



## The Intelligence Revolution for Churches

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Over the past few months I've introduced the Intelligence Revolution and put it in the context of the broader Information Age. Three months ago I provided this working definition: The Intelligence Revolution will help us better understand the world around us; will improve our decision making to enhance our health, safety, and peace of mind; and will enable companies to better serve us based on the correlation and analysis of data from the interrelation of people, things, and content. Over the past two months I've identified the "power" and the "danger" of the Intelligence Revolution. This month's article will address the question that you've probably been pondering over the past several months - what will the Intelligence Revolution mean for my church?

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### Different Kinds of Churches

To be honest, I doubt that the Intelligence Revolution will ever significantly impact how many (most?) churches go about serving the Lord. According to the [2010 Religious Congregations and Membership Survey](#), there are nearly 333 thousand Christian congregations serving over 144 million adherents (adherents is the broadest measure of people associ-

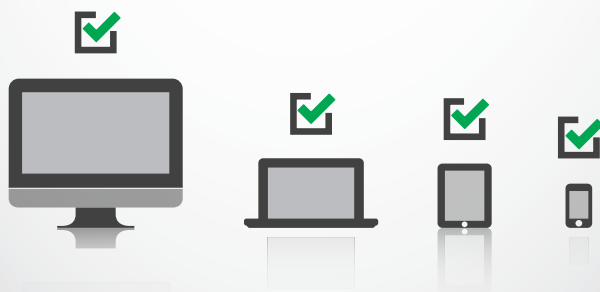
ated with a congregation - this represents nearly half of the U.S. population). The simple math tells us that there's an average of 432 adherents per congregation. In reality, most churches are much smaller than that. According to the 2012 [National Congregations Study](#), the median number of people associated in any way with a congregation is 135 and the median number of attendees at the main worship service is 60. The In-

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telligence Revolution derives value from “big data” analysis, and with groups of people this small, there simply won’t be data that is big in volume, velocity, or variety. At churches this size, there also tends not to be the resources to do fancy analysis of whatever data might be available.

Bottom line, these churches will keep doing what they’ve always done, serving the Lord and serving their communities in Christ. I attend a small church. We don’t need fancy data analysis tools to understand the people we serve, because we have deep personal relationships within the body. We know each other’s needs, gifts, and lives. We adapt as new needs arise (as new families arrive or changes happen within families), as new gifts and talents emerge, and as we grow closer to each other in growing closer to the Lord. Just as PCs, the Internet, the smartphone, and social media have provided tools that enhance what we do and make it easier to do it, I expect that the Intelligence Revolution will provide some tools that will make it easier to see the geographic distribution of our families, the concentrations of ages that we serve, and the participation we have in different ministries, but that is simply putting a precise point on the facts that we already inherently know because we know our own small population.

## Can Big Churches Benefit From Big Data?

Michael D. Gutzler wrote an eye opening article for the Spring 2014 issue of *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. In the article, titled “[Big Data and the 21st Century Church](#),” the Lutheran pastor made the claim that “data collection and analysis could be the key to providing a deeper faith life to the people of our

congregational communities.” While we’ve talked about the dangers of collecting personal information in previous articles, Pastor Gutzler says “I would suggest for those working in the life of the church there is a higher calling to data analysis: to help the participants in a community of faith come to a greater understanding of God’s forgiveness, grace and love.”

As his starting framework, Pastor Gutzler rests upon the Circles of Commitment model promoted by Saddleback Church and documented in Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Church*. The goal for church leaders, in Pastor Gutzler’s model, is to move adherents from being in the unchurched community to the crowd of regular attenders to the congregation of members to the committed maturing members and finally into the core of lay ministers. To accomplish this goal, church leadership analyzes data about each family and family member in the congregation, correlating that data with participation in specific events and activities, examining historical trends, and from that, making wise decisions.

For example, does participation in a given event or activity correlate with increased commitment to the church, no change, or actually a moving away from the core? Do the answers differ based on the current circle of commitment of different families participating? Should we do more events/activities like this or scrap them altogether? Should we target them towards specific families rather than broadly offering them to the entire congregation?

Pastor Gutzler even argues for targeting the sermon message differently for each circle of commitment. He uses the example of a sermon on stewardship: “A better way to approach the subject would be to give one general message about what stewardship is, but have illustrations that speak to each circle. Then, to emphasize the message, a follow-up communication should be sent to each group that falls into each of the demographics to further emphasize the message’s point.”

Pastor Gutzler identifies five classes of data that most churches are already collecting as being enough to get started in implement-

ing this segmentation, targeting, and analysis-driven decision making:

- **Attendance:** at worship, but also at all other church-related events
- **Community Life:** tracking the amount of time congregants invest in different church activities
- **Personal Information:** Pastor Gutzler makes the point that, with tools like Zillow and salary.com, even simple information like address and occupation can provide significant insights that can be correlated with other sources to indicate the family’s financial commitment to the ministry of the church.
- **Personal Giving:** Not just tithes and offerings, but also donations of food, clothing, and responses to other special appeals.
- **Personal Development:** Time committed to opportunities to develop and deepen their faith life.

While I respect Pastor Gutzler’s passion for using every tool available to achieve the mission of his church, I fear that he is demonstrating the “grey

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areas" that I warned about in my last article. Our actions will be scrutinized by the watching world and by our own church members. We are to honor and glorify God, reflecting His attributes in loving and serving those around us. We are not to trust in a mechanical, scientific exercise in data analysis, but we are to trust in the living God who works in mysterious ways, drawing people to Himself.

All that being said, I believe that, especially large churches do and will have "big data" at their fingertips. Pastor Gutzler's article may go to an extreme, but by doing so, I think it hints at ways that churches will be able to honorably improve how they serve their congregants while respecting their privacy. I urge you to rely heavily on prayer and the Word of God as you move your churches forward in this coming revolution.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. As 1 Peter 4:10 teaches us "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

*Russ McGuire is a trusted advisor with proven strategic insights. He has been blessed to serve as an executive in Fortune 500 companies, found technology startups, be awarded technology patents, author a book and contribute to others, write dozens of articles for various publications, and speak at many conferences. More importantly, he's a husband and father who cares about people, and he's a committed Christian who operates with integrity and believes in doing what is right. Learn more at <http://sdgstrategy.com>*

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