

Conducting a Church Assessment

A key step toward Church Revitalization is the willingness to make an honest and well-rounded evaluation of the current state of the church's ministry, vision, attitudes, environment, and performance. A good assessment will enable leaders to gain a clear and reliable picture of the church that means so much to them. An assessment will also provide leaders with some criteria to use when determining priority actions. An assessment can provide a sense of "permission" from the church to address areas identified as needing attention.

When preparing to conduct a church assessment, the following tips may prove helpful.

1. Clearly communicate the purpose of conducting an assessment.

A church assessment can sometimes be a difficult sell to the congregation. Beginning with church leaders, pastors can use the reasons listed above to communicate the value of an assessment. Pastors should also assure people that the results of the assessment will not be used as a means of pushing a pre-determined agenda, attacking someone's ministry, or pointing guilt and blame at people in the church. People should be reminded that an assessment is a way of getting the most feedback from as many members as possible and that is a way of valuing everyone's perspective.

2. Commit to using a formal, reliable assessment tool.

Though tempting to create your own list of survey questions or conduct an informal poll, using an established assessment tool is a wiser course of action. Self-made assessment devices may or may not accurately measure the desired target, contain unintentional bias, and may leave out key pieces of information. An established assessment tool has undergone careful examination, been tested in many previous pilot churches, and has been statistically validated for reliability. A formal tool will give a church confidence that the data received is reliable.

3. Choose the type of assessment that will fit your church and the desired purpose.

Even among formal assessment tools, churches have choices. For churches that just will not use a written survey instrument, fairly reliable information can be gathered through a formal guided conversation. A complete guide for conducting a guided conversation, including sample questions, is found in this guidebook and on the ABSC church revitalization website.

Written survey instruments are also available and generally provide an increased level of reliability. Some are available for a small cost while other very good instruments may be obtained for free. The ABSC church revitalization website has free assessment tools available. When examining survey tools, pay careful attention to the purpose for which the tool was created (what it is designed to measure). Do not attempt to make a tool apply to something for which it was not created. Very brief, broad surveys will likely not get to information that is of much use in creating ministry plans.

A third option is the use of a fee-based, professionally developed research assessment tool. Though some consulting firms charge thousands of dollars for services, churches can gain access to very reliable assessment tools for a relatively small investment of money. For example, the *Transformational Church* assessment tool has been validated in thousands of churches and can be used in any church for as little

as \$200.00. While this amount is still significant, the amount of information received in return and the potential impact of ministries designed in response to it make the investment worthwhile. Please refer to the appendix on “Why Pay for an Assessment Tool” for a discussion on this point.

4. Create a timeline for promoting, providing access to, and evaluating results of the assessment tool.

A good assessment should be given adequate time. The assessment should be conducted during a time of year when most people will be aware and have access to it, such as during the start of the school year or the beginning of the calendar year. Time should be set aside for communication and promotion with a “kick-off” date announced. A firm closing time for participation will also make sure that your results are a clear snapshot of the congregation’s response within a reasonable period of time, generally no more than 2-3 weeks. Plan to total and review the responses and results as soon as possible.

5. Provide a wide variety of ways for church members to participate.

For conversational assessments, at least 3 different focus groups should be used to allow for a good representation of the church body. Written assessments can be made available near the primary worship center, through the Sunday School classes, sent in direct mail or established church publications, or made available for download from the church website. Online assessments are accessible at the convenience of each church member. However, those without computer access may need to be allowed to come to the church for computer use. In most cases, paper copies of an online assessment can be completed by users with the results logged into the online system later by an office staff person or volunteer. In every case, great care should be taken to maintain anonymity. In the case of paper copies, all responses should be protected and kept in a secure location.

6. Use supplemental sources of information to corroborate and connect your findings.

Even the best assessment tools still leave questions and gaps. Pastor may choose to conduct guided conversations with focus groups to further investigate certain ministry areas revealed in the assessment. The Annual Church Profile is another great source of data that can give a statistical snapshot of some key measures of church life and health. Demographic trends may also shed light on possible explanations for why some assessment scores turned out the way that they did. The assessment tool is one piece of all that might be used to create the full picture.

7. Commit to accept the results as they are and for what they are.

Leaders must commit in advance to accepting the results at face value and without reading into or explaining away the results. When an established assessment tool is used, accept the fact that the results are trustworthy and in all likelihood correct in providing an accurate view of the congregation’s perspective. That being said, the results are just one measure of one snapshot of time. No assessment tool can take into consideration every part of a church’s impact in a community and in the lives of individual believers. While assessment data is reliable, it is not inspired or prophetic!

8. Use the results of the assessment in a positive way.

All assessment tools are designed to give feedback pointing out strengths and weaknesses (challenges) of various ministry areas in the church. Many leaders may tend to immediately jump to what the assessment revealed as the “problems” that need to be corrected. However, a better starting point is to celebrate what the assessment reveals as areas of ministry that are valued and deemed effective by the church. Look for ways to celebrate and expand upon parts of the ministry that are achieving the purpose of the church. Lead the church to give thanks to God for what He is doing through the identified areas. For the more challenging survey results, use them as a way to create a new vision and chart a new course for the future.

9. Make evaluation a part of the ongoing culture of your church.

A successful experience with an assessment tool can serve as a starting point for healthy ongoing evaluation in the church. While formal survey instruments need not be used on every occasion, each ministry and church event should include a time of evaluation immediately after its conclusion or at certain points of the year. A culture of evaluation prevents ruts from being formed. Evaluation will also ensure that ministries and events continue to improve and that they stay relevant to the community and to the emphases within the church. Evaluation challenges leaders to keep up with the rapidly changing world around them, sharpen their skills, and promote innovation. Good evaluation keeps the ministry environment from becoming stale and outdated.

Assessment should not be a source of dread in the life of a church. By using these ideas, churches can come away with good, reliable information that will focus resources, inform strategy, prioritize needs, celebrate God’s work, and ultimately reach and disciple more people.