of involvement of the church in the affairs of the **community**.

¹Leon C. Nehr and John B. Mitchell, A Study of the **Rural Church in Four Ohio Communities**, A.E. Departmental Series **354**, Columbus, Dept. of Agricultural **Economics** and Rural **Sociology**, The Ohio State **University**, 1963.

For some denominations the role of the church in action **programs** is a theological **question**. However for many it is simply a question of mobilizing their resources so as to be more effective in **determining community decisions**. **Discussions** of how the church is to become more effective in the lives of ~~its~~ members and in the **community** is a **common** theme at state and national church **meetings**.²

These concerns and interests of churchmen and community development workers point to two major questions: (1) In terms of the **church's** human resources what is its potential for becoming an **effective** force in community affairs? (2) What is the strength of the church in effecting community decisions at the present time? The purpose of this paper is to provide some insight into these **questions**.

Community **influentials**, those people who have **established a reputation** for leadership, are the human resources considered in this **paper**. Because of their reputation for leadership it is felt that these are the people **whose** church **membership**, participation and attitudes **toward** the church should be determined in assessing one aspect of the **strength and potential** of the church in **community** affairs*

Methodology

This report is part of a larger study conducted in 14 **communities** located in southern Ohio. All of these **communities** have population **centers**

²For example see the **Pennsylvania** Council of Churches proceedings from the conference on, "Churches Serve the Changing Community." Also proceedings from a conference sponsored by four national Lutheran denominations, "New Thousands in Town and Country." Continued interest is reflected in the title of a multi-dominational convocation, "Church and Community," held in Columbus, Ohio, in 1967.

of less than ten thousand **people**. Many of them are experiencing **outmigration**. The area has a past history of being economically depressed and unemployment and underemployment are **common**. The area has traditionally **been characterized** by agricultural and extractive industries.

A modified reputational approach was used in studying the **communities**. A panel of judges was selected in each **community**. The judges were asked to name those persons who could cause things to happen or keep things from happening in the community; who are the people who are influential in community affairs? Individuals named two or more times by the panel were considered community influentials and were interviewed.

Data was gathered from 220 influentials concerning their church membership and participation. They were asked to rank the three **organizations** which provided them with the greatest personal satisfaction. Later they responded to a second question: **"How important are the churches in determining community decisions in comparison with other groups in the community?"**

Findings

The findings are **organized** around the major questions raised in the beginning of this paper. (1) The **influential's** affiliation with the church which **is** one of the indicators of the potential force of the church in **community** affairs. (2) The **influential's** evaluation of the importance of churches in **community** affairs.

Membership

Of the 220 respondents **interviewed 92.7%** identified **themselves** as church **members and many** of the **non-members** attended services. (Cf. Table 1).

This is in contrast to 64% of the total population who identified themselves as church members In 1965.³

A partial explanation for this variation in membership can be related to 98% of the **influentials** being over the age of 35, whereas, the nationwide percentage includes all **citizens** of the United **States**. This is important for some denominations do not accept members until after a certain **age**, for **example** 14 years of age. These people would be an important factor in **explaining** the difference between influential and national membership **figures**.

This large percentage indicating **church** membership concurs with the findings of Hostetler and **Mather**⁴ and **Kaufman**⁵. Higher education and favorable social and economic standing were highly related to church activity.

Regardless of the **motivation**, no **organization** was named more frequently than the church. Churches have within their membership the majority of those people identified as community leaders.

In **analyzing** conclusions derived from this membership **data**, it is necessary to note that the distribution of the **influentials** among the three major faiths does not correspond to national membership figures.

³**Statistical** Abstract of the United States - 1967, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the **Census**, p. 43.

⁴John A. Hostetler & William G. Mather, "Participation in the Rural **Church**," paper no. 1762, Journal Series, October, 1952, **Department** of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, The Pennsylvania State College, **State** College, Pa.

⁵**Harold F.** Kaufman, "**Mississippi Churches**, A Half Century of Change," Bulletin 12, Social Sciences Research Center, Mississippi State **University**, September, 1959.

Of the 220 **influentials** there were no **members** of the Jewish faith and only 6.4% were members of the Catholic **religion**. This does not compare to 2.8% and 23.7% Jews and **Catholics**, respectively, in the **national** religious population **figures**.⁶

It is that this variation is a result of the 14 **communities** being located in predominately rural areas. This is important in light of the characteristic urban residence of a **sizeable** majority of Jewish and Catholic members.⁷

Participation

Analysis of the influentials total membership in voluntary association reveals that most are **members** of a number of **organizations**. They are usually members of the Chamber of **Commerce**, service clubs and one or more fraternal **organizations**. However, for many participation in these **organizations** is extremely low; they are almost members in name only. This is especially true for the non-economic and **expressive** organizations which serve what Warren calls the social participation, mutual support functions*

Sixty-two point six percent of the Protestants attend at least **two-thirds** of the church **services**, while **78.6%** of the Catholics attend two-thirds of the services*

In comparison with other voluntary associations especially **expressive** organizations, church attendance is high. Only certain civic **organizations** have a higher **attendance**. Ninety point four percent and **92.9%** of the Influentials attend **two-thirds** of the Rotary and **Kiwanis** meetings, **respectively**, while others such as the **Chamber** of **Commerce**, other civic **organizations**, and

⁶ Statistical Abstracts, op. cit., p. 43.

⁷ Statistical Abstracts, op. cit. p. 41.

fraternal organizations are attended less **frequently**. These findings show that not only does the community influential belong to the **church**, he attends **frequently**.

Satisfaction

Each respondent was asked to name the three **organizations** which **pro-**vided him with the greatest personal **satisfaction**. Fifty-one point six percent of the members of Protestant churches identified the church as one of these organizations while only 28.6% of the Catholics named the **church**.

As **Moberg** points out the church becomes a reference group for its members.⁸ It provides a **criterion** by which others can identify you as being of low or high status.

Table 2 shows that those persons who attend church more frequently tend to rank the church as an important source of personal **gratification** more frequently than those who attend church less than **two-thirds** of the **time**. In terms of personal satisfaction from **organizational membership** churches rank second only to Rotary and **Kiwanis**.

Importance of the Church in Community-**Decisions**

Influentials were asked how important the churches were in **deter-**mining community decisions in comparison with other groups (**Cf. Table 3**). Less than **one-half**, 38.5 percent, said churches were very important in determining community **decisions**. **Twenty-six** point four percent said they were moderately **important** and 35.1 percent said they were of minor **impor-**tance in **determining** community decisions. While this data overlooks a

⁸ David O. Moberg, The Church as a Social Institution, Prentice Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962, p. 132.

number of **influentials** who did not give attendance information but did provide a response to the question on the importance of the **church**, a comparison of the **two** sets of data indicated no significant variation in the **results**. Chi square tests **show** there is no significant relationship between frequency of attendance and perception of the importance of the **church**.

Data for the broad categories of Catholic and Protestant show a higher percentage of the **latter**, see churches as more important in **community** decisions than **Catholics**.

Several respondents expressed the point of view that the church does little in the way of taking a stand on community issues but has considerable impact because of the perspectives and outlook it instills in its **members**. There is also an indication that churches have considerable veto power on a project even though they do not usually actively promote a **project**.

Conclusions

The data indicates that as a voluntary **organization** which **serves** social participation and mutual support functions the religious **institution** is considered very important by the **influentials** in these small **communities**. The majority of these **influentials** belong to a congregation, are frequent **attenders**, and rank their church membership as one of the three **most** important organizations in terms of their personal satisfaction.

These people are in positions, both socially and **economically**, whereby they can assist **congregations** in carrying out **church-community programs**. This combination **of factors** enhances the potential of the **church**, as a formal system, as an effective force in community decision **making**.

Less than **one-half** of **the influentials** perceive **churches** as very important and more than one of every three see churches of **little** importance in **determining community** decisions*

Reasons for this evaluation would be **many**. Moberg observes: ". . . in **all honesty** we must recognize that the churches have seldom taken a united stand on social **issues**."⁹

Another finding from a church study in a mid-western county points out a further difficulty. A vast majority of church members were not acquainted with the social policies of their **denominations**.¹⁰

Other data on these communities indicates an across the board weak formal **organizational** structure. Such a situation provides further opportunities for churches to be a **decisive** force in small **communities**.

Change agents need to be aware of this potential for they may **want** to seek cooperation of church groups more than they have in the **past**.

Church leaders and community development personnel should **identify** these people and develop the kind of **organizational** structure **whereby** **influentials** and their resources will enhance the role of churches in the determination of important community decisions.

⁹Moberg, op. cit., p. 143.

¹⁰Schroeder, W. Wideck, and Obenhaus, Victor, Religion in American Culture, (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964,) p. 172.

Table 1

Denominational Membership of Male Community Influentials

Protestants		190
Methodists	89	
Presbyterians	46	
Church of Christ	19	
Episcopal	10	
Baptist	6	
EUB	6	
Lutheran	4	
Others	10	
Catholic		<u>14</u>
Total Members		204
Total Nonmembers		<u>16</u>
Total Population of Influentials		220

Table 2

Church Members' Attendance and Importance of the Church to the Individual*

Attendance	Total		Importance of Church to Individual			
	No.	%	Ranked		Not Ranked	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total	190	100.0	102	53.7	88	46.3
Attends less than 67% of the time	60	100.0	11	18.3	49	81.7
Attends 67% or more of the time	130	100.0	88	67.7	42	32.3

*Respondents who gave no answer for church attendance are omitted from the table.

Table 3

Church Members' Attendance and Their Perception of the Importance of the Churches in Community Decision*

Frequency of	Total		Very Important		Moderately Important		Of Minor Importance	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total	182	100	70	38.5	48	26.4	64	35.1
Attends less than 67% of the time	55	100	22	40.0	14	25.5	19	34.5
Attends 67% or more of the time	127	100	48	37.8	34	26.8	45	35.4

*Respondents who gave no answer for church attendance or importance of the church are omitted from the table.