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 did 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.

\(^1\)Leon 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.

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 influencers, 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.

For 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 concurrs with the findings of Hostetler and Mather⁴ and Kaufman. 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.

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.  

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.  

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

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 provided 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. 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-Decision**

Influentials were asked how important the churches were in determining 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 importance in determining community decisions. While this data overlooks a

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number of influential 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 influential in these small communities. The majority of these influential 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."  

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.**

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 where influentials and their resources will enhance the role of churches in the determination of important community decisions.

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* Moberg, op. cit., p. 143.
Table 1

Denominational Membership of Male Community Influentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protestant Denomination</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterians</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of Christ</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUB</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Members</strong></td>
<td><strong>204</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Nonmembers</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population of Influentials</strong></td>
<td><strong>220</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Importance of Church to Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Ranked No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends less than 67% of the time</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends 67% or more of the time</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Attendance</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Very Important No.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Moderately Important No.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Of what importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends less than 67% of the time</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends 67% or more of the time</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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