

The #1 sign you are lukewarm!

Why do Churches of Christ stop growing?

A critically important subject - See Rev. 3:15-16

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#1 SIGN YOU ARE LUKEWARM

And it isn't what you think!

Being a lukewarm congregation (Rev. 3:15-16) is a serious problem, especially as Jesus has said **if you are lukewarm, He will spit you out of this mouth.** What exactly being spit out of His mouth is, is a little vague, but it can't be a good thing. Being cold appears to be not as bad as lukewarm, but that is still not good.

Your congregation is hot, lukewarm, or cold as these are the only choices given. There is nothing in this book which is going to make your congregation one of the choices. It is what it is, or hopefully it has been what it has been. There is nothing you can do about the past.

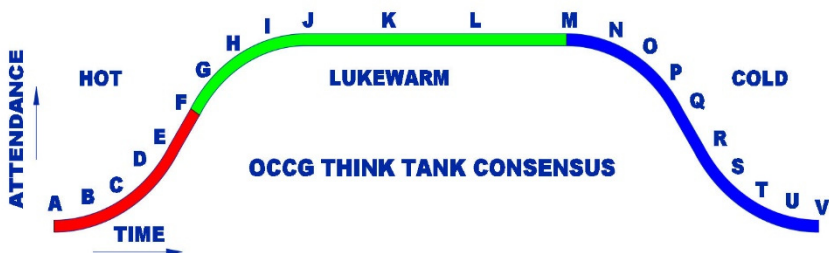
However, if your congregation is lukewarm or cold and you have rationalized that it is hot, this e-book is an attempt to give you a method of objectively making that determination. It is our belief that if a congregation comes to the realization that they are lukewarm, they will likely make appropriate changes.

If a congregation concludes they are lukewarm they may not know what to do to fix it, but they know to start looking for a solution.

Based upon a lifetime of observing Churches of Christ, and specifically the last 3 years focusing specifically on this problem, I have drawn a conclusion as to the #1 sign you may have a lukewarm congregation. This study is complemented with substantial experience in managing people's activities in managing a successful business. I have seen more similarities between managing a business and a church than differences.

This sign is not a guarantee you are lukewarm, but it makes it highly likely that you are. **It is likely something you would not anticipate or consider to be logical and a normal answer to this question.**

The following graphic is a curve presented by the OC Church Growth Think Tank on the life cycle of the typical Church of Christ. What it generally says is that the typical congregation starts off red hot (A-F), converts to being a lukewarm congregation (F-M), and then to being a dying or cold congregation (M-V).



It may be not be a surprise to many that if your attendance is flat it is a sign that you are lukewarm, but the area from F-J in which you would still be growing is also suggested as being lukewarm. Everything from A-F is shown as accelerating or steady growth. Starting at F is a declining growth rate, with presumably a precipitating event happening at F. Past M is a shrinking or dying congregation, which is another subject.

What you can conclude from this is that church growth rate is a factor to consider but would not be the #1 sign. As a practical matter if your community shrinks by 50% and you shrink by only 40%, you may be doing a good job at evangelism. The #1 sign cannot be if you are **growing** as the area between F and J is a growing congregation. This is also impacted by whether there are mergers, splits, new start-ups or congregational closings in your area as they potentially impact your growth rate. There are a limited number of congregations such as in nursing homes or on military bases which provide a service and growth would not be expected. That is not the situation

for most of us. You may be simply benefitted by living in a rapidly growing community with members moving in and simply placing membership.

The #1 sign cannot be whether you are **busy**. Every congregation we have seen has considered themselves “busy” and has lots of “busy” stories to tell you. It is clearly a subjective judgment.

The #1 sign cannot be whether you **think you are lukewarm** or not. With our 12,000+ Churches of Christ presently shrinking at 1.7% per year, at least half our congregations are lukewarm. At least 6,000 of these must be lukewarm, or to put it another way, there is at least a 50/50 chance you are lukewarm. Basically almost no one considers themselves to be lukewarm, so a self-assessment must not be a very reliable indicator.

The #1 sign cannot be whether your **Elders are overworked**. All Elders are all overworked, even the Elders of the likely 6000 lukewarm congregations.

The #1 sign cannot be whether you have a **lot of programs**. Most everybody is busy with some kinds of programs.

The #1 sign cannot be whether your **deacons are not performing**. We would suggest to you that non-performing deacons is a sign but is a symptom of the problem, not the problem.

The #1 sign cannot be whether your **members are not engaged**. Even in lukewarm congregations, many members find something to engage themselves in, so they will feel they are doing some Christian service.

The #1 sign cannot be whether **you think you have a vision**. It seems everyone thinks they have a vision, even when someone else is looking at them see no vision at all. If a theoretical vision is not matched with dedication and intention to accomplish the vision, it might as well not exist.

The #1 sign cannot be an **advancing age** of your congregation. That would be a symptom of a problem, not the problem. It generally means you are not doing the Great Commission for some reason. The basic reason you are not evangelizing new young members is what we are looking for rather than this sign it is not happening.

The #1 sign cannot be the **racial or socio-economic mix** of your congregation not matching that of your service area. That would be a sign or symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. Why has the neighborhood mix changed and you are still what it used to be?

The #1 sign cannot be whether the **world is against us**. In the first century the world was intensely against the church, and it still grew. As a practical matter the first growing churches of Laodicea and Ephesus were criticized 40-50 years after their beginning to be lukewarm. If the congregations with members who saw Jesus and the apostles could be lukewarm 40-50 years later, it should be a clear warning to us today.

There are a lot of signs you are lukewarm, but you cannot correct a problem by addressing the signs, you must fix the problem(s) at the base of the signs.

THE #1 SIGN YOU ARE LUKEWARM

The #1 sign that a congregation is lukewarm is whether the ongoing business decisions in the congregation are made in open business meetings or in private meetings of a small number of leaders. That will likely seem like an absurd statement to most readers at first glance, but let's consider that point.

In the area of the graph from A-F, the congregation was new, and everybody was pulling together. Everybody was desperately important and most everyone knew what was going on. If you were going to make a capital investment, everyone was in the discussion as a necessity. You had

to have their support. You had an organization which could handle this level of administration. You had visionary members who could lead. If you had not had some visionary leaders, you would not have had a new congregation.

The leaders could deal with some difficult members or situations and keep going. They could run a meeting with all members and handle the situations. Likely the leaders were responsible for meetings with the congregation on a rotational basis (as is the Church of Christ custom).

As time progressed, more leaders were enfranchised who were less adept at handling dissention, but who were just as empowered. The organization changed over time.

We need to look at why business decisions are taken into private meetings. It is not an evil intent, it is what humans tend to do. To do this presume your congregation was growing with 50 members, is not longer growing with 300 members, and the number of Elders went from 2 to 6. Also presume that half your members show up for an open business meeting.

1. We have the custom of having each of our leaders take charge of any meeting in rotation. This makes sense in that we do not want to develop a "head Elder".
2. Either of the first two Elders could have been quite competent at running a meeting of 25 members (50% in attendance), and not be capable of running a meeting of 150 members. It is not inherent that if you can do one well, you can do the other well also. Our custom presumes this, but that doesn't make it so.
3. Now presume the first two visionary Elders can satisfactorily run the meeting of 150 members. You have added 4 more Elders for the standard rotation who also need to be capable. In a business, it is hard to find one good leader, much less 6 in the

same organization.

4. It is important to note that Elders are selected for their ability to shepherd, not necessarily as organizational managers.
5. In an open meeting of 150 members, you are always going to have at least one member asking some difficult question to complicate the situation.
6. You are basically using the same management system as you were when the congregation was 1/6 the present size. Organizations need to be changed (within scriptural requirements) to fit the situation.
7. When you were growing, your Elder's average age was probably less than 50. It is probably now more than 60. The current average age is probably a good age for shepherding, but not necessarily so good for the energy needed for growth administration.

Now consider that you have Elder #5 of 6 who is a very good shepherd and is loved by all but is simply not adept at handling an open meeting of 150 members. **You have three basic choices:**

1. Make him run the meeting and do his part, likely to the discomfort of himself and the displeasure of attendees,
2. Stop having open meetings and draw administrative decisions back into private meetings where he can handle himself adequately or
3. Some other choice which may not be customary but is still scriptural. (This will be referred to as choice #3)

In all observations except in 1 case, choice #2 has been taken. Choice #2 is the classic solution to the problem. The exception seen was where a congregation designated some Elders as management Elders and some to be shepherding Elders. That is some "out of the

box” thinking, however, I understand the primary role of Elders to be shepherding, and those Elders would be neglecting their primary role.

WHY IS THE #2 CHOICE CONSIDERED TO BE SO IMPORTANT A FACTOR?

1. **COMMUNICATION:** This change alters the basic communications within a congregation. It changes both how communications are done and who are the recipients of the communications.
2. **US VS. THEM:** It functionally causes a clear case of those who are in control and those who are not. Unless handled very well, it tends to disengage many of the members. The Elders must be in control of the congregation, but they do not have to control all the administrative decisions.
3. **IT CAUSES MANY MEMBERS TO BE “HANDLED”:** In an open meeting, all points of view can be heard, and all can know that their ideas were considered before a group decision was required. In private meetings, the leaders try to anticipate the member’s concerns about a decision, but it is somethings hard to do. When the decision made in private is announced, anyone who had an objection not considered is going to be discouraged. Some can be very frustrated.
4. **GROUP SUPPORT:** When the reasons for an administrative decision are handled openly, members will tend to be more supportive of decision, both timewise and monetarily.

Likely many of our tired church leaders would be happy to have others help in the leadership of the congregation and would say this is not a fair observation of their situation. There is simply no one else willing, capable, and trusted to do this. They are forced to do what they are doing to

keep the congregation going. There is a degree of reasonableness to this situation as that is where they are now. It took time to get here. Potentially anyone with the talents and energy to help them have left, have conflicted with them, or simply never came into their situation. The present leaders may be in a situation set up by a prior group of leaders. They understand they are faithfully doing what used to work and don't recognize what changed. The current leaders may have never seen a situation like the congregation was in when it was growing, and don't have any ideas as to how to get there again. Frequently leaders don't have the extra energies required to go back as all their efforts are consumed in the daily tasks of just surviving now. It is not actually extra energies you need, it is having a clear vision and a plan. In other words, where are you going and what steps are required to get there.

Consider for just a moment if 25% of your members were as dedicated as you are and the remainder are more engaged by those 25%. Your life as a leader would be greatly eased and a lot more would be getting done. The question is not how you can do everyone's job, but rather how you can get others engaged. Getting others involved is your job, it is called equipping the saints. It is not easy, it is just critical.

The Dream Session ⁽¹⁾ paper is intended as example of how to do this where you communicate with the congregation to new accomplish goals. It is just a start but can demonstrate how much members will do if asked in a way when they participate in the decision process.

WHY DO CHURCH GROWTH CONSULTANTS TYPICALLY NOT CONSIDER THIS?

1. **OUT OF THE BOX:** By definition that question makes this an "out of the box" suggestion. It is going to take some "out of the box" thinking to return the Churches of Christ to a growth profile or in other words to doing the Great Commission.

2. WHO IT TENDS TO CRITICIZE: It is functionally a criticism of the Elder's operating methods, which some Elders will take as a criticism of themselves personally. The Elders are rightfully in charge of our congregations, so effectively the Elders must be convinced they need to change. Additionally, the Elders are the customers for church growth consultants. It is hard to remain in business by criticizing your customers.
3. SYMPTOMS OR ROOT CAUSES: Church growth consultant reports have typically focused on the symptoms of the problem. This is not looking at a symptom of the problem, it is trying to address the root cause of the problem. It is a different kind of analysis.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOICE #3:

1. A major role of shepherds is to help mature and equip the younger men for the future role of being a shepherd. Personally, doing the administration of the congregation is doing the deacon work, and not maturing the deacons or other younger men. When the Elders take administration decisions into a private meeting, they minimize the open communication with the congregation, neglect shepherding work in favor of being surrogate deacons, and fail to work at maturing and equipping the deacons. If you are reasonably maturing your deacons, the **experienced deacons should be able to run the open administration meeting.** "Experienced" can be quantified as head of committees where they are satisfactorily administering a portion of the congregation's business. If they can successfully run a committee, they can likely run a meeting. Not always true, but if it is not true, you need to know it. If the Elders cannot trust deacon leaders of committees to run a meeting, why are they committee chairs?

2. What happens in an open business meeting is business or administration. It is not shepherding. Shepherding discussions need to continue to be happening in private meetings, and it is the Elder's primary business. To run the business meeting, you can **have a business manager or facilitator** to be an intermediary between the Elders and the members for this function.
3. Implement a **software program** which facilitates delegating responsibilities in writing, mandated reporting of status, and summarizes reporting for easy overview. Such a software program represents in many ways an intermediary between the Elders and the members as it focuses on better communications. ⁽²⁾
4. If you presently have a software program for running your congregation, focus on using it to organize and track your congregation. Whereas DelCon ⁽²⁾ is specifically focused on this, any program should be able to help in this area.
5. "Out of the box" **church growth consultation**. Contact www.occgthinktank.org, CONTACT tab to start a discussion on a church growth consultation. ⁽³⁾

You had an organization with characteristics which facilitated being an active effective congregation, and that changed. The question is can you change it back?

However, you scripturally accomplish it, it is important that we do our part of the Great Commission in our generation.

Some have suggested that our efforts would be better spent starting new congregations than trying to revive older ones. We would suggest 2 concerns for this approach:

1. If this has presented a reasonable analysis then this

approach would functionally be abandoning our brothers and sisters to judgment day as a lukewarm congregation which Jesus will spit out of his mouth.

2. If this is our operating style, there is a high probability that any new congregation will be in the same conditions a few years after their formation.

As a brotherhood we need to learn how to help new congregation from becoming lukewarm, and a logical first step is to learn how to return lukewarm ones to doing the Great Commission.

This information is submitted for your consideration. If you have any corrections, additions, or changes on this material we would appreciate your counsel at any time. Contact us at bbaugh@thearray.org.

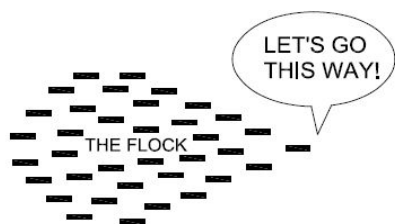
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If this information is thought provoking to you, forward it to your contacts and sign up for our monthly newsletter at www.thearray.org.

- (1) The Dream Session paper can be found at <http://occgthinktank.org> / Project Papers / Organization Papers.
- (2) DelCon is such a software program as this and is specifically designed to operate with the Church of Christ operating style. Using DelCon can effectively increase your management capabilities such that a wider range of shepherd talents can handle larger meetings. Information on this package can be found on www.occgthinktank.org, Project papers tab, Organizational papers tab.

- (3) The DelCon software can be used as the basis for a church growth consultation for your congregation.

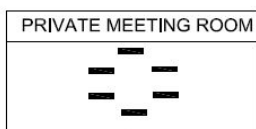
We are like sheep (John 10:4)



IT WORKS THIS WAY!



IT DOESN'T WORK THIS WAY!



IT DOESN'T WORK THIS WAY EITHER!